LIVING WITH MEN

A Novel
Presented to
The School of Graduate Studies
Drake University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Mary Ann Riley
May 1980
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Approved by Committee:

[Signatures]

Dean of the School of Graduate Studies
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An abstract of a Creative Project by
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This is a work of fiction based upon autobiographical material. George Santayana said, "To embroider upon experience is not to bear false witness against one's neighbor but to bear true witness to oneself."

It is a first person narrative with the general theme of family life; the protagonist represents the rewards and limitations of living with a man and raising young men. Her counterpart, now dead, devoted herself to a career rather than family life. Flashbacks to their common experience in deciphering coded messages during wartime serves as a literary device leading to the 'deciphering' of the dead woman's character.

The style is episodic and informal, relying heavily on dialogue. The introspective insights might place it in the tradition of Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway.

As a book reviewer for the past decade, I have had access to a good deal of Feminist literature. While not specifically in that genre, my book does address the questions raised by such contemporary authors as Midge Dector and Doris Lessing.
Designated Owl's Head Addition on the city plat, the neighborhood in which I've lived for thirty years would have been long gone in a larger city to rooming houses or funeral parlors. Most of the homes were built around 1900 and such accoutrements of the post-Victorian way of life as porte-cochères, wide verandahs and two stairways, back and front, are commonplace. Single families occupy these homes and only when death or removal to an extended care facility precipitates the action, do they change hands.

Fortunately, present-day interest in refurbishing old dwellings has enhanced property values and more and more of my neighbors are well-to-do young couples who scorn the subdevelopments that have proliferated in the suburbs. We all know each other, are aware of the patterns of one another's daily life and can even recognize belongings abandoned by children away from home. Spacious lawns predominate and there is little traffic. A strange car, parked for more than half a day, would be noticed.

One afternoon after going to the door to let our Scottie, Heather, out, I lingered, bemused, in the vestibule. Suddenly, I am aware that a stranger is standing on the sidewalk scrutinizing the ravine beside our house, the peculiar sables on our roof and the century-old oaks on the lawn. No salesman's truck is in evidence, no tree surgeon's rig, no car at all.

I note that he is tall and lean, has his thumbs
hooked over his belt in the classic cowboy stance, and wears a cap with the bill facing backward. He has a hunter's watchfulness; I've seen my husband in this pose.

I'm unaware of a backpack until he hefts it and saunters toward my front steps, pausing to fondle the dog. He acknowledges my presence behind the glass storm door with a mock salute. I step outside and he regards me somberly, somewhat like visitors on a guided tour regard a foreign church. Finally, he says, "You have seventeen squirrels around your house at this moment, M'am." When I simply stare, he continues, "I'm Ray. Julie's son."

I have the habit of greeting strangers politely; after my call this morning, this one might have been expected. But for some reason, I am tongue-tied. I don't feel threatened; rather, I'm awed. With that steady gaze that has a hint of scepticism in it, he seems so serene, tranquil. I seldom associate these words with men. Numbly, "Oh, yes, come in," I lead him into the hall.

Slowly, his glance travels from the curving staircase with the small carved owl's heads decorating the newel posts to the marble-based candelabra and my grandfather's Seth Thomas clock on the mantel, then on to the pier glass reflecting the crimson of the Sarouk on the floor of the living room.

I always find people far more interesting than things -- perhaps because I've always had them. That Julie's son finds my things more interesting than he wounds my
vanity.

Suddenly, he announces, "I'm beat. Mind if I nap here somewhere?"

The request startles me so, I simply wave toward the open door to the library. He drops his backpack beside the brass spittoon planted with sansevieria, another relic of a bygone era. In an instant, he is on the sofa, all six feet of skin and bones, stretched out and snoring, with his dirty boots on the needlepoint pillow.

This morning, when Annabel answered the telephone, she was breathless, just in from the Racquet Club. My memory of her frantic efforts to find a partner, even someone who owned a tennis racquet, is still vivid. "It's great to hear your voice," she shouted. "You sound just the same!"

Annabel and I had kept in touch through these three decades solely through the trite Christmas note that told of children's births, schools and marriages and promised a good visit in case I ever came to Philadelphia or she ever came to Des Moines. Thus, a letter from her, off-season, amazed me and its contents almost destroyed the new illusion of renascence that was so pleasant at my age.

Julie Keller was dead.

During my years of service as a WAVE officer during World War II, Julie and I lived together and worked in the same coderoom on the same watch, performing the same duties
day after day and night after night. I loved Julie -- in the pristine way of that archaic time.

"I was shocked to learn about Julie."

"Me, too! I just happened to glance at the Fort Lauderdale paper that day. On vacation I can do without news. When we bought our condo, furnished, the TV didn't work and we never did have it fixed. Anyway, her picture was on the front page. She hadn't changed a bit. I mean she actually looked almost the same as she did in 1945! I don't, that's for sure. Do you?"

"Hardly. But sometimes they use an old picture in an obituary. And a TV personality would be made up to look young."

Annabel chuckled. "Or maybe she found the Fountain of Youth I came down there looking for. Speaking of age -- the paper said she was in her mid-forties. That would mean she was a mere ten year old when we all lived together in the WAVES."

"You said you'd enclose the clipping but you didn't."

"Ye Gods, I s'pose I threw it out. I throw everything away these days so the kids won't have to do it when I die. Always did toss things, though, didn't I? Remember the molded ice cream for the party before your wedding?"

"You thought you were only throwing out the dry ice."

"Well, the paper only said she'd apparently been drinking and then took pain pills. The coroner called it 'accidental'."
"She didn't like to drink when we knew her."

"Doesn't everybody learn to like it sooner or later? Anyhow, she must have had quite a career. Right after the war she was in radio and then went into TV. Hosted talk shows and game shows, was even a news commentator somewhere. No Barbara Walters, of course, but she worked for stations up and down the East Coast. I don't see how I missed her. When the kids were little, I used to watch a lot. I will say her career surprised me. In Washington, she used to talk all the time about life in a rose-covered cottage."

"We all did, didn't we?"

"She married, twice, I think. And the son -- I wrote you about him, didn't I?"

"You said he might drop in to see me on his way west. Why me?" In my view, 'young men on their way west' were superannuated kids in futile search of unformed 'selves'. I had no wish to be involved with another one.

"Listen. When I read about her, I called the paper, got nowhere. Called the TV station and someone there located a number where the son could be reached. Talked to the boy -- man, I mean, expressed my sympathy and asked would he like to drop by for a drink. He declined and said he was on his way out of town, heading west. On foot, I gathered. I just happened to mention you and he seemed very interested, for some reason. Asked for your street address and all."
"Well, thanks a lot! I've got a wandering son of my own."

"Well, he sounded nice. Sort of an intellectual, like you and Julie used to be."

I laughed. "Used to be! As of right now, I'm back in graduate school."

"What on earth for?"

"To occupy my mind. Just wrote a paper comparing Hedda Gabler's 'liberation' with Nora—who-slammed-the-door. That's Modern Drama. And I'm searching out autobiographical details in Rimbaud's 'Season in Hell' for Modern Poetry."

"That stuff's modern? Des Moines is certainly up-to-date! I'm glad I have my backhand to work on. Listen, Mary. Maybe Julie's son won't show up. We left Florida before the middle of March and all I've done is the laundry. Now it's the middle of April. So..."

"I wish you'd sent me Julie's picture, at least. I've always regretted my part in that dreadful scene that broke up..."

"Hey, I have to go! I'm babysitting my grandchild in ten minutes. "Write, will you? Especially if you see the son in the flesh."

Then Annabel broke the connection, images of Julie flooded my mind. Why didn't I make even one effort to talk to her after the terrible row that ended our friendship? I remember very well that the loss of her companionship made my work seem unendurably onerous during the last sum-
mer of the war...and my life away from work, a lonely, endless vigil. Like everyone else I assumed the Japanese would fight for every last inch of their homeland and many more millions of men would die before the war was over. My husband among them, probably.

Being close to Julie had made the anxiety of those early years in service a bearable, often challenging, burden. In her company, I even enjoyed life. Over and above her good looks, she had what was then called "personality" and the capability of making the mundane amusing. Her theatrical bent should have been obvious.

Julie's spirits, moreover, were constantly buoyed up by hope. Hope that something bizarre or exciting would happen, if only so her ebullient wit could render it unforgettable. Later, it was hope that each new man she encountered would be the ideal man to father her child. To me, that search was unforgettable, too.

Long before the effects of indoctrination in a man's navy wore off for the rest of us, Julie convinced herself that to have a baby would be more significant than our war duty -- encoding and decoding secret despatches. Since WAVES had volunteered for the Duration, to embark upon this venture would immediately lead to a less-than-honorable discharge. Thus Julie's conviction was baffling to me but I was amused to watch her machinations. She bought a new lipstick for each blind date, yet things never seemed to work out. She'd tell me later he was jejune or covered with acne or worse -- married, and we'd laugh.
Lord knows we needed laughter. The work we did dealt largely with death and disaster.

After my long distance call to Annabel, I sat down at my desk in the little upstairs room that used to be the nursery. Now that I'm in school, it is my study. But I turned away from the open textbooks and stared out the window at the forsythia that blooms every spring along our drive. Its yellow buds were blossoming as I nursed Sara in this room...Sara, born ten months after George accumulated enough points to be demobilized. My first clothes, after thirty-five months in WAVE uniform, were maternity outfits with ballooning tunics and skirts constructed around a hole to accommodate a bulging belly.

My musing reverted to Julie. How obsessed she'd been with the idea of having a baby! Was her son born long before Sara? Thinking about the war years, I blinked and could see in my mind's eye the dirty, noisy, crowded Naval Code Room in the old Navy Department on Constitution Avenue -- a temporary building, that undistinguished concrete structure had been, ever since the First World War. The golden Capitol, the pink marble Supreme Court, the balconied and turreted State Department, even the D.A.R.'s imposing Constitution Hall which Julie and I passed daily, all were edifices whose magnificence fortified the spirits of all Washingtonians. But the Navy Department and its ugly twin, the Munitions Building, squatted beside the Hall like poor cousins cowering at a family gathering.
Navy personnel assigned there perceptibly shed pride as they showed their I.D.'s to the Marine santries; they shuffled rather than strode to their cell-plain cubicles.

When the elegant new Pentagon opened across the river, I used to imagine Army personnel walking in with jaunty steps, their heads held high. That the Admirals refused to share the building, stubbornly insisting upon a Pentagon of their own, I didn't know until long afterward.

The windows of the Naval Code Room were sealed shut and painted over so we couldn't see the Washington spring as we toiled, 'standing watch'. The Navy's seagoing jargon persisted throughout our shore-based existence and it was long after the war before I could stop saying 'topside', 'ladder' and 'head'.

There were overhead fluorescent lights in NCR that cast their unremitting glare upon us day and night, highlighting the dark circles under our eyes and the ink stains on our collars. This bleak illumination created an oppressive sense of doom. I sometimes felt we were all prisoners of war locked in an interrogation room, an image gained from current movies. I recall that it was always a relief to escape briefly to the dimly lit corridors with their companionable shadows.

Three years, the years of passage from girlhood to womanhood, Julie and I spent there. Day watch, mid watch, night watch...eighth out of every twenty-four hours...as
female officers in the Navy we each replaced a male officer who went to sea. We handled the secret codes necessary for all wartime communications and were privy to the secret information revealed therein. 'A slip of the lip could sink a ship' was no mere slogan to us. Ours was an awesome responsibility.

Josef Stalin was 'Man of the Year' on Time Magazine's cover in December, 1942, when World War II, for America, was only twelve bloody months old. Every man I knew was in the service, somewhere. By virtue of taking a crash course in Geometry in order to qualify, (the one observable deficiency in sixteen years of education), my enlistment in the new women's branch of the Navy was accepted. The first woman from my state -- which put my picture on the front page of the state's biggest newspaper.

Julie and I encountered each other in the throng of girls at the depot in Springfield, Massachusetts, and knew we were kindred spirits because we each carried a book. Mine wasn't new: a plan for English-speaking democracies called Union Now. Hers was James Reston's Prelude To Victory. Although her clothes struck me as flashy -- I wore the classic wool suit and camel's hair coat that had been de rigueur on trips to college -- and her excessive make-up would have provoked my mother to dub her 'common', we recognized each other as fellow-intellectuals. Former intellectuals, that is. Incon-
seriously, along with all the others, we were apprentice sea-
men, scheduled to become Midshipmen after one month's
training, and after several more, Naval Officers. We'd be
entitled, just like men, to burial with flags in the Nation-
al Cemetery!

"All hands on deck!" I first heard this unfamiliar
command on the fourth floor of Rockefeller dormitory on
the Mt. Holyoke College campus, and had a distressing
sense that I had sold myself into slavery for a handful
of brass buttons. Julie's loud laugh dispelled my gloom,
though she stopped laughing at commands soon after.

Patriotism was the primary reason I had volunteered
for service in the WAVES but, admittedly, I was swayed by
the fact that officer training was to take place at Smith,
the college from which I'd been graduated the year before.
That unknown circumstances placed my contingent of train-
ees at 'The Hole' dismayed me.

Julie, a C.C.N.Y. graduate, did not understand my
disappointment. I explained that in my time, girls at
'The Hole' were grinds and seldom seen on weekends at
Yale or Dartmouth.

"Don't destroy my illusions about the Seven Sisters,"
Julie remarked drily. 'Aren't the exclusive female
colleges devoted exclusively to higher learning?'

I remember wondering why it's always the less pri-
ileged who bring class distinctions into ordinary con-
versation but I responded lightly, 'Everybody's party
days are over. There can't be any men on Ivy League campuses now.' With my newly acquired fervor, I added, 'We should have been in this war two years ago, when the Luftwaffe was bombing Britain to bits!' To be truthful, in the winter of 1940, my interest in Britain was limited to a bright metal lapel pin emblazoned 'Bundles for Britain' that I wore to classes. I called myself a non-interventionist. Isolationism was strong in my home state; the nationwide crusade for 'America First' began there.

With the attack on Pearl Harbor, of course, we native midwesterners, like the rest of the nation, were shocked into belligerence. We would pay the Japs back; our men and arms would help our courageous allies, Britain and the Soviet Union, defeat the Nazis. My father, fond of truisms, said, 'It's different when your own ox is gored.'

Because our last names began with W, Julie and I were assigned to the same billet in Rockefeller Hall. Our initial gathering was marked by greetings from our commanding officer, a crusty crewcut male, unmistakably 'regular navy'.

'Welcome aboard the good ship Rockefeller!' his voice boomed. There was no levity in his tone. We were all solemnly attentive. 'Now hear this! You look like civilians in the clothes you wore here. That will change; you will soon be in uniform. You may still feel like civilians,
deciding when you will go to bed and when you will get up; that, too, will change. You volunteered to serve your country in her time of peril and for as long as the struggle my last. So hereafter you are subject to naval regulations."

Julie and I stole a glance at one another. I thought I saw a fierce sort of dedication in her eyes; I'm sure she saw it in mine.

'You are no longer private individuals,' he thundered. 'You are only gobs in a man's navy. And you won't be allowed to forget it!' He strode away, his retreating figure as imposing from the back as from the front. There was a shuffling of feet and a gush of whispers. 'Now to make a girl feel desexed!' Julie muttered.

'Attention!' A stalwart woman in uniform whose stance suggested previous employment as a warden in a women's reformatory introduced herself as the executive officer of this station. 'Be advised that, like men reserve officer's training programs, you will be graded on military aptitude. On the way you drill, enter and leave classes and behave at the approach of an officer. And, of course, on your classwork. Most of you came here direct from college. Be advised that your life here is not like college. You will spend every waking hour training to take your place in a man's navy.' She stared at us briefly as if expecting to see our biceps swell and our bosoms shrink. 'Some of you
will be found unfit for service. Those who are will be discharged and sent home. We glanced from side to side. A sick lump of worry formed in my throat. Unfit...how awful! After my picture appeared on the front page!

'Dismissed. You may go to the restroom; it's known as the 'head'. Report to the drill field in ten minutes.'

Julie and I hurried but we were sixth and seventh in one of five lines. 'I'm already constipated,' Julie whispered. 'What'll I do?'

'You're lucky. There may not be time to do anything.'

I was aware that somebody behind me had wet her pants.

'Silence while lined up for the head!' a voice shouted.

Before that first day of duty was over, we knew there was nothing comical about females subjected to male-oriented regimentation. There was no time for smalltalk and giggling anyway. From early morning until 'lights out', we were herded about, silent as sheep, to and from chow lines, lecture halls and the drill field. We were constantly cautioned that all information about our training was 'restricted', not to be divulged to any civilian, not even to our parents.

Along with our two older roommates, Worth, a buyer in ladies ready-to-wear from Boston, and Mycliffe, Connecticut Women's Golf Champion, 1939-1942, Julie and I obtained the minimal uniform: blue service jacket and skirt, two white blouses and one blue one, neckerchief, gloves, raincoat and a hat that was unique. 'Fit isn't essential,' the uni-
form officer said, 'Since not all of you will earn your Ensign's stripe.'

'Warnings like that are just part of the discipline,' Worth tried to comfort us. But we all worried. I studied more diligently than ever before, even for my cram course in geometry.

On our first liberty, (two hours on Saturday), Julie bought mineral oil and prunes while I had my shoes resoled. I thought her frequent references to elimination distasteful. Her mother, obviously, had not been as fastidious as mine.

We neophyte seamen had difficulty avoiding violations of the rules. Julie got a demerit because her clothes were hung improperly for Saturday inspection. 'Longs hang together, shorts hang separately,' the C.O. murmured. Then he ran his white-gloved hand over my bunk rail and dust appeared on his fingers. I got a demerit, too.

Worth was reprimanded twice for not following the order, 'Company halt!' and 'Mycliffe, who failed to salute an officer, was warned of a dishonorable discharge.

'Whispering after hours, we agreed that all this regimentation might be necessary for enlisted personnel but we were college graduates preparing to be officers and it insulted our intelligence. We were eager to get about the business of winning the war. Square corners on our sheets were hardly a measure of our capabilities. Still, each morning, we snapped to attention, were punctilious about
obeying orders and made great efforts to perform according to naval regulations.

Behavior Modification was an academic embryo in those days but its efficacy was assured by the ease with which wartime indoctrination was administered. The oath I took, parroting an impressively large and dignified naval commander, his unfortunate malocclusion notwithstanding, made me 'a proud participant in America's military force.' I felt myself to be committed body and soul for the duration. No restrictions of freedom or indignities of training could alter my heady conviction that my service would hasten the day of victory over my country's enemies.

Classwork at 'The Hole' was far more demanding than in college. 'Ships and Aircraft' was first on my daily schedule.

'A naval officer is expected to identify properly all military aircraft and naval vessels, our own and the enemy's, in a fraction of a second,' the instructor said. 'Your textbook includes profile, head-on, and quarter-turn illustrations of aircraft and general configuration, tonnage and displacement of naval vessels. You will memorize distinguishing features and be tested weekly on your identification speed. The Lieutenant flipped a switch and a slide appeared on the classroom screen. 'This is an Air-force F-35. Note the twin tail assembly.' Swiftly, the slide changed. 'This is a F-51, called a Mustang; note
the nose... And this is a German Messerschmidt... This, a Mitsubishi Zero.'

'I'll bet he wishes he were flying,' I mused, 'Not showing slides to female seamen.' I was later to learn that by some men such stateside assignments were considered enviable, had it all over the glory of such ventures as Doolittle's B-25 raid on Tokyo.

Ships were easier to identify than aircraft. In a week, I memorized the configuration of the Shokaku, the tonnage of our Maryland and how to distinguish between a destroyer and a destroyer escort. Two months later, I'd forgotten everything; a Stuka dive bomber looked like a Catalina Flying boat, a minesweeper like a cruiser. I was only to see their names on paper.

Julie was aware of this and complained: 'We'll never serve on shipboard. This training is nonsense. Our mandate says we'll replace shore-based officers and free them for active duty.'

'That might change,' I ventured hopefully. 'Look at the British Wrens. I read they're doing more men's jobs all the time.'

'You believe everything you read?' I thought Julie was joking until she added, 'Didn't they teach you to think for yourself at your fancy alma mater?'

How, despite her frequent jibes, I was entranced with Julie is no mystery. She seemed vibrant and stimulating, as different from the girls I had known before as Eggs Gene-
dict from plain poached eggs. She had definite opinions about everything. Obviously, she hadn't wasted precious college time dreaming of a Yale-blue Heaven, or whiled away ten hours on the Boston and Maine to spend one evening at the Famous Door. She hadn't suffered forty-eight hour hangovers from milling around on all-social weekends at Hanover. My old friend Goldie, who had a language all his own, would call Julie a 'sad galoot'. Yet she was as pretty as any Ipana model. She just didn't know how to waste time playing.

A few months after college graduation, I wished I could live those years over again; I'd have foresworn partying and tried to make Phi Beta. Julie had made it in her junior year.

It was usually in the light of her waspish remarks that I found myself questioning some of my basic assumptions. This exhilarated me. Authorities couldn't be infallible. Why was I disposed to think they were?

Preparing to study one evening, I observed, 'I suppose our training is the same as men reservists' because there hasn't been time to devise special training for women.'

Julie wedged her copy of Naval Leadership between Fighting Fleets and A Short History of the Navy. 'The regular navy's going to look down on all of us, male or female. They're trained to be martinet; we come from the undisciplined masses.'
'Oh, I don't know. I used to date an Annapolis man,' I said. 'He'd get drunk and recite part of the Bluejacket's Manual in pig latin.'

'I know for a fact that the navy's theory is memorize details and you'll comprehend generalities later.' She gave a snort. 'Take learning the parts of an eighteen-foot torpedo before tomorrow. We'll never even see one.'

'Aren't you glad? I'd be terrified.'

'Sissy,' she said.

I made a mistake in doing well on our initial typing test. It placed me in the advanced class, while Julie was assigned to intermediate. That night she confided that she had hoped to be rated a beginner; she deliberately made mistakes. 'I don't want to operate a machine as my war duty, do you?'

'With my new knowledge of 'Naval Organization Ashore and Afloat', I asserted, 'There are forty-seven branches in which enlisted men can serve. Surely an officer can do better things than operate a machine.'

Julie's foresight, it turned out, was correct. In our first week, scuttlebutt had it that all the WAVES in our class would be trained in Communications, and that we'd operate machines similar to typewriters for the duration.

The summer of my enlistment I'd undergone a complete physical exam with old Doc West at home to submit with my application. He'd cared for my grandparents before they
moved to California. I might as well have been examined in absentia for the doctor merely took my blood pressure, felt my pulse and asked if my periods were regular. Then he wrote normal in all the appropriate blanks.

'I'm overage or I'd join the navy, too,' he said. 'It's a cleaner life.'

I remembered that remark one day at 1500 when it was my turn for the required second physical at the station and I was examined by the medical officer, a swarthy man who needed a shave. He looked like a former wrestler and appeared to leer at me. I wondered why, huddling under my sheet on the examining table, when he'd seen one WAVE after another all day for a week.

'Well, Miss, let's see if all your parts are in order,' he said and flung off my sheet with one hand to mercilessly probe my stomach with the other. I gritted my teeth. 'Tender, eh? A few more weeks of drill will fix those flabby muscles.' A navy nurse handed him a rubber glove. 'Open up!' I lay rigid, knees locked. No pelvic exam had ever been considered necessary in Doctor West's examining room.

'God, another tightass! I'll take sea duty anytime over a ten hour day examining cunts!' I'd never heard the word spoken aloud. Some college boys used to say, 'Fardon my French,' whenever they used a word like 'Damn' in front of girls.

None too gently, the nurse parted my knees and advised me to relax or it would hurt. I couldn't and it did. As
though I were a wad of taffy in his grip, he addressed the nurse in a mocking falsetto: 'I don't mind the lung x-ray, Doctor, but why give me the Conn test? I've never been exposed to any dreadful social disease. Unless I happened to pick it up from a public toilet.' My eyes smarting under tightly closed lids, I could hear my mother's early warning to 'always hover several inches above public toilets.'

Deprived of all dignity, I endured his rough examination of my breasts and deemed no response necessary when he departed with the taunt that he hoped my 'sensibilities' wouldn't prohibit my leaving him a urine sample. Manipulating the little bowl between my legs, I couldn't urinate until my revulsion at being manhandled gave way to a determination that if I were discharged, it wouldn't be for 'failure to meet physical requirements of the navy.'

'Within a few weeks, Worth, the eldest of our bunkmates, washed out. She had developed high blood pressure. She cried and we cried with her. How could she possibly feel a part of the war effort in her old ready-to-wear job at Filene's?"

To alleviate the ubiquitous worries, I suppose, the chaplain gave each of us a songbook. There was printed assurance in the forward that 'singing people are happy people.' In former happy times, though tone-deaf, I'd sung lustily at fraternity sings and on beer picnics. The lyrics to such songs as 'Fve Gee Sweetheart' and 'Violets' and 'When the Deacon Goes Down' remain in my caapi-
cious memory to this day. But I failed to muster much enthusiasm for the sappy refrains adapted for the WAVES' song-book. The absence of 'something to wet my whistle' may have been a factor; throughout training, liquor was forbidden, even on liberty.

Such lines as:

'Singing, thick cotton stockings and coats of navy blue
You'll have to discard the gear you brought with you.'

made a mockery of 'Bell Bottom Trousers' in my opinion and the peppy tune of 'This Is The Army' was not enhanced by:

'This is the navy, Ensign Kidd
You keep your boyfriend's picture hid.'

Julie was provoked to mutter, 'This war will be the death of grammar.' I was an English major, too, and shuddered. Still, I managed to chant with the rest:

'North and south and east and west
We're marching as one.
We are here to serve our country
Til the war is done.'

I had willingly sacrificed all personal freedom for the duration. And 'duration', for all I knew, could stretch for my lifetime.

Worth's place in our billet was taken by Walker, a brawny writer for confession magazines before enlisting in our nobler calling. Now, sitting in my study staring out at the budding forsythia, it amuses me to think that before I knew Walker I'd believed that 'confessions' were written by the victims, not professional writers.

She was good at interpreting scuttlebutt, we thought. 'Some of us will be going to Lakehurst Naval Air Station,
some to the base at Norfolk, and some to the Naval District in San Francisco,' she prophesied.

'We'll be the only girls among hundreds of eligible men!' Julie exulted.

Many months later, halfway through night watch in war-weary Washington, the inertia peculiar to pre-dawn working hours would set in and I would think longingly of duty in the romantic places Walker had been so certain we'd be sent. There'd be action at the bases, navy yards and ports we only read about in the truncated messages that flowed through our smoky, paper-strewn office. To live in New York or San Francisco or Norfolk where we could see our sleek grey warships slipping in and out of harbour would make even tedious communications tasks seem a more vital part of the war effort.

Not that I wasn't aware of the prestige of the Naval Code Room in Washington. Admiral King and his staff were provided by us with intelligence input from all theaters of war. Through us, his messages went to the fleet. Without us, no total assessment of the status of the war effort was possible. Hadn't I recently decoded an urgent message from Seventh Fleet Headquarters to C.N.C. classified Top Secret? Its importance was clear: 'CONTACTED ARMY AREA COMMANDER RE CLOSE AIR CORPS SUPPORT MY STRIKE (460 X UNABLE CONVICT URGENT!) THIS OPERATION X REQUEST YOU INTERCEPT OCC USA TO DIVERT FIGHT GROUP 117 FROM ROUTINE MOP-UP PALAU X ADVISE IMMEDIATELY X HALSEY.'
One of us encoded the reply. If successful, it might be learned later that this strike was a turning point in the struggle for the South Pacific.

I wondered what action took place after I decoded a sighting report from the ALBACORE directed to CINCPAC with info to CNO: 011752ZAPR - CRS 130 SPD 27 FIVE ENEMY DD THREE CA TWO CV AT 1647 DASH 36 DASH 51F SLANT 28 DASH 17 DASH 23N.' Was CONSEVENTH FLT directed to divert the YORKTOWN toward that remote spot in the Pacific? Perhaps one of her Hellcats sank a Jap cruiser forthwith.

Although I was aware that even logging and duplicating such messages was as necessary as any job an officer could do on shore, still, visions of exchanging salutes with a handsome C.O. on the gangway of the new battleship IOWA would float through my head. I'd be piped aboard the same way as Captain Mildred McAfee or any male officer and invited into the wardroom to be served a meal by Filipino mess boys, and during inspection of the vessel I'd be saluted by scores of crew members, and then when I'd request permission to leave the deck, the C.O., with a perfectly straight face, might say, 'Permission denied, Ensign.' What then?

Daydreaming in my study now, I wonder if Julie and I might have remained fast friends if we'd both been assigned to one of the exotic places I used to dream about during night watch in Washington. I wonder if we might have been in contact through all the years since then and maybe -- it was certainly possible -- changed the course of each
other's postwar lives.

I recollect that Christmas of 1942 came and went, unremarked and uncelebrated. The outpost of our Pacific defenses, Guam and Wake Island, had fallen. My father wrote that civilians were being urged to prepare for a long war.

We who had been seamen at 'The Hole' became Midshipmen on the fourth deck of the Hotel Northampton. From there, each day I led Platoon 2, Company 7, down Park Street and up Prospect to typewriters installed in the twin Smith houses, Northrup and Gillett. I led, not because I knew the territory but because I was tall.

Gillett was the Smith house I had called home for the four years just passed, the years of 'Bundles for Britain', 'No Foreign Wars' and 'I didn't raise my son to be a soldier'. Long gone were the 'gentlemen callers' who drove down from Amherst or up from Yale to lounge on the porch balustrade. Gone, as well, were the obsequious maids who cleaned our rooms and waited tables; they'd gone to work in Connecticut Valley defense factories. And pious Miss Fush, our housemother, who found my midwestern twang deplorable, apparently she, too, had vanished, along with the tranquillity of college life in peacetime.

As we stepped to the cadence, 'Hup, two, three, four,' glimpses of the college girls on Elm Street revealed them as mere children, dressed not in flappers but in shapeless Gloppy Joes, in rundown losers, not saddle shoes,
and their beer jackets had army insignia sewn on them helter-skelter.

Our Mainbocher-designed uniforms had transformed us in a few short weeks into strong, capable women ready to serve the fleet. Recruiting posters had already appeared in which we looked the part. No matter that our uniforms emphasized shoulders rather than busts, or that narrow skirts were unflattering to legs. Or that, at least for the moment, we served at typewriters installed in dormitory dining rooms, day after day after day.

Ultimately, we received our Ensign's gold bars and most of us, our travel vouchers. Walker, who ranked highest in grades, did not; she was relegated to the teaching staff. Wycliffe, who had the typical New Englander's conception of America, was dismayed to be assigned to the Ninth Naval District at Great Lakes. Julie and I, and all the rest, were ordered to 'proceed without delay' to the nation's capitol.

"A stranger's taking a leak in the downstairs can!" Daniel's after-school grumpy face appears at my shoulder.

"Hey, Kid, all clear." A deep male voice is heard downstairs.

"It's Ray, a friend of mine," I explain in a whisper. "I mean, the son of an old friend in the WAVES." We hurry down.

"Startled you, did I, Kid?"
"Ray, this is Daniel." I've been used to first-names-only since girls began dropping by the house to see my sons. 'Hi, I'm Susan, is Bill home?'; 'Hi, I'm Karen. Where's Frank?'

"Ray who?" Dan says. Maybe, as in all things, reaction is setting in with the new generation.

"Ray, who?" The stranger smiles. "I often wonder. But they call me Ray Weller."

A pair of bikes squeak to a stop on the drive and Dan rushes outside. I lead Ray into the living room. Seated, we eye each other speculatively. I see a rather unkempt person with Julie's hazel eyes and her high coloring, but without her full mouth. His is delicately modeled, his expression, wry. To me, he is a boy, but as Annabel said, he is unquestionably a man, perhaps thirty or more. I realize with chagrin that he sees a dowdy matron with frowzy hair, sagging chin and a winter-sallow complexion.

Surprisingly, he says, "You're nice. I knew the moment I saw you that you'd take me in. You're not afraid of people. Prepared to like them, in fact."

'Nice.' I used to hate that word. My mother would say, 'Nice girls don't smoke... Nice girls don't drink... Nice girls don't allow boys to take liberties,' (her euphemism for 'neck'). Then she'd praise the daughter of one of her friends whom I particularly despised. I couldn't wait to start a career of smoking, drinking and necking.

But now that there aren't many compliments of any kind,
not even 'Gee Mom, you look better than most moms,' plain 'nice' sounds good to me. But 'unafraid'? He doesn't know me at all.

"Well, yes." I manage a smile. "Particularly the son of a dear friend. Annabel, Mrs. Carswell, told me you might come to the midwest. I heard the sad news about your mother from her. Please know you have my heartfelt sympathy."

He nods, his face grave. Then he grins a little. "I guess the strangest feeling is knowing I'm an orphan now."

I offer him a beer and pour myself a glass of sherry. We settle down to talk.

Unlike Julie, I have always had the notion that it was rude to search a person's face for clues to his thought. Occasionally, I glance covertly at Ray as he speaks but for the most part, I gaze out the window. I don't want to see loneliness or regret reflected on his face. I haven't time these days for a stranger's problems.

He had settled in a New Hampshire commune after college, 'which took a while because I dropped out to protest, like a lot of others.' "Then the commune broke up, he bummed around Europe for a year, then got into construction work in New England, finally went to Florida. "I hadn't seen Mother for several years. Dropped in on her, like. And a week later she was dead."

He's another victim of the Sixties, I think, murmur- ing, "That a shock. Sad for you." He was born the year before my Sara, which makes him just thirty. "I lost all
contact with your mother," I tell him. "Didn't know she married, or where she lived."

"I found a scrapbook full of clippings among her things. Have it with me. You can follow her career, if you like. The only letter she saved refers to you. Made me think that her friendship with you -- its break-up, rather -- had something to do with the way she lived."

Oh, God! Do I have to take the blame for someone else's mistakes, someone else's foolish choices? I gave all that up after my fiftieth birthday when I realized I had only a quarter of a century more on earth, if that. Like the young, I've taken to seeking my own selfhood since; my college studies help. It isn't easy to give up the habit of apologizing for other people's sins. Not easy to believe that I'm not, that I can't be, responsible for the psychological health and happiness of anybody else, even my own offspring.

Ray is grinning. I'm such a poor dissimulator. "Look, I'm not trying to lay my trip on you," he says. "It's no big deal. I'm curious about my mother, that's all."

My sons are fond of the phrase 'no big deal'. And my spouse, the lawyer, repeatedly warns, 'Don't make a capital case out of it!' But for thirty years I have lived and crises and I still do. All of them domestic and in the end unimportant. I notice the lethargy and loss of appetite that signals sickness in a child, the twitch about the mouth or the shuffle becoming a limp which means another
slight stroke in an elderly parent. I hear the cry of terror in the night and go to comfort the restless dreamer. I've spent years soothing defeated baseball pitchers, class office seekers and teenagers disappointed in love. The minutiae of family life inspires George to refer to me frequently as a 'tyrant of the trivial'.

'It's no big deal, Mom,' Bill said, calling from Emergency the time he went through a windshield. Tom said, 'It's no big deal, Mom,' when he was mauled by a Husky and needed forty stitches. People laugh when George tells the story about his golf partner who urged the foursome not to linger on the greens since he had to finish his round in time for his mother's funeral. Odd that what's 'no big deal' to men and boys is highly significant to women, especially mothers.

"Ray, I'd like to be able to satisfy your curiosity about Julie. But I wonder... it was so long ago. We were both girls. We lived together only a couple of years." I pause. "But perhaps something will come to me that might interest you."

I send him to Tom's room with his pack and mutter something about dinner. Going down to the cellar, I put in a wash as usual and study the contents of the freezer. George has a bar association meeting and will be late. A small sirloin will do for three.

Daniel agrees to do the steak on the grill. I put together a noodle casserole and Ray emerges from the shower
to insist on making a salad. I open some wine and we are engaged in small talk when Daniel suddenly asks, as all his brothers asked before him, "How come you joined the WAVES, Mom? That hat I used to play with! You must have looked like a freak!"

Those navy blue hats with the white head covers and heavy insignia were something between the Breton Sailor of my childhood and the Empress Eugenie fad to which my mother succumbed in the Thirties. Now the Meter Maids in Des Moines wear hats just like the WAVES.

At first, they felt heavy; a small cap made of feathers was in my civilian wardrobe. Julie practiced stretching her short neck so she'd have a queenly posture. During the hatless decades that followed, I've been amazed at the durability of those WAVE bonnets. Of course they were protected from Washington's seasonal drizzles with dark havelocks like the wimples on medieval princesses; we thought these were becoming, especially as compared to male officer's see-through 'icebox covers'. Yet after more than three years of daily wear, mine kept its shape for years of Halloween wear by innumerable neighborhood children. Finally, its shape still intact, Dan tried to convert it into a sailboat and it foundered in the Raccoon River, not to be seen again.

In the Fifties, I used to answer 'Why did you join the WAVES?' with the declaration: 'To help win the war!' But that response would mystify Daniel; as a kindergartner
in the late Sixties, he went along with me to peace rallies. With parents as old as we are, he'll always have a distorted sense of history, I fear. So I tell him now, "I joined the WAVES to look like a freak in a silly hat. What else?"

Ray does not feel demeaned by helping me clear the table for dessert -- a step toward equality of the sexes that I appreciate. And Annabel was right; he is an intellectual, or seems to be.

"I majored in Poly Sci at Princeton," he is saying. "I can understand how America abandoned isolationism right after Pearl Harbor. Especially with a leader like Franklin Roosevelt. And Lord knows, I've heard enough about the war from old men, professors, my friends' fathers, to make me think it was the high point in their lives. But I confess that I..."

Roosevelt. Who could ever forget his distinguished voice on the radio as he addressed Congress after the 'day of infamy'? And Churchill. That magnificent speech, 'We shall fight on the beaches, on the landing grounds...in the fields and in the streets. We shall never surrender.' Was it their words that made us feel compelled to give up anything -- everything -- for victory that seemed impossible at the start? Why are we still sentimental about a time of death and destruction? The reason may be that it was a simpler time, when the issues were clear and defined, when patriotism motivated people and the only alternatives were victory or defeat.
"But I'll confess I'm still baffled by the apparently universal sense of personal involvement. You and Mrs. Carswell and Mother, for instance. Girls weren't drafted and there was no social pressure to volunteer, was there?"

I shake my head. How can I explain why some women felt so personally involved in that war they clamored to join the services? And were totally committed, as they say today, to work that was often dull and difficult?

Sometime later I learned that out of a total of sixteen million people in uniform only a small percentage were females. And one historian of the Forties claims that to most of the country's women, the war was a colossal four-year bore. He suggests that they sat around reading magazines like Mademoiselle and Glamour and singing the popular song, "They're Either Too Young or Too Old." Knowing that civilian women as old as my mother and kids then beginning to be called 'bobby-soxers' volunteered daily in Red Cross Centers everywhere makes me quarrel with his assumption. I believe women working in defense industries felt as vital a part of the war effort as servicemen. Certainly every woman had worry in her heart about one man in a war zone at least. A four-year bore? I disagree.

I do wonder how the girls we were then became the women we are now. We provided the climate for all the changes in attitudes our children can take credit for. It could be said that we built the hothouses for seedlings that became revolutionaries. That's a heavy meta-
This young man might laugh at it.

He's saying something about his generation's anti-war movement. "There was cohesion in our protests -- an easy alignment of the young against the old."

We were girls, Annabel and Sue and Julie and I, who learned how to live with men by having to live without them, I muse. Did that make for a different kind of motherhood?

"Of course it didn't last, that unity. Now, it's each person for him or herself. Mother was born too soon. She was, you know, more like one of us."

Julie? I thought her very much a person of our times. But she would have liked to hear 'born too soon'. It sounds better with each succeeding birthday to all of us.

"How do you mean? She was a romantic. We all were."

"But you," he makes a palm-up gesture suggesting my house, my lifestyle -- that silly word, "Obviously you grew up. She refused to. The perennial girl. That's why I was such a burden. Each year, a reminder that time doesn't stand still."

The wine bottle is empty. Though Ray's draining his glass, I decide against opening another. George will be home soon, to find me entertaining a stranger. He may note that I've put on cologne, used hairspray, even mouthwash. Which might suggest that I am investing this encounter with an intimation of sexuality. I'm not. Only trying to make the best of my deteriorating appearance. I might remind
George that my mention of the pretty new bank teller who asked if 'the handsome man with the goatee' was my husband made him appear to preen.

Ray has brought his mother's scrapbook downstairs. It bulges with clippings from newspapers, a variety of women's magazines such as McCall's and The Journal in the old large format, and there's material from Life, Time and Newsweek. Near the back, TV Guide and Ms. There are countless pictures of Julie in various poses. They are all so alike! Annabel was right; Julie apparently never aged. The texts and captions praise a 'glamorous TV personality.'

How different from the scrapbooks piled in the back of a closet on my second floor! A haphazard photographic history is in them, along with report cards, awards and ribbons, dozens of handmade valentines and birthday cards and news articles mentioning my husband's involvement in community affairs. My mother saved my newspaper picture from the time of my enlistment; it's probably there, too.

"I can't believe I missed reading about your mother even if I didn't happen to see her on television."

"Close inspection will reveal some of these clips are mere mentions. Some are interviews. Only a few might be called rave reviews of performances." He shrugs. "She didn't make it really big but I'm sure she thought of herself as a celebrity."

"Aren't you proud? To have a successful mother?"

He doesn't answer because George appears at that
moment. I feel as though the thick scrapbook between Ray and me on the windowseat is a palpable presence -- Julie herself -- and I am impatient to read it but now an attempt at conversation is necessary.

"You hitchhiked from Florida to Des Moines?" George gives me a look that says "drifter". "Going to Durango, you think? Did Mary tell you we have friends near there, about forty miles north, I think. Beautiful country. It was four, no five years ago we were there."

Daniel comes in, sweaty. It's his bedtime. He can't find his dog.

"Go on to bed anyhow. Heather will come home."

Ray says he'll hit the sack. He's never read Sandburg's Lincoln, noticed it in the library. Could he take it upstairs?

In our bedroom, George asks, "Is your young friend going to stay long?"

"Long enough to finish the Lincoln, you mean? I doubt it."

"I'm surprised you're being so hospitable. When the boys' college friends came through town you'd make sure they had a road map, first thing."

"This is a man. And he takes showers. Moreover, his mother was my best friend." I hadn't made up my mind about Ray yet. A Princeton graduate and still on the road.... "Julie was a celebrity and I didn't even know it!"

George always flosses his teeth before me. I open the
book on our bed. There's a pocket in front containing loose mementoes, playbills, travel brochures, notes and clippings. A blank postcard advertising the Intercontinental Hotel in Curacao. I go in the bathroom and wave it in front of George, sputtering over the Waterpik. "Remember our lovely room there last year?" He is not to be diverted.

After my own bedtime ritual, I settle against my pillows, stuffing the memorabilia back in the pocket. I skim through a September 1947 article from the Miami Herald, a Radio News column: 'Newcomer Julie Weller is bright spot on morning women's interest show, "Around Town", a new series featuring interviews with visiting celebs, food talk, where-to-go.'

What fun it must have been to embark upon such a career after our three long years in that dismal coderoom! Thinking back, a job like that, part-time, perhaps, would have been compatible with the marriage and motherhood we spent the war years yearning for. Possibly, at the start, for Julie it was merely an avocation.

Opposite, a page from a Guide to Visitors' booklet pictures Julie under the caption, 'Radio and TV personality hosts hotel fashion show.' The smile is the same as I remember it. The smooth, thick, bronze-colored hair I used to envy is almost the same, longer than we were allowed to wear it in the WAVES, and old-fashioned now, of course, with those cascading curls. The eyes have the familiar expression of demanding attention. 'Don't you dare ignore
me!' she seems to say. In life, she seemed to say the same thing.

Julie had the knack of focusing on her companion's eyes with the kind of confrontation Assertiveness Training manuals recommend these days. She was never intimidated, as I was so often, by bus drivers and sales clerks, not to mention superior officers.

We looked for permanent quarters in Washington with Annabel, who'd been in my platoon. All three of us were delighted to find a furnished duplex on Nebraska Avenue at the corner of Connecticut.

There were three bedrooms. 'Mary and I'll share the double room,' Julie announced forthwith, without consulting me. 'And we'll find another AWRE for the third bedroom.' This seemed a natural arrangement because Annabel, assigned to Admiral King's office staff, worked slightly different hours.

Sue Hall became the fourth member of our household and we agreed upon the sharing of rent and cleaning tasks. We made no rules; we were naval officers, not college girls. Before long, the men who took us out or came to our parties were calling our house the 5034 Club.

I was the only one who was more or less engaged. The man who snores beside me now was then an officer candidate who'd broken a collarbone on an obstacle course which delayed his being commissioned. It was assumed we would marry as soon as he recovered, certainly prior to his embark-
tion overseas. Although my search for a mate was over, I had a number of platonic friends left over from college days who, from time to time, would pass through Washington. Thus, my situation was enviable and my friendships an advantage in the 5034 Club.

Work dominated our lives. Julie and I were assigned to the Naval Code Room, privileged, as officers, to handle all classified communication between ship and shore and between naval bases around the world -- those not lost to the enemy. In NCR, despatches ranging in priority from urgent to deferred were encoded and decoded, copied, reproduced and distributed. The labor of several dozen officers twenty-four hours a day every day of the year was required to move the staggering volume of wartime traffic. At no time was any member of the work force idle. Nobody, in Daniel's terms, spent time ' goofing off ', that is, until the tide of war changed in our favor and some of us grew restive.

Sue and Annabel worked in another wing of the building. On slow night watches, it was exciting to visit the COMINCH map room with its enormous floor to ceiling facsimile of the world's water surface. The map bristled with colored pins, each one representing a naval vessel or merchant ship. The courses of allied vessels and shipping were known to the sober-faced senior officers who contemplated the map. It was the probable course of enemy vessels that engaged their attention, often far into the night. The Nazi Wolf
Pack roamed the Atlantic and in the Pacific were the Japanese flattops with dive bombers whose pilots reputedly welcomed death in homage to Hirohito.

Awestruck, we'd watch a hovering Admiral's aide remove a pin. It meant that another allied ship had been torpedoed or was long missing and presumed sunk. On all of these ships were 'our men', on some, the men whose desks we WAVES now occupied. Perhaps one of them was the husband destined for Annabel, Julie or Sue. We used to want to believe that one man was born on earth for each of us; no amount of logic could hobble our fantasies.

As girls living without men are prone to do, we spent our leisure time washing our hair and our underwear, talking about love, and arguing about whose turn it was to do the housework. Fortunately, since we worked shifts around the clock, it was seldom that even three of us were awake at the same time in the 5034 Club. So, only one could be called to account when Annabel complained, 'Who ate up all the smoked bacon my mother sent me?' or Sue demanded, 'Who left all those dirty glasses in the sink?' Often, a discussion in hushed tones of a particularly disheartening series of despatches received while Julie and I were on watch was terminated by a wail, 'Somebody used up all the hot water!' These were trying times for girls who had been brought up to believe that at the approach of womanhood they would be living with a man in a home of their own.

We no more expected to be living with other women than
the men who used to sing to us on the dance floor, 'I'll spend my life making love to you, night and day, day and night' expected to be living with other men in tents, or in B.O.Q.s or below decks on a warship!

'You're not going to spend the rest of your life with women, you know. Your main purpose in life should be to learn how to get along with men,' was one of the lines considered smooth by men visiting my all-woman college.

Yet, as WAVES, we were luckier than civilian women. We spent our working hours in a man's world. And most of the men who directed the strategy of this global war were based in Washington, standing side by side with us on the Chevy Chase bus. Whatever happened in the capitol was deemed of paramount importance to people elsewhere; orders affecting the lives of each individual in service originated there. My Yale friend, hospitalized in Hawaii wrote: 'Tell somebody you know in Washington about the goldbricks over here. They all want a C.C.D.; we call it 'Can't do duty.' An Amherst friend who was hunting spies among the German brewmasters in St. Louis wrote: 'Doesn't Washington know what a waste of time this is? Tell somebody to send me where the action is.' George wrote: 'I'm sick of sitting on my ass, smoking too much and doing nothing but censor mail and shine my messkit.' Dealing with the symbols of power, as we did in NCR, was not the same as wielding it but sometimes we let ourselves think it was.

Awe-inspiring and demanding and occasionally exciting
as our life was, a life no woman before our time had ever
glimpsed, we still felt we were merely marking time. All
our daydreams reflected our yearning for the day when one
man would dominate our lives. To love, honor and obey this
man was our heart's desire.

George shifts his body beside me in the bed and re-
sumes his steady snore. I turn the pages of a dead woman's
memory book wondering when I will come upon a mention of
the man or men in her life. Suddenly, I hear, "Mom! Dad!"
and the sound of Daniel's seventy-eight pound body crash-
ing against our closed bedroom door. Each of our children
has been taught to consider it locked.

Instantly alert, George swings out of bed, steps to-
ward his bureau where, untouched for thirty years, his
forty-five automatic lies wrapped in a handkerchief. My
panic matches Daniel's: "What's wrong, Dan? What is it?"

"Heather's been hit by a car!" he sobs. George flings
open the door. Dan is on his knees holding his whimpering
pet. Our houseguest, in teeshirt and jockey shorts, is al-
ready scrutinizing the wound. "She was hit on the rump,"
Ray says. "I don't think any bones are broken."

George bends down and probes; once Heather yelps.
"I don't either. We'll have her x-rayed in the morning."

The men improvise a bandage, the dog is carried to
her basket, and I soothe Daniel. As we all go back to bed,
I thank Ray for helping. "I never had a dog as a kid."
he remarks.

The scrapbook has fallen open at a photograph of Julie taken at an awards banquet in the early days of television. She looks glamorous and worldly. I study her face; as it was when I knew her, it is lovely and self-assured. Ray would have been eight or nine years old then. Wouldn't she let her little boy have a dog? Maybe a woman so svelte and serene couldn't bring herself to clean up after a puppy.

I turn out the light, hoping Heather is asleep and unconscious of her wound. Dozing, I think about the dogs in my life. Peggy was our first Brittainy, a fearless hunter, perversely named for George's decorous Aunt Margaret. Peggy's first litter was born under Bill's bed. Josh, her son, liked to lick the baby. Would that be Frank, or was it Tom?

This morning I have a Child Guidance Center Board meeting. Fortunately, Board members handle policy, not patients; most of them, my age, have forgotten what children, well or ill, are like. Daniel complains of a headache and a sore foot as well, the moment he awakens. Prolonged experience in child-raising tells me he hopes to take Heather to the vet instead of going to school.

Ray appears, rubbing his eyes sleepily which makes him look younger. Last night, I noticed a bald spot on the back of his head. At thirty! "Hey, I'll take the dog to the vet for you. A walk'll wake me up."
"Heather can't walk!" Daniel whines.

"It's almost a mile," I protest.

"Heather rides in my backpack. And what's a mile?"

"Oh dear, I must hurry. Daniel, I'll drive you to school. Ray, there's eggs and orange juice. And if you would...Heather..." Things seem to pile up these days. Decisions, duties. Sometimes I don't even finish sentences. And time goes so fast! What did Annabel say on the telephone? March, she does laundry, then it's April.

The Center needs additional funding. The Chief Social worker is leaving for a new position. Three dozen uncollectibles should be written off. The Service Effectiveness Committee reports...The Mental Health Coordinating Board suggests...I'm struggling to suppress my yawns.

At home, Ray is once more stretched out on the sofa dozing, the Lincoln open on his chest. Long, spindly, a bit gaunt in repose, he has the appearance of a contemplative. He should have been an architect, a shipbuilder, a poet -- creating. But he's an enigma thus far, just as his mother, in my mind, has come to be. Once I thought I knew her so well!

We shared so much! Acute distress, for one thing. Julie was undemonstrative as a rule but her horror at the casualty lists matched mine. I remember when the entire watch spent eight straight hours at the ICMs after Saipan while the names of our men lost there emerged on the tapes. Like an interminable bill of lading, we posted up message
after message: From COMSEVENTH FLT to CNO via CINCPAC, info to Supers, BuMed, BuSandA.

Name, rank and serial number of turret captains, gunner’s mates, torpedoman’s mates, firecontrolmen, signalmen, radiomen, machinist’s mates, water tenders -- deceased or presumed downed, DEC or PDR. Not a few names of Ensigns, Lieutenants j.g. and full Lieutenants appeared; they might have been the men we replaced at our desks in the coderoom. Later I learned that 25,000 men were killed or wounded in Saipan. Still, this battle gave our B-29’s their first base in flying range of Japan, a priceless victory for Marine Lt. General ‘Howlin’ Mad’ Smith.

‘It’s slaughter,’ Julie said over and over as she pasted up tape. ‘We went to bed that night in stunned silence.

But we shared light moments, too, under those stark overhead lights. ‘Will you look at this!’ Julie called out one slow night as we caught up on the messages classified ‘Deferred’. The despatch came via the Commandant Marine Corps; Marine outhouses on shore at Malacca Strait were being destroyed by excessive wakes from passing vessels. CNO was requested to instruct ship’s officers to reduce speed to less than fifteen knots when navigating the strait. ‘It’ll spoil the navy’s fun,’ Julie hooted.

When I decoded a message for Mrs. Harry Hopkins from Lord Beaverbrook sent via COMNAVEN, Julie wanted the whole watch to sign a letter of indignation she proposed to send through channels. ‘A civilian using precious time and navy
code to send a personal message is outrageous!' She slammed her fist down on the watch officer's desk so hard the overflowing ashtray overturned on a pile of incoming despatches. I tried to reason with her; I shouldn't have shown her the message in the first place. 'Look, it's only a friendly note saying he's been worried about Harry Hopkins' health. Even Time reports on Hopkins' health now and then. He's important to our war effort; Beaverbrook knows that.' If our generation had coined the phrase, 'It's no big deal', I'd have said that.

The rest of the girls on Watch Four thought Julie was foolish to even consider a protest so I had to divert her. 'Lots of dumb things happen in wartime. Did I read you what George wrote about the merchantship he went over to Pearl on? The one that took 100,000 pounds of frozen beef aboard at one port by mistake and then had to dump it overboard so another 100,000 pounds could be loaded at a second port? Talk about waste!'

'I'll bet some disgruntled C.I. made that up so the navy would look bad,' she muttered darkly, the protest forgotten.

'We spent a lot of our free time philosophizing. About my inhibitions and her freedom from them. About male sensuality in general and that of some men in particular. We both knew married men whose wives and children were with them in Washington yet they'd proposition any girl in uniform. Julie shared my dismay at some of George's gloomy
V-mail: 'Each day over here is one more day some yellow-faced son-of-a-bitch owes me.'

How could I not know someone well with whom I spent every waking hour and slept beside each night for over two years!

It makes me wonder what I actually perceived, as I hear her son describe her. Seeing him in my house now, a thirty-year-old man, apparently purposeless in life, I also wonder what of her is in him. And who was his father?

I tiptoe away from the library but he calls out, "I'm am? The vet wants to keep Heather for a day or two. There may be some internal bleeding. Thinks she's okay though."

"Thank you for taking her. I was...uh...discombobulated this morning."

"It happens." He grins. "Anything I can do now? I had a first class breakfast. Want to earn my keep."

"Why, you don't have to do anything. A guest...."

"Wash windows? Paint? Sweep the drive?"

Then did my sons offer to do some work around the house? Only when they wanted a quid pro quo, a toy, a trip or some money. "Why can't you learn to direct your children to do what needs to be done around this house!" George demands periodically. 'It's not fair! I'm the only one here all the time," Daniel whimpers. My friends all agree there are no handymen-for-hire left in the whole city.

Now did four girls who worked our odd hours manage..."
house in wartime Washington? I don't remember anybody washing windows. I suspect we let such things go; after all, we were naval officers, not housewives. During married life, however, I've begged and bribed or done things myself. But now that I'm in school, I find I'm scarcely able to see the ravine through the rain-streaked kitchen windows.

Ray's offer tempts me but instead I say, "Why don't we look at your mother's scrapbook together now? I didn't have much chance last night." I'd brought it downstairs; now I sit at the library table. "Who was your father, Ray?"

"I don't know. He died before I was born. Mother reverted to her maiden name, claimed it sounded better on the air." He sits up and shrugs. "His successors, though -- one of them a bonafide stepfather -- didn't find me exactly compatible. So I started boarding school quite early."

"Daniel's age?"

"I was eight." He catches my look of sympathy. "Hey, I wasn't deprived. I had everything I ever asked for.

Even things I didn't think of like a sailboat, a kid's tour of Europe, even my own horse for awhile, until we moved back to New York."

"Then I knew Julie. New York was the last place she hoped to live. Because she'd been brought up there, I guess. Actually, she wanted to live in the Midwest. I was dying to live in the East. Even hoped George would take the New York bar when he came home from overseas. His judgment prevailed, though. Iowa is no paradise but it looks better
every year to me."

"Mother thought you'd leave your husband," Ray says abruptly. "For some guy named Clint. Didn't you read the letter in the front of the book?"

"Leave George for Clint? Oh, my Lord!"

"For some reason, she didn't mail the letter. Curious that she saved it. Since I found no mention anywhere of my father, I suspect she married him on the rebound after... well, you'll see." He jumps up and stands beside my chair; I can't procrastinate.

I finger the miscellany nervously; one old clipping tears -- a picture of a navy flier, no one I knew. The letter is in a franked envelope with Lt. Julie Keller in the corner over her serial number and a Wisconsin Avenue address for Clint; it could have been sealed once.

There's no salutation. 'After learning about you and my roommate, I locked myself in the head here at the Meridian and unwrapped a razor blade. I thought I was alone. Was staring on my wrist when some hysterical female began shouting for help, crying she'd scalded herself in the shower. I stopped and had second thoughts. Would my suicide hurt you or Mary? If not, why do it? I even thought of thanking the girl who was scalded for bringing me to my senses. Now I'm determined to find someone else to love. And before I let all my defenses down, I'll make sure that he loves me alone, that he wants me to make a home for him and have his baby. He won't be like you, Clint, who seems
to prefer a party girl like Mary who's probably deceiving her husband while he's overseas with others beside you. I'm not such a fool as to believe you only played golf together. You can go to hell together, too. After knowing you both, I'll be a different person hereafter. I won't trust anybody!' It was signed 'Julie'.

I look up to meet Ray's eyes. Is it scepticism, even amusement, I see there? People misread each other's expressions all the time. But he doesn't misread mine.

"You're incredulous, right?"

I nod. "Appalled."

"Look, I didn't know my mother well until I was in my teens. But this letter doesn't sound like the woman I knew. Everything about a home bored her, for one thing, and motherhood, too." He reaches for the letter, stuffs it back in the book and continues. "I can't fault her for not taking responsibility for me, though. Early on she saw to it I was cared for. But the few hours she managed to spend with me were taken up with discussions of her martyrdom -- 'raising a son all by myself'. Then she'd quiz me: 'Are you happy? What would make you happy?' I'd clam up. I couldn't help her raise her son and I didn't know what, if anything, would make me happy. I didn't know what happiness was, in fact."

I rise and walk over to the south window where I can see the Judas tree, so aptly named with its purple buds on bare boughs. I murmur, "It's easier to know what misery is." My mind is full of Julie; I can't think clearly. Now
dare she leave such a vicious hate-letter for her son to find after her death! On the phone, Annabel mentioned throwing things out so her kids wouldn't have to do so when she died. But I'm just as careless as Julie was. There may be letters, mementoes, all sorts of things in my desk I wouldn't want my children to discover. But nothing that reflects on somebody else's character! Nothing deliberately malicious!

Ray is pacing back and forth behind me, apparently caught up in his own memories. He says, "Yes," forcefully, as if my comment reflects his experience. "I remember she was always talking about the quality of the time she spent with me. Quality versus quantity. 'An hour of good heart-to-heart talk,' she'd say, 'Is far better than a whole day together without real communication.' But all my pals had full-time mothers and never had to suffer through these 'quality' hours of interrogation. I envied them."

I press my forehead against the cool glass of the window to order my thoughts. Julie could write a spiteful letter; yet she cared about the quality of her motherhood. Have I -- do I provide 'quality' mothering? How often I'm present in the flesh but far away in spirit? I can't count the times a child has waved his hand in front of my fixed gaze: 'What ya staring at, Mom?' And Daniel sometimes demands, 'Watch, Mom!' and adds, 'Hey, you're looking through me, not at me!'
Yet I've always been a full-time mother. Always I've been propelled into action by quick stabs of guilt about my lack of responsibility. During each child's infancy, there was no problem; complete helplessness generates responsibility. Besides, I've always believed that the degree to which we were nurtured and cared for in infancy determines the degree to which we are capable of nurturing and caring; I don't want my children deprived of this capacity. In childhood, I dutifully drove them to school, to after-school activities, to appointments with barbers, doctors, orthodontists. I conjured up words of comfort when they suffered psychological distress and provided bandages when distress was physical, not to mention frantic ambulance service to Emergency. But can I assume all this was 'quality' mothering when, often, my heart wasn't in it? Julie herself taught me to question easy assumptions. Was I simply investing my time, and not myself?

I was certainly more attuned to my first child than the others; one is a novice and a learner, totally absorbed in the experience of motherhood. Gradually, with each new child, I regained a sense of selfhood. The boys would wonder, 'How come grown-ups like to just sit around and talk?'; they were forever tunneling each other, racing, building, doing. 'We're different people and like different things,' I'd explain. Bill came home from college with the flip axiom, 'Different strokes for different folks.' I guess I learned about individuality from my children, my own and
theirs. Perhaps the children themselves gave 'quality' to my mothering.

At twilight, Ray is playing catch with Daniel in the side yard when Bill appears. Still bearded, nostalgic for his college days, but constrained by his job in an insurance company to wear a business suit, Bill throws off his coat and joins the game. I don't doubt he envies Ray; jeans and a shapeless sweatshirt were once his own daily costume.

Old eldest son, like me, is capable of instant friendships. The boys come inside where George is reading the paper in his favorite chair and I am in mine, sewing a ripped seam in Dan's windbreaker. Bill opens a couple of beers. Then, without preamble, announces: "I've been ripped off. My stereo, Dad's 410, and my clock. Gail and I were in Kansas City over the weekend but Dave claims he was away from the house only an hour or so." He turns to Ray. "We live on a farm. Twenty miles south of town. They must have steaked us out."

During the first stage of his independence, Bill found urban apartment living too confining. He discovered a run-down farmhouse and a series of friends have lived there with him, sharing the rent and groceries but not the miseries of maintenance. Periodically, the pipes freeze or the basement floods and his roommates move out until order is restored. I can understand this; unquestionably, only
the scarcity of housing in wartime Washington kept the 5034 club intact for so long. Only in family life can conflicts, inconveniences and mishaps be endured with equanimity.

Bill is, fortunately, unflappable. He claims, crises notwithstanding, sitting on his west porch to watch the sun go down over the cornfields has it all over sunset over a parking lot. There's a gaping hole in his porch where an old icebox slid into the cellar through rotten boards. Yet, complacent and at peace, Bill can overlook the hole and sit, appreciating nature in an old rocking chair with one arm. His wants are few.

George says: "In view of your occupation, I assume your coverage is adequate."

"Look, I know the claims department. My stereo can't be replaced for what they'll give me today. And they took Cail's guitar and a lamp, too. And Dave's steak. He was having people in for a cookout last night."

"You have people coming and going all the time out there," his father observes. "Parties every weekend so you haven't time to fix that hole in the porch, for instance." I want to protest; he did replace the warped toilet seat and start to take the wallpaper off the kitchen. But I have pledged myself to forbear apologizing for a full-grown son. George continues: "Maybe one of your so-called friends did the job."

Bill's light blue eyes, exactly like his father's, flash with indignation. "I know my friends, Dad. I trust
them. They wouldn't rip me off."

George is looking across the room at me. His glance strays briefly toward Ray and then back again. Admittedly, I, too, find everyone trustworthy. Bill and I both assume people will like us; if they like us they won't harm us. What did Ray say to me soon after he arrived? 'You aren't afraid of people.' Right. But I'm afraid of myself.

"Oh, here's Gail," Bill says as the yellow Volks pulls up. "Dad, let me know what value to place on your 410. I can replace that, at least. And Ray, if you want, come on out on Saturday. Dave's going to make spaghetti and we got some good red vino in Kansas City."

Gail walks in, her long blonde hair in braids, her jeans paint-spattered. She teaches at the Art Center and finds 'wildly exciting talent' among the six-year-olds. George and I have learned to be casual with her; we took the first girl who joined Bill's household far too seriously. Bill said he had to tell her to leave, that he was tired of playing house. She used to cook and clean and even iron his shirts. 'When I want a wife, I'll marry one,' he said to me.

Sympathetic with a fellow-female, I protested, 'She was just practicing wifehood.' Pleasant, pretty, protective of his interests, I wondered why he didn't marry her.

'I companion is all I want, mother. Someone to share things with. My sunsets, geese flying, deer in the woods. Incidentally, when I wanted to get married my sophomore
year, you nearly split a gut. Why press me now?'

'Now you're old enough to...to...settle down,' I stammered, wondering if I'd ever come to terms with the new morality. He had someone to share his bed; in former times, that was a wife's prime reason for being. He had settled down in a job, a house, a casual way of life that suited him. Why, indeed, did he need marriage?

I'm glad my marriage has given me a permanent situation throughout life. As a woman, today's world of chance would be unpleasant for me; I'm aware of the loneliness and despair single people suffer in middle age. The total self-regard that predominates in youth is, to my mind, something to be outgrown. In family life, we have to outgrow it. I only hope that the distinguishing feature of human kind -- its capacity for selfless love -- is not thrown out in today's social upheaval like the proverbial baby with the bathwater.

George and I, our daughter Sara and her husband, Bill and his brothers, have certain standards in common but our goals and theirs seem widely disparate. Perhaps 'our' war, which separated millions of couples like George and me in our youth made us determined to solidify our relationships by having children as soon as possible after war's end.

Our war, unlike Vietnam, involved us all. We saw its conclusion in black and white terms -- an end to civilization itself was averted by total victory.

'Duration' was an unknown. While the war went on, we
realized we were losing our best years, the years when mates learn how to live together. So after victory was achieved, there was no time to waste. We promptly set about our business in life -- to make a home, a living, a family.

I'm reminded again of the Christmas messages Annabel and I, and many others, exchanged in the years that followed. Chronicles of family life -- a testimony to the social order we had fought for and won. We overdid our enthusiasm; the mimeographed messages grew banal and tiresome. Julie would have been the first to sneer at news of Frank as Little League pitcher and Sara as class secretary. But when I knew her, this was the world we each in our own way prayed someday would be restored.

Today, Sara and her brothers claim that fulfilling their own potential is their first priority. Later on... maybe...they will opt for parenthood after their duty to themselves is done. Certainly Sara's husband speaks with more pride of her stature in the business world than my homebound pursuits ever elicited from George. Coping with crying babies, littered rooms and burning vegetables is admittedly inglorious; but having survived, one knows the rewards and, as in childbirth, the pain is forgotten.

I'll confess, though, that I'm glad life can't be lived over again. The choice of motherhood is infinitely harder to make now.

Burning vegetables! Again! I drop Dan's windbreaker
and rush to the kitchen. Why on earth did I turn on the stove under the frozen limas! The pork chops won't be done for another half-hour.

I hear Gail's soft Carolina drawl as she and Bill depart. "Y'll come out to the farm, hear?"

"Ray and I'll come together," Daniel promises, "To help plant your vegetable garden."

"No wheels, Danny, you know?" Ray murmurs.

"We can take Mom's car," Daniel assures him. "But where's yours?" Child of an affluent age, Daniel has never known an adult without a car of his own.

"Sold it. You'd have dug my van. Painted by a real artist -- a lake, pine trees, blue sky. Needed bread, though, when my mother died."

I guess I, too, share Daniel's comfortable assumptions. Did Julie leave no money? Even during our service in the AFRS, she always managed to put part of her monthly pay into savings.

At the dinner table, Daniel wants to know if Bill will have to lock the farmhouse now. Chagrined, I focus on my plate. The whole family knows I've never locked our house. In recent months, a rash of daylight robberies not three blocks away provoked George to insist I be more careful.

"Anyone who wants to get in can do so if a house is empty," I venture. "A simple screwdriver..."

"I know how to get into a locked car," Daniel interrupts. "Use a coat hanger through the vent. I saw it on tv." He
resumes the task of separating blackened limas from green ones.

Burned vegetables always make me feel contentious. "Anything can be replaced," I assert. "Besides, I refuse to be a slave to things."

"Your grandmother's tea service? Your mother's oriental rugs?" George says, offering to pass the scorned limas. I am silent, chastened.

After a pause, Ray remarks, "I'd have thought, in a town this size, you couldn't find a fence for silver and rugs. Of course, stereos and TV's have a quick turnover anywhere."

George gives him a sharp look. Then he says to Dan, "By the way, have you put your bike in the garage? Thieves find bikes are easy to dispose of, too."

I chafe at the thought that Daniel will grow up not sharing my trust. It seems so natural to me! As a child during the Depression, I recall my mother helping the raid to fix a hot meal for hoboers, who were always invited into the house. How many hungry men observed the valuable objects she'd collected on travels, the rings on her fingers? Yet not one of them betrayed her trust. They made some mark on one of our oak trees, though, my father said, to tell others of their sad fraternity that they'd be welcomed with a good meal inside our house.

At college, none of our bedrooms had locks on the doors; pilfering, it was assumed, would be beneath the dignity of
college women.

In Washington at the 5034 Club, however, trust was considered rash. Julie, with her big city wariness, insisted that we be locked up all the time: 'like animals in the zoo,' I grumbled.

Oddly enough, the only time we were robbed was when we were all at home and a party was going on. One of my Amherst friends brought a contingent of young officers from the DD 147 up from Norfolk. Due to their generosity, we could serve Fishhouse Punch. Annabel and Sue invited the lone remaining male staffer in CCOMGCH and two British officers. Several WAVES from Watch Four were present. Instant romances, typical of the times, made it a great party.

Late in the evening, my friend Ed, at one time a so-called greasy grind who scorned alcohol, had passed out on my bed. Julie was observed necking with a former Phi Gam from Williams in Sue's room. I spent a long time locked in the herd throwing up Fishhouse Punch; probably the robbery took place then.

The guests' greatcoats and jackets piled in Annabel's room were discovered on the floor, a dozen empty wallets strewn about. Even the dresser drawers in the rooms where Ed slept and Julie enraged in dalliance were ransacked for cash and trinkets. Ed, briefly roused, declared it was worth his fifty dollars to sleep in a bed that didn't move. Somebody cried, 'But we're all shipmates, nobody's a stran-
In the spirit of the party, the COMINC staffer yelled, 'Who the hell needs money anyhow?' And one of the WAVES sang, 'I've got plenty of nuthin' and nuthin's plenty for me....'

I recall that Julie fancied herself in love with the Phi Gam after their brief acquaintance. The letter she wrote must have unnerved him, though, in a hasty reply he said he was unofficially engaged to a girl at Swarthmore. Indignant, Julie then alleged that she had kept her eyes closed all the time they were together and the Phi Gam might well have been our party thief.

When we later learned that the DD 147 had taken a torpedo off the coast of Algiers and sank with its full complement on board, Julie forgot her vindictive allegation, wept copiously and told all the WAVES on our watch that the Phi Gam had been her unofficial fiancee.

Julie's letter to the one serious boyfriend she had while I knew her haunts me. 'Would my suicide hurt you or Mary? A party girl like Mary, deceiving her husband... After knowing you both I'll be a different person...I won't trust anybody!'

How juvenile it sounds now! Arrogant, spiteful, yet pitiful, too. Because I'm the survivor -- 'alive and well and living in Des Moines.' But it's not surprising how the letter makes Julie come alive.

'By what stretch of the imagination, Julie, did you envision me forsaking George for Clint? To me, your boy-
friend was a colorless character, a coward clinging to a
desk job in the Pentagon. While George, the boy I'd known
all my life, was risking his life in Okinawa! In constant
danger from Kamikaze pilots, mortar fire, even our own
ships' shells!'

'Bullshit!' Men's profanity came easily to her tongue
even in that pre-Liberation era. 'You lie in your teeth,
Mary, if you say George in his foxhole with shells explod-
ing overhead was constantly on your mind! 'When you spend
most of your free time with men you call 'platonic ac-
quaintances' or 'old friends of the family'!' Her express-
ive eyes would mirror her derision as she spit out words.

'But I never forget that someday I'm going to assume
my role as George's wife! I'm just passing the time until
the war's over and real life can begin.'

'I say you're lying in your teeth! You want to keep
your options open in case you become a real war widow!'

'You're just jealous, Julie. You don't know how to
be friends with men. To you, they're all sex figures.'

We never had a conversation like that, of course.
After the terrible row in which I was the innocent victim
...surely I was!...Julie never spoke to me again.

But of all my friendships before or since, hers is
the one I remember most clearly. In youth, I guess, we
cherish the contemporaries who share our own illusions.

During our first year at the 503rd Club, Julie con-
trived to cement our relationship by insisting that we
were two intellectuals struggling to survive in a world of nincompoops. "We share a frame of reference," she'd say. "We don't dwell on the mundane, petty level most girls our age do. We're idealists."

How I was deluded into assuming that Julie and I occupied some aerie far above the mass of simple-minded humankind astounds me now. But then, faced with a world our parents' generation had allowed to drift from one world war to another, I was all too ready to believe that bright young adults could chart a gloriously different future. Ours would be the era of world nations united to outlaw war forever, an era in which technology would be triumphant and prosperity universal.

"We're the first generation to be free from materialism, bigotry and false inhibitions," Julie once proclaimed. "Our code of ethics will lift society out of power-hungry nationalism and money-grubbing competitiveness."

I caught my breath in admiration. "How you can say exactly what I've always thought is astonishing, Julie!"

This is not to say that we consistently disdained the more prosaic activities of our contemporaries. We saw a lot of movies: unremarkable musical comedies along with classics of the future such as FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS and SONG OF BERNADETTE. Since men were constantly coming through Washington, to report, to inspect, to receive new orders, many were old friends of mine, or friends of friends, even husbands of friends, and they would take us
dancing at the Shoreham or the Roosevelt, or to extravagan
t meals at L'Escargot or the Occidental.

I was always proud to take Julie along; she was vivacious, quick-witted, good-looking. And it was my secret hope that I'd be the one to introduce Julie to a man she considered worthy of her. She would, of course, thus be forever in my debt.

I wasn't certain I wanted to be a married woman in wartime. The several 'war widows' among the WAVES on our watch struck me as tiresome bores. I didn't want to be like them, bringing my V-mail to the Code Room to read aloud long nostalgic passages about pre-war courtship days. I always listened, though, in the vain hope that I'd hear how it really was in the Solomons or in the Mediterranean; being a secret-keeper myself, I knew it was unlikely the censors would permit any such revelations.

When George called to say he'd have his commission in a month and we should get married, I shared my misgivings with Julie.

'But don't you see how important it is to him?' she demanded. 'He'll go overseas and you'd never forgive yourself if you've put it off and then he doesn't come back.'

With her customary forthrightness, one afternoon after day watch, she marched me to the Cathedral and requested a conference with the pastor. 'What does a non-Catholic have to do before she marries a Catholic?' I
blurted out, uneasy in the presence of sanctity. His manner was reassuring and kind. 'The customary several month period of instruction for non-Catholic spouses is no longer mandatory due to the war,' he said. The priest's open-minded attitude toward a 'mixed marriage', much frowned-upon in those days, helped me to decide that Julie was right, I should marry George promptly.

Going home on the bus, I mentioned that I thought a party would be more fun than the traditional wedding reception. 'I think people our age prefer martinis and manhattens to champagne, don't you?'

Julie appeared to grow pale with shock. 'You wouldn't! Your own wedding! Weddings have to be traditional, like funerals.'

'But I'm a free spirit, like you, Julie. I don't have to do what's always been done. And in wartime, things should be different.'

Exasperated, Julie said, 'You'll thank me later for seeing that you change your mind.'

While George might have gone along with the idea of a party instead of a reception, both sets of parents would have been scandalized. I should have wondered why Julie, who so often ridiculed my conventional upbringing, ('thus helping me grow out of it,' she said), should have insisted on a conventional wedding. I was grateful later, as she predicted. On the other hand, perhaps it was simply the vicarious experience in the bride-role that intrigued
her.

At this time, Navy Regulations permitted WAVES to be out of uniform long enough to wear a traditional wedding dress. Julie stood over my typewriter to compose the necessary memoranda for our Commanding Officer, with copies to the Vice-Chief of Naval Operations.

'Subject: Permission to wear Civilian Attire.
Ref: (a) Women's Reserve Circular Letter 2-43

In accordance with reference (a) permission is hereby requested to wear civilian attire at my marriage on April 29, 1944.

Subject: Emergency Leave, request for.

In accordance with existing policy, emergency leave is hereby requested from April 29 to May 2, 1944 due to my forthcoming marriage.'

A further request was addressed to Bupers, with copies to ComNav, BuMed, BuSandA, General Accounting office, Office of Secnav and the Veterans Administration.

'Subject: Change of Name.
Ref: Op 20-A-1

In accordance with reference (a) permission is hereby requested for notation of change of name from Mary Warren to Mary Riley as of April 29, 1944.'

While waiting for return memoranda with permission granted or withheld, Julie took me on a tour of bridal salons. 'Which one of you is getting married?' the saleslady at Garfinkel's wanted to know as Julie modeled gowns with tucks and lace while I stubbornly insisted on something simple, aware of Mother's standards of good taste.

Julie let me know that my final selection was about as decorative as a bed sheet but then she soothed my
wounded feelings by saying George wouldn't care what garment I wore as long as I was out of uniform. I happened to outrank him.

A photographer from Harris and Ewing was engaged to take the traditional bride's picture which still hangs on my bedroom wall. I look stiff and self-conscious, as lifeless as the store-furnished wax bouquet in my hands.

At the Willard Hotel, the maitre d'hôtel agreed with Julie about the champagne and the cake as well. 'It has to be white, with white frosting, even if George likes chocolate better,' she said firmly. 'He won't eat it anyway.' She was right; I didn't eat any either.

Finally, it was she who discovered an ad in a travel agent's window for a three-day military weekend 'special' at the prestigious Homestead in Hot Springs, Virginia. 'Only $25.00 a day for three days,' she told me. 'If you two can't afford it, I'll lend you the money out of my savings. You can pay me the interest I lose.' Julie had faith in banks, I recall, but not in War Bonds.

After all requests had gone through channels and been granted, the wedding took place as scheduled. Julie's officiousness was remarked upon by a few of my old friends from home but at the time, I was grateful for it. Rather, I was too tired to care. I had to work a double watch just prior to the ceremony to make up for my emergency leave.

Several months afterwards, when George was in pre-embarkation status on the west coast, I met a Polish army
officer, an escapee from the Nazi invasion. To a worldly European, my wedding ring had no significance at all. He invited me to a dance at the Mayflower Hotel arranged by the Washington dowagers who were called 'cave-dwellers' by society columnists.

When I announced that I was going with Stefan, Julie frowned. 'I'm worried about you. A married woman should not go out with other men, or want to.' That a fellow free-thinker and idealist should criticize my actions was a shock. Perhaps I felt like a naughty child disobeying mother. In any case, I was so flattered by the attention of a glamorous personage that I couldn't deny myself a new 'experience'.

The dowagers were appropriately garbed to display jewels seldom seen due to wartime austerity, a sprinkling of embassy ladies appeared in native costume and a host of local debutantes in fashionably short skirts had the 'bare skin look' that was popular at the time. Yet the clothes of these women were overshadowed by the full-dress uniforms of Free-French officers, British Naval attaches, Canadian airmen and assorted European refugees. Although my dress blues and my working uniform were one and the same, I was the only WAVE present and people stared as if I were exotic, too. Lester Lanin's orchestra played 'Deep Purple' and I remember Stefan trying to sing the words in his broken English.

To this day, when Daniel takes a dollar to the nearby
fast-food shop for a hamburger and brings home a few cents' change. I recall the White Tower on G. Street where Stefan took me after the ball for hamburgers at a nickel each.

He'd been brought from London to Washington for a month's debriefing by the Office of Strategic Services and naturally, couldn't tell me why. So enchanted was he by the bright lights, the good food, the pretty girls, that he didn't want to talk about the devastation of his native country or what happened to him when the Panzer units rolled across the Polish border in September of 1939 -- while I was among the tourists admiring the picturesque Polish pavilion at the New York World's Fair. I remember very well his scorn for our allies, the Russians: 'They are not to be trusted,' he muttered darkly.

His stipend was so limited that several times I spent part of our hoard of red stamps on meat to feed him. Julie's disapproval grew. 'He's using you! Can't you see that? And what will George think?'

'I've written to him about Stefan. He'll understand why I find a foreigner interesting. I've never known one before. Besides, I feel sorry for someone who's always hungry.' We were in the navy cafeteria at the time and like the crowd of stateside Naval personnel all around us, our plates were piled with meat. At home, my uncomplaining parents were doing without it four nights a week and wrote how pleased they were that people in the service need not be deprived.
Between bites, Julie whispered, 'Where will it lead except to adultery?'

I laughed. 'That's the farthest thing from my mind.'

It wasn't the farthest thing from Stefan's, as it turned out, but, successful in evading his advances, I saw no reason to admit this to Julie -- or to George.

'I'm only attracted to Stefan as a rare specie, not as a man,' I told Julie. I may have added, 'Mind your own business', but I probably didn't. We were best friends, after all. Living with Julie was a learning experience I felt lucky to have. Who else cared enough to hold my convictions up to ridicule, compelling me to re-examine them myself? Who but a true friend would tickle my sluggish conscience into motion?

I've seen my children rely on goading friends to teach them all sorts of things. Only in youth are we so malleable. Then only do we assume that it is a friend's mission to facilitate our personal growth.

When the C.I.S. concluded the interrogation of Stefan, no further debate with Julie about propriety was necessary. To leave America made Stefan cry; he was so sensitive. I'd never seen a man cry before. 'Washington is wonderful, while London is dreary rations, black-outs, fire bombs,' he told me. 'And then I go back to Europe -- where there is only terror.'

Not long after he left I became acquainted with a navy
intelligence officer I was sure I recognized as a homosexual. This made him an easy companion for a married woman; besides, he had a sailboat. I'd make sandwiches and he'd bring beer and we'd glide along the Potomac, past the grounds of the Army War College with its tree-lined golf course and down to Anacostia where the President's yacht sat at anchor. We'd discuss the news of the day, the foibles of our co-workers, and the poetry of A. E. Housman. Both of us a year past 'one and twenty', we'd assure each other that God would somehow make up for our lost youth after this horrible war was over.

I'd go home sun-burned and water-logged and Julie would accuse me of being unfaithful to my husband. 'You just claim that O.N.I guy is a fairy so you won't feel guilty.'

'I don't feel a bit guilty,' I'd retort. 'And believe me, even if he weren't, no girl could be seduced on board a six foot dinghy.'

Apparently Ray found an old package of Redimix Cement in the garage. I discover him outdoors by the west porch, preparing to fix the steps that have long been crumbling.

"You must be a workaholic! Had breakfast yet?" I've become very solicitous in the few days he's been here. I always imagine men don't know enough to eat properly. For a lifetime, proper nourishment three times a day has been my preoccupation.
He grins up at me. "You fed me so well last night I'm not hungry this morning."

"Why are you doing this? I mean, nobody uses these steps, or this side porch either. Wouldn't you rather amuse yourself today? Maybe I could suggest...."

"I can amuse myself with a trowel." He looks ruefully at the rusty implement he's found somewhere in our littered basement. "Happy as I am to be traveling light, I wish I still had my own tools. This looks like an Indian relic."

I explain, "According to their father, each one of our boys buried all the family tools in the ravine." I'm hugging myself against the morning chill as he fits a couple of boards against a corner for a make-shift form. "Can't you come in for a cup of coffee, at least?"

He gives me a quick look, pours the mix and then follows me to the back door. I suppose he thinks I'm just another lonely housewife who wants to talk. I'm not; for thirty years I've craved solitude and I love it. But nobody should work outdoors without something warm in the stomach. I must admit, though, that I'm curious as to why Ray is here and why he stays.

It's curious, too, that I want him to stay.

Sitting down with his coffee, he asks, "The phone call from your son last night -- it wasn't bad news, I trust."

All he could have heard was Daniel's excited shout, "Hey, Tom, Dad! It's Tom calling from Alaska! Collect!"
and George's caustic initial comment, "Surely you didn't call from Anchorage just to ask me how I am."

"Not bad news," I reply, "Except that to a man with a strong work ethic, a son who would go on unemployment insurance is bad news."

Men have always read my thoughts. "I don't see you as a person who'd be uptight about that. I think you might understand a kid who finds the work ethic an outmoded concept."

"Well... but I understand Tom's father better. And he's the man I continue to live with. He deserves primary loyalty, you might say."

"That phrase reminds me of Mother. Throughout her various male relationships, she always insisted that her primary loyalty was to me. But it wasn't. It was to herself."

I'm not sure I can contradict him. Her early devotion to the war effort was as selfless as any other WAVE's, yet she complained more and schemed to get out. Her affection for me seemed unselfish, though she spent more time guarding my morals than doing personal favors.

As he sips his coffee, Ray's gaze is fixed on me with the same hint of scepticism in it that I noticed when he first arrived. I study those remarkable hazel eyes for a moment, then glance away, vaguely embarrassed by our proximity.

A book Gloria lent me is beside the telephone; I've
read only part of it. It catches my eye and I muse aloud: "Maybe you were right to say that Julie fits the pattern of your times better than her own. She may have striving for what later was known as self-actualization."

Ray's watchfulness, so familiar in my husband, alerts him to follow my glance and nod. As George drives through the countryside at five miles over the speed limit, he'll say, 'See the hen pheasant in the stubble?' but I never do. Ray may not be a hunter but it pleases me that he's a reader.

"I bought all Maslow's books in college. Toward a Psychology of Being is his best, I think. But self-actualization is a means to an end, isn't it? The end being universal compassion." He creases his lips. "Mother never had that aim."

I'm irritated by his remark. Why must our offspring be so critical of us? I rise too quickly and coffee sloshes into my saucer. "Maslow cited only a few people in history who reached that point -- Eleanor Roosevelt was one. Anyhow, when your mother and I lived together, Julie wasn't totally self-oriented. I've known people who are; they're hard to live with."

"Self-oriented people had best be self-sufficient," he observes. Maybe he guesses I'm thinking of my long-absent son.

Now I wish Tom didn't blame me for past decisions that affected his life! "Why didn't you let me delay
college until I was ready for it!' All decisions concerning the adolescents of his particularly rebellious era were agonizing ones for parents. I tried to explain that if mistakes were made, I was sorry. I always meant well. But now I'm tired of feeling guilty about my failures, real or fancied, in raising my children. They must take responsibility for their own happiness and success at this point, even Daniel, who will have to simply grow up fast.

Tears threaten to spill out. How I yearn for my estrangement from Tom to end! "Tom's been self-sufficient since he dropped out of college," I say haltingly. "He's tried all sorts of jobs. Now he thinks he'll try Law School -- without an undergraduate degree -- and at night. . ." I deplore sounding like a plaintive mother! With a shrug, I add, "The nights are longer than the days, of course, in Alaska."

Ray grins. "Which doesn't leave much time for a daytime job. You'd like to subsidize him, I take it, but..." "But George wants some proof that he won't drop out again." I carry my cup to the sink, then decide to have more coffee. I pour some for Ray. I'd forgotten how comforting it is to confide in someone. Seldom in my life have I felt free to do so. Except with Julie -- I must see her in her son.

Tom's vacillations depress me but the mood won't last. I have too much else to think about these days. I'm through crying over spilled milk, as Mother used to say.
As a child, I was devastated by fancied slights -- 'The teacher ignored me!', by any kind of teasing -- at grandmother's dinner table, my uncle called me 'Gertie Garbagegap', by juvenile insults -- 'You pick your nose!' I still cried in girlhood. I guess I found relief from tension in it. 'You're going to turn on the sweeps!' my friend Goldie used to say and he'd cower under an imaginary umbrella. Later, he flew with the A.T.C. over the Hump and addressed letters full of his innovative language to his 'Dearest Little Ripple'.

I turn back to Ray. "Wandering thoughts -- the disease of middle age."

"Some people are particularly susceptible to the disease of adolescence, too. Perhaps Tom's one."

"He's very bright. Was always a reader. So full of promise..."

"He didn't promise you anything, did he?" That wry expression appears again.

I'm unnerved by the question; as is my habit, I try to sort out my thoughts by speaking them aloud. "Parents assume there's a quid pro quo due then, I guess. Give the child care and nourishment while he's helpless. When he's grown, you expect to be given satisfaction, some sort of emotional nourishment. Intangibles in return for tangibles."

"You 'assume' and 'expect' like merchants expect customers, farmers expect rain, stock-holders expect dividends. But then there are shoplifters, floods and bankruptcies."
I shake my head. "And on this particular investment I'm just getting a poor return."

"Well, it seems to me all parents make a large investment when they have a kid. Not just money. But any investment involves risk. It strikes me you were more willing to risk than most women today -- to have five children, one when you were well into middle-age."

I think back to the conversation I overheard when I was six months' pregnant with Dan. Bill, at sixteen, was trying to speak softly but his new voice was too skittish to control: 'Dad, I read in the paper that statistics show there are lots more birth defects in babies born to women over forty. Does Mom know this?'

'Statistics show that millions of normal babies are born to women over forty, too,' George replied, too vehemently, I thought. 'Don't you worry about it, Son. But it's not something you should mention to your mother.'

I hadn't thought I was taking a risk at all! I'd had four perfect children and simply assumed my fifth would be perfect, too. But perhaps 'statistics' were prompting the doctor to see me more often than during past pregnancies, to examine me more carefully.

I made a firm resolution to overcome anxiety. But every once in awhile, an insistent kick at my belly's underside would bring to mind the dreadful possibility that a monster was incubating there. Maybe the concern George and I shared, though we never spoke of it, made us
consider Daniel a precious gift.

"A gift!" I say suddenly to Ray. "That's what children are, a gift, not an investment. A parent has the gift of a child; the grown child is his own person." I feel as though I've discovered some universal truth. "A child doesn't promise anything at all and he shouldn't."

Ray brings me back to earth. "You still wish Tom would try to live up to your expectations, though." He seems bemused. "I didn't live up to my mother's expectations either when I was his age. She thought a Princeton graduate would naturally opt for an Establishment career. I went into the porno film industry. She learned about it when I got hauled into court on a trumped-up child molestation charge. We used volunteers and failed to check their birth certificates. After that, I could agree with her that it was a distasteful career." The wry grin appears. "To tell the truth, I got more of a charge out of photographing rabbit tracks in the snow."

Perhaps my face registers disappointment or else he can guess that no woman my age would condone such a career. Actually, I'm thinking, 'People shouldn't reveal all of themselves to others. If they remain slightly mysterious, we endow them with flawless pasts.'

Suddenly, the tranquillity I thought so remarkable in him vanishes. He bursts out, "Mother's own career was equally distasteful! Slimpering over hair-spray before a camera is a sex-sell that's worse because it's subtle.
She didn't live up to my expectations, either. She disappointed me -- continually."

I thought his argument somewhat specious but tried to appear sympathetic.

"In prep school, I was fourteen, I guess, when Mother was on the tube a lot. The Headmaster called it the idiot box even back then. Mother would show up on telethons and the quiz shows that were big in those days. 'I've Got a Secret' was one. All her appearances humiliated me. My friends came from conventional families. Their mothers were dignified. And I was the offspring of a 'television personality' -- a clown."

We didn't have a television set, I remember, until the Army-McCarthy Hearings. When they were over, I stopped watching, left it to the children, in fact, until the Watergate Hearings about twenty years later. But I could imagine the reaction in a strait-laced prep school to the exhibitionism on early TV. And boys in their early teens are so conforming -- to whatever milieu in which they find themselves.

"Look!" I feel an impulse to preach. "No one is capable of creating happiness for anybody else, even if we wish we could. Julie was expressing herself, making herself happy. Think of the self-esteem her career gave her! Maybe because I'm a social parasite I understand her better than you do."

My message, garbled though it was, made him relax and
grin. "Wouldn't it be great if everybody's self-expression matched what others expect of them?"

The kitchen door bursts open and Dan appears, his face scarlet from running. "Has the principal called yet, Mom?"

"What did you do?" I demand and then think, "Why do I expect misbehavior? If I expected good behavior, it might happen."

"I called the gym teacher an asshole and got sent home from school."

I slump in the kitchen chair. Eight hours from now, his father is sure to shout, 'Gooddamit! I won't have a child of mine using obscenities at school!' There will be a mock trial, with grueling prosecution and weak defense, and the sentence -- corporal punishment. I'll grit my teeth through yet another domestic crisis.

"Hey, man," Ray puts in, "You must have been doggone mad to call the head jock a bad name. Best way to get rid of that feeling is to stir cement. Ever try it? Come on outside."

I put Ray's cup and mine in the dishwasher, wishing that a father substitute had always materialized when behavior-to-be-coped-with occurred. I don't want what some women want -- a wife to do the housework. I want a man at home to administer behavior modification around the clock.

I address the ghost of Julie: 'Your son is a good man. You should be proud of him.' Then I close the cup-
board door and lean my forehead against it. May somebody else, please God, be able to say that about my son Tom.

I go quickly to my upstairs study. Half the morning gone and I must read Mallarmé's poems again before class. One elusive image after another to decipher! Frustrating. Almost as frustrating as a garbled strip code message in NCP.

I have a suspicion that Mallarmé was a droll old man playing word-games with the young poets who attended his Tuesday evening salons. He'd recite one of his riddles and Verlaine would try to guess its meaning, then Valéry, then Debussy. Debussy translated the meaning into music, which may have been the best way.

It seems slightly ridiculous that nearly a century later, a motley group of graduate students in a university once known as a cow college is still analyzing these poems, and enjoying it. Others in the seminar are somewhat better than I at the guessing game, particularly the ex-telegrapher with the yellow teeth who looks like a satyr. He claims to see the Faun as a symbol for unattainable desire and he reads 'intoxication' for 'Flowing bubbles from grapeskins' without hesitation. I suppose all my years in the world of domesticity -- grease on the rug, overdone meat, children's accidents -- have given practicality the edge over imagination in my case.

The professor says that 'some of Mallarmé's symbols
are deliberately vague' because he wants the reader to give them symbolic value; thus the reader becomes part of the creative process. I like the thought of being part of a poet's creativity, even one long dead. But this illusion of self-importance is brief.

I have to take Daniel to the principal's office, suffer through his apology to the gym teacher, demand sternly that he list 'I will not use dirty words' on his daily program of chores right after 'I will feed the dog every morning', and, lastly, I withhold half of his weekly allowance as punishment -- unquestionably a proof of blunted imagination.

Happily, George and I are invited out for dinner. He is late arriving home, so barely has time to pretend admiration for the cement work accomplished and to listen to Daniel's halting confession. Ray's presence, the wry grimace he wears, probably averts the inquisition I so much dreaded. On the way to the dinner party, George doesn't even mention the episode. He says, "I wonder if your guest will still be here on the Fourth of July?"

"'What if your old army buddy's son came to town?" I counter. "Wouldn't you want to be hospitable?"

After a couple of drinks I hear him say to Clare, our hostess, "My wife may flunk her courses this semester, she's so busy entertaining the son of an old navy buddy."

"Ye God," Clare exclaims, "Hasn't she had enough companionship with young men? All those sons you spawned
and all their friends! She never got out of the kitchen!"

Clare's husband Mike claps George on the shoulder.

"Maybe this is a different kind of companionship. Better watch it, old man!"

I turn toward the bar, hoping my resentment doesn't show. I've known Mike as long as I've known George. In the summer of 1943, after some kind of service off the Aleutian Islands, he was assigned to a desk job in BuOrd. Clare was at home, pregnant. Mike took me to dinner once in awhile; La Salle du Bois was his favorite restaurant. He fancied himself a gourmand before ulcers changed his way of life. Now that I think about it, he did make a pass or two, as we used to say. But George was his best friend and I grew up next door to Clare, so even after too many martinis, one or the other of us would remember Des Moines. But Good Lord, we're different people now! A middle-aged man with a sixty-inch waistline has no business attributing his own horniness to all his contemporaries!

As I undress for bed, I leaf through Julie's scrapbook once again. Articles from television columns in metropolitan dailies, interviews in Redbook and Woman's Day, notices in TV Guide. The texts are trite and repetitive. I remember how scornfully Julia would quote from interviews in Look or Life with such celebrities as Jinx Falkenburg or Arlene Francis, while plainly idolizing them. Years later, she is quoted as saying the same
things: her work is 'stimulating, a challenge, great fun.'

Nor is there anything unusual about her pictures in advertisements for mops, make-up, whiskey. They all show a girl perfectly groomed, smiling, pretty, and the eyes demanding -- what? Love my Cedarwax mop? Love my Max Factor pancake? My Dewar's scotch?

No clear image of her life emerges from this welter of clippings. What did she do outside of working hours? Were her friends other celebrities, people in the media, or ordinary folk like me? Somehow, the scrapbook gives the impression that there was no life outside of the glamorous life on camera. And through all these years, as Clare observed, I seldom got out of the kitchen.

Mike's remark still galls. That he should suggest I am one of those aging females on the make? I've read a lot of novels about them so there must be plenty in real life. The fictional type is always beautiful and self-assured, and at loose ends somewhere in Europe. She meets a much younger man in some auberge or villa that's out-of-bounds for ordinary tourists. And no one finds out about their tryst; they're far from Hartford or Dayton or Des Moines. I wonder if psychiatry has a fancy label for the 'Madame Bovary syndrome'?

Well, what is my feeling toward Julie's son? Maternal? Curiosity because he's enigmatic? That sounds close, especially since nearly everyone else I've known in life has been predictable -- except Julie herself.
I'm certainly predictable; at least I thought so, until Ray came. George is predictably suspicious of Ray, as he is of all drifters. I've heard him tell our boys a thousand times: "If you coast, you'll only move downhill."

Dozing, I must admit that I don't know why I seem reluctant to examine my true feelings about Ray. Surely, the fact that today he found our long-lost hedge clippers and trimmed our scraggly shrubbery is not the only reason I am happy to have him around!

There's going to be a quiz on Gorky in Modern Drama today, I'm sure of it. The undergraduates in the class don't seem to understand why so many characters in Lower Depths live in the past. I want to tell them that all too soon they will.

My friend Dot often calls early in the morning because her husband leaves the house at seven to make his hospital rounds.

"I hear you have live-in help again!"

Ray is comparing muscles with Dan. "I drank two glasses of milk each meal as a kid, that's why mine bulge." He could have written a parent-effectiveness manual. Dan hops up to pour himself a second glass at once.

"Yes, we have a houseguest," I respond, hoping the message is clear that he's within earshot.

"Well, I don't suppose you'll do your spring cleaning now that you're in class everyday. How about sending him
my way? I could do with an extra pair of hands."

I feel a jab of annoyance. My guest is not a handy-
man for hire.

"I tried Rent-A-Kid last spring," she is saying.
"The two teenagers they sent were behind the door when the
brains were passed out. Never again."

As Dan gets ready for school, I hear Ray promising
to pick up the dog at the vet's during the day. Suddenly
I realize I'd forgotten even to inquire about Heather!

"I'm losing mine!" I exclaim. "Forget everything!"

"You were ahead of me at the check-out counter yester-
day and so pre-occupied you didn't turn around when I
nudged your cart. I think maybe this graduate work is
too much for you -- or," she paused, "Or is there some-
thing special about this houseguest? You can tell me. I
love to fantasize."

"Look, Dot, I am not the type to...."

"You used to be. I can remember."

Dot only hangs up because it's time for her standing
hair appointment. I rush up to my study without going
outside to see what Ray is doing. For all I care he can
clip the bushes down to the ground. Tonight, I tell myself,
I'll settle down for a long talk with him. 'Ray, I hope
you won't misunderstand. I'm simply curious about why
you're content to stay here.' Too pointed. I'd put him
on the defensive. I might try solicitude. 'Ray, I can't
help being concerned about you, just as I'd be about one
of my own sons. Don't you have plans? Plans to do something with your life?' Like our onetime pontifical city planner whom George delights in quoting, Ray may say: 'Plans? Of course I have plans. I just don't know what they are yet.'

Actually, the aimlessness of some young men long ago became a bore to my friends and to me. And I still have Tom -- treading water.

Damn! I've been infected with aimlessness myself. Must get to work or I'll flunk the test on Lower Depths. How humiliating!

Professor Dunn warned us to keep the characters straight. Luka is, I suppose, a Christ figure. Why doesn't the Actor have a name? Or the Baron? Is he a nobleman or is his title just a touch of irony?

I'm having a martini tonight even though George is sure to make a remark about brain-softeners. "Celebrating an A on my drama quiz," I tell him.

"Gin will guarantee your F on the next one," he says.

Dan and Ray are upstairs, ministering to a subdued Heather in her basket beside Dan's bed.

"Tonight I'm going to have a little talk with Ray," I whisper as George pours his bourbon.

"You want to put him on the payroll, I presume."

"No, that would insult him. But don't the shrubs look nice? I just...."
"Our neighbors' shrubs all look nice, too. But of course they don't have a mature graduate student trying to run the household."

Living with George for over thirty years has made me well aware of the truth of Mother's admonition: 'Always handle a tired man with kid gloves.' But no female today could remain untouched by the Feminist Movement. More and more, I find myself responding to his jibes with some tart remark that makes him glower. He treats me with icy civility for an hour or more afterwards.

"If you've noticed, in our neighbor's yards it's the husbands who are out trimming hedges."

Predictably, he stalks away and I wonder if his highball glass will shatter as he plants it on the marbletop table. He mutters his customary taunt: "If you want to take over my law practice, I'll take over your house." He knows that I share Montaigne's opinion that it would be 'better for us to have no laws at all than to have them in so prodigious numbers as we have.'

A few minutes later there is a light tap at the front door and I hear George, ever the affable host, exchange greetings with our next door neighbor.

"Things are certainly slicked up around your house," Bert says admiringly. "I thought your wife was a fulltime student."

I quickly explain that Ray is an unusually helpful houseguest and George makes no comment as he fixes Bert's
drink. "I just hope Ray stays long enough to teach Dan that manual labor has dignity," I add, "So I can continue to cultivate my mind." Inadvertently, I've left my textbooks on the bar. I snatch them up in case George is tempted to splash them with seltzer.

Dan thumps down the backstairs, followed by Ray.

"Hey, Mom, when's dinner? Oh, Hi, Mr. Hanes. Did you see my cement work? I think I'll be a cement-finisher when I grow up."

I say, "Last week you set your sights higher -- on being an architect," and then introduce Ray. Dan, always wary of adult conversation, disappears outdoors. Bert and George, unalterably role-conscious, begin discussing the appointment of women to local corporate boards.

"I wish I could find one for the bank board who's as smart as the girl-lawyer you took into your office," Bert tells George.

"Murly, George replies, "I didn't anticipate that she'd perform so well, even better than some of the boys. Of course, she knows when to keep her mouth shut." He gives me a pointed look.

I forbear reminding him that he usually describes her competence in terms of 'her man's mind'.

Bert sighs. "Well, I've got to find a woman who'll measure up to the smart black on my board and I don't know where to look."

"Good luck," I say but they ignore my tone and I go
out to attend to the broccoli in the pressure cooker.

When Bert departs I hear him say something to Ray about a bank job that 'would be just right for a young man with ambition.' He promises to recommend him. "Just call the personnel manager for an appointment. This town's a great place to live -- clean air, nice people, good place to raise a family."

George is in good humor throughout dinner. He tells Dan the old story about the man who goes into a country store to buy a can of tomatoes. The storekeeper is out; he's out of peas and corn and carrots, too. But there's salt all over the place. Box after box on all the shelves. The customer observes, 'You must sell a lot of salt, Mister.' The storekeeper scratches his head and says, 'Not much. But the guy who sells me salt, does he sell salt?'

Dan responds with his new riddle: "If a rooster laid an egg on top of a barn, which side would it roll down?" His father affects ignorance. "Roosters don't lay eggs!"

It develops that Ray has agreed to help Dan build a clubhouse at the edge of the ravine. After some negotiation, George promises to take them to a lumber yard for building materials soon. Dan, to my surprise and delight, helps Ray clear the table for me and afterward they disappear for a walk around the neighborhood. "When they return at Dan's bedtime, they have two yard-bags full of trash. "We collected it from the gutters, Mom, and just in one square block!" Dan marvels. Ray says he's going to call
on an acquaintance and departs.

I wonder if our guest might be overdoing the helpful service role. But what could be wrong with teaching a sixth grader to be a good neighbor?

George mutters, "Is Ray gunning for Eagle Scout at age thirty?"

Instead of mentioning my own misgivings, I suggest he may have gone next door to talk to Bert about the bank job.

"I'll admit I'm biased," George says, kicking off his shoes. "It strikes me that your young friend lacks any Horatio Alger qualities. I used to have that name thrown at me as a boy; I doubt if Ray did. Anyhow, he'll find some excuse not to take whatever Bert offers. You wait and see."

The next day when I'm just about to go to my mid-afternoon class, I hear the Volvo in the drive and Heather's yelp of welcome. George stomps in and I see him grit his teeth as he looks at Ray and me. I'm in my favorite chair as usual, Ray, in the Lotus position at my feet. Unquestionably, the sight of an idle matron passing time with a young drifter infuriates him.

I jump up. "George, what brings you home at this hour?"

"Come on. We're going to Clare's." His voice is unnatural, thin and toneless. "Mike had a coronary playing handball. He's dead."

"My God!" In my mind's eye, images pile up one upon
another of the man I saw night before last, jovial, solicitous, alive — gestulating, talking, alive! And they dissolve to a flaccid body with a sixty inch waistline, its flesh glistening with sweat, inert on the polished floor of a handball court. Clare's lean face, frozen in horror, is superimposed. What can I do for her? I must take her something! Food, everybody takes food when tragedy strikes!

I turn, heading for the kitchen; Ray's on his feet and we collide.

"Where are you going?" George demands.

"I must take something to Clare. She'll need...."

"Not now! Get your coat!"

I begin to cry, and hurry to the car, thinking of artichokes and green beans and cheese soup and coffee.

It is six o'clock when we return home, sick at heart and drained of energy. All of us at Clare's house were good friends, all of us middle-aged. As we puttered about and tried to console Clare or make conversation, the unspoken question on everyone's lips was 'Who will be next?' Clare, in the first shock of grief, was numb and silently watched our vain attempts to cope with our sorrow and our fear.

I raise a limp hand in greeting to Dan and Ray, who are tinkering with a bicycle in the lower drive.

"Hi, Mom, guess what?" Dan's round young face is
suffused with excitement. "Ray's got a bike! Now we can go on a bike hike!" He sees our solemn faces and sober.
"Gee, it's sad about Mr. Wright. How could he play hand-
ball anyhow -- being so fat?"

After dinner, George goes to the airport to meet
Clare's son; he and his wife live in Phoenix. I make calls
to a few mutual friends who may not have heard the news.
We discuss Clare's courage, debate funeral flowers versus
charity contributions, and arrange meals for Clare's house-
hold over the next several days. All the women want to do
something helpful. All the women, I'm sure, see their own
widowhood in imagination.

Sinking into my living room chair to wait for George,
I remind Dan of bedtime. I must hear his new riddle be-
fore he goes upstairs. "Where was the Declaration of Inde-
pendence signed, Mom?"

Ray, sympathetic to my mood, spares me from pondering.
"Philadelphia?"

Cheerful, Dan corrects him: "At the bottom, Dilly!"
Ray, apparently going out, lingers as I sigh, "The
awful thing for Clare, the worst part, will be having to
live alone. I simply couldn't bear it."

"You could," he says gently. "You've told me you did,
deliberately, sometimes."

"But choosing to and having to are different."

Ray leans against the wall beside the framed steel
engravings George bought me in a Dublin shop. I sense that
he intends to leave as soon as he hears the Volvo in the drive. I'm too tired to wonder about Ray's attitude toward my husband, aware as he must be, that George distrusts him.

He appears to be musing aloud. "My mother always longed to be alone."

"She's alone now," I think. "We all die alone."

"She said privacy was necessary for self-enrichment. Needless to say, she resented my intrusions on her limited free time. 'Cultivate yourself, cherish yourself, stay aloof,' she'd tell me, 'Or other people will tear you to bits.' She didn't have good feelings about her own childhood. Or her experience in the WAVES. 'Until I was twenty-five, I never had a room of my own,' she'd say. Oh, yes, she frowned on you because your friends would drop in all the time in Washington. 'Mary would even welcome strangers!' she once said." His wry grin appears. "I guess that's why I came to Des Moines. Curious to meet a woman who'd welcome strangers."

I am jolted out of my preoccupation with Clare's tragic loneliness. "Why, I thought Julie wanted to meet people! To make new friends."

"Possibly she did," Ray says slowly, "but she didn't want to give anything in exchange for friendship. She didn't want to be bothered or touched by other people's problems. Right now, you're all caught up in your friend's sorrow. You've taken it on as though it were your own."
You're losing -- rather, giving away some of yourself."
He breaks off with a self-conscious laugh. "The curb-
stone philosopher will take his leave now. One of the
kids I met at Russ's found that bike for me. It's a bar-
gain. I'm buying it tonight."

I am suddenly conscience-stricken. "Do you have
money, Ray? I mean, you should be paid for the work
you've done around here."

He shakes his head, gives me a warm smile. "Thank
bike's cheap. And if I run out of money, I can always
get a job painting houses, plastering, dishwashing...."

I recall Bert's offer, and George's dour prediction.
"You're not...ah...interested in Mr. Hanes' offer? With
your education, I wouldn't think you'd consider washing
dishes."

His smile broadens. "That's what I was talking about
-- about caring. You care about others. Having a family
must do that for you." He gives a mock salute. "See
you." He closes the door firmly behind him.

My thoughts drift. He didn't answer my question
about the bank. Maybe being involved with other people
means I try to make their business my own. Or maybe
'giving myself' to others and their problems frees me
from having to confront myself and my problems. Maybe
I've already given away so much of myself there isn't
any self left!

The telephone rings; impulsively I decide to ignore
it. Instead, I cross the hall to the table where my textbooks are piled. Baudelaire's Prose Poems are the next assignment; I sit down to reread "Be Drunken"... 'With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you please... if you would not be the martyred slaves of Time.' Surely, the poet means absorption with something outside oneself!

I think back to my conversation with Ray this afternoon. While it rained steadily all morning, I'd finished Hauptman's The Weavers for drama class. When Ray appeared, it was noon. He still looked sleepy.

"Haven't had a night out for awhile," he grinned.

"Russ says his place around the corner from your house is a converted stable. Quite a spot for a party anyhow."

I've not met that neighbor but seen him a time or two; he's unprepossessing and slightly stooped, in the music department at Drake, I understand. Gloria once told me he was the cellist with a chamber music group she heard.

"I met the professor on my way to the vet's that day," Ray explained. "He told me to drop by. A few of his students were there last night and we all stayed too late. He had some good grass."

I was careful to give no sign that I still cling to my generation's myth that good whiskey is better for you than good grass. Nevertheless, my conviction must have been evident.

He squatted on his haunches in front of me. "Look, don't worry that I'm going to lead Daniel astray. Anyhow,
by the time he's in high school, pot may be legal."

"I thought your generation was turning away from it and taking up liquor." I sound priggish, I thought. Just like Julie, with her supercilious way of saying, 'You can't tell me anything about booze. All my life I've watched drunks lurch along the street after wasting their whole paycheck at some gin-mill!' My only experiences, as a teenager, were with 'tipsy' middle-aged men at the Country Club whom our crowd thought terribly funny. I considered Julie terribly naive in her attitude toward alcohol.

Actually, our disenchantment with each other may have begun when I'd feel slightly guilty after drinking too much and she'd try to shame me, authoritarian as always: 'You look like you've been sick all night.' Sometimes I had been; to know it showed made me feel worse. 'You're supposed to be an example for enlisted personnel.' Since no enlisted personnel had access to the coderoom, I was particularly aggravated by that comment.

"I'll have to say I hope that's happening," I continued, "because the brain damage from drugs, acid, speed, cocaine, that we've heard about seems so much worse than the damage some of our contemporaries suffered -- are suffering from alcohol. We understand the effects of alcohol but drugs are so -- mysterious."

Ray's head was cocked, eyes open wide, mouth deliberately closed, it seemed. His silence, nonetheless, was
propitiation -- unlike the arrogance of my sons when I used to broach this subject. From them, I got the message, 'Elders all have closed minds.'

Ray might not remember when LSD was first publicized in Life Magazine. I told him I was pregnant with Dan at the time but eager to try mind-expansion. "As a guinea-pig, under controlled laboratory conditions, of course."

Ray murmured, "Always hedge your bets."

I gave him a sharp look, decided his remark wasn't sarcastic, and went on, "None of our doctor friends would take my interest seriously and George was appalled. I've never lived it down."

"If you hadn't been pregnant, do you suppose you'd have taken the risk?" Ray asked but didn't wait for an answer. "Just as well you didn't."

I smiled. "Because I'd have been hooked? But seriously, I'm still interested in mind expansion by drugs but I'll probably be in a nursing home before it becomes safe."

Then I told him how shocking it was when drugs first came to Des Moines and we knew our boys were 'experimenting' ... a euphemism we used to comfort ourselves. I didn't go into details to spare myself from reliving them. "I was brought up to cope with my own problems but the early drug scene was so harrowing, I wish now I'd had outside help."

Ray's interest was consoling. "And your husband?"

"Looking back, I think he felt the climate of contention around our house had to be my fault. I was supposed
to be in charge there. Now I think the fault was mine... because I didn't take charge. I literally retreated into solitude. Lived with books." I sighed. "Mutual caring had been the mainstay of our family life. It was missing during that time. That's why drugs, to me, are anathema."

Then Ray told me a little about life in the commune. "Sitting around nights, we'd pass a joint, listen to Duke make music and plan to share the work next day. The place was a pig sty by then, dog vomit, mouse droppings, you name it. But next day, everybody did his own thing and the plans were shot. All our caring about each other didn't extend to doing for each other."

I seized on his phrase. "That's what distinguishes family life -- caring and doing for each other!"

And then George appeared with the shocking news about Mike.

I'm glad now that in telling Ray about Tom's self-absorption I didn't relate details of his rebellious adolescence. I still wonder why some of them come back to me so vividly. Am I a masochist? Do I revel in being one of Baudelaire's 'martyred slaves of Time'?

Maybe that's the reason I began graduate school this year with a sense of deja vu. Six years ago, when Daniel started kindergarten, I first determined to do something different with the rest of my life. Even though I believed the Women's Movement was addressed to younger women, it gave me the impetus to move.
I should have remembered chicken pox from previous experience. Dan broke out the same day that Bill's notice to appear for his army physical arrived. And that very day, George lost a lawsuit in the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals. They all needed my time and attention; I was no freer to start off in a new direction than I'd ever been. Pursuit of a self-oriented goal was, for me, a chimera. I remember fixing a drink that evening that tasted just like the unflavored gelatin I was taking to strengthen my fingernails. I'd begun biting them again -- shades of my anguished periods in girlhood.

Then Tom appeared. 'The sniveling turd! I'm taking my knife to school tomorrow and when he jumps me, I'll stick it in his ribs!'

Even now I find myself clutching my book against my chest. Biographers dwell on Baudelaire's tortured youth, but agony is ordinary, not only the province of poets!

Tom's face was flushed, his body rigid, when he heard his father thunder, "Quiet!" I sat, shaking, in my customary chair, the dog beside me...was it Peggy? She, too, was alert and tense. Ignoring his father, Tom spat out, 'Coddamit, I've got a knife and I'll use it on that shitty bastard!' Then he dashed upstairs to slam his door so hard I heard a hinge snap. Suddenly, my drink overturned, soaking a circle on the oriental rug my parents had just given us for our anniversary. George strode toward me, his face suffused with rage. "Tell your son,"
he commanded, 'That carrying a concealed weapon is a felony. And tell him I'll put him in jail myself before he can use it!'

That night I sponged small whimpering Daniel a dozen times with calomine lotion and wondered if my spirit was finally threadbare, splitting weft from warp. I felt older than my elderly parents. I couldn't blame God for my distress. He wasn't abusing me; though He certainly wasn't using me very well.

I remember thinking, 'Is life like this for all women?'

Obviously, it wasn't. Other women were out in the world pursuing personal goals, my old friend Julie among them. It was the beginning of the Seventies, a new decade promising a new, liberated life for women. And I was still at home coping with family life...trying to cope...while Julie was expressing herself, was one of the New Women.

George comes in so quietly I am startled. "Was the plane on time?"

"I had to wait a while. It'll help Clare to have her family here. You look tired, dear. Let's go to bed." On the way upstairs, he puts out his hand and rubs my neck. "You take on too much...other people's burdens," he murmurs.

"What happened to Mike could happen to you," I protest. "I'd want my friends to help -- to be concerned."

George takes a long breath. "It may happen to me but
not tomorrow or the next day. God willing, I'll be here to celebrate a few more wedding anniversaries. Or did you forget? Today's the day...or it was, back in 1944."

I had forgotten! He mustn't know; it might hurt his feelings. Quickly, I say, "I liked our ceremony, didn't you? It was unusual, though I can't remember the exact words."

"'And the two shall be as one,'" George repeated, emptying his pockets on the dresser.

I can't help saying, half in jest, "And you've always been the one. While I'm -- always have been -- a parasite."

Good-naturedly, he responds, "Not, fortunately, a parasite who devours the host like the Black Widow spider."

I shudder at the word 'widow' and thank God that in a few moments I can lie down next to the big warm body of the man I love more now that I did in 1944 -- even though he will never find fault with my statement that he is the one we are.

I will need my car all morning to do errands for Clare and when I tell Dan at breakfast he looks disconsolate. "Ray and I were going to go to the farm to help Bill plant his garden, remember?"

Washing yolks for deviled eggs, I snap, "I can't drive you today and you know why." I envision Clare's drawn face. She will sit in the front row of the church,
her shoulders hunched, grey head bowed.

Ray and Dan have been whispering. Now, Dan, his
eyes alight, explodes with a shout, though I am standing
beside the sink, not five feet from him. "Mom! Guess
what!"

"Hush... I can hear."

"Ray and I will ride our bikes out to Bill's!" He
pauses, excitement crackling about him like static elec-
tricity. "I mean, can we ride our bikes to Bill's? It's
not even twenty miles and I've gone five, lots of times!
Please, Mom, oh, please!"

I recall newspaper pictures of the annual organized
bicycle trip across our state. Lots of kids, but surely
none as young as Dan. Besides, there were trucks carrying
supplies and medics along and state troopers to protect
the riders. Ray is, of course, capable of protecting Dan.
If they go by the back roads, there wouldn't be much
traffic. No rain is predicted.

"Are you sure you could pedal all that way?" I ask,
worried about the necessity for making the decision and
at the same time, disgusted by my indecisiveness. If
George would only come home....

"I've got a ten-speed, Mom, you know that. Almost as
good as the one Ray bought. And we'll be careful, honest!"

George has often scolded me for vacillating about
minor issues. I can hear him now: 'You can make up your
mind in one instant about a major decision... where a kid
is going to college, what kind of new car to buy. But you have to ask me whether or not to get your hair cut!

"Ray, you must think it's all right or you wouldn't suggest it," I murmur, just as the Volvo is heard in the drive.

"I'll call Bill for directions," Ray says briskly, "And we'll plan several rest stops. Get your canteen, Pal, we'll need water on this safari."

Sitting close to the front in Clare's church this afternoon, not wishing to look around and exchange sad little smiles with all the friends I know are gathering in the pews behind me, I cast about in my cluttered mind for something to think about that is distracting, yet appropriate. I fail to find it. Reverend Belknap has just taken his seat behind the pulpit; he's staring out at us with a frown that seems to make us blameworthy for this sad occasion.

He's given to long eulogies, too. I don't want to hear about Mike's schooling, or his clubs, or his community good works. I knew him well and will miss him. But the pastor's recapitulation of his life will not comfort me. How can it comfort Clare?

Thoughts of my friend's desolate future spare me from hearing the pastor's voice as more than a drone. Clare's only son will go home soon and she will be all alone. She has many friends, just as I have, but she will
be half a couple in a couple-oriented social group. We will all mourn with her for awhile but months from now, when she still thinks of little else, we will have put Mike into that mental compartment, quite full at our age, of nice people we used to know. We'll wish he were here to join us in a party, a game, or an excursion, remembering that he used to enjoy it so. But will we remember to include Clare -- the still living part of 'two who were made one'?

Reverend Belknap has raised his voice; now it echoes from the vault with the faulty resonance of a toy drum. "All men say they will repent tomorrow. Tomorrow, they say, they will prepare themselves to meet our Lord."

To think that Clare and all of us who are grieving with her are being subjected to a comfortless exhortation exasperates me.

"Prepare yourselves today, I say! For Michael, our departed brother, tomorrow never came!"

How I wish this bombastic man of the cloth were capable of Baudelaire's economy... 'Our sins are strenuous, cowardly our repentances.' Furtively, I glance at George. He stares blankly straight ahead. Plainly, he has managed to transport himself from this place and stays, unruffled, in private thought.

Later, as we drive to Clare's house, I ask, "Where did you go during that awful funeral oration? Back to Okinawa? Or to last month's victory in the Iowa Supreme
"Never look back at funerals. Look ahead." A slight grin appears, accentuating the dimple he's always had that I usually fail to notice. "This time I went mushrooming. The morels will be up soon. As soon as the lilac buds are as big as squirrel's ears, according to the farmers."

Sunday morning Ray sleeps late while Daniel goes to Mass with his father. It was almost dark when they arrived home from the country last night. I make a quick trip to Clare's house to see what can be done for her today and return to find Ray and Dan spading up a garden plot in our back yard.

"Daddy said we could have a garden just like Bill's," Dan exults. "Carrots, radishes, lettuce. Won't you be glad, Mom?"

How many seed packets have washed away into our ravine? Each child has feverishly spaded a garden on the first warm spring day just like this one and by June, when the weeds appear, it's been forgotten. Just as each child in turn has lost his father's tools, has converted our third floor ballroom into a gym, our basement rooms into a Fun House, so each child has planted and abandoned a garden. "Hang in there, Mom," Bill used to say whenever I was tempted to deny a child his turn at implementing a fantasy.

"Be sure you remember to weed and water it," I tell
Dan, still 'hanging in there', since he deserves the same experiences his brothers had before him.

Today is the kind of day that inspires householders to wander about their yards, contemplating the accumulations of winter leaves and the bare spots that need resodding. It is not a day for yard work because a snowfall in April, while not common, is always possible. This serves as an excuse to procrastinate.

Next door, Bert is poking at a loose vine on his trellis. He's happy to accept George's offer of a Bloody Mary. "Gloria's concocting some casserole to take to Clare," he says, leaning against the porch balustrade. "I'm glad I can be outdoors even though I know I'm about as useful as sand in your shoe."

"'Ere lucky to live in a place where the change of seasons is so dramatic -- and pleasant," I observe, sipping my drink.

From the back yard, we hear Dan chanting, "'See my pinkie, see my thumb, see my fist, you'd better run!'" and Ray laughing, "Pick on somebody your own size, Chum. But let's finish up here first, okay?"

"I hope that young man decides to talk to my personnel department," Bert says. "He finishes what he starts. That's rare nowadays. Say, wasn't that plane crash in the school yard an awful story in the morning paper?"

"I saw it on the news last night. California, again." George murmurs.
"When I was in the navy, the same thing happened at Pensacola. The pilot was a buddy of mine. We thought he could have avoided the school. God, I'll never forget -- the playground looked as though it had been bulldozed. Kids' clothes and shoes and nun's habits flung about like laundry blown off a clothes line. I was glad when nuns changed to ordinary dresses. Never saw one in a habit but what I'd be reminded of that bloody playground."

I shudder. When I read about yesterday's tragedy, I was reminded of something, too, but I knew I'd never seen such a sight. What...Oh! The faded clipping in Julie's scrapbook had a picture of a Navy pilot and described a schoolyard crash near San Diego. I'd torn it, looking through the mementoes for the letter Ray insisted I read. It was dated 1945. Julie never would have saved that clipping unless the flier was important in her life. Maybe he was the man she chose to be the father of her child! The baby that would secure her release from the WAVES long before the rest of us were discharged. Why didn't it occur to me, or to Ray, that this flier could have been his father?

Before I start to fix lunch, I examine the clipping more carefully. 'Pilot flying a TAC fighter on routine training mission...crash kills forty-two parochial students...pilot error suspected.' Perhaps Julie reverted to her maiden name to avoid reminding herself of the tragedy. Perhaps she deliberately did not tell her son that
his father's error had caused such a catastrophe. Perhaps... but how do I know what went through the mind of a young woman suddenly widowed while carrying her first baby?

George finds me studying the picture to see signs of a resemblance to Ray. It's a full face, unlined, expressionless, exactly like the thousands of photographs we used to see in those long ago days of wartime -- 'Area Residents Killed in Action'. Photos we'd glance at, feeling a flutter of sorrow about that handful of individuals out of the impersonal thousands who probably died the same day; then we'd turn to 'Mary Haworth's Mail' to read about whether a wife should share her husband's letters from overseas with his mother.

"Still raking over the ashes of the past?" George says.

I show him the clipping. "Do you think this could be Ray's father? Should I say I think it is?"

He scans the print. "'Like father, like son' is a heavy load to carry. Best forget it."

I am trying to study for my finals next month but in my present state of mind I can't concentrate. Like durable rubber bands, the ties to one's offspring have an indeterminate capacity to stretch but they still sometimes snap back into their original sphere. Then the child grown into a man becomes a child again and his
mother involuntarily gives way to concern, even anxiety about him. Today, I'm wondering if my scholarly son Frank has had any experience with his own sensuality. What if he has to face it after he embarks on a vocation? Obviously, they have provision for novitiates to leave a seminary but Frank is so conscientious, he might feel that, once undertaken, his calling is obligatory. Would self-immolation make him a better priest, or a bitter man? I wonder.

A conversation with Julie comes back to me. We'd just been to see the film version of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. In line with our shared intellectual pretensions, we agreed we liked the book better. Julie spoke so seldom about her upbringing that I recall my surprise when she suddenly divulged something about her family I thought too confidential for even a best friend to hear.

"My father was a Catholic," she said, "Was in a seminary for several years, studying to be a priest. He should have been one; it wasn't his nature to be a husband or a father. And Mother was a fool to marry him."

We were walking past St. Matthew's Cathedral, I remember, which would be the place of my wedding a few months later.

"I've always assumed you sprang full-grown from the head of a sage, Julie," I said lightly, "I've heard so much about your independence and your jobs during school, I scarcely knew you had a family."
'Who needs one? I'm my own person,' she muttered.
'I guess I do. All through college I sent my laundry home and I still ask my mother what kind of underwear to buy.'

My parents and I exchanged long weekly letters. Julie would tease me about relying on my father for an analysis of the war news. 'He just paraphrases what Time says. If you'd concentrate on what goes over our desks, you'd find out things Time doesn't know.' I had to admit that it was easier to let my father do my thinking for me and it pleased him to know he did.

Now it seems obvious that Julie was jealous of my close familial relationship. But I'll never know whether she envied the love and loyalty or the creature comforts I had always been provided.

Her confiding mood persisted as we walked past the Mayflower Hotel. 'My father's coldness destroyed my mother. She was a dreamer. That's why she called me Juliette -- quite a contrast to Yeller, wouldn't you say? If Dickens knew a real Sam, he probably was my ancestor.' I stopped to peer in the window of a florist's shop as she continued. 'Anyhow, my mother became so despondent, she even lost interest in me. Eventually, his neglect is what killed her.'

'How awful!' I said, tears of sympathy springing to my eyes. 'And you and your dad...?'

'Were strangers.' With a slight smile, she added,
'Which saved me from parochial schools and going to Mass.'

I remember trying to think what insights my psychology professor in college might have gathered from her story. Psychoanalysis was in its infancy then and we were led to think that all the mysteries of humanity would be clarified in the next decade or two. But there seemed to be no mystery to Julie then; she was, as she said, her own person. I said, 'Well, you're too smart to pick a man like your father when you fall in love.'

'You think so?' she responded. 'I don't. I think I'll probably pick a real sadist.'

Since Ray has been here, Dan is never late coming home from school. We meet on the porch just as I am returning from class. 'Guess what! I told my teacher that Ray knew all about retaining walls. So she's going to ask him to come to school and fix one. The rain wrecked it.'

'You can ask him. There he is, clearing out some brush way out in back.'

'You know what else, Mom? Miss Mackey said if Ray's not married, she 'specially wants to meet him. Why do women all seem anxious to get married, Mom?'

I have to laugh. 'Because men are, silly.' I sniff the warm air filled with a dozen sweet, indistinguishable scents and add, 'Especially in spring.'

'But what would my own thoughts be about having a family if I were young today, I wonder. Dan's teacher
may entertain the same fantasies about marriage that Julie and I had more than three decades ago. But no one escapes its realities. Equal but different describes the partners and it is in the area of 'different' that special demands are made upon the woman. If her focus is restricted to her equal status, she'll resent these demands. Enduring mutual love erases the resentment but I wonder if today's marriages will last long enough to attain it.

While the pot roast is browning, I peel carrots and set the table. Ray, his lean face aglow with sweat, greets me cheerfully and is thoughtful enough to leave his muddy boots on the back porch. When he reappears after a shower, his wet hair that distinctive shiny bronze that was Julie's, I say, "I'm sorry I've been so pre-occupied with my friend Clare's loss these past few days that I've had no chance to visit with you. Tell me, are you at all interested in Mr. Hanes' offer of a job?"

The wry expression that has become familiar now appears on his face along with a sheepish grin. "To tell you the truth, I forgot all about it."

I suppose a look of disapproval crossed my face because he adds quickly, "I will call the bank for an appointment, though. He was nice to make the offer. But first, I promised your son Bill I'd do a little work on his foundation; he has a seepage problem I think I can fix. His friend Dave's going out of town so I'll spend a few days
out at the farm, okay?"

"Dan's teacher will be disappointed," I say, smiling. "She wants to meet you, and incidentally engage your services for wall-mending."

"Dan says she's pretty, too. I told him that'd be dangerous -- a pretty teacher in springtime." He breaks off and takes a deep breath. "Maybe I ought to move on before Dan inveigles me into another lifestyle."

It will relieve George to know that Ray is thinking about moving on. But Dan will be heartsick; Ray has taken the place of his absent brothers. I hadn't realized how lonely Dan was, growing up as an only child. And I? Do I want Ray to stay and possibly be lured into the mainstream? Am I clinging to a stranger because one of my own flesh and blood is far from home, also wandering and rootless?

I decide to be noncommittal. "George has a dinner meeting tonight and won't be home. We can eat whenever you and Dan are ready. Want a beer first?"

"Sure, thanks." He's glancing at the evening paper and laughs. "See this? The Director of the Washington zoo bought a stud camel and found it was castrated. His plans for a camel colony are shot."

"I used to spend a lot of time at that zoo, visiting a certain monkey," I say, pouring myself a drink. "I had a friend called Goldie during the war -- a real character, as we used to say. He had a long tour of duty
with the Air Transport Command in India and came home with a Rhesus monkey. Your mother didn't know him, of course, and was flabbergasted when he appeared at the 5034 Club with his pet. He couldn't keep it in the officer's barracks at his base so planned to give it to the Washington zoo. Goldie asked if the monkey could stay with us until he got to see the Director and just then the pet leapt out of his arms, onto the mantel and then to a curtain rod which instantly collapsed. I had to laugh but Julie was undone. She insisted it could only stay at our house as long as Goldie stayed with it. Our guest room was a decrepit bed in the basement; she made Goldie promise to keep him down there."

Ray follows me into the living room. "Given your habit of hospitality and Mother's insistence on her privacy, I'd think there would have been conflict over any houseguest."

I let that comment pass. "We had night watch that weekend and tried to sleep in the daytime. I never did get used to our jumbled hours! Well, Goldie couldn't manage to confine the monkey. We'd wake up to hear all kinds of commotion -- Goldie chasing the pet, the pet shrieking like a human being and knocking lamps and ashtrays over. That with Goldie's beer cans and the monkey's banana peels, they were both a nuisance. But I liked Goldie and after the zoo accepted the pet, I went to see it once a week to report on its health and happiness."
At dinner, Dan is delighted to hear this story and wants to know if the monkey recognized me on my zoo visits. "Of course he did -- in my WAVE hat!"

Our discussion helps Dan to overcome his disappointment that school will prevent him from helping Ray repair Bill's house. "You'll come back as soon as you're through, won't you, Ray?"

"Of course he will," I say promptly. "Ray's like a member of the family." I'd completely forgotten earlier qualms as well as the likelihood that George would frown on an indefinite extension of Ray's stay.

Gloria calls the next morning to complain: "Ever since you went back to school, you've neglected your old friends! Please come for coffee! I'm doing over our bedroom and need advice on some fabric. By the way, I just saw your houseguest take off on a bike with his backpack. I'll bet my husband's offer of a stuffy bank job drove him away."

"Oh, he's just going out to Bill's farm to do some work. He'll be back. I'll come over but you know interior decorating is not my forte, Gloria. Ask me about nineteenth century stagecraft instead."

"I'd ask but I don't want to know the answer. For me, the pursuit of knowledge ceased as soon as I got a house to fool around with."

I like Gloria's condor. Some of my friends, as
baffled as she by my return to school, occasionally de-clare they'd go to school, too, if they had the free time ...if they didn't have such a big house to care for...if closets didn't always need cleaning...if they didn't have so many standing appointments. Our pastimes and goals were all exactly alike when we were girls growing up in Des Moines. We collected movie stars' pictures, samples of face powder, cereal, toothpaste, and we put up our hair every night in metal curlers. We talked mostly about boys. We were aiming from the age of twelve toward our ultimate common goal, a husband, a home and a baby.

Now, in this era of self-concern, when sexist pursuits and training are scorned for little girls and a hoped-for multitude of self-fulfilling choices open to them, who will point out the rewards of family life? Only the reactionaries and the fanatics? That such impoverished spirits should be the family's sole advocates will be a tragedy.

Yet I am proud, and relieved, that the change in women's view of themselves has allowed us finally to become individuals. Mature women can choose to pamper either their bodies or their minds. But young women, faced with a long term commitment to a self-oriented goal or to a family-oriented one, must find the decision agonizing. I do not envy them.

Over Gloria's mantel there still hangs a pastel por-
trait of Bert in his Navy uniform. He looks so cocky -- the crushed crown of his officer's hat indicating his branch of service. She follows my glance and laughs. "You're wondering why I keep rehanging that picture each time I redecorate. It's to remind Bert that he wasn't always a stuffy banker. Whenever he's particularly pompous, I stare at it and he gets the message."

Gloria's in her leotard; she's taking ballet lessons again. "I keep a picture of myself beside my full length mirror. So I can dream about what might have been while I'm struggling into my girdle. Come on. I took the coffee to the upstairs sitting room."

Our footsteps muffled by the thick stair carpeting, I follow Gloria. Seeing the seams of her costume stretched taut over her ample thighs, I think of the slim dancer's body she had in youth.

"You remember I was going to study ballet in New York before the war?" she says over her shoulder. "Then when you went into the WAVES, instead I went to work for Solar Aircraft -- so I'd be here at home when Bert got back from overseas." She pauses, then giggles. "Thus the world lost another Margot Fonteyn."

"We didn't think we really had choices then, did we?" I remark.

At the top of the stairs, Gloria is a bit breathless. "I'm glad we didn't. The so-called velvet trap has been just fine for me."
Gloria's 'trap' is extremely comfortable, I think, as I sit down in the lovely airy room with its exquisite, and expensive, furnishings. A choice of fabric seems to me easy -- carnal, so to speak, as compared with spiritual choices. Gloria has virtually made up her mind anyway so we engage in desultory talk over our coffee...Clare's sad situation, the projected closing of a neighborhood school, plans for a party on Memorial Day.

Eventually, Gloria mentions Ray. "Don't you find it peculiar that he stays on here with you?"

"Well, his mother was my best friend in the WAVES. She died recently and he's curious about her past. Her career in television prevented much mothering, I take it, so he didn't know her well. Thinks maybe I can cast some light on the kind of person she was. But, you know, the more I think about her, the more mysterious it seems that we were such close friends. We didn't have a similar background -- though we did share the 'pursuit of knowledge' you tease me about." We exchange the comfortable smiles of old friends.

"Believe it or not, I had a great friend at the aircraft factory, sat next to her examining those precision instruments, and we spent virtually every waking hour together after work. I guess there was real sisterhood in wartime. But she disappeared afterward; I never saw her... until not long ago, I thought the woman behind the counter in the hardware store looked familiar. It turned out to
be my old friend! Funny, we couldn't think of anything
to say to each other after 'How've you been all these
years?'"

"We had a sort of esprit d'corps in the WAVES, I
think," I murmur. "Our differences, class differences,
if you will, were dissolved in our group dedication to
help win the war and bring the boys back home." As I
look out of Gloria's south bay window at the greening
trees on her lawn, I visualize the code room again. It
becomes a kind of scrim behind the shiny panes.

Continually, smoke swirled about -- we were all con-
stant smokers; summer and winter, haste made us perspire;
locked away from the rest of the Navy Department for rea-
sons of security, a fetid smell never left our quarters.
I've not encountered that smell since but emergencies al-
ways bring it to mind -- the air in outpatient waiting
rooms, the steam rising from a burning building, smoke
from an auto collision. It's the smell of urgency.

Urgency pushed us every hour; we became robot-like
in dealing with it. Pneumatic tubes beside the logging
desk whined and wheezed...were they relics of World War I
like the building itself? Giant intestines, they wove
between the coderooms and the huge adjacent radio room
where enlisted personnel handled the traffic. Who among
them could know whether the five jumbled letter combina-
tions they transcribed represented supplies for the quar-
ter master corps or a call for help from a torpedoed ship?
Set the Electric Coding Machine -- hurry -- type the code and check the message on the tape -- if it's clear English, finish quickly, paste it up -- if it's garbled, reset machine, try again. The despatch shoots through the tube to NCR. Copy it on carbon-backed paper, red-bordered for Secret, orange for Confidential. No errors allowed; redo. Run to reproduce it on the ditto machine, ten information addressees, twenty, thirty. Rush; it's top priority! Stow the extras in the burnbag. Get back to work!

"You're breathing as hard as I do when I run upstairs!" Gloria's voice intrudes. "Hyperventilating or what?"

Men's lives are in the balance; Communications must not fail! If they do, the admirals can't adjust the timetable, the Seabees won't clear the air field, the strike will abort!

I apologize as my breathing subsides. "I simply got carried away. Puzzling over Ray's mother makes me feel as though I'm reliving our war. You know what I mean?"

"Sure. Anybody who did war work would know. I still see my assembly line in dreams sometimes. If we passed a faulty part, you know, it could mean another lost bomber crew. 'We concentrated, believe me. But you know," Gloria paused and stared into space, "Our kids never did understand that war. They were sure it wasn't different from Vietnam. I can just hear Bert, junior: 'A war's a war.' He grins whenever he comes home and sees that picture of his father still on display."

I nodded. "I gave up trying to explain the impact of that war on all of us. Our children couldn't believe that everybody felt the same way about it. Or that we felt we used up our youth in it."

"Remember? Crush the Nazi war machine, sink the Japanese fleet, or life won't be worth living!" Gloria reached out to touch the lovely cloisonne box on the table beside her. "Yet, when Bert and I bought this in Tokyo a few years ago, it was as though that war had never happened."

"I confess I didn't feel quite that way when George and I visited Berchtesgaden."

"Well, you WAVES were into secret stuff. I remember ages ago when I asked you if Naval communications meant anything besides semaphores. You told me then about the harried life in the Washington code room."

"What puzzles me now is that the years don't emerge with any clarity. Except for 1945 when the war was over and '46 when George came home from the Pacific."

Yet certain scenes come back clearly -- the way the punctilious, elderly tailor fitted Julie and me for uniforms in the austere tailor shop we visited our first week on duty. I told Gloria how proud we were of those 'fitted' uniforms. We wore our regular issue blue serge on night watch and saved them for day watch and for dates. It was funny a few years after the war when I put on my 'best' uniform again and found how awful it looked. Soxy, padded
in the places men's suits were, not shaped to any conceivable female form. The tailor was famous for catering to naval officers; of course, formerly they'd always been men.

As I'm leaving, Gloria remarks, "Wasn't that air crash yesterday in California a ghastly accident?"

"Terrible. Bert said he'd known a pilot at Pensacola who dove into a schoolyard, too." Gloria nods.

"Another odd coincidence -- in Ray's mother's scrapbook there's a clipping about a flier who crashed in a San Diego schoolyard back in 1945. I'm guessing he's Ray's father, about whom Ray knows nothing at all." I pause at the front door. "I've been speculating. Julie left a letter to an old boyfriend as well. It was a vicious letter implicating me in the breakup of the romance. So I figure she might have married the flier on the rebound, got pregnant right away, just as we all wanted to, and then when he died...."

Gloria is doing a surprisingly graceful plié on the parquet floor of her vestibule. She interrupts me. "Suppose she was miserable the few months they lived together. I knew some fliers who were real squirrels, in love with themselves, bullies with the enlisted men, all that...." She goes into an Arabesque. Then she narrowly misses the hanging lamp above the door, she winks and I smile at her burlesque.

She raises her fists and intones, "The couple quarrel-
The man refused to be domesticated. She hated him, hoped he would disappear, or that she could." Gloria dies in mime. I begin to clap just as she springs up. "Then she hears the news of the crash landing. She can't cry. A phoenix is born from the ashes of that snoldering plane. A woman emerges." Gloria strikes a pose, arms outstretched, chin and belly thrust forward. "In spite of being big with child, she's free to be herself!" Then she shakes herself and relaxes with a hearty laugh. "My art transmogrifies, wouldn't you say? I just learned that word. To transform with absurd effect, it means."

I'm laughing. "What do you mean by saying that you stopped pursuing knowledge thirty years ago? Incidentally, Shirley Maclaine would have had some stiff competition if you'd pursued your career."

Driving to the campus I find myself fantasizing in the same vein as Gloria's performance. Suppose Julie had quarreled with her Lieutenant -- wasn't his name Holland? Being pregnant, she'd be uncomfortable and irritable; she was always capable of caustic remarks. Maybe Holland was playing around. Young people don't realize that to have a beautiful baby, the mother goes through an ugly nine months. The fliers I used to know were great womanizers. God knows, if Julie was jealous of my innocent golf games with Clint, she'd make life miserable for a husband she suspected. Then, with the airplane an extension of his ego, he wakes up angry and goes out to risk death. And
Julie knows she drove him to it...

Circling the parking lot and finding it full, I am angry, too. That motorcycle taking up a whole car-space! I'd like to ram it! Ah, here's luck; a chevy is backing out. I decide I won't share my juvenile fantasy with Ray when he comes back to stay at our house. George is right; 'like father, like son' is a heavy burden for anyone.

"In discussing today's poems, especially the ones Baudelaire addressed to his octroon mistress, Jeanne Duval, I'd prefer to use the euphemism 'C.A.' for copulatory activity. We don't want the folks in the next classroom to think we're studying pornography, do we? Not when they're trying to concentrate on accounting." The professor grins, inviting comment.

"Dr. Blake, I don't understand this line in "The Jewels" -- 'More caressing than all the Angels of Evil'," an earnest young man says and the class snickers.

"Heavenly Sin. I wonder if you midwestern puritans will ever understand Baudelaire's conviction of the goodness of sin."

Dan comes home singing a new set of words to the tune of "Stouthearted Men". They have to do with clean-up week at school. Probably because I've had Julie on my mind, the words to the WAVE marching song drift into memory:

'Marching along, we are one thousand strong and soon there'll be ten thousand more
WAVES proud of serving, our purpose unswerving,
they'll know us from mountain to shore. Hup!'
At the 'Hup!', we'd stamp our feet in those ugly black regulation shoes.

The wonder of it was that girls nourished on the saccharine screen images of June Allyson, Alice Paye and Jeannette MacDonald could be reconstituted, in the space of a few weeks, into military robots. Automatons who would blindly follow orders -- 'Eyes right!', 'Left Flank!' -- through slush and snow and winter rain.

"The Allen kid wants to play hockey next season, Mom," Dan informs me. "My shoulder pads were too small this year. I can give them to him, can't I?"

"Of course."

"He wants to pay me. But I'd rather give 'em away."

I want to hug my son for his spontaneous generosity but he's out the door before I can. I suppose I could congratulate myself; I tried to impress each child in turn with the special joy in giving. I realized, in my experience with Julie, that it is a learned concept rather than an instinctive joy.

Our first Christmas in Washington was 1943. American infantrymen were bogged down south of Rome; the navy had not yet moved on New Guinea. Our spirits were low. Then I received a box of presents from home. There were two lovely nightgowns; lingerie was conceived to be a morale booster for girls in uniform. Aunt Maude's gift was far more expensive and elaborate than my mother's. Impulsively, I gave it to Julie.
'Why don't you want me to pay you for it?' she demanded.

'I just want to give it to you,' I insisted. Then, thinking it might embarrass her to accept so lavish a gift, I added off-handedly, 'You can give me something sometime.'

'No, I'd rather....' She had looked longingly at the nightie at first; now she examined it critically. 'It doesn't look as though it cost much. I'll give you two dollars.'

At the time, I couldn't explain to myself why both Julie's inability to accept a gift gracefully and then the absurdly low price she placed on the garment should distress me. She further exacerbated my wounded feelings by saying, 'I suppose you think it's worth more. I don't happen to.'

Now, I'm amazed that for so long I overlooked these minor differences in our values. I must have been more naive than I would admit. Or else I was so convinced that Julie had a superior mind, I deliberately refused to recognize her callous insensitivity.

I simply stopped going to the grocery store across Connecticut avenue from our corner because I was reluctant to be identified with Julie. She always haggled with the grocer over the price of a head of lettuce or a dented can. Too, the meals it was her turn to prepare became increasingly Spartan. 'Sedentary jobs like ours require that
we curb our appetites,' she would say gaily. The fact was, we were not sedentary and some of us were still growing. My feet certainly were.

'Julie's family doesn't have money,' I once explained to Annabel when we were alone in the drugstore. After one of Julie's suppers, we had a need to fill up on a double chocolate sundae or a banana split. 'I suppose being careful about money is characteristic of people who've always been poor.'

'Posh. My family doesn't have money either and I'm not stingy. Besides, we all make the same $203.00 a month. I notice that when she does spend a dollar, it's for herself.'

I'd hear the girls on our watch complain about Julie's miserly habits; we used to treat each other to coffee in the cafeteria during breaks. Once a girl from Kansas City, Dottie somebody, demanded of me: 'Why does Julie Selleer think she can always forget when it's her turn to treat?' My loyalty as a roommate was sometimes a burden. I thought of an excuse: 'I believe she sends part of her paycheck home.' Dottie refused to let me get away with that. 'Oh, Baloney. People like her wouldn't share anything with anybody. Stick up for her if you like. You're a sucker.'

No, no, that isn't what happened! Memory sometimes distorts! Julie herself revealed that Dottie confronted her with the accusation that she always 'forgot' when it was her turn to treat. 'I do forget, Mary. You
believe me, don't you?' We were in bed, chatting as usual before we turned out the light. Julie's expressive eyes were full of entreaty; as always, I felt flattered that she was so eager for my good opinion.

'Why not write yourself a note tomorrow, and go all out for treats?' I suggested.

'I've been thinking about sending part of my pay-check home,' she said.

It didn't occur to me that she was temporizing. 'Tell the girls that, then. But don't let them treat you anymore.' I must have thought myself a fount of common sense.

Is that a howl I hear? Or only one of the current popular songs with unintelligible repetitions that suggest four letter words? Can it be someone in pain? Feet pounding up the front steps alert me. The neighborhood gang bursts in the front door. "Dan's hurt! Took a bat on his head! There's lots of blood!"

This time, the emergency room is almost empty, which is some small comfort, although that recognizable smell persists, suggestive of urgency. I sink down on the worn leather sofa, unable to shut out the sounds of Dan's moans and the nurse's brisk assurances that head wounds always bleed a lot. I take some deep breaths to calm myself. Poor Dan, poor baby -- poor mother. I will not weep. I will not.
The nurse said he may need a few stitches. She said I should have seen the kid who just came in, a bat caught him in the jaw. 'Spring, baseball, kids,' she said smiling. Actually smiling!

I stare at the water fountain thinking of the first time I came here, a young mother, distraught. Sara, not yet two, had fallen out of the cart at the supermarket. 'Only a mild concussion; be sure to keep her awake for an hour or two,' I was told. How soon after that did Bill eat the rat poison found in a neighbor's kitchen? That time, I was so angry with adults who bought rat poison I didn't cry as I held his little head to help him vomit. Then did Frank ride double and get his heel caught in his pal's bike sprocket? Which child dumped the pan of boiling water on his bare legs? Who ate the dishwasher detergent? Who pushed the button up his nose?

George met the ambulance at Emergency when Bill went through the windshield. George went with me when Tom was mauled by the sheepdog. I was alone when Frank got a stick in his eye.

On this April day, I look out the hospital window and see a soft rain beginning. Daffodils are so close to blooming, this warm rain is sure to bring them out. I feel the same quickening of the pulse that I have felt every spring I can remember. This child will heal -- heal and play ball again.

Driving home, a chastened Tom sitting in front so the
sight of the bloody towels in back won't generate fresh tears, I tell him the doctor said he was a brave boy and that he can have aspirin, pizza and ice cream. "And even though it's a school night, Daddy won't mind if you watch television," I promise.

"Frankenstein's on again at six o'clock," he says drowsily.

Bill calls and commiserates with me. "My head was the target for a golf club once, remember, Mom? Boys have tough heads. Tell Dan." He pauses. "And tell him I'll hurry Ray along. Ray's a master craftsman, Mom. You've got to see the job he's doing at the farm."

George is tender with his sons when they are hurt but he controls his feelings sufficiently so that they will not be tempted to indulge in self-pity. He can't tolerate whining. Accordingly, Dan, ensconced on the sofa in the library, describes his mishap in the briefest of terms. I note he's peering around his father's looming form to see if Frankenstein has begun.

George warns him to hold his head still so his brains won't leak out between the stitches; then he goes to the living room to take his accustomed chair with mail, newspaper and highball at hand.

I sit on the adjacent windowseat to whisper, "Dan showed remarkable courage for his age."

"Could he doesn't feel anything because his head's empty."
"You don't believe that! Why do you continually belittle your sons?"

"To make them into men. Praise a boy and first thing you know, he's a braggart. Next, he's a real prick." He picks up his paper.

I place my hand on his to forestall his customary absorption. "We're lucky, don't you think? You know our boys aren't braggarts. And you aren't overweight like poor Mike was. You'll probably live forever, if only to continue teasing me. And today I heard from the Breast Cancer Demonstration Project that I don't have cancer. We're just plain lucky, I think. We ought to be grateful."

He takes my hand in a firm grip. "Damn right. I am. And I trust dinner will be ready soon."

I snatch my hand away and jump to my feet. "You're lucky that I'm a family woman. If I weren't, I wouldn't be here to take your children to Emergency or have your dinner ready the moment you want it," I tell him, not entirely in jest. "Furthermore, the more I think about my friend Julie, the more I envy her. She didn't spend her lifetime picking up dirty socks off the floor, washing them, putting them away, not to mention...."

"Their holes intact," he cuts in, grinning. "But even so, I'd never let a dame like Julie touch my sox."

"You never knew her! You've just heard me talk about her."

"I knew her. You worked an extra eight-hour watch,
remember, so we could have our three-day honeymoon."
Rather than tear the newspaper I've snatched away from him, he adds in mock exasperation, "She invited me to lunch. I paid. That's all there was to it. Now may I have my paper back?"

"First, I want to know what you talked about."

"First, I want to read the paper. Then I'll tell you what your crazy WAVE friend talked about."

As always, when it's my avowed intention to finish a conversation with my husband, the bell on the stove sounds or the telephone rings. Tonight, it's the invalid interrupting to make a polite request for a glass of milk. We are in bed before I think to ask George again about his afternoon with Julie.

"Look, it wasn't pleasant. She wasn't the great gal you apparently thought she was. She had piano legs, too, didn't you notice? I can't understand why you're digging around in the past to find out what you can about a dame like that."

"Well, her son came to see me, ostensibly to find out more about his mother. I began thinking about her, and also about myself. It turns out our lives were so different! I'd like to understand her -- and maybe, in the process, learn more about myself." I settle against my back-rest. "Now, tell me."

He sighs. "I fail to see the point in rehashing a conversation of thirty years ago. Unless it may shed some
light on the reason her son is still around — freeloading, if you please. Without giving any indication as to when he'll depart, what's more."

George props himself up with an extra pillow. I hold my breath because, in our long intimacy, there have been few times that he would give himself over to an exploration of past events to determine a cause and effect relationship he considers trivial. Moreover, an 'if -- then' philosophy is as alien to his nature as tears.

"Well, she took me to a little restaurant across the street from the Wardman Park, Napoleon's, I think it was. They knew her there, which made me feel less like a man and more like a trophy. Remember, I'd just gotten my second louie bars. You and she were j.g.'s already and I knew I'd be taking a lot of flak about being outranked at our wedding the next day."

I struggle to keep my disbelief from showing. That this man with whom I'd lived for more than thirty years had ever in his lifetime felt inferior was a revelation that cut into my consciousness like a child's scream in a nightmare. At least once a year, I've heard him say, 'I've only made one mistake in my life -- Once I thought I'd made a mistake and I hadn't.' The wrong stop on the Paris metro was 'an opportunity to walk a few blocks', the wrong turn off an expressway was 'a chance to see the countryside', a hangover was simply ignored. To think that once, in company with my self-assured UPI roommate, he felt less
than self-confident!

"She started off by analyzing you. Not as you were, but as my mate in the future. Cassandra, she called herself, and made the error of asking a guy who'd had five years of Greek if he understood the reference. Ever notice how self-satisfied people invariably patronize you?" He's not waiting for an answer; his dimple appears and his eyes are on the ceiling, probably noting the spider web in the corner, to which he'll soon call my attention. "She said you'd be easy to live with, but dull -- always predictable."

"Well, thanks a lot, Julie," I said under my breath. "Mary likes having people around all the time," she went on to say, so I'd have no peace. There wouldn't be any variety, either. 'Mary's friends are all alike -- party types without an ounce of ambition.'"

"At least I had friends! She didn't," I interject. "She didn't know most of your friends were my friends, too. Anyway, what it all added up to was that I could look forward to an uneventful slide downhill into middle-age. 'You'll die on the vine, stuck in your hometown,' she prophesied.

"Cassandra! Why didn't you tell her you...""

He ignores me, single-mindedly pursuing his subject the way lawyers work -- or dogs chase a cat. "She began speaking a confidential whisper, to prevent the waiter from sharing the benefit of her wisdom, I suppose."
voice drops to a mock whisper. "After this war, things are going to be a hell of a lot different than before, George. Most people will want to take up where they left off, take up a life just like their parents', only they expect to have more money, a better house, all the mechanical marvels they're promising after reconversion. But some of us are going to strike out and do big things, make big money, move! You could, George. I can see it in your face. If you had the kind of a wife who would help you, instead of someone who's going to pull you into a nest in your old hometown. That nest will be a hole you won't even see out of."

I can almost see Julie scanning George's face, assessing his potential and shaping his future for him. And even if she kept her voice low, it would have had that attention-demanding urgency in it that always marked her pronouncements.

Lord knows I've looked at our wedding pictures often enough so I know his young face, too thin, almost haggard after a long hospital stay with his broken collar bone. And that determined jaw! If the dimple ever showed then, I can't remember it. What George is telling me now makes me realize that Julie would have thought ambition was written all over that face. Determination to excel as an army officer would have been translated into a potential for power-grabbing, in her mind. Of course, she would have known, as we all know then, that only by attachment to a
successful man could a woman hope to enjoy the fruits of success. Only by marriage to a young man who'd look like the men in the Lord Calvert advertisements when he got out of uniform could she hope to have power of her own. My mind is a jumble of thoughts; I must tuck away these revelations and sort them out later or I'll miss what George is saying.

"'Risks. You men are all taking risks now because you have to,' she said. I was on my third martini -- we drank them straight-up in those days, remember? -- and I'd had no breakfast."

"She was...ah, impressive."

"She was a nut. Listen. 'But most of the men who survive the risks of war will beat a retreat to no-risk lives. The strong ones, the ones with guts, won't settle for that. They'll be willing to go on taking risks -- if a woman inspires them.' Didn't Julie ever reveal how comparatively uninspiring she thought you were?' George is grinning broadly now. He reaches over to squeeze my arm.

By now I am furious. "She told you all this when you were going to marry me the next day? Why, she was... a deceitful...."

"Bitch. Of course. I'm amazed you failed to see it."

He gets out of bed to dial the time number and sets his wristwatch alarm. Afraid of a change in mood, I hurry to say, "She even planned our wedding, George, down to the last detail! Found out where to get a license and led me
there because I was always getting lost in Washington. She shopped for my wedding dress and posed me for my wed-
ing picture. Even made an appointment at the Dispensary with a Catholic doctor so I'd learn about the rhythm method. Ye Gods, now that I think about it, we couldn't have gotten married without her! After all that, how could she think she might take my place?"

George gets back into bed and shrugs. "Don't ask me what goes through the mind of a woman. Particularly a female like your precious friend. By the way, I seem to recall that her teeth were crooked. If she wound up on television, she had to have them capped. Anyway, maybe all the formalities she led you through was a dry run. She figured I'd decamp after lunch, hide out for awhile, from you, that is, and then she and I'd get together some-

where later. She predicted, correctly, that I'd be on the west coast awhile before going overseas."

I remember now that not long before my wedding, Julie tried to arrange a transfer to San Francisco. Annabel heard from a friend in Supers that her request was going through channels; she didn't confide in us. Around that time a lot of girls were saying how nice a change of sta-
tion would be but they were all too timid to make a formal request and risk offending our current Commanding Officer.

Long before, I'd recognized Julie's fearlessness. Now I know she was conniving as well. How many Julie's were there? How could the one who urged me to get married
be the same girl who, on the eve of my wedding....

George is chuckling out loud, watching my face. "You didn't know old George was propositioned the day before you landed him, did you?"

"Listen, I wasn't fishing for you!" His indignation dissolves in laughter. "Julie talked me into getting married in the first place."

"I know it. She told me you were as indecisive as a toy balloon; you've never seen fit to grow out of it, have you? In any case, her prodding occurred before she met me personally. She fell helplessly in love at first sight, no question about it." He begins to sing that old Rodgers and Hart song, "I didn't know what time it was... then I met you...." I wish he'd sing more often; his college Glee Club voice has not faltered through the years. He remembers all the old lyrics, too. They hardly qualify as poetry but poor Dan has only "Keep On A-Rockin' Me, Baby" or worse, to lift his spirits.

The bedside light is switched off. "Wait, George. Tell me what you told Julie. About why you couldn't, or would not, marry her instead of me?"

He rolls over. "I told her you and I were already married in the eyes of God."

I snap the light back on. "You didn't!" At this juncture I am so caught up in my recollections of the past that I feel the visceral shock such a disclosure would have made upon me then. I punch his arm and repeat, "You
"I might have," he murmurs sleepily. "All I remember for sure is stumbling to the can about three p.m. and relieving my stomach of all the booze and food I'd just paid for."

Bill comes in the next evening just before dinner to say that Ray discovered a leak in his roof. "He'll be staying on a few more days at the farm. That guy can fix anything!"

"That guy has a way of making himself indispensable," George observes, not without malice. "Your friend Dave may return to find himself without a bed."

"No problem, Dad. Ray brought his sleeping bag." Bill grins; he knows his father well.

Dan stayed home from school, recovering from his injury: 'malingering', his father called it. Bill is flip-sent with his little brother; "I've heard of third baseman getting clobbered but never a pitcher! How come?"

"I should have stayed on the mound," Dan says in the weak voice he uses to solicit sympathy.

"Instead you showed 'em you were tough. You hit the bat with your head."

Pleased by his big brother's compliment, Dan giggles. Though he's requested a tray, he says, "If Bill will stay for spaghetti, I think I can eat in the dining room with the family, Mom."
The other day I was reading that since human beings are the only animals to anticipate the future, they have the ability to modify impending events, even to preshape what they envision. How I wish I'd trained myself to do this early in my career as a family woman! I would have convinced Sara of her unique beauty at thirteen; then she could have faced the dreadful popularity contest that is high school life with aplomb. If I'd been skilled in modifying impending events, Bill would have had the courage of his convictions about not joining the college fraternity he grew to hate. Frank might have been the star of the YMCA swim team -- Tom, a Merit Scholar.

But preshaping other people's futures is manipulating them! Each of my children is a person in his own right. Mother playing God, even in trivial matters, would have denied them responsibility for themselves. I want to think this through before I'm tempted to tamper with the malleable psyche of my last born.

George finds a bottle of Chianti to serve with dinner as a salute to Dan's remarkable recovery. Dan grimaces at the unfamiliar taste but the adults enjoy.

I feel a buoyancy of spirit that comes, I realize, from George's revelation of his encounter with Julie before our marriage. It proved I was not responsible for the way she spent her life, as Ray suggested at first. I think now it was her self-satisfaction that spoiled all her relationships. She was satisfied with her appearance,
as well she could be. So she often made fun of Annabel and me, as we tried innumerable methods of improving our hair, our complexion, our posture. She was satisfied with her performance of the duties of a Communications Officer; we kept trying to type faster, make fewer errors, be more alert. Her personal goals were always attainable. Neither she nor I ever doubted that she'd find that man and have that baby in due course. Whereas I always set impossible goals: dexterity in sports, for instance, despite my lack of coordination -- proficiency in foreign languages, with a stone ear.

Royal Navy Officers of the British Liaison staff frequented Annabel's office in Cominich and from them she learned the ritual of afternoon tea. Julie and I were quick to follow her lead; it made us feel an affinity with our valiant allies who had been involved in this war for so much longer than we had. Moreover, it was an act of defiance against the age-old coffee tradition of the U.S. Navy.

Unable to provide ourselves with Hervey's Bristol Cream, the sherry which Annabel claimed was the customary accompaniment in John and Theobald's quarters, we substituted dollops of rum in our tea. Sometimes, teatime extended past supper time and the next day we'd go on watch at seven a.m., dimly aware that tea and toll house cookies were not only inadequate sustenance but conducive to heated arguments. Julie did not equate tea laced with
rum and ordinary drinking, nor did I.

One of our discussions centered on the evacuation of the Nisei from the West Coast. 'It's absolutely necessary for the security of California,' Julie asserted.

'But you don't know. You've never been there,' I protested. 'My grandmother's gardener is a second-generation Japanese, loyal, hard-working and an old man besides. He even changed his name so people would find it easier to pronounce in this country. To intern him, along with his children, behind barbed wire someplace in Nevada is just stupid!' As a child, I'd often gone with my mother to visit in Beverly Hills and spent hours watching 'Joe' prune the avocado trees. I felt that made me an authority.

'Even third-generation Orientals pose a threat,' Julie insisted. 'If their countrymen land on the West Coast, where do you think their loyalties will be? I've known plenty of Chinese in New York. I wouldn't trust them either.'

We didn't agree about conscientious objectors either. 'They aren't traitors,' I claimed. 'They're just misguided souls who are willing to suffer being shunned by the rest of us for their beliefs.' I knew of various sects in rural Iowa who would not bear arms and wanted only to continue raising crops. 'The nation's breadbasket provides fuel for the war effort, too,' I told Julie.

'Prison is too good for those crazy Jehovah's Witnesses,' she declared. 'If they want freedom of religion,
they have to be willing to fight for it. They're fanatics, just as dangerous as Hitler's Storm Troopers. Why, everybody knows the Watchtower is pro-Fascist. It's probably even financed somehow by the Third Reich.'

'Religious fanatics aren't necessarily seditionists,' I said, helping myself to more rum which cooled my tea to room temperature. Now, the very thought of that insipid concoction makes me slightly nauseated.

'You're forgetting the flag case back in 1940!' Julie slammed the teapot down on the coffee table so hard I was sure it would break. It was a Royal Doulton pot I'd asked Mother to send me so our tea ritual could be conducted in style. 'Insisting their kids should not salute the flag -- the flag of our country -- was...was....'

As she searched for an appropriate term of disdain, I supplied 'Silly.'

'Not silly! Those kids could grow up to be a permanent Fifth column! Dangerous in the extreme!'

I was sure our debates provided intellectual stimulation. Most WAVES on our watch seemed content to discuss Joan Farry's paternity suit against Charlie Chaplin or the baby Errol Flynn finally acknowledged as his own. Julie and I were sharpening our minds with discourse on contemporary issues. It was long afterwards before I realized we were merely parroting common assumptions of the times. While our country was united by a dedication to victory, all shades of opinion could be heard on the
radio and read in the newspapers. For the most part, Julie and I simply echoed the voice of some commentator or columnist whose glib appraisals matched the ideas we'd absorbed in our limited past experience. But with the exotism of youth, we congratulated each other on our original thoughts.

Still inseparable, our relationship showed signs of deterioration shortly after my marriage. Julie was especially critical of my friendship with an elderly expatriate Bulgarian whom I chanced to meet at the home of Iowa's senior Senator. He and I took long walks together in Rock Creek Park. I always addressed him as Mr. Klava, or 'Sir'; he was a former diplomat and my exposure to modern European history in college led me to align all diplomats with Metternich. He called me 'my dear young lady' or 'Lieutenant Mary.' I went often to his house for dinner, a long, filling repast prepared by his housekeeper.

Returning to the 5034 Club, where the evening meal had been hot dogs or Annabel's Spanish Rice, Julie would say, 'I suppose you've spent another 'innocent' evening with that dissolute old lecher.'

'He's a dear, Julie. He's no more a lecher than I'm a lesbian. You don't know him. Anyhow, why do you always assume my friendships with men are clandestine affairs?'

'In this case, you're selling your soul, if not your body,' she said with contempt. 'What can you and a man twice your age possibly have in common? Another foreigner,
like the Pole you took up with. I guess there's one good thing about being raised in New York after all. I don't make all foreigners into romantic heroes. Mary, why can't you get over being provincial? I swear, you're as unsophisticated as the cows you grew up with.'

Food had assumed an awesome importance during wartime. I found Mr. Klava's conversation interesting but to be perfectly honest, I found his dinner table more so. Thus, it was difficult to defend our companionship on its own merits. I responded defensively, 'I've told you before, Julie, I didn't grow up with cows, or hogs either. I'll grant Des Moines isn't much like New York but you New Yorkers are provincial if you read State Fair as fact instead of fiction.'

"If I'd known that farmland in Madison County would sell for more than $2000 an acre just two years after I agreed to rent," Bill is saying to his father, "I'd have sold my soul for a down payment on my five acres."

"If dog rabbit," George observes dryly.

"What's that mean?" Dan wants to know.

"If the dog hadn't stopped to piss, he'd have caught the rabbit. Abbreviation: if dog rabbit."

Dan laughs with the rollicking, unself-conscious abandon of eleven year olds. We all smile to hear it. Julie used to giggle; giggling was appropriate to the ridicule from which her humor sometimes derived. The fat
woman wedged next to us on the bus, the senior watch officer's encroaching baldness, the bickering couple next door. Though sometimes discomfited by taking part, I giggled along with Julie, pleased to be privy to her insight. She made me think that only the intelligentsia would be capable of appreciating her jokes.

Bill is eyeing his watch. "Going to meet Gail at the Greenwood Tap. Her art lecture's over by now." Growing up with household help apparently prevents him from noting a table full of dirty dishes, I reflect. Ray's helping hand was certainly welcome.

The phone rings and Dan calls his brother. An unfamiliar gravity comes over Bill's face as he listens. Then he hangs up and, avoiding his father's eyes, tells us:
"Bad news. My friend Trescott, you know? The math genius who paints houses? He tried to hang himself this morning."

Dan is wide-eyed; George frowns.

"That's the young man with what you called 'a little weakness' for sniffing paint thinner, isn't it? Perhaps now you see why I prefer, as you once succinctly put it, 'more conventional highs'." I'd always assumed George's expressed dislike of this friend of Bill's stemmed solely from Trescott's waste of his talents.

Bill shifts from one foot to the other, a classic pose for our sons when put on the defensive for the indefensible conduct of their friends. He continues, "His landlady found him, just in time." Now Bill's blinking
fast, probably trying to blot out the mental picture.

"How sad," I breathe. "Do his parents live here?"

"Someplace in New Jersey, I think. He graduated from Grinnell, oh, four years ago, maybe. Magna cum, Phi Eta, all that. Stayed in the Midwest on account of a girl but that didn't last. Afterward, he never made a connection, you know? I mean, he'd paint a house, take the cash and goof off, then come back and paint another. I suppose he was stoned when he tried to -- ah, do himself in."

I stare out the window at our empty birdfeeder, swinging haphazardly on its wire in the evening breeze. I am thinking, 'Another victim of the turbulent Sixties.' I hear Dan shuffling his feet and deplore the fact that a child his age learned about suicide this way. I make a gesture toward him, a mute appeal to Bill to end the discussion.

Bill shrugs, "Dan watches TV. This won't shock him."

"'On, can I go outdoors?" Dan asks hastily, anxious to avoid a confrontation over his TV habits, no doubt.

"You feel all right? Come in by eight, then. School tomorrow."

He slips away. Bill sighs. "Bad scene. I've got to hit the road. Gail's waiting." He rubs his cheek against mine. "Thanks for the meal, Mom. 'Night, Dad."

I rise from the table and stand behind George's chair. Bad news always makes me want to be close to him. I am thinking that all human beings know they need others but
in a family they're willing to admit it. I guess sharing lessens the impact on an individual.

"I'm glad Ray isn't here. His mother took her own life, he told me," I remark.

"What compels people to take the final step differs in each case," George says. "But if a kid is stoned, no judgment of any sort is involved. He's non compos mentis. Which reinforces my conviction about drug usage."

I stroke the back of his head; I've known him to become vituperative on the subject. That's bad for his blood pressure. "But don't certain personalities...."

George turns around, interrupting me. "Listen, I talked to that math genius friend of our son's. He may understand quantum physics but if you ask me, he's too dumb to pour pee out of a boot with the instructions on the heel. We had guys like that in our battery. Losers. Now, tell me where you hid this month's National Geographic."

Loading the dishwasher, I think of a conversation with Ray shortly after he came. I'd remarked, 'I'm in the kitchen so much I sometimes feel I was born in it.'

'One of my psych profs kept repeating, 'Your view of yourself colors everything you do,'" Ray said. "'You don't think of yourself as a kitchen drudge, not really. You opted for a life of pleasing a man. Making a home for him is part of it.'"

I smiled. 'I suppose I should take comfort from Betty Friedan's recent confession that she's rediscovered
the joy of cooking.'

Ray appeared to be scanning my shelf of cookbooks but his thoughts were obviously elsewhere. 'Mother never realized the effort required in living with others. Particularly men. We argued about this, in fact, a day or two before she....'

I was going to repeat my conviction that women of my generation did learn how to live with men by having to live without them during a long war. But he looked so morose, I suspected he would point out that his mother was the exception that proved the rule. She was exceptional; he should know that. 'Julie had so much talent! It would have been wasted in a life like mine. I opted for home and family, as you say, but there's no getting around the fact that my choice made me more of an appendage to others than an individual in my own right, no matter how I may view myself.'

'Mother's view of herself was inflated. No one else shared it.' He spoke bitterly and then abruptly changed his tone. 'Oh well, she spent a lifetime pleasing herself, I suppose. You, on the other hand, get your jollies out of pleasing others. Each to her own.'

Heather bounded in just then, slid on the linoleum and did a back flip. We both laughed. I was prompted to ask, 'Did Julie ever have fun, Ray? I mean, outside of her satisfaction with her career? Did she enjoy travel or sports or anything?'
Not that I know of. She was always showing people. Showing them up, rather. 'Look at me; I'm more attractive than you. Watch me perform; I'm more capable than you.' Her pleasure, I guess, lay in believing she was better than other people.'

I pondered my envy of Julie. It had lurked in the back of my mind since I first looked at her scrapbook. If she examined her past, as I'm doing, she could have said, 'I did something with my life. I became a person in my own right; I was recognized as Julie Weller, not somebody's wife or somebody's mother.'

Although she didn't reach the top in her profession, she obviously kept on trying and probably thought she would do so. But what kind of perfectability can a family woman strive for? There is no perfectly contented husband, no perfectly brought up child, no absolutely clean house. Nor is comparison with others any comfort. Looking back, it's as though a woman with a family to care for has spent her life swimming upstream, only to find that, after all, the landmarks remain in place -- she's been treading water all the time!

No! What am I saying? The effort expended is what's worthwhile. Moreover, as a rule, some kind of benefit to someone is achieved. And haven't I been happy most of the time? Never deprived of anything I really wanted, or wanted for others I've loved?

"Mary!" George's imperative tone drives me out of
the kitchen at a run. "Where's my dental floss?"

I hasten upstairs. Where did I put it after I dropped it in the wash basin? Oh, of course -- to dry on the radiator.

Some such minor interruption has thwarted almost all my attempts to penetrate the mystery of Julie! I wonder if I'll ever have time to analyze Ray's mother to his satisfaction or my own. Whenever I think about her, some new revelation occurs to me. Yet at the same time, the panorama of her life seems to expand, its segments shift, like the toy kaleidoscopes we used to buy the children. Even the long conversations Ray and I had before Mike's death weren't conclusive.

Clare! I'm ashamed. My friend's sorrow has already receded to the back of my mind. "George, we must ask Clare for dinner tomorrow," I exclaim.

Fragmentation. I've never been able to avoid it but at least I've learned to accept it. I constantly remind myself that a whole is made up of fragments. The variety of the fragments enhances the whole. The 'whole' for me has been family life and family life is always full of surprises.

In the dead of the night, I hear a joyous 'Whoop!' George mumbles, 'What the hell!' and I lurch out of bed. Dan is jumping up and down outside his door. "Come look!"

His father and I shuffle down the hall. Directly below Dan's west window, in the glow of the garage light,
are two large raccoons, now turning their humped backs to paw the ground, next shyly peeking over their shoulders to show us their clownish black-ring ed eyes. Quietly, we watch -- two sleepy adults caught up in a child's wonder.

Once more in bed I think of the billboard I saw early this spring on our trip to Dallas. Huge red letters read 'Problem Pregnancy?' and below, the telephone number of an abortion clinic. We adults who've lost touch with the child in ourselves can't restore that connection with all that is childlike -- curiosity, amazement, amusement -- unless we live with children. Pregnancy a problem? For some of us it was a solution.

Glancing through the week's school lunches listed in the morning paper so I can tell Dan to look forward to ravioli on Tuesday, my eye catches a filler at the bottom of the column: 'More than half of the children born to Washington DC residents last year were born out of wedlock.' George shared Dan's wonder with me at the 'coons last night, shared a thousand episodes just like it as the other children were growing up. In a family without a father to share them, would these little incidents seem like joys in memory? I doubt it. Thus, for half the mothers in Washington this year, pregnancy is a problem. So much for post-midnight easy solutions.

I gaze out of our south dining room window which George has opened so the fresh spring air will seep into
our winter musty house. At times like this, I wish there were a wall of windows to the south! Unfortunately, post-victorian architects in the prairie states did not dream of bringing the outdoors in. The size and spacing of their windows seems designed to keep the outdoors out, probably so that the cast iron radiators can function efficiently. View windows superimposed on such an aged structure as this would look as silly as false eyelashes on the eyelids of aging ladies.

I'm reminded of the suitable setting Julie used to imagine for the adorable infant she would bring into the world. It was a miracle home made with cellular glass, aluminum and plywood. After victory, the women's magazines used to promise, builders would construct millions of prefabricated homes with soft fluorescent lights -- not like the steely tubes that glared over our coderoom! -- with automatic laundries, dishwashing machines and even air conditioning, the luxury we only knew in movie theaters. Stromberg-Carlson radio-phonographs would fill our rumpus rooms with sound; the 'Ford in our Future' would be parked beside a terrace bordered with pots of begonias. I daydreamed along with Julie about just such a house -- and just a few years after the war, how uniform and sterile such houses appeared!

Pay, when he first came and admired our home, told me that Julie never lived in a house. When he realized as a child that other children had a yard to play in, she
said, 'Apartments suit me. When you grow up, you can have your own house if you can afford it.'

One particularly gloomy day in the Navy cafeteria, she and I were talking about where we wanted to live in the wonderful postwar future. Usually, I dreamed of New York. By war's end, the great cities of Europe would surely be reduced to rubble and New York would be the greatest city in the world. But that Thursday, I was homesick; if I were still a child at home, I'd be going to the Des Moines Club for dinner with my parents, having a yard of starched white linen tucked under my chin by a solicitous waiter in that place of crimson velvet draperies and crystal chandeliers. After George had been in practice awhile, perhaps we, too, would take our children there. To live in one's hometown might not be exciting but it would be satisfying in many different ways.

Julie was musing aloud: "Well, not New York. Not anywhere on the East Coast. Too crowded. And the West Coast has all those floozy starlets. Aimee Semple McPherson nuts. Skies out of Steinbeck. I guess I'd like to live in the Midwest. But not in your hometown. They take the sidewalks up at night, I'll bet."

Julie's trip to the WAVE training school was the only time she'd ever been away from home and she had nothing nice to say about Northampton. I wondered if she would ever find a place that suited her.

The beginning of the end of my friendship with Julie
is connected in my mind with President Roosevelt's death. That was April, 1945. Watch Four was on standby. Julie, at the ditto machine, claimed that cramps were killing her. She 'fell off the roof', as we so quaintly put it in those days, at frequent intervals that suited her convenience. This condition in female junior officers was so patently embarrassing to senior male officers that Julie was quickly ordered to sick bay. Thus, while she read Time at leisure, the rest of us were delegated to share her work.

That didn't bother me. I always felt Julie deserved special privileges; I only wondered why the other WAVES failed to recognize this. She was quicker, more deft at mechanical tasks, more imaginative in decoding puzzles in strip code messages from merchant ships, and full of vitality during the most tedious of night watches. She had Eleanor Roosevelt's kind of energy.

It used to amuse me to see her charm Joe Olson, a Mustang whose line status dated from the outbreak of war.

'A hero who was on the West Virginia when she was torpedoed at Pearl is too important to act as an errand-boy,' she said, transparent as cellophane. 'Let me take that 'Urgent' up to Cominich for you.'

'Well, okay,' Joe said, 'And on your way back tell our watch officer I'm too important to stable burnbars, too.'

I heard snide remarks from other WAVES about Julie's disregard of the WAVES image in the service; at the bot-
tom of the chain of command, we'd been indoctrinated with unquestioning obedience. But living with her, I knew her inclination was not to conform. I even saw her aggressiveness as admirable, although I considered it unfeminine and thus, a dangerous habit if one planned to marry.

We both read *The Fountainhead*. While the story seemed implausible to me, Julie found in it a dominating female model she hoped to emulate.

'It's not realistic to think you can have a loving husband and a darling baby in a miracle house and an executive career at the same time, Julie,' I protested. We were off watch and in the morning's mail, George's letter reiterated his pledge that if he survived the Kamikazes and his own trigger-happy comrades, he'd work his fingers to the bone to provide his wife with everything she wanted -- a house, a car, and a baby. George, and all the other men I'd known, could not conceive of a woman wanting more. 'I've never known any man who....'

Julie interrupted: 'Not everybody's going back to the traditional way of life after this war's over. I have a brain, you know. I intend to use it. I'll have babies in my twenties, a career in my thirties.'

I picked up my stationery to answer George's letter promptly, as usual. 'But once you have a baby, it's there for the rest of your life,' I said. Life, in my view, was virtually over at forty, or whenever one's babies left home for college. My own parents were
vigorous and contented, but I saw them as old and merely marking time until they died.

'You can hire someone to take care of children,' she said blithely.

'But after the war, all the good jobs will go to veterans. And they should!'

'I'll be a veteran,' she pointed out. I still thought her plans for the future as dependent on contingencies as the plans of the naval strategists' under Admiral King.

Julie was not discouraged that two years of dating failed to provide her with the man of her dreams. When I introduced her to someone who was good-looking or a good dancer or had a great sense of humor -- among girls, these characteristics were the criterion of excellence -- she claimed he talked through his nose or had B.O. or suffered from acne. I did not fail to notice that she made these allegations after a certain amount of time elapsed and the man did not ask her out again.

Finally, she found Clint on her own during one of her out-of-the-office message runs to the new Pentagon. In early March, she announced that he was coming to the 503½ Club for dinner to meet her roommates.

The chosen day was dismal. Annabel and I went to the neighborhood flicks and walked home, I remember, with a raw wind whipping our voluminous raincoats around our knees. We talked about Joan Crawford's figure. Towns by Adrian made the difference between her shape and ours, we
decided. We wondered when, if ever, we'd be wearing long chiffon dresses with spaghetti straps again.

Julie clung to the captain's arm while she introduced him. I thought him strikingly unlike her fantasy; she'd always described her dream man as a Tyrone Power with a dimple or maybe a cowlick. Clint was no taller than I, with glasses and a distinct air of dejection. I already knew he'd spent his entire service in a desk job due to asthma. That was bound to make a single man humble in wartime.

Julie kept her customary assertiveness in check, I noted. In fact, the evidence of her slavish adoration embarrassed both Annabel and me. Like most girls our age, we were unaccustomed to displays of affection in front of others.

Sitting around before dinner with weak Cuba Libras, Clint attempted to make conversation with us while Julie pressed herself close beside him on the sofa and entwined her fingers with his. 'Did you girls know about our invasion of Luzon beforehand?' he asked politely.

Julie had undoubtedly told him that all the Navy's secrets passed through our hands. 'The build-up was obvious,' she said, smiling into his eyes.

There was silence until Annabel thought of something to say. 'Wasn't that picture of our Marines on top of Iwo Jima thrilling?'

'Ve all nodded and Clint endeavored to discern the
hand in order to light a cigarette. Julie quickly lit it for him.

'I think we'll land on Okinawa before we hit Japan,' he said and Julie vigorously agreed. Yet more than once, I'd heard her claim positive inside information that our B-29's would reduce Japan to rubble and then our forces would move in directly from the Philippines. I wondered if this submissive role, so foreign to her nature, would prove to be a strain eventually.

'With victory surely just around the corner in Europe, I can't understand why the casualties are mounting so in the Ruhr,' I said, my mind on another hometown friend who was an Infantry captain.

Annabel whispered to Julie that she smelled something burning. Reluctantly, Julie left for the kitchen. 'It's still entirely possible that Hitler will pull a rabbit out of his hat,' Clint said. 'Like the V-2 missiles he lobbed at England just when the British had begun to feel secure.' Warming to his subject, he went on, 'You never know what the fertile brain of a fanatic may devise. And back in Detroit, my folks write that people are already talking about reconversion!'

'How can people think the war's almost over when there's no sign Japan will surrender?' I put in. It was George's war now and in my view, it had just begun. 'I can't understand the unfounded hopes civilians seem to have. My parents, too. Those of us in the service cer-
tainly know that hostilities can go on and on.' George's latest letter had gloomily predicted that he'd be the oldest new lawyer admitted to practice in the Midwest, 'even older than Lincoln, who was twenty-eight.' George's fund of incidental information made some of our friends think he should try for a career on "Information Please", the radio program at which all college graduates in the country marveled.

Tuna casserole, quite brown around the edges, and jello salad with bits of marshmallow were the mainstay of Julie's party fare menu. If she had not disdained my help, I would have suggested that the way to Clint's heart might lie in more stomach-filling food. It did please her, though, when Annabel and I offered to wash the dishes.

As it happened, Clint lingered in the kitchen and noticed my golf clubs standing by the back door for want of closet space. 'Hey, you want to play someday?' he asked. He, too, worked several night shifts a week. We agreed to meet at Glen Echo, the officer's golf club, a few days later.

When Julie came to bed later, she said icily, 'I'd think you could leave my man alone. You're married and have plenty of other friends besides. I intend to marry Clint. Soon, too. I'll thank you not to interfere.'

'I wouldn't think of it!' I exclaimed. 'If you don't want me to play golf with him, I'll call and tell
him I forgot some appointment or other. What's his phone number?'

Julie's eyes glittered. 'Do you think I'm stupid enough to give you his number? So you can simply change your golf date to some other time when I won't know? What I want you to do is just not show up. Then he won't ask you again.'

'That wouldn't be fair, not after I promised.' By then Annabel had found a few people who played tennis but I knew no one at all who played golf. I'd carry my clubs on the bus down to the Navy department at midnight; in the morning when the watch was relieved, I'd wait for the Glen Echo streetcar and arrive at the club about the time the pro shop was opening. The Pro was friendly, even gave me a few lessons, but often, those warm Washington mornings, I was the only player on the course.

Playing alone was a bore but I didn't admit this. Instead, I suggested, 'Why don't you come along, Julie? Walk around with us.'

'And carry your bag, maybe? Look for lost balls like a good caddy? I used to get paid for waiting on people and that was bad enough. You think I'd do it for nothing?'

'I carry my own bag,' I said huffily. But thinking of her summers working as a waitress while I was sitting around a country club pool, I added quickly, 'Sports would be easy for you, Julie. You could learn to play golf. Clint could teach you. Men always like to be instructors,'
I've found.

She was suddenly enraged. 'I don't need any advice about how to handle my love life!' She snatched up her pillow and flounced out of our bedroom to sleep on the downstairs sofa. I tossed, uneasy in my conscience, most of the night.

Nevertheless, I thought her childish when she refused to speak to me the next day. So I met Clint at Glen Echo with a feeling of self-righteousness. My tee shots were better than usual.

He turned out to have been a member of the golf team at Ohio State. He was no conversationalist, though; I might as well have been alone. But the tip on putting he gave me I use to this day: 'Hold the putter loosely, as if you were cradling a little bird in your hands.' I thought it an unusual comparison for a man to think of, which is probably why I remember it.

Over a beer in the clubhouse afterward, we agreed to play again. Neither one of us mentioned Julie.

Eventually, she abandoned what we used to call the silent treatment. She was seeing Clint as frequently as their time off coincided. One day as we worked together I made the mistake of saying, 'Clint doesn't have much to say, does he? I mean, he concentrates so, on the golf course. When George or Goldie and I used to play at home, we always clowned around. Goldie carried beer in his bag and one day, somebody gave him a new bell on number three
that exploded when he drove. We nearly died laughing and...

She cut me short with a haughty stare. 'I find your reminiscences exceedingly tiresome. Clint told me that you talk too much to be a good golfer.'

Probably I continued to play golf with Clint to be perverse. Julie's occasional acid remarks to my friends also nettled me. One time Goldie came down from Delaware with a couple of attractive captains who wanted to take us dancing at the Shoreham. Annabel went along happily but although Clint was on duty that night, Julie refused, saying archly to Goldie: 'I have different standards than your friend, the merry war-widow.'

Her suggestive remark led to a difficult evening for me. One of the captains was overly familiar on the dance-floor -- how quaint that phrase sounds today! Then, back at the 5034 Club, I thought I was close to being raped. Goldie was full of booze but he managed to rescue me.

'You set me up to be humiliated!' I accused Julie.

'Nobody forced you to go out,' she said airily.

'Maybe you deserved the treatment you got.'

About this time, I was considerably jarred by a series of obscene telephone calls. So rare and unmentionable were such calls in those days, I didn't even confide in my roommates. I felt myself singled out, tainted, when I'd answer the phone to hear a stream of obscenities. I began to think Julie was right. As a chaste married woman, I should have nothing to do with other men. Reluctantly, I
even gave up seeing my venerable Bulgarian friend and sorely missed his housekeeper's meals.

Nonetheless, I continued to play golf with Clint. We planned to play on a Saturday in April. It was late Friday afternoon when all the WAVES on watch heard the Executive Officer suddenly bawl, 'Shuddup, you guys!' The clanging racket of the pneumatic tubes continued but our chatter ceased and the clattering upright Underwoods were still. 'Roosevelt's dead,' he barked, chewing hard on the stump of cigar that always protruded from his mouth. Although we'd read in the papers that our Commander-in-Chief's health was declining, his death was a shock. He had been in the White House since our childhood; his voice on the radio was as familiar as our parents'.

I began weeping, as did most other girls. Julie, whose pleasure in non-conformity had become intensified of late, it seemed, wore an aloof half-smile. 'Ye've been in danger of a Fascist dictatorship for a long time now,' I overheard her say.

'Oh, Julie, how can you be so unfeeling!' somebody cried.

"George, how did you learn about Roosevelt's death in Okinawa? What were you doing when you got the word?"

The "fatternik is empty; he can't help hearing me, although a recent Technology Review is propped up against the mirror."
"We were on Ie Shima. The Company Commander called out over the bullhorn, 'All you privates move up to PFC! You PFCs make corporal. And so on.' The troops were whooping and yelling 'How come?' 'The guy at the top just kicked the bucket!' That's how I heard about it."

"Then what?"

"Then we all went back into those stinking caves, found a few more corpses and continued to get the hell bit out of us by fleas."

The Navy had it all over the Army for dignity, I'm thinking, our laconic Exec notwithstanding. I remember the substance of Secnav Forrestal's Alnav which came out that night: 'Colors will be displayed at half mast at all stations and yards for the next thirty days, as well as on board all naval vessels, war operations permitting.'

At midnight, tired and depressed, I waited with Julie for the Chevy Chase bus. In a mock-pleasant voice, she said, 'I'd think, out of respect to the old navy buff, the officer's golf clubs around the country would be closed tomorrow.'

'I can always play on a municipal course,' I replied, testily, no doubt.

In bed that night, I wondered whether the death of our president might mean that the victory in Europe would suddenly be snatched away and the war would be, as we once thought, everlasting. The next morning, I wondered if this tragic event might also precipitate an open quarrel
in the 503rd Club. I overheard Julie demanding that Annabel clean out the tub after shaving her legs. 'Slovenly,' was her epiphany. We'd all overlooked such negligence during the two years we'd lived together -- just as we put up with Sue's loud radio, Julie's underwear on the shower rod and my lipstick on the towels.

Hostility feeds upon itself. Annabel snatched the hanging wet lingerie and threw it on the floor. 'I'm sick and tired of your dirty laundry all over the place, too!'

I was scanning the morning paper, feeling glum. Under the headline, 'Roosevelt Dead at Warm Springs', was the customary summary of war fronts: 'Jap plane attacks on our fleet and beachhead at Okinawa...one hundred and eleven enemy planes shot down.' By George's anti-aircraft battalion? That about retaliatory shellfire?

Julie seemed elated when she informed me that Clint had called to say he'd been assigned to extra duty and also that Glen Echo was closed.

Later, with the sun beating down and my wool uniform hot and itchy, I went alone to stand in the crowd lining Pennsylvania Avenue and watch the funeral procession go by. Everyone around me seemed to feel isolated in a private grief. Sometimes, in dreams, I hear again the sonorous sound of marching troops, the rumble of a cannon, and birds -- I heard more birdsong that day than I'd been conscious of during my entire sojourn in Washington. I remember thinking that the loss of most of my
illusions about Julie was a kind of death, too.

The next Saturday, Clint moved into the basement bedroom at the 5034 Club. Julie casually informed us that he would stay a few days until he found other quarters. It seemed his former landlady needed his bedroom for her son, home from a rehabilitation center. 'It's not as if he's the first man to stay here, you know. Mary's friend Goldie even brought his monkey.'

Our varied hours of duty made Clint's presence no more than a minor inconvenience. But as the days stretched into a week, we began to think he pre-empted the shower each morning and there was a significant increase in the consumption of such staples as bread and eggs.

Annabel said, 'If Julie's too chintzy to put extra money in our food kitty, he should. Who does he think he is? A charity case?'

Sue, usually absent from our household confabs, complained that the milk was always gone when she was thirsty.

Finally, Annabel came to me. 'Julie's your best friend. You talk to her about Clint.'

'I can't!' I thought of the nearly thirty months Julie and I had been together, the closest of friends. Hadn't we always been open with each other, told each other exactly what we thought? At this point, I doubted that we'd been completely candid. If we had, nothing would prevent a dispassionate discussion of a conflict. That seemed impossible now.
Suddenly I felt a fierce longing to be with George. 'Women weren't meant to live with other women!' I said to myself. 'They don't get along. They don't trust each other. It's unnatural.' The odd thought occurred to me that I'd never noticed whether or not female animals occupied the same cages at the zoo. On my next visit to see Goldie's monkey, I'd ask someone.

'Our friendship is undergoing a strain right now,' I told Annabel. 'Maybe you could talk to her about Clint.'

Annabel said scornfully, 'You big softie! All right, I will. And I'll tell Clint he can empty his own ashtrays, too.'

I was more worried about Julie than I dared reveal to Annabel. When we were on day watch, Julie spent her nights with Clint in the basement. The first time, I'd been naive enough to say, 'I don't see how you can go to work without any sleep, Julie.'

'I have the rest of my life to sleep,' she replied airily. 'Clint and I have a lot to talk about.'

After that, I told myself that Julie's affair was not my business but nonetheless I felt shame just thinking about what was going on in our basement.

The morning, on impulse, I broached the subject to Clint on the impersonal ground at Ilen Yoho. 'Are you having any luck finding a place to live?' We were waiting for a slow foursome on the tenth tee. 'I swung my driver idly, unable to meet his eyes.
'Julie says there's no hurry. She says having a man around the house is protection for you girls.'

'Protection from what?' I looked up to see him grin.

'Oh, burglars. Rapists.'

I probably blushed although I considered myself as worldly as any girl my age. No puritanical scruples prevented me from singing along with the Betas, 'I wish little girls were like little white rabbits -- And I were a hare who could teach them bad habits.'

Stiffly, I addressed the ball and said, 'The only burglary we've ever had at the 5034 Club was during a party.' Suddenly, the memory of that party and its aftermath clouded my vision. Over a year had gone by since we learned that the DD 147 had been torpedoed and sunk with all hands aboard. I hadn't seen Julie cry again after shedding tears over the Phi Sam with whom she'd spent that evening.

'No man I know has ever been accosted,' I added. In those innocent days, even post midnight on the streets of Washington, if a man were to lurch out of a bar and leer at us, we assumed an officer's haughty stare. I wonder now if it was the ever-vigilant shore patrol that protected us, or if it was those forbidding hats with their shiny insignia gleaming like headlamps in the dark.

My tee shot dribbled into the rough. Clint's customary slow, smooth swing sent his drive soaring. Deliberate as usual, he slowly relaxed his stance, leaned for-
ward for his tee, and then said, 'Is there anything you'd suggest I could do? To make the rest of you girls more comfortable about my presence?'

'I think it's just too difficult for women to live with a man,' I said lamely, 'outside of marriage.'

He looked for my ball and found it nestled against a tree. 'Hmmm. Think I could handle three wives?'

I swung at the ball and whiffed. 'Don't be silly. Men live with other men in officer's barracks all over the country.'

He sighed. 'Okay. I get the message. Now, stop talking and keep your head down. And follow through.'

I had the worst round I'd had all year.

Early the next morning, Clint called up the stairs to say I was wanted on the phone. I dreaded another obscene call but it was only a high school friend from home. She'd married a captain stationed at the Army War College and hoped to get an assignment to call me as soon as she arrived.

'I've been trying to reach you for two days. But how come a man answers your phone at seven a.m.? There was a hint of malicious anticipation in her voice.

'He's just a friend in the service,' I said, and hoping to impress her with a military exigency, added, 'He needed temporary quarters.'

'I hope George doesn't hear about it. Or people at base. They might think you were playing around.' The disbelieving voice echoed. People from my hometown have always
accepted the inevitability of gossip. We call it a proof of caring.

I didn't share my embarrassment with my roommates. Maybe I should have. Sue's aunt in Bethesda, who'd been to visit the 5034 Club only twice in two years, also showed that Friday. She encountered Clint, wrapped in a towel, descending the stairs from his shower. Nonchalant, he passed through the living room saying, 'When I'm in uniform, Sue, I'd like to meet your aunt.'

In the early forties, the sight of a near-naked man in a girl's domicile would shock most matrons and shame most girls. Julie, as it happened, was asleep in Clint's bed during this episode.

Sue's aunt did not mince words. 'Are you girls running a house of ill fame?' she demanded.

I remember hoping Julie would not suddenly emerge from the basement in her nightgown. It would have been just like her, I thought.

Sue, Annabel and I agreed to deal with our domestic problem promptly. We whispered to each other about plans, our conferences as serious as if we'd be passing military secrets in some unlikely meeting place. Since we all shopped for stockings at Chip's Stores in Anacostia Navy Yard, we decided to meet on Tuesday at the stocking counter at Sarfinkel's.

The meeting did not take place, but not because of any foul-up in communications. A contingency occurred
that we would never have anticipated.

My latest work assignment was in the plush recess where the supersecret new overseas scrambler was installed. During this spring of 1945, the last spring of the war, senior officers who wished immediate contact with our bases in Guam and Pearl came to an unmarked door, were admitted by full lieutenants, (USNR-WR), and sat around our elaborate teletype machines on homelike upholstered furniture. We typed their queries and monitored the responses. Occasionally, the messages were garbled. The admirals would leave. Then the scrambler would invariably clear.

"GUAM CALLING WASHN X DO YOU READ ME NOW" and I would have to pass the information that the conferees were gone and would set up a new schedule.

After a cautious waiting period, the machine would print, "WAVE ON DUTY INT" and when I'd respond "AFFIRMATIVE," my fellow-officer halfway around the world would encode, "TALL DARK AND HANDSOME JO ON GUAM NEEDS WORDS OF COMFORT FROM WASHN A RELAY WAVE DISPLACED 10 MILE ERP FRIENDLY PROMPTLY." If traffic was slow, my partner Lou and I would engage in silly clandestine chats by the hour.

AT CARNIVAL OR CREAM KEY OR I'VE NEVER RUN INTO

BIG TIME NAMED ROY HAMPT DARTMOUTH CLASS OF FORTY INT

WITH X FRATERNITY INT

GOOD SITUATION X PLUS IN JACK X PLUS WAIT X BACK TO

YOU SAY" WORRY ABOUT
TELL HIM LOYAL TO BAKER TARE PREP X
BUNCH OF SKUNKS RPT DRUNKS X C O HAS MSG FOR SFRA\N RT

We'd be careful to tear off the evidence of neglect of duty at frequent intervals and stow it in the burnbag.

Security demanded that no unassigned personnel be admitted to the scrambler room. Thus, Lou and I enjoyed absolute privacy; one week I had time to reread War and Peace.

 Barely twelve hours after Clint's untimely appearance in the living room at the 5034 Club, there was a peremptory knock on our secret door. Since no conference was scheduled, we assumed a dire emergency demanded immediate contact with the Pacific theater.

It was Julie. She pushed past Lou, ignoring her protests, and confronted me at my station. 'What did you tell Clint to make him leave?' she yelled over the clatter of a transcription from Pearl.

'Why, nothing,' I stammered. 'I didn't know he was leaving.'

'You told him somethinz! He's moving in the morning. You two-timing bitch! I'll bet you....'

There was another peremptory knock at our locked door. Ashast, Lou opened it again. No four-striper could have looked as threatening as our own watch officer, who had never before set foot in this room. His voice boomed with what seemed to us the force of an underwater explosion:

'Lieutenant Veller! It will be my duty to report this
breach of security at once! You've risked prosecution. You could be dishonorably discharged from the Navy!

For the second time since I had known her, Julie began to cry. 'Oh, Commander, I'm so in love,' she said, 'I simply lost my head. I had to talk to my roommate. She -- she'd like my mother!'

Unlike the first time, when I knew Julie's tears were mere theatrics, I felt such sympathy for her I forgot that only moments before she'd called me a bitch. Tears came to my own eyes. But through the blur I could see Commander White's stern countenance soften. Time passed; it seemed interminable. Then he set his jaw again and said, 'Hear this, Lieutenant. In the Navy, an emotional state is not an extenuating circumstance. However, if I am satisfied as to your remorse, perhaps this one time I can overlook a flagrant abuse of Navy regs. You will return to the code room at once. Your dereliction of duty will be taken under advisement.'

Julie moved toward him; I thought she was about to do the unthinkable -- kiss the Commander! He jerked back. 'Insubordination will not be tolerated, Lieutenant! You will obey my command instantly. Dismissed!'

Julie managed a salute before she turned and ran from the room. Commander White, his hand on the door, looked back at Lou and me, stone-eyed at attention.

'At ease!' he barked, and was gone.

The face-off to which Lou and I had been a party
left us both flabbergasted. Together, we sank down on the flag officers' upholstered sofa and simply stared at our machines as they continued their hum and clatter. When the scrambler bell rang insistently, Lou dragged herself across the room to respond, saying over her shoulder, 'To think that in two minutes you changed from a two-timing bitch into Julie's mother!'

To avoid an encounter with Julie when the morning watch relieved us, I deliberately missed the first out-bound Chevy Chase bus. I hoped she would be asleep when I reached home. Tired to the bone, the night's events took on a dream-like quality. Had Julie really burst into our secret room... called me a dirty name... been confronted by our Commander... and wept? Annabel and Sue would never believe it!

The door of the room I'd shared with Julie for over two years was open. When I went in, she was frantically throwing clothes into her suitcase. Humbling, 'I'll go sleep downstairs,' I turned away.

'Oh, no, you don't!' she hissed. 'You and I are going to have this out right now!' She slammed the bedroom door.

George simply shuts our bedroom door. 'You and I are going to have this out right now,' he says firmly. He came home from the office to find Roy's bike parked across the drive, which required him to leave the Volvo
fifteen yards behind his customary parking space. He came in the house growling, "I thought it was understood around here that bikes belong in the garage."

"Ray just came in from Bill's farm about ten minutes ago," I explained. "As soon as he gets out of the shower, I'll ask him to move it."

"I'd hoped to hear, one of these days, that Ray had moved somewhere for good." George was glowering.

Dan was ecstatic about Ray's return. Before dinner, they went on a tour of the basement where several carpentry projects were in progress and then, at the table, Dan bubbled, "Dad, Mom, guess what? Ray's going to help me get the third floor bedroom back in shape. Then he and I can be roommates up there!"

George's scowl made his disapproval obvious. "Have you discussed such a plan with your mother?"

"No, but she'll let us do it, won't you, Mom?"

No one is more reluctant to resurrect the ghosts of the third floor than I. I wondered how Dan could be unaware of his parents' mental associations with that scene of deafening rock and pot parties.

"Don't be too sure, young man," his father said, which meant the project was scuttled and I was relieved of making the decision.

The silence was ominous. Then Ray observed, "I'd never really appreciated spring before I came to the Midwest. It's so sudden, such a big change."
"Just you wait for summer," Dan said. "It's even better."

I looked at my plate, wondering how to face the next domestic crisis. Until Ray's return this evening, I hadn't realized just how serious it could be. George distrusts, probably dislikes, Ray; Dan is enthralled by him. I consider myself dispassionate about his presence. But am I? Over the years, I have eagerly welcomed houseguests but much more eagerly bade them farewell -- as a rule, after two days. Ray arrived several weeks ago and ever since, I've had my mind on Julie, remembering, conjecturing, puzzling over her. I've given little thought to Ray himself.

But now I must. In our bedroom behind the closed door, George is confronting me with an ultimatum: Ray must leave.

I do not argue. "I've been intending to suggest it's time. I don't want Dan to become dependent on him. The final break would be that much harder."

"You may concern yourself with a child's feelings but I don't!"

I know very well that George's affection for his children has no limits; but now he's angry. "You don't mean that," I say mildly.

"That's important to my peace of mind! Am I getting through to you? Or I?"

"Ray just returned this evening, George. I'll have
on opportunity soon to tell him."

"You'll make an opportunity soon or I will. He may be a great companion for you and Dan but for me he's like Hazlitt's old meat served up too often. He's lost both relish and wholesomeness."

I know when I hear an apt quotation out of George's prodigious store of incidental knowledge, that the storm is past. He's already selecting his evening's reading from the bedside collection.

Dozing, I think that through all my years of living with this man, I've been secure in the knowledge that his outbursts of temper are always short-lived. I've seen George white-hot with anger one moment, a droll expression on his face the next, as a joke or a quotation befitting the occasion comes to mind. He never holds a grudge. His sons are just like him.

On the other hand, I've known some women who cherish small resentments as though they were pets, even nurture them, it seems, until they become consuming passions. "You and I are going to have this out!" Julie screamed at me that morning so long ago as she grabbed my arm and slammed our bedroom door.

"Take your hands off me, Julie!" I remember saying. "I'm going to get eight hours of sleep and then, if you like, we can talk." A histrionic discussion of the preceding night's melodrama was the last thing I wanted to face that dismal Washington morning.
'Like hell you're going to sleep!' I tried to free my arm but she clutched it so fiercely I could feel her fingernails through the sleeve of my uniform.

'You're going to admit you've been trying to take Clint away from me ever since you met him! You have a man of your own and still want mine! You wanted to break us up so you could sleep with him yourself, you bitch!'

Her face was so pale that her eyes shone like chunks of mica in white sand. Having never seen a person in such a state of rage, I must have been staring in stupefaction until I felt a sharp crack on the jaw.

Absurd as it was, my mother's quaint maxim came to mind: 'Little birds in their nests agree.'

It's not true. Time and time again through the years I've seen nestlings -- robins, sparrows, jays -- scolding, jostling, pecking each other. I never used mother's maxim with my own children when they turned belligerent. Certainly, no old saying would have pacified Julie.

The recollection of my only experience in hand-to-hand combat has dimmed through the years, for which I am thankful. I do know that by the time Annabel rushed into the room and Clint after her, my face stung from scratches, my jaw throbbed and my throat ached from Julie's clawlike grip on my neck. I was numbly aware of their struggle with my assailant and then Annabel had us in the bathroom, dabbing at my face with alcohol and muttering, 'She'd gone crazy! We should have known! Oh, you poor thing!'
Sleep brought relief for awhile but I wakened to torment, most of it self-imposed. The indignity of my involvement in a frantic battle with another female was so humiliating I felt I could never face anyone who knew me again. My parents would be aghast: 'Only slatterns use their fists!' George would be embarrassed for me: 'I thought WAVES officers were selected for intelligence!'

Why I spent all day wallowing in self-mortification behind the closed door of Annabel's room, I can't imagine. But it was after dark before I crept out to the head and saw my swollen face in the mirror. My cry of dismay brought my two friends on the run, full of sympathy.

'Julie's gone. Moved to the Meridian Hotel.' Annabel's words came out in a torrent. 'She'll never hurt you again, don't worry. Clint threatened to call the shore patrol and have her locked up. That brought her to her senses.'

'And Julie's got a bald spot right above the ear!' Sue sounded exultant. 'Did you know you pulled her hair out?'

I'd been a willing participant, not a mere victim! Chagrin made my tears flow. 'Oh, I couldn't have!' I whimpered.

'Come on downstairs,' Sue urged. 'Clint's gone, too, but he left us half a pint of Southern Comfort. We'll have a drink and then we'll eat Annabel's Irish Rice.'

Comforted by their solicitude and by the realization
that I was on my forty-eight hour liberty, I followed the girls downstairs. My visible injuries might heal before I went on watch again and had to face people, Julie among them. I was suddenly ravenous.

Is that the telephone? I hear George humming in the shower. "Hey, were you already asleep? It's only nine o'clock!" It's Gloria. "I knew you were home so I let it ring. Listen, can you and George come for dinner tomorrow night? The standing rib roast I defrosted today is way too big for Bert and me alone."

Still partly bemused by my reverie, I say, "We'd love to. I'm ravenous already."

Next morning, there's an early call from Lot: "The season's open, you know. Let's play golf with our husbands this weekend."

"Oh, I shouldn't. I've wasted a lot of time lately. The outside reading for my courses is piling up."

"Look, what are you going to school for? Just to get a job. Lot, I trust, to show off in front of a bunch of rich kids, either. You said you were going just to stretch your mental muscles. Well, at our age, the body needs stretching, too."

"Priorities," I murmur. "I have to choose between work and play."

"Play with one's husband should be a priority. Re-

ember, you went to the funeral of one of our contemporar-

y.
ies last week. You may have some long years ahead yourself to do what you like alone."

When does dread begin to be a part of a woman's love for a man? Probably, fear of loss is present from the start. But it grows and grows and grows, just as love does. Without further thought, I agree to play.

Ray and I do not encounter each other until Dan comes home from school. "When do we go on our next bike ride?" Dan wants to know.

"One of these days, Pal, that's for sure."

A kind of mental peristalsis seizes me; I must keep my pledge to George. But now, in front of Dan? No, later.

"School's out soon. We can go on a real long one. Like RAGBRAI." Dan hops up and down; his body, these days, seems in constant motion.

"That's RAGBRAI?" Ray asks.

"Register Annual Bike Ride -- no, Great Bike Ride Across Iowa."

Ray laughs. "He'd have to train for that."

"You can train 'til I get out of school. I'm already in shape. Look at my push-ups."

Amused, we watch Dan's strenuous demonstration and Ray suddenly says, "Incidentally, I had an interview at Mr. Jones' bank this morning. I hope he won't mind -- I had to tell the personnel director I just wouldn't feel comfortable working indoors all day."
Straining to keep his elbows stiff, Dan puffs, "I hate being in school all day, too."

I think my dismay must show. A thirty-year-old man admitting to perennial spring fever is no example for a child. I must make clear, now, that Ray is no longer welcome to stay with us. But I find myself arguing privately, 'He's no trouble, he's been more than helpful, in some ways he's a good model for Dan!"

"I happened to stop by Russ's apartment and agreed to help out a friend of his for a few nights," Ray is saying. "Hey, straighten your back, Dan! It's a security job at the university; some guy wants to stay home and help his wife with a new baby."

I say, "That's a nice thing to do for someone," but I sound neither convinced nor convincing. A man who's not the least bit interested in embarking on a lifetime career has plenty of time to do nice things for others.

Now he looks at me. "I should have been on my way long before this. You've been more than hospitable."

Dan flops on the floor with a groan. Before he can speak, I say, "Oh, but it's been our pleasure. So plan to stay another few days. I'm still remembering things to tell you about your mother."

"Another few days!" Dan pants. "You've got to stay for the summer, Ray! My brothers will be home and with 'ill we'll have half a baseball team right in the family!"

"I like it here," Ray is looking directly at me.
That goes without saying."

To avoid further discussion, I escape to study. For the time being, I'll stop worrying about when Ray will leave. He himself raised the question and that should pacify George. But why did he give me that peculiar look when he said, 'I like it here.'?

I spend two days rereading _Flowers of Evil_ to plant more of Baudelaire's images firmly in mind. His precision appeals to me, especially the image of 'spider webs around the brain'. Before I went back to school, my own brain was as dusty and neglected as the attic. I'm hoping, after my mental tool is in use for a couple of years, it will be brash-bright again -- like the front door knob and lock fixture I just noticed that Ray must have burnished sometime while I was out.

Oh, but I wish I hadn't lived so long that I question the validity of 'the banal canvas of our pitiful destinies.' Off and on, I've chafed at the banality of my own existence. Then I first looked at Julie's scrapbook, I saw her life as a spectacular contrast. But the more I've thought about this contrast, the more I've come to believe that banality definitely is in the eye of the beholder. Julie pursued glory and prestige in television and apparently was never satisfied that she achieved it. What is more banal than failure?

I remember coming home from college one summer full
of talk about my ambition to be my generation's Dorothy Thompson. I pitied my mother her dull life and told her so. She calmly observed, 'Just because motherhood is a common experience does not make it less than miraculous.' She was monogramming new handkerchiefs for my father. 'And you'll find that family life is never stereotyped and never dull.' Subsequently, I found this observation to be true. And now I realize that Julie's single-minded progress toward self-glorification compelled her to miss companionship with her growing son -- the one joy that might have made life worth living after it became apparent that her personal goal was unattainable.

Thursday was one of those glorious days in spring that transmits energy to the body but seems to render the brain inert. I felt a kinship with Dan; how can a student concentrate on books when the buds on the trees appear full enough to burst into leaf while one blinks? The neighborhood grass is feathery and green; Gloria's tulips are muted scarlet, like the stripes in our old flag that Dan is tiring to be ready for Memorial Day. And oh, the smell of lilacs! It's never been bottled.

It's a perfect day for golf but my summer partners are all at their Investment Club meeting. I decide to go out alone and practice.

Ray, who's been going to sleep after his night job about the time we get up in the mornings, appears on the
front porch. "Too nice a day to stay in bed," he says. "Anything I can do for you outdoors?"

"Not a thing. I don't let anyone pull up shoots in the gardens just in case they might be flowers." I have my shoes and golf glove in hand. "You don't play golf, by chance, do you?"

"Used to. It's been awhile."

"Come on along with me. I'd much rather have a game than practice. Maybe George's golf shoes will fit you."

Driving out to the country club I say, "I didn't want to tell you at the outset, but now I feel I can. Your mother and I didn't have a simple misunderstanding. Our friendship ended with a fearful -- oh, conflict."

Briefly, I ponder the irony in today's golf invitation to her son. "I kept on playing golf with her boyfriend even though I knew it annoyed her. Being married and only interested in Clint as a partner, I rationalized that our games wouldn't affect his love life. But since I've learned more about Julie, that reasoning seems self-serving, to say the least."

"You said once that we can't be responsible for other people's happiness, even if we wish we could."

He's smiling; I don't believe he's ever taken seriously his mother's accusation of me in that nasty letter. "What does he want of me, then? Was he stayed so long only because 'he likes it here'?"

"I could have made some sort of a friendly overture
after she moved out of the 5034 Club, though." It's too late to apologize to Julie; I may as well tell her son that I'm sorry. "And then Germany surrendered. Come to think of it, it was just about this time in May."

"Nice time of year for a celebration," he observes.

"We didn't celebrate. Everybody thought the war with Japan would last at least as long as the war in Europe, or even longer. In Washington, the churches had special services and the theaters showed O.W.I. pictures. That was our propaganda agency. I went to see 'Two Down and One To Go,' I remember. Italy and Germany defeated, but Japan was yet to be."

I park and we walk slowly down to the pro shop. "Now, I truly regret my part in the whole affair. A couple of months later, Julie was no longer on watch with me. I assumed she'd been transferred."

"He told me she left the service and was married before the war was over."

I feel a prickle of resentment, wondering how Julie managed that. The rest of us, married or not, weren't released until December of 1945.

"I was born early in '46, you know."

It occurs to me that with the current popular interest in genes, it is odd that Ray has not speculated aloud about who his father might have been. He realizes, of course, that it's unlikely I would have known him. But surely, Ray, too, noticed the clipping about the flier I
showed to George. Funny he hasn't mentioned it. It's possible, of course, that to a man whose father died before he was born, the mother is all important. And to his generation, the self-styled sexual revolutionaries, an indiscriminate scattering of seed is commonplace. Maybe only the middle-aged seek answers in heritage.

In fact, now that I think about it, Ray seems to have lost interest in exploring his mother's character as well. He doesn't initiate conversations about her; I do. Perhaps he drifts in and out of interests in the same way he's drifting through life. If he no longer cares about finding out 'who I am' -- as he told Dan when they met -- I certainly should hasten him on his way. His presence has done nothing but remind me of my own drifting son and my own long-buried past. I should be glad to be rid of such dubious gifts.

A wood hooked in his elbows, Ray begins to pivot on the first tee, a practice I'm too lazy to follow, even though I'm stiff until well into the first nine.

"Frank used to warm up like that," I remark. "I wish I'd gotten the habit."

"The boy who's going to enter the priesthood?"

I made a face. "He may have to give up golf, too."

In sports, 'no longer young' says it better than 'middle age'. Now I seldom drive over one hundred and seventy yards but I keep hoping I will. When Ray swings, it's a slow, smooth stroke and the ball goes with a nice
little slice on it so it lands on the hill at the start of the dogleg.

"Beautiful drive!" Suddenly the thought strikes me, he swings exactly the way Clint used to! Holds his stance after the follow-through and leans just as deliberately to pick up the tee! I am so unnerved that I stumble getting into the cart and we lurch to a start, rattling the clubs in back. "You're obviously not a novice on the golf course," I say.

"Love the game. Maybe because Mother always discouraged me. Insisted on lessons in every other sport, even fencing, but called golf a game for idiots. I caddied on the sly to have a course to play. I suppose her disdain for golf stemmed from the disappointing love affair referred to in that letter."

It takes me two strokes to catch up to his drive. Watching him address the ball and swing again, I am even more certain that my intuition is on target. I had never noticed Ray's movement or his gestures, the 'body language' therapists read so readily, because his face bears such a striking resemblance to his mother's. Why on earth hadn't it ever occurred to me that Julie's fury must have sprung from something far more threatening than a roommate's duplicity? Often, frustration provokes one to strike out blindly; I've seen this in my children.

In those old days I have nostalgically called 'innocent', Clint must have simply abandoned Julie when she
got pregnant. 'You're only guessing,' I warn myself, as my approach rolls within two feet of the cup -- a reward for my forbearance.

"Somebody once advised me that I'd play better if I didn't talk so much," I tell Ray.

After our game, in my study at home, the revelation that so startled me on the course becomes oppressive. How could I have been so obtuse? Day in and day out, I'd been deciphering messages, many far more difficult to translate than the message Julie was sending all along, with her caustic requests that I leave her man alone. Her erratic behavior was the now-familiar 'cry for help'.

In those long ago days before the advent of the pill, we talked about 'the facts of life' but always in hushed tones. I certainly knew about 'problem pregnancies'. And there were no billboards in the cities then, with a telephone number to provide counseling. I couldn't have provided counsel but at least I could have listened. Obviously, our long companionship meant something to Julie. So doubt all she wanted was a sounding board, a little sympathy.

Finals are next week; I can no longer procrastinate. Brechadeire's vision of the indestructibility of the past -- which 'grows with his cursed fangs on our mind' is not unique. My past has certainly been growing at my mind interminably these past weeks. And like the poet, I'm recognizing myself in memory with disgust.
Are human beings destined to mislead each other forever with messages that fail to come clear? Why do the few clear messages -- the ones that provoked charity and caring -- seem so rare in our pasts?

But it is what Frank or Bill would call a cop-out for me to blame Ray for this obsession with the past. That he reminds me of it is hardly his fault. In fact, it's possible that in reliving the past, I will exorcise it. A good thing.

I hear an elated cry. "Mom, Mom, guess what!" Dan is bounding up the stairs, Heather bumping and barking behind him. "The new neighbors down the street gave me a puppy! Look at her! Quiet, Heather! Oh, Mom, isn't she beautiful?"

Dan sinks to his knees and holds the puppy for Heather to lick. I sigh but I have to smile. I've seen this transforming joy in each of my sons in turn. The ecstatic boyhood faces of three full-grown men come alive in my mind. Bill bred our first Brittany; how the birth of each pup in the litter amazed him! Frank nursed a sick stray while we were out of town and surprised us with a healthy dog on our return. Tom's uncle gave him Heather when he was ten; he slept with her from the start.

"Are you sure you can handle two dogs by yourself, Dan?"

"Mom, I could handle three, four, a dozen! Then I
grow up, I'm going to have an orphan home for dogs."

George comes home from the office, critically in-
spects the new pup, finally pronounces it fit to join our household. I overhear Dan assuring Ray that he's arranged for the pup to go back to its mother 'when we go on our bike hike'. I regret that the projected bike hike has assumed such importance in Dan's anticipation of summer, now that Ray will undoubtedly leave after his short stint as a security officer at Drake. On the other hand, if my child were to be on the road overnight, even with an adult companion, I'd be worried sick.

This is the first opportunity I've had to tell George about my talk with Ray. "After this volunteer job is over, I'm sure he'll be leaving. I hope we can compensate Dan some way for his disappointment."

George merely shrugs as he goes to answer the telephone. He calls out, "Take the upstairs phone, Mary. Frank wants to tell us something."

"Hi, Mom, how's school?" It cheers me to know that Frank senses the importance of my avocation to me.

"Dad, I don't know exactly how to explain this but I've given up the idea of the priesthood."

I'm relieved but say nothing. George has never im-
posed his judgment on his sons' career choices; however, I hope Frank's decision does not disappoint him.

"I've been sailing a lot on weekends," Frank continues.

"A family I know has asked me to sail to Hawaii with them"
this summer. As it happens, they have a daughter. And
Mom, this may be hard to believe, but I think I'm in love!"

George and I both laugh. Frank's astonishment at his
own condition is so typical of youth. I have a sudden
yearning to feel that sense of wonder again myself, to
have a future longer than my history. But my past is my
identity and I'd be lonely without it.

"Frank, we've always trusted you to make your own de-
cisions. And the trip to Hawaii sounds great." How
George would love to sail the Pacific, I think, wishing
for him the same impossible extension of life I just wish-
ed for myself. "And a long voyage should give you plenty
of time to decide whether or not you're in love."

The next day's mail brings a letter from Sara that
gives me pause. 'Just culled this gem from an article in
U. S. News and World Report,' she writes. 'A poll reveals
that the highest degree of satisfaction with life occurs
among young married people with no children. What's more,
as kids enter the scene, happiness goes down and stress
goes up! Why on earth should anybody our age want to
have children?'

At Sara's age, my female friends, both WAVES and
civilians, could not conceive of ultimate happiness with-
out children. We fantasized about children almost as of-
ten as about house and husband. First things first, of
course, we aimed toward our common goal with 'Foofbury
Facial Crop, plucked our eyebrows, and wore so-called
'Furlough nightgowns' of pink rayon chiffon with black lace midriffs, just like Rita Hayworth's.

Dear Sara, scrubbed face and jeans, how can I describe for you what's in parenthood for the parent? The French Symbolists and O'Neill's plays as subjects of inquiry seem sterile and meaningless compared to your query.

I sit at my desk and sort out my thoughts about the compensations I had for the sacrifices and heartaches my daughter undoubtedly observed and remembers. Knowing what I know now about her father and myself, would I invest my physical and emotional energy as I did for more than thirty years all over again? Given the same conditioning and the same options, I would. But Sara and her contemporaries had different conditioning and today their options are open-ended.

Does 'If you have to ask the price, don't buy' apply? I don't think so. Sara's asking for advice; the message is clear, for once.

I begin the letter with a few of the repugnant aspects of child-raising to let her know I'm trying to be objective. Cleaning up other creatures' vomit is one I can't forget. To George, they were always 'my' creatures, too, including the dogs. Then I describe the era; it may be hard for Sara to comprehend that to a whole generation which faced death daily in war, giving life when at last able to do so seemed an ennobling duty. Educated women of my day were content to impart wisdom to their
children and influence their men,' as the orator at my Commencement exercises foresaw. 'That's not enough action for me,' Sara may say. Still, she can't help agreeing that my generation provided the climatic conditions for the progress her generation can claim as its own: in civil rights, in the peace movement, in ecology, (a word we didn't hear until middle age), and finally, in the need for self-awareness and personal fulfillment.

To me, personal fulfillment seems hollow, incomplete, without a child of one's own. Marriage is still considered by most people to be an important institution; women still opt for it in preference to life in all-female enclaves. Most of us also find that married love grows deeper in the sharing of love with children. So, in my view, people who deny themselves the experience of parenthood are deprived human beings.

All the do-it-yourself psychology books urge us 'to see things freshly and to live in the here and now'. They're talking about seeing things with a child's eyes, experiencing wonder. I mention her little brother's face when he brought home the new puppy and her brother Frank's voice when he said he might be in love. As adults, it's hard to see things freshly without a child to show us the way. So to fulfill oneself, I tell Sara, it's necessary to fulfill one's human potential.

Reeling the latter, I hope it won't sound sententious to a girl with her name on an office door and a business
card identifying her as a marketing consultant.

I hear the Volvo in the drive. There's no time to be apprehensive because George calls up the stairs, "Want me to take you out to lunch? I had an errand out of the office and I thought...."

I've run to meet him and now plant a kiss on his cheek before he can finish the sentence with some deflating remark like, 'I'd surprise the old lady.'

"Let's go! I don't even need a coat. What a nice idea!"

In keeping with his self-image as a belittler, he says, "Don't wet your pants."

I should have wondered why we sped past the country club and on to a restaurant at the airport hotel. We're seated among strangers and I say lightly, "Romantic of you to choose a place where we're not likely to see anybody we know, or who knows us."

At the club, friends would be sure to stop by our table to greet us, pass the time of day, or make a joke about a married couple lunching alone -- 'Don't you see enough of one another at home?' Des Moines is still a small town for those of us who were born here, who know each other so well that appearances in public are noted. So are periods of disappearance. And companions become objects of curiosity. In Des Moines, a clandestine affair is not a secret for long, even if the lovers meet at such out-of-the-way places as airport restaurants.
I still think this a proof of caring, as opposed to indifference. We even care so much about one another that someone's chronic halitosis is a subject of concern.

The unlikely happens just as George picks up the menu. "Hi, George. I just stopped by your office. Heard about a farm one of your clients might find interesting."

"Hello, Miles. You know my wife?"

I've met the man and nod, smiling.

He makes a gesture that indicates he would join us but George says, "Come by the office later, Miles. I'll be in all afternoon."

I now realize the prescience of my remark when we sat down. George has something to tell me that may be unsettling. He thinks I may cry. To cry is to make a scene, tolerable only among strangers.

"Have you just had a physical, George? Is something wrong?"

He laughs and I can relax. "No, thank God. Want a steak sandwich?"

"The chef's salad, please. Could I have a martini, first? To prepare myself for whatever you're going to say?"

"I have to be downtown at two but -- all right." He tells the waitress we'd like martinis on the rocks. Then, without preamble, he declares, "Jill wants to get married."

"Oh, that's wonderful! Gail, I assume?" He nods.

"I'm so glad! I admire Gail and think she's perfect for Jill. Oh, and I'm glad, too, because Carlos and Jenny and
I were just talking yesterday in the Thriftway about how long it's been since we've had any pre-nuptials for our kids. By the way, why did Bill tell you instead of me? He knows I'll want to make some plans. Have they set a date yet?" I realize I'm babbling, one of the little habits George has deplored for years. When I'm excited, I can't seem to help it that I talk first and think later.

George is silent until the waitress serves our drinks.

"The reason Bill told me instead of you is precisely because he knew you'd want to make plans. That your lady friends would have parties for him, just as you've had parties for their kids. That you'd make it -- in his words -- a big deal."

"'Well, weddings are a big deal! Happy occasions."

"Private occasions, in Bill's view. He wants just the family to be present."

"But that won't prevent people from entertaining before the wedding! And Bill will have to pick out their silver pattern, their china, all that. Even with announcements, people want...."

"What people want and what Bill wants are two different things. For starters, there can't be any pre-nuptial festivities. They're getting married tomorrow, outdoors, at the farm." George gives me a hard look. "Drink your drink. For Christ's sake, don't cry."

"My distress is not over the lack of formalities, or
George obviously assumes. Instead, I'm depressed that Bill is being so conventionally unconventional. Weddings on hillsides under trees have gone out of style. The newest young of our acquaintance are getting married in church again, with a procession of bridesmaids, a bower of flowers and a huge reception afterward. Memories of a big occasion may do something to stem the divorce tide; haphazard unions in the woods certainly failed to do so. "I wish he wanted a real wedding," I manage to blurt out.

"He says it will be real. They have a minister. As you well know, he gave up my church at that non-sectarian college you and he selected. Incidentally, you can also forget the notion of china and silver. He says they have the old plates and cutlery you gave him when he moved out of our house. The only presents they want, Bill says, are handmade things -- crafts or whatever. I gather they don't want to be bogged down with material possessions like sheets and towels and appliances."

A little laugh escapes me. "I should get a hot pad kit and put it together before tomorrow?"

George shrugs. "I'm sure a handwritten check will be more than welcome."

Sail wore a pretty yellow dress and carried a handful of field daisies. The minister stood under the maple tree beside Bill's pump and pronounced the young couple man and wife at four in the afternoon with Bill's cousin.
Dan, George and me in attendance. Dan asked Ray to come along but he declined.

I like Gail so much, I found myself choked up after the ceremony was over. Indeed, the marriage seemed even more 'real' for this particular couple than an elaborate church service would have been. They are, after all, the product of their era, the era of simplistic, though violent changes in mores. My generation's decisions denied them any traditions they could consider meaningful.

Bill reached his brothers on the phone, (Sara was on a business trip), and repeated his dictum, 'no big deal' to them both. Frank was disappointed because he'd always expected to be a best man and Tom regretted having to buy his own beer to toast the bride and groom. Dan, the only sibling present, enjoyed the distinction: "I feel lots more important today than I did at Sara's wedding, when I was only a little kid," he told Bill. Gail promptly changed out of the one dress I'd ever seen on her and back into jeans, which was just as well: Dan, toasting Chablis into some old jelly glasses, spilled some on her teeshirt.

It was the next day before I could reach Sara to relay the news. She, too, was disappointed that her brother hadn't let her know in time to fly home. "I suppose Bill just wanted to show me how much he resented getting into a rented morning coat for my wedding," she said.
I told her it was a sweet ceremony, a beautiful warm day, and that birds sang over the freshly plowed field behind Bill's house. "They looked so happy. It was just the sort of bucolic affair your brother would want. He has to work in the establishment, he often says, but he doesn't have to live in it. Gail obviously feels the same. As for presents, they want homemade artifacts -- or nothing at all."

"Pooh, I'm going to send them a real wedding present anyhow. They can put it away until they change their minds." Tara's tone of voice suddenly altered; brisk big sister became mother's little girl. "Mother, did you put a lot of thought into the letter I just received? I mean, did you think before you wrote? I know Daddy claims you don't, but did you this time?"

"Often, I find myself smiling at inanimate objects like a telephone. "He also claims I can't walk and chew gum at the same time. But yes, for once I thought before I wrote you."

There's a silence. Conscious, as always, that long distance calls aren't free, I prompt her. "By?"

"Well, we decided several months ago...that is, I'm already pregnant. But when I was sure, I wondered if we'd done the right thing, for us, I mean. I began thinking I might have an abortion, put off this big step a while longer. We get along so well as it is. Too needs trouble, you know? It's certainly a risk. Maybe I really
wanted my decision reinforced when I asked what was in 
parenthood for the parent. What it is did come across to 
me. So thanks. Say, I wonder how you and Dad will like 
being grandparents?"

"I have no idea," I laugh. "I'll still be a grad-
uate student and your father will still be a lawyer.
Right now, I admit to feeling odd about it because I don't 
think I've quite matured yet myself. But there's no such 
thing as an immature grandmother, is there?"

Sara's voice is once more confident and business-
like. "Mother, you just don't know yourself. You never 
have."

"I've never had to. Your father always says he can 
tell me all I need to know about myself. I suppose he 
can. He knows me very well indeed."

"Mother! Sisterhood gives you freedom to think for 
yourself! Well, so long. I've got to prepare our tax 
return. Six weeks overdue, I know. Don't tell Dad."

"Come home for a weekend soon, darling, before you're 
too uncomfortable to travel."

"I don't expect to be uncomfortable at all. I'm 
going to keep on working right along. May go back after 
the baby comes, too."

When I relay the news to George, he acts as though 
I've presented him with a half gallon of Crown Royal. 
Frankly, I'm astonished. Was he this happy when I an-
nounced, five times, that the obstetrician had confirmed
our hopes? The last time, I can well remember, he said, 'Now I can't afford to retire until I'm seventy-five!'

I'm still not sure exactly how I feel at the prospect of being a grandmother, although my friends seem to enjoy the role. Ironically, the first one of my contemporaries to extol its virtues wrote to me the very day I knew I was pregnant with Ben to say that being a grandmother had it all over doing-it-yourself.

I hear George coming in the front door. Ben is reminding him that tonight he promised to take us to a Mexican restaurant for dinner. "I'm glad you're home early, dear," I say. "I know it's not because you're especially fond of Mexican food."

"As a matter of fact, I'm going to have to watch my diet carefully from now on," he says, taking some pamphlets out of his briefcase.

"You didn't buy more life insurance, I hope." I don't want to hear him say again that he's worth more dead than alive.

"No, I'm going to take part in an experiment. For middle-aged men with elevated cholesterol -- of which I'm one. It'll be a five year program and I'll take a drug twice a day. That is, I'll either be in the control group that takes a new drug or the group that takes a placebo. Doc says it's all right for me to take the risk."

He hands me some literature to read. "Risk?" I
repeat. "Why should you take a risk -- at your age?"

"Because this is an important experiment in the control of heart disease. If they find this drug consistently lowers cholesterol levels, it will save a lot of lives in the future. Men like Mike, for instance. I'll be carefully watched, so don't worry. The risk is minimal. And certainly worthwhile."

Later, in bed, I toss and turn with worry. George is willing to take a risk for a worthwhile cause. Sara used the same word -- risk -- on the phone with me; to a happy couple, a baby is thought to be a risk.

Suddenly, I sit upright in bed. I don't take risks! Though Ray suggested that having children was a risk, it wasn't for me. After the war, everybody I knew began their families. Sara's statement, 'Happiness goes down, stress goes up' would have been inconceivable to us, at least unimportant. It was those of us who did not manage to have a baby promptly who were under stress. I recall how they arranged to have coitus with the fluctuations of the wife's temperature, the husbands underwent a sperm count, and they signed up with an adoption agency, just in case. Even the baby I had after forty did not seem a risk since I didn't know then about the high incidence of defective children borne by women that age.

Then was I ever a risk-taker? In college, I wanted lots of boyfriends, not just one, in case the boy would become disenchanted, or I would. Marriagre was no risk
ever one I knew wanted to be married, and all our mutual friends considered George and me a permanent couple because we'd dated for so long.

In our war, joining the service was no more risk for a girl than working in an airplane factory. Combat training was not even contemplated for women. If the war had not come about following my graduation from college, I'd have stayed home, filled my time with Junior League work and bridge until George saved enough money for us to be married, a prerequisite demanded by all parents.

In sixth grade, I stated my ambition as 'journalist'. This ambition, a nebulous daydream, stayed with me into my twenties. Yet I never tried to get a job on a newspaper. I never wanted to risk failure! The easy, the expected, the acceptable route was the one I chose. Why? I wonder if it was because I was 'gently bred' and thus afraid.

Julie's image once more springs into mind. Julie fearlessly crossing 2 Street against the traffic light... Julie scoffing at Navy Rees and carrying her jacket on a hot day... Julie saying 'Okay' instead of 'Yes Sir' to our superior officers. I remember flinching when she ate warmed-over spaghetti right from the pan. I'd never do that. For fear someone would think I don't know better? I never take the smallest risk!

It shouldn't surprise me to realize that Julie took the risk of pregnancy with Clint. Sure and the girls her
age will never understand the terrible threat that intercourse outside marriage posed for women my age. Julie played for high stakes -- and lost. But she managed to extricate herself from what was considered a dreadful predicament by promptly marrying someone else. She could have known him only briefly, and they might not have been compatible at all.

Now that I think about it, Julie must have spent her whole life taking risks! I was wrong to attribute banality to her lifetime of failure. The effort to achieve is what distinguishes us all as striving human beings. Julie set her sights high, on public eminence. And was willing to take risks, even the risk of losing her only child's love, in pursuit of her ambition. This isn't pathos; it's tragedy -- and tragedy is never banal.

George shifts in his sleep, throws out an arm and his hand rests on my thigh. I feel its warmth and lie down again. I've made an effort in life, too, I tell myself. How about all the pot roasts I've browned, the dirty laundry I've sorted, the sinks I've scoured? Is that a different kind of effort than would have been required of me in a big city newsroom?

Truthfully answering this question is not comfortable. It would be sententious to say I was 'doing for others'; if I were discussing this matter with her, she might say, "Nobody made you be a martyr!" I'll simply have to admit that I chose the path of least resistance,
did what I conceived of as my duty once the choice of family life was made, and didn't strain myself either. George has given up reminding me that attics and basements should be cleaned once a year, that cobwebs really are an evidence of laziness.

Now I have this new self-justification: I'm going to school as a pastime. It didn't occur to me to risk rejection in the job market. I'd be a fool, what's more, to give up the pleasures of my trips with George, my freedom to read all day, to take an occasional nap. And how could I expect to compare favorably in the performance of a job with all the bright young women I see around the campus today?

Betty Friedan gave me excuses that allayed my 'approaching forty' anxiety: the times, war's postlude, the media and the advertisers produced my homebound generation.

No, I didn't set my sights on a star. Do I wish now that I'd have been a struggler, a risker, Julia's sister-in-spirit? Sometimes. But I've never wished it enough to try.

I've had my finals. Dan will be out of school next week. Ray's volunteer job lasted longer than he anticipated but is over now. I've spent the entire day thinking about him. About the fact that we know both Frank and Tom will be away from home all summer and that Ray's continuing presence is for some reason important to me. Al-
though it's mystifying that he wants to stay. He may enjoy Dan's adulation.

He may simply enjoy being around our house; he's never had a real home. But he must sense that George feels anything but genial toward him; still, they didn't encounter one another during the period of Ray's night job. Possibly George has mellowed and can be persuaded now that it's all right for Ray to stay; there have been no pointed remarks recently regarding his departure.

If Ray wants to stay, is it to be with me?

George and I have been busy lately, what with a bon voyage party for Dot and the Doctor, who are going to the Orient, the big family picnic Gloria and Bert had on Sunday, and the small dinner party I gave for my professors and their wives last night. I had only one brief visit with Ray; my recent insight into his mother's capacity for risk-taking was, I felt, an interesting key to her nature.

But it was a rather frustrating conversation. As I set the table, I told him: "Your mother was never intimidated by the 'brass'. In fact, when an admiral would come into the code room, the rest of us, used since midshipmen training by the chain of command, would be very quiet and studiously apply ourselves to the task at hand. But Julia would jump up, give a friendly salute and become a self-appointed guide. Make jokes. Even flirt with
them a little, which never failed to charm the old men."

It seemed to me that Ray deliberately averted his
gaze; he began scrutinizing the homemade terrarium Dan
made for Nature Study.

I went on, laughing a little: "They have classes
in Self-assertiveness at Drake now. I read one of the
textbooks. But I guess the Navy's indoctrination im-
pressed me so thoroughly I'm still cowed by people in
command, even the produce man at the supermarket."

"Mother never let anyone put her down," he remarked
dryly. "She put them down first."

"I admire self-assertion," I protested. "Not pure
aggressiveness, of course. That's always rude."

He grinned. "Only a lady like you would use the word
'rude'. Mother, as you surely realized, had no ladylike
attributes at all."

"I always think of 'pretensions' as a companion word
to 'ladylike'. You don't flatter me, calling me that.
"Then -- hypocrisy -- form for form's sake -- I heard it
all from my young." I decide not to use butter plates
and butter knives for the guests.

"Hey, look, this terrarium Dan made is really some-
thing! I know he got all the plants out of the woods. I
think I even spot some poison ivy."

I peered at it with him. "Oddly enough, when he
brought this home from school he was disheartened. Said
all the other kids had fancy terrariums they bought at
some florist's shop or plant store. But the teacher called me and said that his, the only handmade one, showed great imagination. I wonder if she noticed the poison ivy."

"He's an unusual kid."

"Self-assertive, too. I've been trying to get him to wash his hair all week and he just won't." I placed the napkins around and, on impulse said, "It strikes me that you aren't as interested as you were at first in learning what I know about your mother. I haven't been very helpful, maybe, but...."

"Look, just observing you and your family has told me a lot about my mother. More than I needed to know. While I was with her the last week of her life, I saw very clearly what she was. A selfish harridan. A drunk. Whenever she was relatively sober during that week she blamed everyone she'd ever known for the mess her life had been." Ray's eyes were steadily fixed on mine; obviously he had thought long and hard about what he was saying to me.

"She blamed you and the soldier, first. Then her early bosses in radio. Then the TV producers, ad men and writers; everybody she met along the way. By stepfather, who was 'old enough to be her father' and the other guy she married, who was gay, she said, and only married her for a meal ticket. Everything that happened was somebody else's fault, not hers. She couldn't admit that the choices she made in life were her choices. She
maneuvered and manipulated people and lied and cheated -- to get what she wanted. You said you and she had a 'conflict'. I'll bet she tore into you tooth and nail. I saw that happen, often. Carry a scar or two myself."

He fingered his scalp; I noticed that his eyes had become inflamed.

"Don't resent the word 'lady'! Wives and mothers who are selfless, caring ladies make the world livable. Terrorists and polluters and all kinds of crazies are trying to wreck this planet. But it's still the ordinary people you see everyday who make up your world."

Suddenly, he relaxed. "Soapboxes are for juveniles. Forgive me." I thought I saw a trace of tears in his eyes. "Being around 'ladies' like you makes me know what I've missed in life -- and will miss. These days there are more girls like my mother than like you."

Dan came in just then with what he was sure was a fossil. Oblivious, as always, to adult tensions, he begged Ray to look at it with him under the microscope.

I had to mix the sour cream and onion soup for hors d'oeuvres, scarcely innovative, but the quail and wild rice might make up for it. Then the company came and I couldn't mull over what Ray had told me until the evening was over.

As if to frustrate me, George fell asleep instantly; I'm not sure he found my professors as scintillating as I do. I'd so wanted to talk about asking Ray to extend
his stay for an indefinite period. About all the things Ray told me while I was setting the table. Surely George couldn't help but feel that Ray deserves a home, at least for awhile!

Dan came home from school this afternoon determined to map out a nature trail in our woods and prevailed upon Ray to help him.

George's perfunctory greeting often belies his true state of mind. Casually, he asks if I've read the evening paper. I haven't. "Well, there's a little item on page nine that made my day," he says, sorting the mail on the hall table.

I scan page nine -- ads, traffic violations, a woman pushed off a rooftop in New York. "Tell me," I say, "I can't find anything that pertains to you, unless you were ticketed for overtime parking which isn't...."

"The fine print, see?" He points to a list of Supreme Court decisions I'd overlooked. "The Fortico case -- upheld -- as it should have been."

I make complimentary comments although George never discusses his cases with me and I have no idea why this one means so much to him. In any event, now is certainly a propitious time to broach the subject of Ray.

"Would you be amenable," I begin, "to the idea of asking Ray to stay here with us awhile longer? Oh, George, he's told me some things about his mother that make me
think...."

His face has darkened perceptibly as I speak; now he
interrupts, "You're a patsy."

"I'm not! Ray didn't have the normal upbringing our
children did. Julie used to say she wanted a baby, but
it's obvious, she didn't want a growing child. She virtu-
ally ignored him while she pursued her career. He's in-
dicated how much he likes being in our home, likes Dan,
and us. What would be wrong with his staying a while
longer? You haven't told me!"

"I don't have a black eye so I don't need a leech."
George pours his bourbon, picks up the paper and sits
down without another glance in my direction.

Dejected, I find myself slamming the salad bowl down
on the table. If George notices, he gives no sign.

While I'm loading the dishwasher after dinner, Ray
and Dan come out to the kitchen and stand silently, as if
awaiting an audience with some dignity. I turn and
smile, tempted to say, 'At ease, Dan."

"You know the bike hike, Mom," Dan begins. "You
know you promised I could go with Ray on a bike hike."

"Well, sort of promised," I say. "I've been meaning
to talk to you about it. I think a one day trip like the
one you took out to Jim's farm would be best."

Dan gasps in dismay and Ray makes a little gesture
of resignation as if to mollify him. "But we're going
on a trip, 'em! I bike bike trip!" He begins to cry.
"You promised, Mom! You know you did."

"But school isn't out yet," I say weakly, playing for time. I didn't give my outright permission for this trip, but I didn't discourage Dan from anticipating it, either. I've always indulged this child far more than I did the others. His little disappointments seem to hurt me far more than the ones Sara, Bill, Frank and Tom all suffered. They comforted each other; I was usually too busy to do more than hope they'd get over it. They always did, it seemed.

Right after dinner, George went to visit an aged client in a nursing home. "We'll talk it over with your father when he comes home," I say.

"Oh, Mom, do we have to talk to Dad? I mean, he might say 'no'."

"But we always talk over big decisions like this with Daddy," I say, reaching out to hug him.

He wriggles out of my arms. "No, we don't. Not if it will upset him."

Clever little boy. I smile at Ray. "Well, we'll see."

I was already asleep when George came home last night and there is never time for family discussions in the morning. It's another glorious day and I look out the back door to see Ray tinkering with his bike in the lower drive. I leave the sink gladly to go outside. "Hey, here
in Iowa, is the best time of the whole year!" I exclaim.

He looks up quizzically. After regarding me for a moment, he says, "How about going for a bike ride? I need to try out this gear shift I've been working on. Come on along."

I laugh. "Don't tempt me. I haven't ridden a bike since college days. I'd fall off and break a leg."

"No, you wouldn't. You'd get the feel of it again. Try Dan's bike. Why not?"

I sniff the lovely fresh air and think of the long days in my cubicle of a study. I need the exercise. Maybe I also need to take a little risk at this stage of my life, if only so that I can empathize with my pregnant daughter and my spouse in the Lipid experiment. I'll not actually be risking more than a skinned knee if I should fall.

Gingerly climbing on Dan's bike, I say, "Hold me on, hey, until I feel steady, will you?" His hand at the small of my back, I make a wobbly tour of the empty garage. Like a dancing partner of old, his guiding hand gives firm support; I feel secure.

"You can do it, see? And it'll get easier as you go along," he encourages me.

He's right. Out on the sidewalk, I begin to feel exhilarated. We walk the bicycles downhill to Water Works Park and the bike trail. Before long, I'm riding easily; I'm as proud of my feet as if I'd learned to paint or
weave or sculpt after a few directions.

It's almost noon when we arrive home. I hadn't realized how tired I was, but following Ray into the garage, I would have collapsed getting off the bike if he had not been there to catch me. Something in his embrace startles me; he holds me overlong and I look up at him inquiringly.

He drops his hands, seems self-conscious. "That was quite a workout for someone who's not used to it. But tell me the truth. Didn't you like it? Find it exciting?"

His hand is on my arm again; I don't seem to want to look at him although I sense that his eyes are searching my face. Today, I realize, is the first time he has ever touched me. Is the mere touch of a young man dredging up old sexual fantasies? My God, I'm like the women in the novels I've so often scorned; my pulse is racing! I do not meet his eyes.

It seems to me his voice is unnaturally low and cautious. "Why don't you come along with me on a little bike trip, Mary?" He's never called me Mary; I can't think how he's addressed me but never by name! I bow my head to conceal my confusion. "Can and his dad could get along for a few days without you. And we could have some good ... ah, talks. Come on! Be willing to take a little risk!"

Risk! I don't take risks! Suddenly, it occurs to me that George, in his recalcitrance about Ray's continued stay, may have been wary of just such an encounter as this! Is it possible that the man I have lived with for
over thirty years is actually jealous? By now, I have
managed to catch my breath and regain at least some of my
composure. I can at last look at Ray.

With what I hope is the gaze of a dignified and
slightly amused dowager, I say: "My dear boy, it's abso-
lutely out of the question." I pause, thinking how best
to elaborate upon a pointblank refusal. After all, there
was such tenderness in his tone, his look, his touch! I
should at least take pleasure in learning that sex today
may still retain some of the nuances and mystery in old-
fashioned romance. But if I reveal how much I appreciate
knowing that a man finds me desirable even at my age, that
would only encourage him to importune me further.

He's no longer waiting for me to speak. He's look-
ing out at the empty blue sky and saying softly, "I never
really had a mother, you know. I thought -- foolish at
my age -- that you'd be willing to take her place. Oh,
well, no sweet."

I stare at him for a brief moment and then rush in-
doors. Laughter is choking me but I can't let him think
I'm laughing at him! 'Deluded old creature that you are,
Mary, you went so far as to envision Ray as a would-be
lover!' The more I dwell on it, puffing with the exert-
tion of running up the stairs to my bathroom, the funnier
it becomes. I lock the door, laughing so hard I set the
biccups. I hope my can't hear; he'll think I'm hysteri-
ocal.
Resting on my bed this afternoon, I'm finally able to think clearly. Until now, I've been unwilling to acknowledge why Ray's presence seemed important to me. He has been helping me cling to my past! He brought Julie alive for me, and Julie represented my youth, or the myth I've made of it. All along, ever since those far-off days in Washington, I've consistently refused to grow 'old'. Perhaps I've clung desperately to youth because a line I read somewhere keeps running through my mind, 'The young think they will never die'.

Mike's death unnerved me. Now Frank thinks he's 'in love'; Bill suddenly is married; Sara is making me a grandmother. I am old. How could I maintain the silly fantasy that 'I haven't matured yet'? In staying here so long Ray actually did me a disservice. But thank God, the ridiculous encounter in the garage occurred! That brought me to the point of breaking out into the present. It jolted me out of my inversion in the past that made me inattentive, to say the least, to 'now'. Living in the present will be the greatest challenge I've ever faced. A true risk.

Staring at the cobweb in the corner of the ceiling, I'm determined to take this risk. Maybe if I never look back again, I won't feel so worthless, so dependent, such a parasite. After all, I can look at myself and think who I am now is simply someone trying to be a better person. I won't have to keep on justifying myself, rational-
izing and apologizing for what was contemptible, or stupid, or foolish in the past.

I almost leap off my bed, admittedly a stiff, awkward motion at my age, but I go down to prepare dinner feeling freer than I recall ever feeling before. It will take some getting used to, this freedom. But already, I know I like it.

Next morning, my new sense of freedom is diluted by a peculiar foreboding. Brushing my teeth, it seems to me there's an oppressive stillness in the air, like the ominous stillness during a tornado watch. Are the birds silent? No, but their song is a muted drone. A horn honks; it rasps on my nerves. People on our block never honk before seven in the morning.

George complains that he didn't sleep well. Glum, he can't locate the tie he wants. "There are my brown socks?" he asks querulously.

"In the wash, I presume."

"I've never done the laundry for two weeks?"

"Of course I have," I answer petulantly. "You have a whole drawer full of socks." That's wrong with me? Why do I feel apprehensive?

Going down the hall, I note that Jay's door is closed, as is Ann's. I open it, as usual: "Ann, get up for school," I call and hurry down to start the coffee.

Dropped on the kitchen table is a note. Frantic
because I've left my reading glasses upstairs, I hold it at arm's length and read: 'Dear Mom. We left on the bike hike real early and didn't want to wake up the family. I have my toothbrush in my bedroll and promise to brush everyday. Ray says he'll earn money for food. See you. 
Love, Dan.'

The image of the Pied Piper flashes through my mind. And then I see a line of adult handwriting underneath Dan's note. I make out, 'Thanks for everything -- the hospitality and the memories. I wish you all the best.' The signature is big and bold: 'Your friend, Ray Weller.'

I call upstairs. No doubt sensing panic in my voice, George hurries down. He reads the note quickly and calmly tosses it aside, saying, "Don't worry, You'll hear from Dan. By tomorrow morning at the latest."

"Oh, George!" I feel myself breaking down in tears and haven't the power to control them. "Ray's kidnapped him! If he's capable of doing this -- after being with us for so long, and pretending the whole time -- he may even be a child-molester, for all we know! God help me, why was I so stubborn! You didn't trust Ray from the start and I wouldn't listen!"

"I trust Dan, though," George says, sitting down at the table as usual and opening his paper. "I not only trust Dan but the weather forecast for central Iowa is rain this afternoon and tonight. Heavy rain. You'll hear from him tomorrow morning. Is the coffee ready?"
All day long and far into the night, I think about my empty nest. I must have slept at last. It is daylight outside. The jangle of the phone startles me. George answers before the second ring. "Yes, Operator, I'll accept the charges," he says and I hold my breath. "Where are you, Dan?"

I fall back on my pillow, relief as all-encompassing as an orgasm. As if from far away, I hear George say, "Your mother will leave to pick you up right after breakfast. It's about an hour's drive. So long, Son."

Once on I-80, I regret the horrid thoughts I harbored all day yesterday about Ray. Undoubtedly, he planned from the start to give Dan a taste of adventure and then send him home when the toughness of the trip was obvious to the boy. I wonder if I should give Ray the address of our Turano friends; they always needed extra hands on the ranch, they told us. He'd make himself useful; he has the faculty for becoming indispensable, George once said.

I may meet him somewhere someday — a gardener at a resort, guide at a fishing lodge, grounds-keeper at a golf course. He'll be using his gifts and enjoying his life.

The end