

**FURROWS: A COLLECTION OF STORIES**

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**KAREN SCHOLLE**



FURROWS: A Collection of Stories

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An Abstract

Presented to

the Graduate Council of  
Austin Peay State University

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

Karen Scholle

June, 1987

## ABSTRACT

This collection of stories was written to explore the lives and attitudes of characters who struggle to establish decent and fulfilling human relationships. The stories reveal the influence of the past on the present, for present problems often exist because of a person's past failures or mistakes; and as the stories unfold, individually and collectively, they suggest that the failures of relationships between people often derive from an initial failure of psychological integration: the individual's inability to achieve an inward harmony, to establish a relationship with self.

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Master of Arts

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Creative Thesis written by Karen Scholle entitled "Furrows: A Collection of Stories." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.



Major Professor

We have read this thesis and  
recommend its acceptance:

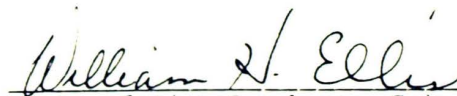


Second Committee Member



Third Committee Member

Accepted for the  
Graduate Council:



Dean of the Graduate School

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## BLUE DAWN

Her eyes shut, Jodie Phelps fumbled for the snooze button on the clock radio, found it, silenced it, and settled back into her pillow for nine more minutes. The cheerful voice of a female disk jockey reminding listeners they were tuned-in to their "favorite Country-Land station" mingled with the mournful lyrics of a dejected lover to penetrate her sleep-fogged consciousness. Reluctantly, she forced her mind awake but kept her eyes closed until the alarm sounded again. Not paying much attention to the music from the radio, she stretched and yawned. She recognized Mac Davis's voice singing a lively melody about being good-looking, happy, and vain. One refrain sparked her sense of humor and she smiled while turning off the radio, repeating the words in an off-key mumble, "Oh, Lor-rrd it's har-ard to be humble, when yu're purr-fect in ev-verrey wayaa."

Good idea--be perfect and proud, she thought, heading for the kitchen to start water heating. She measured instant coffee in a cup and set breakfast on the table--wheat bread,

margarine, and a half-grapefruit--then walked back through the house to the bathroom to plug in the curling iron.

By now she had moved about enough to be completely awake and she went to the living room to do morning exercises. The drapes were drawn, but there was enough natural light in the room that she did not have to turn on the lamp. She liked this hour of the day. There was something special about privacy in the blue light of dawn that made her feel secure and seductive, and also her own person. Never in sixteen years of marriage to Herb had she exercised nude on the living room floor at six o'clock in the morning. When she started the routine two months ago she realized the act was probably one of many new routes to independent thinking that she would undertake.

Now she stepped out of her long, blue housecoat and cotton nightgown and stared with pride at her naked reflection in the mirror above the couch. At thirty-seven, her body was firm and supple and nearly perfectly proportioned, except for hips that were slightly larger than she wanted. Slowly, she inhaled and exhaled and began rotating her arms in long, sweeping motions. Soon she had moved into waist bends and knee bends and finally stretched her five-foot, nine-inch frame full length on the floor to do leg raises and sit ups. She'd learned in Yoga classes years ago to "move slow, stretch big and breathe deep." During this early morning routine, she took her time, enjoying the energy that surged through her body.

Jodie had always been conscious of health and physical fitness, and she had made up her mind as a young girl to keep trim all her life. A strikingly pretty woman with dark brown hair and big, black eyes, she had learned as a teenager that she couldn't be attractive if she neglected herself. Consequently, she was as particular with her makeup and dress as she was her diet and exercise.

When the mantle clock struck six-thirty, she stopped exercising, slipped into her robe, and returned to the kitchen for breakfast. After eating toast and fruit, she drank half a glass of milk to swallow seven vitamins--high potency, extra strength, B vitamins for stress. While she sipped coffee, she read a daily devotion from the "Spiritual Nutrition" booklet lying on the table. This was another habit she'd acquired since the divorce, to help start the day with a positive attitude.

The telephone jingled. She answered in the kitchen, her voice cheerful, "Hello."

"Good morning," said Herb. He sounded sleepy. "How are you today?"

Jodie hesitated, a knot forming in her throat. Why does he affect me? she wondered. Everytime I hear his voice I get uptight. Aloud, she replied, "I'm fine," trying to sound nonchalant, but her voice cracked and she had to clear her throat. "Excuse me," she said. Why are we so polite anymore? she thought.

Herb seemed not to notice her nervousness. "You know



that box of odds and ends I left in the spare room? I need some stuff out of it. If you're going to be home tonight, I'd like to stop by and pick it up."

She hesitated again, fighting for calm. "I'll be home all evening. You can come by anytime." She caught herself holding her breath, but she couldn't relax. I don't want to see him. But I do, she argued silently.

"I'll be there between seven and eight. Don't know for sure," Herb said.

Her hands trembled when she hung up. Angrily, she rose from the table, dumped the remainder of her coffee down the drain, and began clearing the breakfast dishes. Why don't I tell him to stay away? Why do I still want to see him? Why can't I get over him? I'll never let him know how much he bothers me! Never! Wouldn't he love that? Damn! Damn! Damn him! Why won't he take all his stuff and quit coming back to the house? Oh, why won't you leave me alone, Herb Phelps! I've got to make you think I don't care!

Tears stung her eyes as she stomped to the bathroom. "You've done it again, Herb Phelps," she cried out loud. "You've ruined my day!"

Rapidly twisting curls around the hot iron, she thought about Herb and Sylvia. I'd like to choke her! Both of them! What does he see in her? How can he fall in love with a fat, plain nobody? Just because she likes to screw! She recalled his taunt the night of their last argument--"Jodie, she loves to screw! You don't!"-- the night he got drunk and walked

out. The night he blamed her for their not having children. The night he blamed her for his running around. The night he blamed her for all their troubles. Will I never forget that horrible night? she wondered.

Long before their divorce, Jodie realized that her sexual relationship with Herb was unsatisfactory, but she refused to talk to him about it. Herb didn't understand. He never had. She dried her eyes and smoothed makeup on her face, remembering bitterly her battle for health. She'd been robust as a young girl. The sickness didn't occur until after their marriage. First there was the miscarriage. Then the thyroid operation. She fingered the tiny scar across her throat, barely visible now, and remembered the agony of going through the operation without him. He was gone when she needed him. He was always gone when she needed him! To Texas. Wyoming. The Dakotas. Oklahoma. He preferred working in the oil fields to being with her. And she certainly wasn't able to travel with him! So he met Sylvia, a secretary for some oil-drilling rig in the Texas panhandle.

The last operation was a hysterectomy. She was too young, barely twenty-nine at the time, but she couldn't help it. Herb was disappointed, she knew, because he had wanted children, but he hid his feelings and told her the important thing was to get well. After she recovered, she did her best to please him. She strived to make him proud of both her and their home. He took pride in his home, too, and he worked hard to keep it up when he was in town. But gradually the

road trips took more and more of his time, and she had to hire much of the maintenance work to be done. When Herb left to marry Sylvia, Jodie fought to keep the house. And won. At first he was angry, wanting to take the house for his own and move Sylvia into it, but later he seemed to reconcile himself to the loss and went out of his way to make peace with her. She feared he had some kind of plot against her, but as time went on and nothing happened, she relaxed and quit worrying. He bought another house, this one in the country, and was slowly moving his things into it. Jodie couldn't understand why he settled near her after being gone so much of the time.

She shook her head, as if to clear her mind, and went to the bedroom to dress, choosing a black suit-and white blouse. She liked to wear black--it slenderized her hips and besides, it made her look professional and chic. She was putting on large gold earrings when the phone rang again.

Afraid to answer, but just as afraid not to, she slowly put the receiver to her ear. When she spoke, her voice was flat, serious, "Hello."

"Morning, Jodie," sang a vivacious voice. "You okay?"

"Oh, hi, Pat," answered Jodie, relieved. "Yes. I just had a call from Herb is all."

"Ah," Pat said, sympathetically. "Well, I won't keep you. Know you're on the way to work. Just called to ask if you want to walk with Barbara and me tonight after work."

"Walk? Where?" asked Jodie.



"Lots of people are walking or jogging around the track at the high school football field in the evenings. We thought we'd start doing it, too. Four times around is a mile. Might work off some of this flab. Want to join us?"

"Herb's coming by to pick up a box of his things, " Jodie said. "I have to be home in time to clean up before he gets here."

"Walking won't take long," Pat explained. "As soon as we get home from work, we're changing clothes and heading straight for the stadium. We can be there by 5:30 or so and be on our way back home by 6:15 at the latest. Won't take long to walk a mile, especially if we walk fast, which we need to do. More invigorating. Besides, it'll get our blood pumping after sitting behind a desk all day. But mainly I'm interested in trimming down."

"Me too," nodded Jodie. "I'll meet you there."

After the call, Jodie applied bright red lipstick and approved her image in the full-length mirror one last time, smoothing an invisible wrinkle over her hips. The knot in her throat was gone. Her breathing was calm again. She picked up her purse and keys and left the house. Climbing into the car, she forced a determined smile and began humming, ". . . purr-fect in ev-verrey wayaa. . . ." as she joined the morning traffic.

## FURROWS

Kicking up dust in the widening tract of furrows, the air-conditioned tractor hummed in the warm, morning air. Inside the cabin, Ron Baxter squinted at the moist, rich soil to his right, and at the hard-packed stubble on his left. Hope I get this done by night, he thought. Damn field goes on forever. He maneuvered the tractor around a turn in the corner of the field and stopped the machine, letting it idle while he climbed out to stretch his legs. Round and round, he thought, nothing but plow, plant, cut, stretch my legs, round and round. . . .

Looking up at the clear, blue sky, he spoke aloud. "Wish it'd rain a couple of days." Then he walked the length of the farm equipment, checked the plow, and wiped the sweat off his forehead and the inside band of his dirty, straw hat. Not even dinner time and already a scorcher, he thought. When he saw a pickup speeding down the road on the far side of the field, he waved automatically and at the same time swung back into the tractor's cabin. He turned the radio on

and found comfort in the twang of a lonesome, love-sick cowboy as he settled once more into the monotonous crawl necessary to plow the field.

The music couldn't relieve the boredom, however, and soon he broke yesterday's vow to quit thinking about the land. Frequently when he worked alone, which was almost every day, he wondered why he couldn't be content to earn a living farming, like his dad and brother. As the years advanced, he felt a growing resentment toward the confinement of his duties, as well as toward the success of the operation. Sometimes he wanted to walk away from it all--to get in his pickup and just drive, but he couldn't tell anyone, especially Mike, his father. Mike had deeded a thousand acres of prime farm land to both his sons when they turned twenty-five. He'd kept over three thousand acres for himself though, part of which was uncleared pasture used for grazing the cattle owned by all three Baxter men. When Mike, Daniel, and Ron incorporated, they became the top grain producers and cattlemen in the county, and Mike was very proud of his two sons.

It wasn't that Ron didn't enjoy the financial rewards of the farming operation--he more than appreciated his plush, modern house in the city limits of Collyer, and he liked the solitude and independence of working in the country away from the noise of traffic and the insufferable telephone. But sometimes he resented the success of the business. He resented the elements that could make or break the farm. He

resented the government's ignorance and the Eastern bureaucracy. When he was younger, he sometimes wished that the farm would fail so he'd have an excuse to do what he wanted to do--study law.

He was a sophomore in college, hoping to be a lawyer, when Mike got sick and summoned him home. Daniel, who had majored in agriculture, had already graduated and returned home to oversee the family operation while Ron was in school. There was never any question that Ron would not follow suit, but the youngest Baxter had never been able to approach his dad on the subject. He knew he'd hurt his father by refusing to farm, and he also feared his dad's wrath. So he kept silent, waiting for his chance that never materialized. When Mike had to have open heart surgery, they all thought he would die. That was when Ron, realizing that the farm was too large for Daniel to handle alone, quietly accepted his fate.

When he quit college at mid-term of his sophomore year, he married Sarah Pruitt, whom he'd met at school. That was fourteen years ago. It was easier to ignore the bitterness then, but as he grew older, Ron's thoughts turned more and more inward, to his sacrifice which no one knew about. As he watched his children grow, two daughters and a son, Ron vowed they would be able to make their own lives. His oldest daughter, Patty, soon to be a freshman in high school, showed a fine streak of independence; he felt she would choose her own career. Becky, eleven, was too much like her mother and



would probably want to stay close to home. Seven-year-old Garth was his main concern, however. I'll be damned if I'll make him do something he doesn't want to do, Ron thought. I'll talk to him when it's time. If he wants to leave the farm and study law, that'll be fine with me. He knew if Sarah had her way, though, the boy would never leave home.

He frowned, thinking of Sarah. How could someone be so nice? Too nice for her own good. Almost perfect, in fact. She never raised her voice or showed temper. Never cooked a bad meal. Served as room mother for the kids at school. Went to church three times a week. Remembering this, Ron realized that today was Wednesday and Sarah would go to church tonight; it was also Fair Board meeting night, so he wouldn't be home, either. Anticipating the Fair Board meeting brought Ron out of his reverie and he turned the radio up louder, singing, "Come on, John Deere! Let's get this field plowed so we can call it a day!"

Ron was late to the meeting. When he arrived, he was surprised to see a dozen or more people assembled in the small partitioned room that served as the Fair Board's office in the exhibit building at the fairgrounds. Usually, only the seven board members, the county agent, and sometimes a reporter from the local newspaper attended the meetings. Ron was president of the Fair Board and the other board members patiently waited his arrival, unconcerned at his tardiness, for they were landowners themselves and understood when a man couldn't get out of the field on time.

Curious about the visitors, Ron dispensed with regular business matters and turned his attention to the group, flashing them an engaging smile. "Welcome to the Fair Board," he said, his eyes scanning the group. He knew all of them but three, a young man and woman who appeared to be a couple, and a pretty, dark-haired woman seated next to Harriet Yeager. When their eyes met, Ron felt a prickly sensation electrify his skin. Caught off guard and momentarily bewildered, he pulled his chair closer to the table and shifted his weight so that he could lean on his elbows. The movements were swift and sudden, but long enough for him to regain his composure. When he spoke, he addressed Harriet's husband, Dudley, the man he knew best in the group. "What can we do for you?"

Harriet answered. "We're here as parents to protest the dates of the County Fair every summer." Her voice was cordial but emphatic.

"What's wrong with them?" Ron asked, surprised.

"The Fair is held the first week of school," she answered. "It interferes with school. Teachers don't want their students to be absent and the kids don't want to do their school work when the Fair is going on. They want to spend every night on the midway, which doesn't close before midnight. And 4-H students are forced to be absent from school to take care of livestock or work on Fair projects. Teachers don't seem to understand why the Fair is so important. We, as parents, would like to see you change the Fair

dates to the week before school starts."

The visitors murmured assent.

"One other thing," said Dudley Yeager. "Football practice is well underway by Fair time and it's hard to keep the boys in training that week. They want to take in the midway, too, as well as the auto races and other events."

Alex Wiley, a member of the Fair Board, broke in. "We've set the Fair dates in conjunction with harvest. You can't dictate crops to get ripe when you want them to."

"A week shouldn't matter," said a man's voice in the back row. Ron recognized the speaker as Lowell Phillips.

The murmur rose again among the visitors and Ron spoke, his voice ringing clear and sincere. "It's too late to do anything about the dates this year because they're set a year in advance. The Fair is only two months away now. When we set the dates for next year, we can discuss this matter then. And we should probably hear from school officials. I'm surprised this matter has never been mentioned."

"It's been mentioned, but not where it'll do any good," said Lisa Ward. "I have five children in school. Believe me, I know what a problem the Fair causes."

As the visitors rose to leave, Ron looked at the dark-haired woman and again felt that surge of excitement when their eyes met. This time he was prepared, however, and maintained his composure, feeling certain that no one noticed that his smile was for her. She smiled in return and Ron couldn't understand why it made him happy. Who is she? he

wondered, watching the rhythm of her hips as she disappeared out the door. Cute. Good ass. He had trouble concentrating on Fair Board business after she left, for all through the meeting her big, brown eyes and dark curls kept popping into his mind. He was glad when the meeting was finally over.

He continued to wonder about her the next few days, and although he could have asked any of a number of people about her when he had coffee every morning at the Wheatland Cafe before going to the farm, he kept quiet. He didn't understand his feelings. He didn't know what to say about her. So he watched and waited. He was surprised that he hadn't seen her before, but Collyer was a small town, and he felt certain that he would run into her in time.

In mid-July, an early morning rain prevented his working in the field, so he stayed in town after coffee at the Wheatland to renew truck tags. When he left the courthouse he went to the post office and ran into the strange woman. She was on her way out, her arms full of mail. "Hello," they said at the same time. She dropped a letter. He scooped it up, glad of the diversion. He was breathing fast and he felt self-conscious and awkward. He said the first thing that popped into his mind, "You were at the Fair Board meeting." She knows that, he thought. What an impression you're making! Aloud, he said, "Do you mind if I ask your name?" trying to sound casual. "I wondered who you were."

She grinned. "I'm Heidi Nolan."

What a sultry voice! He glanced around, saw that others



in the post office were ignoring them, and continued, "Are you new in town?"

"No. I've been here about six years," she said. "I don't get out much. My job keeps me busy."

When she explained that she worked at the National Bank, Ron understood why he had never seen her. He banked at First Savings. But she knew of him, not only because of her attendance at the Fair Board meeting, but also through reading his name in the paper, she said.

Soon after their chance meeting, Ron made an excuse to go into the National Bank to talk to Fair Board member Tom Hanley, who worked in the farm loan department, about the proposed change in the Country Fair dates. Normally, Ron did not discuss Fair business with board members outside regular meetings. He didn't have time, and he did not want to be accused of breaking the Sunshine Law, should a question ever arise.

This issue, however, merited some outside discussion, he told Tom, and he decided to talk to other board members personally. As they talked, Heidi walked past Tom's glass window and smiled. Ron seized the opportunity to ask about her. Tom said she started working at the bank three years ago following a divorce. He wasn't sure, but he thought she had a teenage son living with her during school months and that the boy lived with his dad somewhere on the East coast during the summer.

"She's good looking, isn't she?" said Tom. "I don't

know her well. I think she gets along with the others, but she seems to stay to herself. She's smart and a good worker. I was surprised to see her at the meeting. Didn't know she knew the Yeagers."

After that day, Ron couldn't get his mind off Heidi. He retreated to the solitude of the farm, where he plowed his fields and constantly thought about her. He wondered what caused her divorce, if she had a lover, if she was happy, who her friends were. He wanted to get to know her and he was shocked at himself for admitting it. You stupid son-of-a-bitch, he berated himself. What are you thinking of, anyway. You're a married man. You're a respected man. Heidi's a stranger. How can you get to know another person in a small town? You can't be friends with another woman.

Then one afternoon he admitted he didn't want to be friends with Heidi. He wanted her. Wanted her bad. The truth was both exciting and frightening to him, frightening because of the strange, new sensations churning in his gut. He felt like a different person, like someone he didn't know. You crazy bastard, he thought. What's wrong with you?

The John Deere became his refuge as he started fantasizing about Heidi, seeing her nude in his mind, seeing them together in his wildest dreams making love and loving life.

For days he fantasized and rationalized--and wrestled with his conscience. You've got a wife. Yeah, but she's so nice. Your wife's a good woman. You don't want anything to happen to your marriage. What would people say? Who

would know? You can't risk a scandal. What would dad say? He won't find out. Ha. He probably pumped his secretary years ago. What would Daniel say? He wants to run for office one of these days. Jesus, he'd beat the shit outta me if I messed up his chance for the legislature. All you're doin' is thinkin' you fool. Thinkin' never hurt anyone. Forget it. You'll forget her in a few days. You're one crazy bastard, Baxter.

He couldn't put her out of his mind, but he made no effort to contact her. Neither did he return to the bank, though he went out of his way to drive past the parking lot behind the bank before he headed to work in the country every morning. One day when he drove past, Heidi pulled into the parking lot. She smiled and waved. He was elated.

He took the week off work to attend the County Fair in late August and realized the truth of the parents' complaint about the Fair interfering with school. Patty was more interested in meeting her friends on the midway than with getting her homework done. She was also a freshman football cheerleader, and she went directly from cheerleading practice to the fairgrounds after school. He could see during the week that her health suffered, as well as her grades, and Ron vowed to do something about changing the Fair schedule for next year.

Near the end of the week, he was in the Fair Board office one evening reviewing the contract for the sponsors of the tractor pull, when he glanced through the window facing

the exhibit room and saw Heidi looking at the cut flower arrangements. He dropped the contract and quickly crossed the exhibit hall to speak to her. She didn't seem surprised to see him. "You've put on a nice Fair," she smiled.

"It's not my Fair, but thanks," he laughed, staring at her, as if transfixed. She blushed and turned away. "Look at these. Aren't they striking?" she said, pointing to an arrangement of sunflowers.

"Yes, you are," he murmured close to her ear. "Heidi, I've been thinking about you. I'd like to get to know you. Could I call you some evening?"

Her voice was little more than a whisper when she answered. "Yes . . . yes. I'd like that."

As she walked away, he looked at the sunflowers, breathless, excited. In the distance, he could hear the sounds of people laughing on the midway. He wished he could join them.



## MAURICE

When Maurice Attebery killed himself, townspeople shook their heads in pity. "Poor soul, he didn't know what he was doing," they moaned. I said to myself, "Shoot, he did too know what he was doing." I also thought that his family would be far better off without him, but I sure didn't go around telling people how I felt. I had my reasons, though. You see, Maurice and his family used to be my neighbors. I saw and heard things happen over there that other people didn't know about. Not most people, anyway.

We lived in a neighborhood where the houses were small and close together. The bedrooms and bathroom in my house were on the north, facing those same rooms in Attebery's house. During nice weather, I kept my windows open and I could hear loud noises in their house, even though they kept their windows closed and the air conditioner on day and night. Sometimes I heard the TV, other times the kids fighting, and often Donna and Maurice arguing, though I couldn't make out particular words. Most of their arguments happened

late at night and the noise would wake me.

One evening a fight occurred early, while the kids were still up. It was growing dark, but Donna had not yet drawn the curtains when I went into my bathroom and saw next door. Maurice was standing in the doorway of the boys' room, pointing at them, yelling. They looked scared. The youngest was on the top bunk, cowering against the wall. The oldest, about eleven, stood at the edge of the bed, facing his dad, his fists clenched. I thought he might be trying to protect his little brother. Surely he knew he couldn't fight his father. Maurice was a big, burly guy with a bushy, black beard. When he was mad, he was ferocious.

In the other bedroom, Donna huddled in the middle of the room with her two little girls. All three were crying. I don't know what had happened since I had my TV on and hadn't heard or seen anything until I walked into my bathroom. I kept the light off and watched, feeling sneaky, but I wanted to know what was going to happen. Nothing did, for suddenly Maurice stopped talking, crammed his Stetson on his head, and stomped out of the house. I hurried to the living room but all I saw was Maurice roaring off in his pickup. When I returned to the bathroom to look next door, Donna had closed the curtains. For days after that, I thought about the family next door.

I remember the first night I learned that Donna and Maurice had troubles. It was an early summer evening. I hadn't lived in the house long and was sitting on my little

patio, getting used to the sounds of the new neighborhood and enjoying the warm, night air while waiting for my dog to do her duty. Suddenly, an eruption from Attebery's broke my reverie. I ran to the fence--I had a high redwood fence all around my backyard--and peeked through a crack in time to see Maurice stalk across the yard to the alley and head north. Donna stood in the doorway screaming, "You better get back here or you're gonna be sorry!" Maurice kept on walking. She ran into the yard, crying hysterically and yelling "Maurice! Maurice!" She stopped short of chasing him, though, and in a few seconds returned to the house. I was stunned and frightened, although I didn't know why, for I certainly was in no danger. But the incident unnerved me and I resolved to be kind to Donna because I felt sorry for her and I didn't like Maurice. I didn't like their kids, either. They were loud and unruly and I was constantly having to pick up trash in my yard that I felt sure came from them. Late one afternoon I was working in my small flower bed in front when Donna got home. I smiled and called, "Evening, Donna. Pretty day." She peered over a sack of groceries, said, "Hello, Esther, how are you?" and walked right on into the house without another word or smile. Well, I thought, good neighbor to you, too.

I work as a typesetter at the local newspaper and one of the reporters, Sammy Mitchell, is a good friend. One day I asked him about the Attebery's. Sammy often told me things about local people because he grew up in Lawson and knew al-

most everybody. I'd only lived here about three years. Sammy was younger than Maurice but knew a lot about him because Maurice had played tackle on the high school football team and the year Lawson won the state championship, Maurice was one of the town's heroes. A few days after Sammy told me about Maurice's high school days, he heard something new. He was working his police beat and had stopped at the courthouse before returning to the newspaper office. He learned at the courthouse that Donna had written some hot checks and the judge gave her a suspended jail sentence for a year and she had to pay the checks and court costs. It came to over \$500. Sammy saw Donna go into the ladies room crying.

Soon after her court appearance, she started clerking nights at a 24-hour convenience store. Sammy found out because he stopped there one evening for gas. I thought she probably worked at night so that Maurice could be home with the kids. Some babysitter, I thought. But sometimes I saw Donna's mother at the house, probably because Maurice was gone so much of the time. He hauled cattle for an area feed lot and he worked odd hours. I often wondered how many of his evening absences were actually work related.

During the holidays I went to a party at Rita's Lounge with my boyfriend, Gerald Hooper. I was surprised to see Maurice and Donna there. It never occurred to me that they ever dressed up and went out together. I was surprised, too, to learn that Gerald knew Maurice fairly well--and liked him. Gerald said they occasionally drank a beer at The Rusty Bar.



I walked out of the ladies lounge to find Gerald and Maurice in the hallway, talking. Maurice wanted to give me a New Year's kiss. Gerald laughed. I was afraid to offend Maurice, so I turned my cheek up to him. He ignored it and kissed me on the lips. His mouth in that mess of beard was hot and sticky. His breath stunk, too. I wanted to cringe. Instead, I grabbed Gerald's arm and croaked, "Let's dance!" I heard Maurice laugh behind my back.

Soon after that night, I moved to an apartment across town and lost touch with the Attebery's, except to see Donna once in awhile at the convenience store if I stopped there for gas.

The next fall, I started going to a new singles club in town, The Gold Dust. One night Maurice walked in. Was I surprised! He sat at the bar. I watched but didn't speak. I could tell by the way he hunched over his drink that he was in a foul mood. Soon he disappeared, but I finally saw him with some people in a back booth where it was dark. I forgot about him then, until I saw him on the dance floor cuddling with a real tiny woman. He had to stoop; she stood on tip-toes. They looked uncomfortable, but they also appeared absorbed in each other. Well, would you look at that, I thought. Wonder what she sees in him.

Maurice became a regular customer at The Gold Dust and eventually we spoke. "Hi" was all we said, and I usually gave him a big grin. Sometimes he smiled in return. Maybe he thought I would tell Donna. Hah! I wouldn't waste my

breath!

Most of the crowd at The Gold Dust were football fans, always betting on games. Maurice got involved in the betting, too. I listened to the talk but refused to join any of the pools that were organized each week because I thought it was silly to risk losing hard-earned money on a football game. But I thought the talk was fun and I watched enough of the games on TV to keep abreast of what was going on, even if I didn't understand about such things as stats and percentage points. Usually, I just picked a team and rooted for it. One night at the The Gold Dust I'd had a couple of beers and felt smart so I decided to impress Maurice with my football savvy. He was sitting at the bar alone and I perched on the stool next to him and spouted something about the Cowboys winning the season. He shook his head and growled, "Nah. They ain't got a chance."

"Ah, come on. The Cowboy's can whip every. . . ." I started to tease, but he scowled at me, "You don't know what you're talkin' about," and stuck a cigarette between his teeth. I marched off without another word, angry. He was right. I didn't know what I was talking about, but he didn't need to be so mean about it. You're a damned ol' grouch, I thought. Just when I think you might act like a human being, you show your true colors! He looked ugly. And tough. Soon I saw him dancing with that tiny woman again and I asked my friend, Debbie Burgess, about her. Debbie said her name was Tina Woods. Name fits, I thought. I stayed out of Maurice's

way after that because everytime I saw him, it seemed he looked uglier and tougher.

Then on New year's day, or night rather, Sammy called me, excited and alarmed. "Esther, do you have your scanner on?"

"No," I mumbled, too sleepy and sick from celebrating with Gerald the night before to be interested in police business. I told Sammy I couldn't get up to get it.

"Come on, Esther, wake up! You gotta hear. Maurice Attebery is threatening to kill Donna and the kids. You can hear her screaming on the phone. The dispatcher left the line open."

"Oh, my gosh," I said, struggling out of bed to get my scanner on the dresser. I flipped it on and returned to bed with it, putting it on the pillow close to my ear. An officer was saying he was enroute to Maurice's house--I recognized the address--and then there was silence. I waited, fighting the nausea from my hangover and from the anxiety of wondering what would happen. Sammy called again and we listened to our scanners and talked. An officer reported he had calmed Donna, but Maurice had left the house before he had arrived. Sammy and I wondered where he could have gone, then I remembered Tina and told Sammy about her. We hung up shortly and I went back to sleep.

The next morning, I listened to my scanner while dressing for work. The police were talking about the old airport when I turned it on. Suddenly, someone said, "There's a body

in this pickup. Send an ambulance." Cold chills went down my spine. I hurried to work and waited nervously for Sammy. When he arrived, he didn't have time to talk and said he'd let me know what had happened as soon as he had some facts. He was going to the old airport and the police station and said he'd be back as soon as possible.

He was gone over an hour and I was on the edge of my chair by the time he returned. He looked strange.

"What's wrong?" I demanded.

"It's Maurice Attebery," he said. "He put a hose in his pickup and killed himself last night."

"Oh, no!" I gasped, stunned. "What happened?"

"All I know so far is that he lost a lot of money on football bowl games yesterday. He got mad and started drinking pretty heavily. He and Donna got into a big fight last night. After he threatened to kill her and the kids, he left the house and must have driven around a long time. Police think he must have set at the end of that old runway a long time, too, because there were lots of cigarette butts all over the ground around the pickup. They think he's been dead since around 4:30 or 5:30 this morning. They won't let anyone near the pickup."

"It must have been an awful lot of money," I said, "I wonder how much."

"No one knows," said Sammy. "But it seems he thought he could get some major debts taken care of by winning bets on football games, so he went all out."



"What a stupid thing to do," I said.

Townsfolk talked about the tragedy for days. Mostly, people felt sorry for Donna and the kids. A few said they would have helped Maurice if only they'd known. "What a shame. What a pity," they kept saying, over and over.

Sammy overheard the police talking about a suicide note on Maurice, but he couldn't find out what it said. I was curious to know if it mentioned his girl friend.

Sammy and I took off work to attend the funeral. I couldn't hardly look at Donna and the kids. She was visibly shaken. The kids acted as if they were in a dream. People packed the church. I was surprised Maurice had so much family.

I didn't bother to listen to the preacher during the service. He couldn't say anything to make me feel better. Besides, I felt that Donna and her kids would be better off without Maurice, and financially, for a while at least, she'd have a steady income and wouldn't have to write hot checks anymore. They wouldn't tremble in fear anymore, either. I felt bad thinking this way, but I couldn't help it. Oh, Maurice, you crazy, dumb fool, I sighed. Why'd ya' buckle?

I was glad when the service finally ended. We filed out the sanctuary by rows. Sammy and I were seated near the back, so we didn't have to wait long. We were anxious to view the body. We were both surprised when we saw him. He was dressed in a new, light brown suit. His hair was combed, his beard spread neatly over his throat. He looked good.

Relaxed. Even handsome. Better than I'd ever seen him look. My gosh, I thought.

Sammy and I hurried back to work before they carried Maurice out of the church. It was cold. I didn't want to go to the cemetery. I didn't want to see Maurice put in the ground.

## THE ENGAGEMENT

The car eased into the driveway and rolled to a stop. Janet Rayburn picked up her purse and sweater and stepped wearily to the pavement, glad the work day was over. As she walked to the front door, she noticed the gray paint peeling from the sides of the house. Wonder if Mr. Stipp will pay to have this house fixed up, she thought. I'll ask when I pay rent next time. Surely he can see the need. She paused at the mailbox and flipped through the mail. "Bah, junk," she said with a sigh as she unlocked the door and tossed the envelopes on the couch.

The house she now called home was a small, two-bedroom built in the fifties. It was all she could afford at the time of the divorce two years ago and as it turned out it was plenty big enough, for she could only salvage a little furniture to put in it. The living room had a couch, two end tables, a chair, and a television set. One bedroom had a bed and dresser. The other bedroom was empty except for a few boxes and clothes--and the ironing board which remained set

up. The kitchen was big enough to hold the washing machine and a small round table. Janet had learned to be comfortable in the house, though it lacked warmth, and the stark, bare walls reminded her every evening that her life had been reduced to the bare essentials. She was still getting used to living alone, however, and she was neither emotionally nor financially able to replace some of the luxuries she used to have.

The telephone rang. It was on the table at one end of the couch and she sat down as she answered. "Hello." Her voice was tired.

"Mom," said the caller. "Did you just get home?"

"Hi, Hank," she said, perking up at the sound of her son's voice. She kicked off her high-heeled shoes and stretched out on the couch. "What are you doing? It's early for you to call. You didn't get fired, did you?" she teased.

"Nah," he guffawed. "I want to tell you some news."

"On?" said Janet. "What's up?"

"I asked Terrie to marry me last night. She said yes. We're going to. . . ."

"Marry you!" Janet gasped, sitting upright. "I didn't know you were serious about her. You'd had a fight the last time we talked. Are you sure? What do her parents think? What if she. . . ."

"Hey, Mom! It's okay," Hank interrupted. "We patched things up. It was just a misunderstanding. We know what we're doing. I know what I'm doing. I want to marry



Terrie."

"But do you love her?" Janet insisted, by now on her feet, pacing in front of the couch. Damn, she thought. I should have seen this coming.

"Yeh, I sure do," Hank chuckled. "Look, Mom. I'll tell you more later. I gotta go right now. I'm supposed to pick Terrie up at work so we can go to the mall and buy rings. I'll come by tonight and talk to you."

Janet cradled the phone, frowning. A knot formed in the pit of her stomach and a prickly sensation ran down her spine. No! No! she thought. Not Hank. Not yet. He's not ready for marriage. A girl, yes. Wife, no. Terrie doesn't love him. She can't. They've only gone together . . . three months maybe. Hardly long enough to get acquainted, let alone married.

She stormed into her bedroom, pulling off the suit she'd worn at work all day to don a pair of blue jeans and a deep yellow, oversized shirt. I've got to put a stop to this, she thought. I don't want him to get married. But she knew that Hank, at age twenty-one, could do what he wanted to do. He had been on his own since turning eighteen, shortly before the divorce. He worked in construction and although he usually had to go on unemployment during the worst part of winter, he had managed to fend for himself and keep his apartment. He lived across town but he called her once a week and stopped to see her at least twice a month. They'd always been close and she damn well didn't want some young,

foolish girl coming between them.

Janet ran a comb through her short, dark curls and stared at her reflection in the dresser mirror. Piercing blue eyes beneath heavy, black eyebrows stared back. A good-looking woman, at age forty-three she could--and did--pass for younger, a game she relished playing. She peered into the mirror to inspect the lines in her expertly made-up face and added a new coat of bright red lipstick. If Hank gets married, she thought, I'll be a grandmother in no time. I don't want to be a grandmother. I'm not ready. I'm not old enough to be a grandmother. Oh, shit! She tossed the lipstick on the dresser and stalked to the kitchen to find something to do. As usual whenever she was upset, she needed to keep busy, so now she began washing the few dishes and the silverware she'd left in the sink that morning.

After sponge-mopping the floor, she took the dust cloth to the living room and rapidly polished the furniture. She paused at the small, built-in bookshelf on the north wall and tenderly wiped the few knick-knacks and photos of her sons, Hank and Robert, now twenty-two. The things sitting on the three shelves were the only reminders in the room of her former life. During the divorce, she had discarded most of the furnishings and mementoes that would remind her of Carl and their twenty-three year marriage, but she found that she couldn't toss out everything. Gently, she wiped the figurines on the shelves, gifts from Robert and Hank when they were growing up, and a petrified rock that Carl had given her

once while on their vacation in Arizona. There was also a hand-painted plate from her mother, and an empty piggy bank she'd bought years ago to help save for something special long lost to memory.

She polished Robert's picture and smiled at his profile, grinning in his Army uniform, in front of the United States flag. He had had the picture made after he completed basic training and she felt a measure of pride whenever she looked at it. He's so handsome, she thought. Why can't he get a wife, instead of Hank? Then she dusted Hank's high school graduation picture and set it firmly back on the shelf, speaking to it. "I mean it, Hank Rayburn," she said grimly. "I won't allow you to do something you're going to regret later."

She finished cleaning the house by vacuuming the floors, which had been swept only two nights ago. It's clean and it doesn't matter, she thought. I wonder if I'll ever get used to living here. Or anywhere. Does Carl kiss her all time the way I do? Probably not. He managed to find a nice new one. Hah! Probably had help from that little tramp he married! Will he have the nerve to bring her to the wedding? Not if I can help it! There'll be no wedding! Her tongue felt cotton-coated and her stomach ached.

The telephone rang. She caught it on the second ring. "Hello," she answered curtly.

"My, my, what's wrong with you?" laughed a deep voice. Janet recognized the caller at once. "Oh, hello, Ben.

It's nothing. I'm in a foul mood, that's all. It's been a hard day. I'm tired. I don't feel well."

"How 'bout me coming over and getting you out of your foul mood?" he drawled.

"No. Not tonight."

"I see." He sounded perturbed. "If that's the way you want it. But tell me one thing. Are you seein' someone else?"

The seriousness in his voice surprised and irritated her. "No, but what if I am?" she demanded.

He slammed the receiver in her ear.

Good riddance, she thought. She had met Ben Davis at the Twilight Lounge after the divorce when she and Mona Turner, her best friend, started going out on Friday nights for a drink. Ben was attracted to her at once, and she enjoyed his flirtations. They found comfort in each other's loneliness, for he, too, was going through a divorce, and they soon became lovers. Ben was a rancher, not rich but comfortably well-off. He liked to party and they had fun, in the beginning. But gradually his arrogance and selfishness, along with his heavy drinking, strained her nerves. She had been thinking about breaking their relationship. Now maybe it had happened.

She shrugged, dismissing thoughts of him, and went to the kitchen to pour a glass of white wine and eat some cheese and crackers. She decided to take a bath, knowing that Hank would probably not arrive until after the mall closed at nine



o'clock, and took a glass of wine to the bathroom.

As she soaked in the hot, bubbly water and sipped the drink, she couldn't stop the flood of memories of Carl and their years together. There were good times. Plenty of them. And hard times, agonizing years when the boys were babies and there was hardly enough money to feed and clothe them all. She had scraped, saved, and sacrificed to help Carl get ahead and own his own business. But he'd gone bankrupt and bitterly blamed the tax system for his failure. After that, she had supported his going to work for a large retail chain and for a time, things were better. But gradually Carl changed. The changes were small at first and she didn't notice them because she was busy with the boys in school. Then she began to realize that he didn't enjoy the family as he used to. He didn't want to take them out to eat, go to movies, go boating, or go on vacations. He didn't seem to care about their home anymore and refused to mow the grass and tend the flowers. He didn't seem to want to do anything but work, often working overtime during the week. And he attended every out-of-town sales meeting and regional conference that he could.

At one time she had argued with him to stay home or spend more time with the boys. One day they quit arguing. They quit talking. Finally, the day arrived when he broke the silence and told her he wanted out, that he loved someone else. Perhaps she had expected it. Perhaps the fight had gone out of her. Stunned, she had merely accepted his

intention without a struggle, not knowing what else to do. By this time he was broke again and the sale of their home paid off years of accumulated debts. The divorce left them penniless. Janet soon found a typing job at an insurance agency and began the slow process of surviving on her own. Six months later, Carl bounced back and married his girl friend, who had two, school-age children. Janet's shock gradually gave way to anger and shame. Her job helped restore her sense of worth, but she couldn't rid herself of the feeling of failure, nor her anger at Carl. She had not seen him in over five months. The thought of seeing him with his wife at Hank's wedding made her shudder.

After bathing, Janet put on her long, red satin robe, the only luxury she had afforded herself as a single woman. The feel of satin next to her skin made her feel rich and feminine--and less a failure. She felt desirable and sure of herself when she wore it. She had poured another glass of wine and settled on the couch to watch television when Hank arrived. He strode in, a tall, thin youth with shaggy, brown hair, black eyes, and a bushy mustache. He grinned and tossed his cap in the chair.

"You look relaxed and party," he said. He always managed a compliment.

She smiled, flipped off the television, and went to the refrigerator to get him a beer. He followed her to the kitchen, but after she handed him the beer and poured herself a glass of wine, she motioned him to the living room. "It's

more comfortable in here," she said.

He sprawled on the opposite end of the couch from her, stretching his long legs covered in faded blue jeans. "Well, we got 'em bought. You should see 'em. Boy, they're purty. It'll take me a year to pay for 'em, but Terrie said she'd help if I need her to. 'Spect she'll have to, with winter comin' on."

Janet curled her knees under her robe and faced her son in an attempt at casualness. Careful, she warned herself. Aloud, she said, "We need to talk about this wedding."

"What's there to talk about?" he asked, his grin fading.

"Do you think you're able to support a wife when you can't even pay for the rings?" she asked.

"Sure. Terrie works. She'll help out. We'll do okay. Paying for the rings is just a little thing."

"Oh, good night, Hank!" snapped Janet, forgetting her desire for caution. "That's the way your father and I started, with me helping him. And look what happened. Do you want to. . . ."

"Yeh, look what happened. You got me," Hank interrupted, patting her shoulder and giving her a lop-sided smile. "Come on, Mom," he said gently. "Gimme a break. Just because it happened to you doesn't mean. . . ."

"I know, son," Janet broke in. "I'm sorry. But this has happened too fast. I'm not prepared. I'm afraid for you. For both of us."

"Afraid?" Hank stammered. "What the hell you afraid

of?"

"I don't know," said Janet. "You're so young. Terrie doesn't have a good job. You don't know if she. . . ."

Hank flipped his hand at his mother, stopping her. "When you get to know her, you'll see how great she is," he said. "She knows how to save her money. She loaned me fifty dollars last month out of money she's been saving. She knows how to cook. She plans to take an accounting course at the college next spring."

Janet jumped to her feet. "Loaned you fifty dollars!" she gasped. "Oh, Hank, how could you borrow money from your girl friend? Now you're indebted to her. I'll pay her back for you. Don't let yourself get into debt with her or her family. Oh, I can't accept the idea of you borrowing money from her!"

Hank gaped at his mother, but before he could answer she stalked to the kitchen for more wine and beer. When she returned she was still angry and shoved the can into his hand. He looked frightened and confused and took a big gulp of the beer. Janet continued, as if there had been no break. "I'll pay her back any money you owe her. I'll pay her back tomorrow."

"You don't have to do that," he spluttered. "I told her I'd pay her back. She doesn't need it right away, anyway." He changed the subject. "She plans to work two or three years. Then we'll talk about a house and kids. I wanted her to come with me tonight but. . . ."



Not listening, Janet brushed Hank's cap from the chair and sat down across from the couch to look squarely at him. "I don't want you to get married," she said, firmly.

Hank put his head in his hands, elbows on his knees, and looked at the floor. After a minute he spoke. "Why?"

"You're all I have left, Hank," she said. "I'm not ready to lose you. I love you more than life itself. I can't live without you. If you marry this girl I'm going to end it all. That's how much I love you. I'll give you money if you need it. I'll do anything I can to help you. But I won't allow you to marry this girl. Not yet. You're not over the divorce yet. Let her work two or three years if she wants to. Then you'll be ready. But you're not ready. Not now."

"What if we live together?" Hank said.

"No!" shouted Janet. "She might get pregnant! Oh my, God! I didn't think. Is she?"

"No," Hank said, shaking his head. "I wish she was," he mumbled.

Janet began to moan and cry.

"Don't do that, Mom. I can't stand to see you cry."

"I don't mean to," sobbed Janet. "I didn't intend to. But I can't help it. You don't understand. You're my life. You always have been. What will I do without you? How can I go on without you?"

"You're not losing me if I get married," Hank said, impatient.

"I only want you to wait a little while," Janet whined. "Not long. A few months. Maybe a year. Give us time to get used to being alone. All we have is each other. Terrie's not much younger than that girl your father married. How can she handle that?"

"I hadn't thought about it," said Hank.

Suddenly Janet quit crying and wiped her eyes. She straightened up and looked at Hank. "I'm sorry, son," she apologized, her voice little more than a whisper. "I didn't mean to break down. It's been a rough day. You shocked me."

"I'm sorry," Hank said, shifting nervously on the couch. "I don't mean to hurt you. I know you've been hurt enough." He stared at the floor again.

"Hank," she said. The firmness in her voice startled him and he glanced up to see a hard expression on his mother's face. Her hands rested in a tight ball in her lap. When she spoke, her voice was calm and controlled and her words rang clear and deliberate. "I forbid you to marry Terrie right away. Do you understand!"

Hank nodded, putting his head back in his hands. "Yes," he muttered.

"Hank!" Janet snapped. "Do you hear me!"

"Yes. Yes, I heard you." He didn't move.

Janet went to the couch and sat next to him, stroking his head and patting his rounded shoulders. At length she crooned, "My dearest darling, you must understand. I need you right now. Please understand. I'm sure you will by

morning, after you've had a chance to think about it."

Hank nodded and straightened. They rose.

"Hug me before you go," Janet said.

Hank embraced her. She clung to him. "I love you so much," she whispered. "You're my pride and joy."

He stepped out of her arms and bent to pick up his cap on the floor, responding automatically, "I love you, too." Neither did he look at her as he opened the door, but mumbled over his shoulder, "Talk to you tomorrow."

Janet listened to his car pull out of the drive. Then she returned to the kitchen and poured another glass of wine. She was smiling.

## CHÂTEAU LODGE

The Château Lodge, a thirty-unit apartment complex, catered to single adults. It didn't advertise for singles only, it just happened that way. There wasn't anything wrong with the Château--it was clean, quiet, and orderly. It simply did not have the atmosphere that married people want, did not satisfy either their desire for privacy or neighborliness. Maybe the old saying that singles and marrieds don't mix is true, because whenever any of the Château's tenants got married, they moved out.

The apartments circled a courtyard that contained a swimming pool and a small two-story building that had a lounge built over a storage room and a laundry room. The lounge was reserved by tenants for special occasions or rented to various civic groups for meetings. All of the apartments overlooked the swimming pool. The singles had a way of going swimming when few others were in the pool. They were cordial to one another when they met at the pool, but they tended to swim, sunbathe a short time, and return



quietly to their own apartments. When one or two left the pool, one or two more appeared. It was a continual procession, whether on weekends or after work during the week.

Emma Hudson, the sixty-two year old, nosy, apartment manager, closed the swimming pool by locking the gate at 10:30 every night. Then she locked the laundry room. She was aware of the odd hours some of the singles kept, and she knew if she didn't lock both, some of them would be swimming or washing their clothes at 3:00 in the morning. After locking up, she made her nightly rounds, keeping to the shadows while sipping on a beer, peeking in open windows, and checking each of the four entrances to the complex to make sure that the gates were closed to keep out stray dogs. She also inspected the parking lot--she knew the cars the tenants drove and she could tell by glancing at the lot who was home and if there were visitors on the premises. She checked the lot again in the early morning. She watched the parking lot because tenants occasionally tried to slip roommates or live-ins into the complex. It wasn't that she cared about the personal lives of the tenants--she said she didn't give a damn what anyone did--but she didn't want people living at the Château who didn't pay his fair share of the rent. Someone's mother could visit for a week and that was fine, but a lover was another story--pay or get out, said Emma.

Early one Saturday morning Maxine Giles hurried to the laundry room carrying a basket heaped with dirty clothes, trying to get there before the machines were taken. The

laundry room was in full use on weekends, but since many tenants slept later than usual on Saturday, the activity didn't begin much before nine o'clock. The room was empty when Maxine arrived and she was glad. She was inserting coins into two machines when Emma walked in.

"Morning, Shug," crooned Maxine. "How's my favorite landlady today?"

Emma beamed at the praise, but answered with her usual surliness, "Oh, hell, it's too damned early to know. When I retire, I'm staying in bed till ten o'clock every morning." She pointed to the corner cabinet. "Look's like someone was here early. Empty soap box and dirty ashtray. Must have been Dewey Sampson. He's good at leaving a mess. I sure as hell can't understand why people don't clean up after themselves." She wiped the cabinet top with a damp cloth. "What are you up to today?"

"Not much," Maxine said, smiling to herself at Emma's irritation. The manager's own apartment was directly across the passageway from the laundry room, and Maxine knew that she deliberately left her drapes open so that she could see the laundry room traffic. Maxine also understood the landlady. She knew the older woman would never be content sleeping until ten in the morning and that her main joy in life was complaining about the tenants. Maxine's voice sounded syrupy when she spoke. "Thought I'd do my laundry early, then whisk through my apartment. It doesn't get very dirty, just dusty. I asked Suzanne to come over for a swim this

afternoon and then we'll probably go eat someplace afterwards. A normal, quiet weekend. You know, same ol' dull stuff."

"Don't give me that crap," Emma retorted in a low, throaty laugh, pausing to light a cigarette. "You girls manage to have plenty of action in that 'dull stuff' as you call it."

Her reference to "girls" was teasing, yet sarcastic, for Maxine and her close friend, Suzanne Fox, were in their mid forties. The two had met a year ago during a self-defense course for women at the local, community college. Maxine was recently divorced at the time and attended the class because living alone was frightening. She thought self-defense techniques would give her courage. She sat next to Suzanne, a divorcée of five years who was taking the course as a personal challenge. The two became instant friends and Maxine often invited Suzanne to visit her at the Château and go swimming. Suzanne lived in a small apartment on the other side of town. She told Maxine she had called once about an apartment at the Château and was told there was a six-month waiting list. Maxine had laughed. "It's who you know, hon." Her boss, Arlie Udall, city manager of Tyler, knew Emma and also Emma's husband, Tom, who worked at one of the hardware stores downtown. When Arlie called Emma and told her one of the bookkeepers at City Hall needed an apartment, Emma said she'd have space available in three days. And she did.

Maxine was happy with her one-bedroom apartment. It was



comfortable, modern, and large enough to accommodate her meager belongings. She also felt secure in the surroundings, for Emma kept out solicitors and strangers. Even though Emma was crabby, she was nice to the people she liked, and she liked Maxine, mainly because Maxine worked overtime to keep on the good side of her. Maxine deliberately coaxed her into conversations, usually gossip, whenever they met, and sometimes Maxine sought her out just to talk. She often took cookies or other desserts to Emma and Tom. Tom was gone much of the time and Maxine wondered if part of Emma's crabbiness was loneliness.

Maxine went out of her way to convince Emma to like Suzanne before she invited Suzanne to her apartment because she didn't want Emma jumping to the wrong conclusions about Suzanne's character. Suzanne was a self-confident, enthusiastic, and pretty woman, the type of woman who often made other women apprehensive. Men were attracted to Suzanne, too, and Maxine didn't want to arouse Emma's suspicious nature or her jealousy, even though Emma was twice her age and did not take care of her appearance. Maxine started out by bragging about Suzanne's work with the Chamber of Commerce and Tourist Commission because she knew that Emma was more impressed by position than looks. As it turned out Emma did like Suzanne, although she had reservations about most divorcées, Maxine included, she told Maxine later.

Suzanne had returned from a three-day meeting out of state when she joined Maxine for a swim that afternoon. "I'm



exhausted," she said. "It feels good to be lazy in the sun." she swam laps while Maxine dog-paddled close to the edge. When they stopped to rest, they sat on the pool steps and kicked water while they talked. Maxine told her friend about Emma's teasing remark that morning.

"What would she think if she knew the action we really have?" laughed Suzanne. "I'm surprised at how strict and narrow-minded she is. We've seen her at night when she looked as if she'd been nipping pretty good. I don't see why she cares what we do. I think she's nosy because she resents divorced women."

"Uh-huh," said Maxine. "And drinking; fuels her meddling. Thursday night when I came home she was going into the laundry room carrying a glass. She waved when she saw me. I think she goes into the laundry room to look out the window. I have to be very quiet when I come home at night since I live so close to her apartment. Sometimes she says, 'I heard you come home last night. What were you doing out so late?' I don't know if she's telling the truth or guessing."

"Of all the gall," Suzanne said, angrily. "It's really none of her business. She has no right. Gail, I'd hate for someone to be watching me like that. Have you considered moving?"

"Many times. But the advantages of living here outweigh Emma's prying eyes. The apartments are affordable and modern. When I'm on vacation, she waters my plants and

brings in my mail. I don't have to worry about my apartment being broken into when I'm gone, either."

"I guess she means well," Suzanne nodded. "But she's such a pain. Nuisance is a better word. And what about that woman on the second floor--you know, that nurse you told me about? Didn't you say a guy spends weekends with her? Does Emma give her trouble?"

"That's Crystal Deyoe," said Maxine. "She's lived here a long time and she knows practically everybody in town. She knows how to handle people." Maxine giggled. "She probably told Emma, 'Hey, I'm living with a man on weekends, rent free, and it's none of your business!' I wish I had that kind of nerve. But Crystal gossips to Emma--tells her all kinds of things--some of it I'm sure comes from the hospital. Emma tells me things but she never says how she finds out about people. I don't know how she could possibly know some of the things she does if it didn't come from Crystal--like the night that Lowell woman escaped a would-be rapist by running through a field. She ran naked through a sticker patch and cut her feet, legs, and breasts. Who would know something like that if it wasn't a nurse?"

"Anyway, Crystal met a guy from Wakley. Emma told me. I never talk to Crystal. He comes over every Friday night and stays until late Sunday afternoon. Crystal apparently told Emma that since Wakley is a three-hour drive, he doesn't want to go home Friday night and they decided that he should stay here the whole weekend. I don't know how they got Emma

to go along with them because Emma is so afraid she'll get a reputation of running a whorehouse. But she seems to accept Crystal. I think the guy might bring a bottle once in awhile to give to Emma. I don't think Emma has ever tried to charge Crystal more rent--she can't--but she doesn't raise a fuss about it either. At least not to Crystal's face. Behind her back she calls Crystal a hussy and a tramp."

"What do you think Emma would say if she ever found out you had J.D. in your apartment all night on more than one occasion?" asked Suzanne.

"Sh!" Maxine whispered. "Lower your voice. It makes me shudder to think about it. She thinks I'm helpless and innocent." Maxine giggled. "She probably thinks that with my age and figure no man would take a second look at me. I have a hunch she feels sorry for me. That's why she teases me about us going out. She thinks it's wonderful that we have the nerve to go to a bar together and have a drink and maybe be asked to dance. She thinks we're safe in doing that. But she doesn't think we'll ever meet nice men and have the chance for serious relationships. She has no idea what it's really like to be single, even though she lives among singles. She thinks we're just playing games."

"We are," laughed Suzanne. "And it's fun. We don't have to worry about meeting nice men and having serious relationships. That will take care of itself."

"Let's face it," said Maxine. "Available, sober, single men our age who have good jobs are practically extinct. May-

be she's right to pity us. As long as she can pity us or laugh at us--or condemn us--I doubt that she'll pay serious attention to us."

"We'd better hope so. J.D. is married, remember. And so's Scott. Good night, if she knew. . . ."

"It would destroy her faith in me. In you, too. She must never find out. Never." Maxine suddenly sat up and began nervously applying suntan lotion to her arms and legs in quick, short motions. "It's not that I particularly care about her opinion of me, as a person. I just don't want her talking about me. About either of us. Not the way she talks about Crystal. And she'd tell everyone--the way she tells about Crystal. She can't keep anything to herself. It would be a disaster if she finds out we're having affairs with married men."

"Yes," Suzanne agreed, sitting up and looking about the apartment grounds. "It occurs to me--Emma doesn't know what divorce is like. If she were single right now, it would be worse on her than on us. She's trapped patrolling this apartment complex. She couldn't get a job like either of ours. Or attract men like J.D. and Scott. Look, there she is now, coming this way. I bet she isn't as old as she looks. Maybe we're wrong, but who's worse off--her or us?"

"I wouldn't trade places with her, that's for sure," said Maxine. "Come on. Let's get ready to go out. I wonder what's going on in town tonight."

At that moment Emma entered the deck area and walked to



the edge of the pool. She stopped, put her hands on her hips, and squinted down at them from under her wide-brimmed, straw hat. "You two are going to roast."

"Hi, Shug," smiled Maxine in her syrupy voice. "Get your suit and join us. The water's cool."

"Hell, no," Emma grinned. "I only came out to see what you girls are up to. But it's too damned hot out here. I can't take this sun. I'm going in for a beer." She waved abruptly and turned to leave. "You two have fun," she snickered. "And behave yourselves."

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### HALF-WAY DOWN FRONT

The two women, engrossed in thought, hardly noticed the barren fields and empty sky as the car sped along the highway. Rachel Elwell stared out the window. Her best friend, Gracie Barber, behind the wheel, let the car cruise at seventy, knowing there was slight chance of getting ticketed on this empty stretch of prairie. Denver was five hours behind them and they had not seen another vehicle in over an hour. Rachel broke the silence.

"Those lectures were refreshing. And powerful. No theatrics. No screaming or yelling. No smiling helpers. Just a humble, simple servant of God speaking from his heart about a subject he loves."

Gracie nodded. "Even his name is plain--Brown. I wonder why his mother named him Ephraim? Right out of the Old Testament."

"Maybe she didn't," said Rachel. "Maybe he assumed it, like a stage name, when he started preaching. Maybe he has another name he uses in private life."

"Perhaps, but I doubt it," said Gracie. "The name is catching. He's a combination of the usual and the unusual, too. He held his lectures--or revival, whatever you want to call it--in a college auditorium, not in a church. There was no pomp and circumstance--no buildup before his appearance. He was alone. The few people who helped him--those who passed the money cans during intermission and sold his books, tapes, and records--were from the church that sponsored his program. I asked the woman who sat next to me on Saturday night."

"No one seemed to miss a guitar or piano or other musical accompaniment," added Rachel. "Did you notice how he simply started singing and invited everyone to join in? The music was natural." She sighed.

Gracie nodded. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could get him to come to Leemont? As small as our church is, a revival might be the boost our congregation needs."

Rachel reached into the back seat and rummaged through parcels. "Ah, here it is," she said, clutching a small, plastic bag. "I bought three of his tapes and picked up a brochure telling about his ministry. He lives back East, travels extensively during the year . . . there it is, see, it says he was educated in Virginia and England and now lives in Connecticut. There's an address. You can get his six-month lecture schedule, too." Her voice sounded excited. "I'm going to study the schedule. He might be appearing close to Leemont. . . . Gracie, maybe you can persuade John

to talk to the church board." She looked at her friend and smiled. "I'd like to meet him, wouldn't you?"

She didn't wait for Gracie's reply, but turned her head to gaze out the window and think about the past three days. Rachel and Gracie had decided to go on their annual shopping trip to Denver, a trek they had been taking for six years. Every year they made the trip in early October, driving to Denver on Thursday, shopping on Friday and Saturday, and returning to Leemont on Sunday. Besides shopping, they usually visited museums and attended art shows. At a new bookstore in the mall Friday morning, they saw a poster announcing the lecture series by the Rev. Ephraim Brown, a leading religious teacher of the Old Testament and an evangelist. Intrigued by his picture--he had a full beard and wore a suit and tie--and by the topic of his lecture, "He Leads You Through," they decided to attend the program Friday evening. When Rachel heard him speak, she felt for the first time since Loren's death that she could actually turn to God for relief from the pain she had been living with for the past year. After the accident that had claimed her husband's life at age fifty-one, she had sought spiritual comfort, but to no avail. All she felt was anger: anger toward her deceased husband, the church, the world, and, most of all, toward God. Try as she might, she could not rid herself of the anger. Miraculously, the feelings that had swelled in her for several months started fading as she listened to Ephraim's smooth, comforting voice. She recalled his final



words, "When He leads you through something, He lets you hurt. When you grasp the situation, He lifts the hurt." Ephraim's words began helping her come to grips with Loren's death.

Rachel turned to Gracie. "I wonder why I keep thinking of him as Ephraim, instead of Reverend Brown," she said.

"I'm the same way," said Gracie. "He doesn't seem like a stranger, although we didn't meet him. I doubt that anyone calls him Reverend Brown."

As they approached a small, prairie town, Gracie said she needed gas and suggested they stop for lunch. They ate sandwiches and drank coffee at a twenty-four hour truck stop and continued on their way, spending the remainder of their travel time talking about the evangelist and comparing him to others they had heard.

When they arrived in Leemont, Gracie bid Rachel good-bye with the promise to talk to her husband, John, about the church sponsoring Ephraim on a lecture tour. At home, Rachel eagerly inserted a tape into the cassette player. The rest of the evening she listened to the soothing voice of the evangelist as she unpacked from the trip and prepared her clothes for the coming work week. She felt that his words touched her very soul. When he said, "God is love, therefore He loves," she sat down, spellbound. "His love does not depend on who we are, but on who He is. Human love always has a reason. It must have a response. God's love is not like that." Rachel pictured Ephraim's immense frame, pic-

tured him raising his arms as he emphasized each word to illustrate Everlasting Love. She went to sleep with the vision of Ephraim entrenched in her mind.

Gracie easily convinced John to speak to the church board of directors about sponsoring Ephraim for a week-long revival. John liked revivals and he realized their church would benefit by such an event. The Barbers belonged to a small, charismatic church that had been in existence for only five years. It was still struggling to get on its feet financially at a time when the word "charismatic" was new to much of the populace of Leemont. People in the congregation were those who had grown dissatisfied with their former churches and had decided to establish one of their own. They named it the Living Faith Church. Gracie and John and Rachel and Loren were among the thirty-three charter members. The venture had been exciting and daring, but new members were slow to join.

Rachel contented herself with listening to Ephraim's voice on the tapes talking about Jesus taking away peoples' sins, about Jesus carrying people to the Father, and about a person's true humility in a relationship to Jesus. She'd heard these words all her life, but somehow they seemed new and refreshing coming from Ephraim. For the first time since Loren's death, she felt like smiling. She felt the sadness lifting when she heard Ephraim speak about the joy of God.

She listened to the tapes every evening. She ordered more from the brochures she had picked up in Denver. And she

studied his tour schedule. She saw that by driving several miles on Friday evenings, she could attend three Saturday lectures in the spring. She told Gracie of her plans, but she did not expect her friend to leave her husband to go with her, and John had to work half days on Saturday. Rachel said she didn't mind traveling alone. In fact, she preferred to go alone because she wanted to think. The sense of elation that had come over her was a new feeling, one that she wasn't ready to share, and if Gracie were with her, she might say something she would regret later.

At each of Ephraim's lectures that spring, Rachel sat in approximately the same location in the audience, half-way down front, near the center aisle. If he sees me, she thought, it'll be easier to get acquainted. She knew she would meet him eventually, but she was too shy to boldly introduce herself; she knew she must wait for the right moment. When she bought tapes during intermission, she watched him, but he remained secluded; and after the programs, people swarmed around him to talk. She wasn't able to meet him but she didn't let it bother her. She knew she would.

At home and at work, she began to daydream about their meeting, imagining what she would say and how he would respond. In her dreams he would look deeply into her eyes and say, "I've been wanting to meet you." One afternoon at work she suddenly brought herself up short. Don't be silly, she scolded herself. You act like you're in love. The



thought startled her and she rejected it, ashamed that she could think romantically about the preacher. But she wondered if he would like her.

When Gracie called to say that their church had contracted with Ephraim for a week-long revival for the next fall, to be billed as a lecture series, Rachel was overjoyed. From Gracie she learned that Ephraim preferred to speak in public auditoriums to avoid denominational differences and to avoid being connected with any particular group. He told the Living Faith board of directors that he was simply a teacher of the Bible with emphasis on the Old Testament and that he didn't want to be labeled. Rachel hid her enthusiasm about his upcoming appearance in Leemont; she signed up to help with a reception committee from the church to host an informal gathering in the church fellowship hall before the first lecture began.

At the gathering, the evangelist was warm to the Leemont people. Rachel thought he was quieter than she'd imagined he would be. He seemed almost timid in the crowd and stayed near John, Gracie, and Ron Ferris, a board member. When Gracie introduced her to Ephraim, Rachel hardly had more than a chance to say "Welcome to Leemont" before John announced that it was time to go to the civic center's small auditorium where the lectures were to be held. But she did manage to shake Ephraim's hand and she thrilled at his touch and his smile when he greeted her.

A good-sized crowd from the church and community was on



hand in the auditorium. Rachel managed to find a seat in her usual location. After John introduced Ephraim and left the stage, Rachel looked up to find Ephraim's eyes on her. Flushed, she looked away. He found me, she thought, shaken by his stare.

During the week he was in Leemont, he stayed to himself, telling the church board that he preferred to spend his days studying and preparing for his evening lectures. After each night's speech, which usually ended between nine-thirty and ten o'clock, he gathered his tapes and literature and met with John and Virgil Prather for a late evening snack and discussion of the revival. There was no opportunity for Rachel to make herself a part of the group, so she satisfied herself by catching his eye before each lecture. By the end of the week she was brave enough to send him a warm smile, which he returned.

After his final program, she waited for the crowd to thin out before she approached him to purchase five new cassette tapes and a small booklet. She paid him with a personalized check, which he glanced at before putting it into a small, leather case.

"We're honored that you came to Leemont," she told him. "Your messages have renewed my faith."

"Praise God," he said. "Thank you for being here each night, Mrs. Elwell." He grasped her hand in a firm shake and Rachel felt an electrifying sensation surge through her. Before she could reply, John interrupted them, saying he was

ready to settle finances.

When Rachel walked in the next morning at church school, others were talking about the success of the revival and the popularity of the evangelist. She listened to the talk and asked, "Do you know anything about him? He seems to be a mystery."

"He probably wants to remain that way," said Mabel Ferris. "Ron thinks he's divorced. If that's so, he'll want to keep his personal life quiet. You know what divorce talk could do to him, no matter how good a preacher he is. That's probably why he stayed so close to his motel room."

"I don't care about his personal life," said Penny Merrel. "Look at his work. He's wonderful. And we made money out of him, too. Nobody dares say anything bad about him to me!"

The conversation jolted Rachel. Divorced! Could he possibly be single? she thought. She kept silent, wanting to hear more but afraid to ask for fear someone would question her curiosity. At that moment Frank Martin, the Sunday school teacher, walked in and the group grew silent.

The remark increased Rachel's interest in Ephraim, and during the next few months, she managed to attend three of his Saturday lectures. The programs attracted between 500 and 900 people. Rachel realized that the evangelist only drew small crowds, but she felt that he preferred it that way. At each program, she managed to sit in the same section, near the center aisle half-way down front. She knew he

recognized her and she smiled broadly. She grew bolder away from home and one night sought him out back stage during the intermission. "I am enjoying your sermon this evening. You seem to be speaking directly to me," she said.

He took her small hand in his large, firm grasp. "Hello, Mrs. Elwell. Good to see you again. I'm glad you are receiving God's message."

"Please call me Rachel," she said.

"Ah, Rachel. Of course. A pretty name for a pretty woman." He smiled, but before either could say more, they were interrupted by a man announcing that intermission was almost over.

At home and at work Rachel's thoughts were constantly on Ephraim and the wisdom of his words. The strain of widowhood did not loom as large nor did the shock of Loren's death plague her as before. Every night she listened to the spiritual messages of Ephraim's tapes before going to sleep and she told herself she felt better than she had felt in years. One night she allowed herself to think about love and wonder if she had fallen in love with the evangelist. If so, it was a feeling different from that she'd known with Loren, but it was a good feeling, nevertheless. She mulled the thought over in her mind and decided it wasn't a bad idea. She felt wonderful. She decided she wanted to be on the road with Ephraim, and in her daydreams, she pictured them traveling together, bringing people to God.

Her cassette library grew until she had purchased every

tape Ephraim had advertised in his catalog. She didn't mind playing them over and over, though. Her favorite dealt with helplessness. This tape made her feel strong. "Man was meant to be helpless," said Ephraim. "He was meant to be totally dependent on God. It is good to feel helpless . . . we're afraid to be helpless . . . when we feel we're out of control, we're afraid of helplessness . . . don't be afraid of your feelings . . . nothing is wrong with feelings . . . the greatest man in the Bible felt helpless . . . He had feelings . . . acknowledge your feelings to God . . . He's the only one you can trust . . . it can be dangerous to go to other people . . . give your feelings to God but don't be afraid of your feelings . . . distress paralyzes you . . . as you call upon your Lord the deliverer, you are delivered . . . your mind clears . . . you know what to do . . . He is in you . . . stress causes helplessness . . . that helplessness causes you to call on Him . . . when you're so confused you don't even know what you're asking God for, then you're supremely His . . . you're resting in God . . . you're in His hands."

Rachel played the tape over and over, hearing Ephraim's deep, strong voice in her ear. She felt comfortable and sure of the future.

One night Gracie called to say that Ephraim was returning to Leemont. Almost a year had elapsed since his first visit and the church board decided to contract with him again. Rachel greeted the announcement with excitement. It had been



two months since she had attended one of his lectures. She did not have his next schedule yet. "Oh wonderful!" she cried. "I hope he has some new tapes. I've played all the ones I have till I'm tired of them," she laughed, trying to sound casual. Gracie did not know her feelings for Ephraim. Hadn't he himself said not to talk to other people about your feelings?

"I hope he has some new ones, too," said Gracie. "He might, since it'll be after Easter when he speaks here."

Rachel continued to think about traveling with Ephraim. What'll he say if I ask him for a job? she wondered. After all, I'm an experienced secretary and bookkeeper. I could be invaluable to his ministry. Maybe he'll say "Sure, come on. I'm headed south!" She decided she would be ready to go to work immediately, to prove her sincerity. Somehow, she'd find a way to talk to him.

A week before his arrival, she took her biggest suitcase from the closet and began packing, carefully selecting a wardrobe that would be suitable for selling religious tapes. She packed three suits and also three, spring dresses that she considered particularly feminine. If he says yes, come on with me tonight, I'll be ready, and if he says yes, join me later, I'll still be ready, she thought. He doesn't need to know I'm packed.

She could hardly wait. Finally the night arrived when he returned to Leemont. She learned from Gracie where he was staying and sent a note to his room asking him to have dinner

with her at her home after his first evening's lecture, regardless of the late hour. She did not hear from him nor did she get a chance to see him before his appearance. That night, she sat with Gracie in her regular spot. His eyes found her as she knew they would. He smiled. She felt smug and excited. During intermission, he showed up in the lobby and singled her out, taking her hand in his warm grasp. "I'm so sorry, Rachel, but I can't have dinner with you tonight. I had already accepted another engagement before receiving your message."

Disappointed, she forced a smile. "I'm sorry, too," she said. "I understand. I only wanted to share our Leemont hospitality. I thought you might be tired and would enjoy a quiet meal after your long, hectic day." She tried to sound nonchalant but her stomach churned. She wanted to flee! She had embarrassed herself! She'd invited him to dinner and he had said no! She wanted to hide in shame. Quickly she told Gracie that she had come down with a headache and slipped out the side entrance and went home.

The next day Ephraim called her at work and apologized for having to turn down her invitation. He invited her to join him with the others after his final lecture Saturday, saying he was leaving soon afterwards.

"I would like to talk to you privately before you leave," said Rachel.

"If you can stay awhile after tonight's program, I'll talk to you then," he said.

She agreed and after the call felt a combination of elation and apprehension. Nervously, she watched the clock all day, anxious for quitting time.

That night she could tell that Ephraim sought her face when he walked out on stage. "He's looking right at us," whispered Gracie.

"Sure is," smiled Rachel.

During his talk, she thought he pointed his finger at her. "Let God do the leading or you'll get into trouble every time!" he warned. "If you receive a prophetic message, forget about it quickly or you'll try to do it yourself. Let God do the leading. When you feel the need to go talk to somebody, think about it very carefully, then choose your words carefully. Your concern should be for that person."

Rachel gasped. What was he saying?

Ephraim went on to tell of an experience concerning his wife and son, who was now fourteen years old. At the mention of his wife, Rachel was stunned. She didn't hear the remainder of his speech. She only heard over and over in her ears the word wife. Wife. WIFE. Married! Not divorced! Oh, how could I have listened to gossip! she cried to herself. Her face burned with shame and humiliation. She wanted to leave but couldn't face the attention it would cause by getting up half-way down front to walk out. The people would talk. They would suspect! She forced herself to remain seated and bit her lips to hold back the tears. At intermission she told Gracie that she was sick and hurried out.

Gracie ran after her calling, "Rachel! What's wrong? Do you need a doctor?"

"N-no!" stammered Rachel over her shoulder. "Throbbing headache. Going home." Leave me alone! she wanted to scream. Leave me alone and let me die!

When she arrived home, she collapsed on the bed and sobbed. Fool! she cried. How could you be such a fool? How could you fall for the wrong man? A married man! Why didn't you pay attention? He's a stranger. Rachel, you fool, fool, fool! Her self-censure did not ease the pain, however, and she cried until she fell asleep, exhausted.

The next day she called in sick and stayed home from work, too humiliated to face anyone. At mid-morning the phone rang. She answered, expecting Gracie. It was Ephraim. "I called to see if you were all right," he said. "Gracie said you took ill last night."

"I'm better today," said Rachel, her voice hoarse from crying. "Occasionally I get bad headaches that come on suddenly. It takes me awhile to recover. It's nice of you to call. I won't be able to attend your lecture tonight. I'm sorry."

"I understand," he said. "I hope you recover soon. You wanted to talk to me last night?"

"It's nothing now," she said, haltingly, embarrassed. What should I say? she thought. Aloud she said, "My question was answered. Rather, my problem solved itself."

"I see. Well, I hope I was of some help to you."



"You were. You'll never know how much. I hope you'll return to Leemont again," she said, trying to sound cordial. Liar, she thought. I never want to see you again.

He was in a friendly mood. "I will," he said. "I usually don't tour during the summer months so that I can be with my family, but my son wants to go on tour and I'm going to ask Living Faith to have me back this summer. I'd like to bring my wife and son here so they can meet the fine people of Leemont."

Rachel almost choked. "We'll look forward to meeting them," she mumbled, feeling nauseated. Tears flowed down her cheeks. "Goodbye and good luck," she said.

When she hung up, she remembered his words, "When He leads you through something, He lets you hurt. When you grasp the situation, He lifts the hurt."

On God, please hurry and take away the hurt, she prayed.

## AFTERWORD

I am moved by fancies that are curled  
Around these images, and cling;  
The notion of some infinitely gentle  
Infinitely suffering thing.

T. S. Eliot, "Preludes"

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People must learn to live in harmony with themselves before they can expect to live in harmony with others. When people seek to avoid solutions rather than find answers through self-understanding, they often deceive themselves--and end up digging deeper furrows in their lives. T.S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock and the lady in "Portrait of a Lady" exemplify personalities who are unhappy with themselves and agonize in their isolation and inability to relate to other people. Because of frustration and fear, Prufrock's love song is never sung; the lady takes revenge for what life has done to her by destroying things. Their characterizations demonstrate the fact that the failure of human

relationships ultimately rests with, and within, the individual.

Eliot believed that a moment of failure in life colors the rest of one's life. Thus selfishness, greed, anger, cowardice, and poor judgment all take their toll on the future. Eliot also believed that any action is an end and a beginning. "What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning," he wrote in "Four Quartets." By applying this philosophy to the characters of "Furrows," we can judge for ourselves their destinies.

Jodi and Rachel have the best chances of overcoming their problems and renewing their lives because both have arrived at the stage of their development in which they seek spiritual help. Jodi begins each day by striving for emotional, physical, and spiritual well being. By turning to God in a time of weakness, Rachel receives mental strength; she will not be so easily fooled by her own naiveté again. Ron may overcome his unhappiness in time because he is too sensitive and conscientious to lead a double existence for very long. These traits may eventually give him the courage to be honest with himself--and his wife and father. Emma is stuck in her furrows and will probably never change her attitude because she is not searching for meaning. Like all the Emmas of the world, she is content to complain and gossip. These negative habits erode a person both physically and spiritually. Maxine and Suzanne have yet to reach a point in life when they seek illumination, but they may, for

superficiality and hypocrisy produce their own just rewards. Maurice is a pitiful failure because he lacked the inner strength to endure and the courage to confront his problems. His refusal to deal with reality and his decision to escape mark an end and a beginning within themselves. Janet is the most tragic character of all, both in her relationship to herself and in her relationship to others, for she attempts to punish one person through another. Out of selfishness, she will destroy both her son and herself. To destroy another person's life is the worst possible failure, but she can halt the destruction by coming to terms with her real motive for manipulating her son.

The success or failure of human relationships depends on the individual. If people want their relationships to succeed, they must first try to find their inner selves, the "Buried Life," as Matthew Arnold called it. If they achieve truth and harmony with their inner selves, they will be able to live in authentic relationship with other people, avoiding the neurotic agonies of such as Prufrock.