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*The Complete Works of*  
**SHIRLEY JACKSON**

(1916-1965)



**Contents**

*The Novels*

The Road through the Wall (1948)  
Hangsaman (1951)  
The Bird's Nest (1954)  
The Sundial (1958)  
The Haunting of Hill House (1959)  
We Have Always Lived in the Castle (1962)  
Come Along with Me (1968)

*The Shorter Fiction*

The Lottery and Other Stories (1949)  
Stories from 'Come Along with Me' (1968)  
Miscellaneous Stories

*The Short Stories*

List of Short Stories in Chronological Order  
List of Short Stories in Alphabetical Order

*The Children's Books*

The Bad Children (1958)  
Nine Magic Wishes (1963)  
Famous Sally (1966)

*The Non-Fiction*

The Witchcraft of Salem Village (1956)  
Special Delivery (1960)  
Miscellaneous Essays and Sketches

*The Memoirs*

Life among the Savages (1953)  
Raising Demons (1957)

*The Delphi Classics Catalogue*

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Steve Sackman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Steve" written in a more compact, rounded style and the last name "Sackman" written in a more elongated, flowing style.

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Version 1

*The Complete Works of*  
**SHIRLEY JACKSON**



*By Delphi Classics, 2026*

# COPYRIGHT

*Complete Works of Shirley Jackson*



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## The Novels



*Colour lithograph of San Francisco, 1878 — Shirley Jackson was born in the city in 1916.*



*San Francisco, today*

## The Road through the Wall (1948)

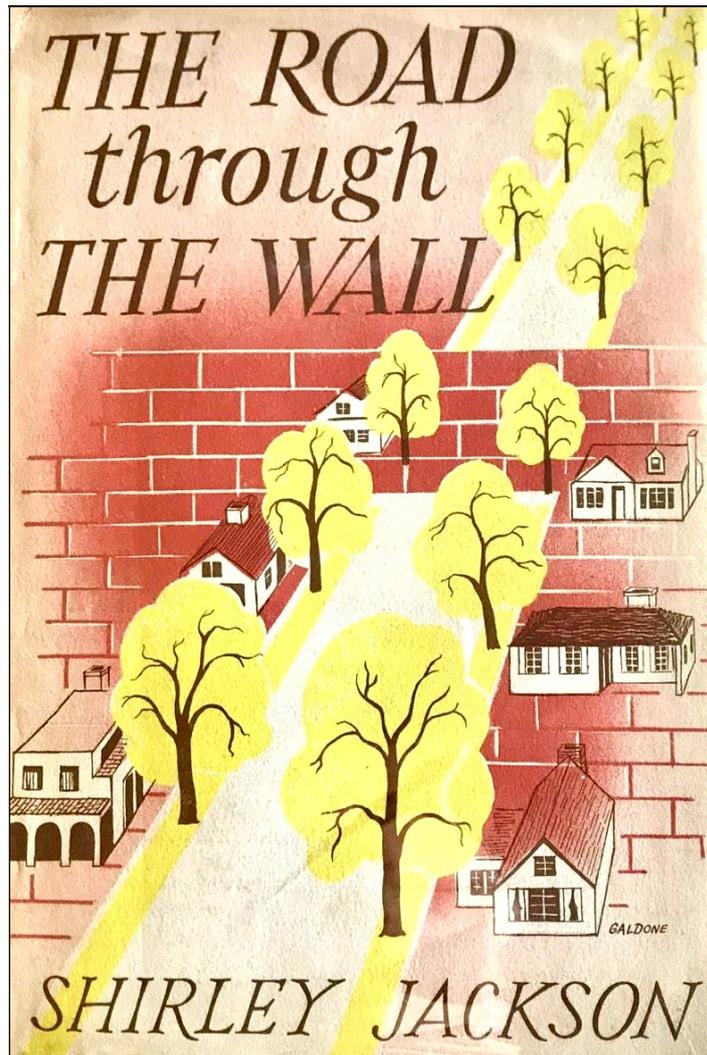


Shirley Jackson's first novel, *The Road through the Wall*, was first published in the USA in 1948 by Farrar, Straus and Company. It was released the same year as her classic short story 'The Lottery', which launched her highly successful and respected career as a writer of horror and mystery fiction. She had developed an interest in literature, writing and the supernatural as a child, when seeking refuge from an unhappy home life. While studying for an undergraduate degree in journalism at Syracuse University in the late 1930's, Jackson established and edited a campus literary magazine called *Spectre*, alongside fellow student, Stanley Edgar Hyman. Jackson and Hyman soon became a couple and married in August 1940.

*The Road through the Wall* was inspired by the author's affluent, but unsatisfying and emotionally damaging childhood spent in Burlingame, California. The novel is set in an upper-class, insular neighbourhood called Pepper Street. It appears almost idyllic from the outside, but under the façade it is a world populated by selfish, superficial and bigoted citizens. The inhabitants are mortified by a plan to knock down a wall at the edge of their neighbourhood to build a new housing development; they fear that they will be forced into contact with uncouth and dangerous poor people. When a violent and shocking event occurs in Pepper Street, the true cruelty and darkness of the community is exposed in the most horrific manner.



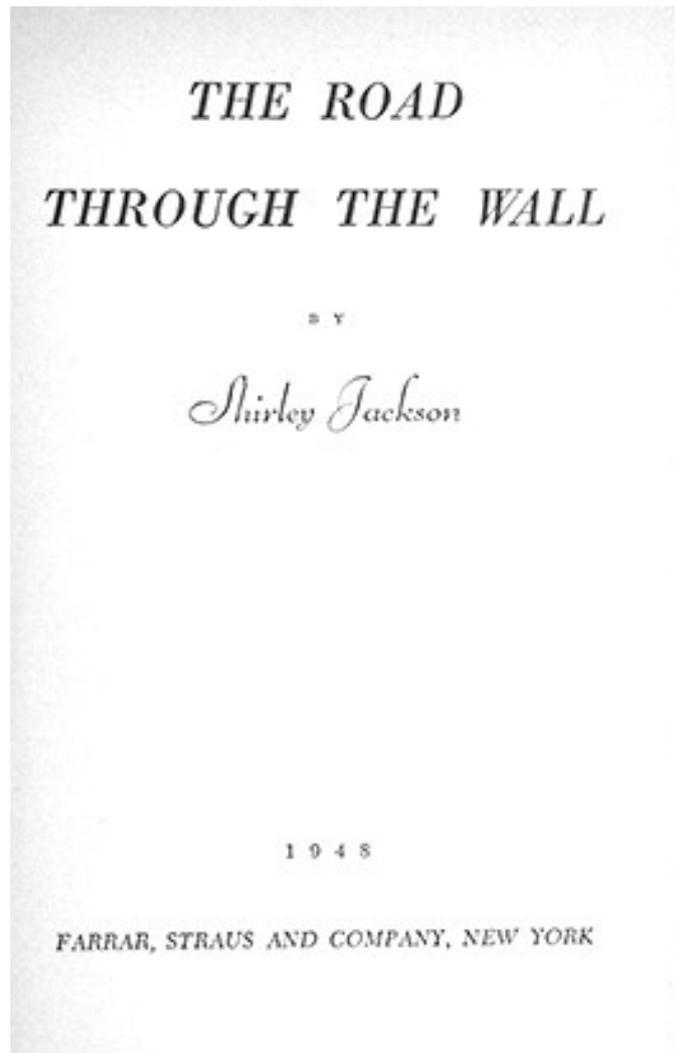
*Jackson at the beginning of her writing career*



*The first edition*

## **CONTENTS**

PROLOGUE  
CHAPTER ONE  
CHAPTER TWO  
CHAPTER THREE  
CHAPTER FOUR  
CHAPTER FIVE  
CHAPTER SIX



*The first edition's title page*

## PROLOGUE



THE WEATHER FALLS more gently on some places than on others, the world looks down more paternally on some people. Some spots are proverbially warm, and keep, through falling snow, their untarnished reputations as summer resorts; some people are automatically above suspicion. Mr. John Desmond and Mr. Bradley Ransom-Jones and Mr. Michael Roberts and Miss Susannah Fielding, all of whom lived on Pepper Street in a town called Cabrillo, California, thought of their invulnerability as justice; Mr. Myron Perlman and possibly Mr. William Byrne, also of Pepper Street, would have been optimistic if they thought of it as anything less than fate. No man owns a house because he really wants a house, any more than he marries because he favors monogamy, but all these men were married and most of them owned houses, and they regarded themselves as reasonable and unselfish and even, to themselves, as responsible. They all lived on Pepper Street because they were able to afford it, and none of them would have lived there if he had been able to afford living elsewhere, although Pepper Street was charming and fairly expensive and even comfortably isolated. The town of Cabrillo, in 1936, was fortunate in housing such people as Mr. Desmond and his family.

The Desmonds had lived on Pepper Street longer than anyone else, because when Mr. Desmond was able to build his home (he rented the first house he lived in with his wife) he chose a good location in a neighborhood not yet developed but undeniably "nice." The Desmond house was on the corner of Pepper Street and Cortez Road, facing Pepper Street, with a large garden to the side along Pepper Street and tall blank windows on the Cortez Road side. The tall windows belonged on the inside to the Desmond living-room where the family sat in the evenings, and the Venetian blinds were always closed after dark. When the Desmonds moved in, their daughter Caroline had not been born, and the hedge around the visible sides of the house was inches high. By the time Caroline was three, the hedge was waist high and required the services of a boy every Saturday to keep it trimmed. Beyond the hedge the Desmonds lived in a rambling modern-style house, richly jeweled with glass brick. They were the aristocracy of the neighborhood, and their house was the largest; their adopted son Johnny, who was fifteen years old, associated with boys whose families did not live on Pepper Street, but in neighborhoods where the Desmonds expected to live some day.

Next door to the Desmonds, on Pepper Street, was the orchard of apple trees which successfully hid the house of crazy old Mrs. Mack, and beyond that was the Byrne house where fourteen-year-old Pat Byrne and twelve-year-old Mary lived under Mrs. Byrne's rigid faith, and from which they issued every morning with faces glowing from hard soap. Their house was a recent regrettable pink stucco with the abortive front porch made of a mantel over the front door and a slight unreliable iron railing on either side of the one step, a front porch unhappily popular in late suburban developments. Mr. Byrne had not built this house, neither did he own it, but he paid the rent for it regularly.

Next door to the Byrnes were the Robertses. Mike Roberts had been a cavalry officer in 1917 and had felt ever since that life without his horse was restricting. His wife had helped the architect with the plans for their house, and it began with bravado and ended weakly with a flat ugly goldfish pond never finished in the back yard. In

front it had a sweeping wide concrete porch upon which bougainvillea would not grow — although the Perlman's next door had it in profusion — and was thickly surrounded with bushes which were inadequate to disguise the fact that the roof was colonial, the windows modern, and the whole a gaudy yellow. The Roberts family had two children, Art and young Jamie. Art Roberts and Pat Byrne were free with one another's houses, and had once built a telephone of tin cans and pieces of string between their bedroom windows.

The Perlman's were the only Jewish family on Pepper Street, and lived sheltered under their masses of bougainvillea. They lived in a house which they rented, although it must have had the proper number of bedrooms and adequate closet space, since they never moved. The Perlman's driveway was barely separated from the vacant lot next door by a grey picket fence; from their dining-room windows the Perlman's would survey the reaches of empty grass and shortcut paths which ended at Winslow Road, cutting north and south across Pepper Street's east and west. There was another vacant lot just across Pepper Street; it lay next to the Ransom-Jones house, which was then roughly across the street from the Perlman's.

Mr. and Mrs. Ransom-Jones and her sister lived on Pepper Street, probably, because like Mr. Desmond they were not rich enough to live in the style they coveted and not proud enough to live in opposition to it. They devoted themselves, instead, to a garden which swept up from the sidewalk to the end of their lot, compensating for the tiny house, which might have been quaint and cottage-like, but was inadequate by Ransom-Jones standards. The Ransom-Jones garden, however, stretched so far that the house was almost hidden from its neighbors, and it was necessary for Mrs. Ransom-Jones to leave her front door and walk halfway down the stepping-stones before she could see the street. The Donalds were the Ransom-Jones's neighbors, pushed so far down the block by the garden that they were almost directly across the street from the Byrne house. Mr. Donald was another one who only rented his house; it had never occurred to him to build a house of his own, and so he spent all his life living in the patterns set out by other more enterprising men. His present house, which suited him and his family admirably, was made of bricks put together in a square, ample enough for Mr. and Mrs. Donald and their three children, and pretentious enough for Mr. Donald's wife and daughter to feel at home.

The one thorn in the side of the Donald women was the house-for-rent, which crowded them boorishly, in contrast to the Ransom-Jones garden; it went up for rent regularly and was never suitably tenanted during the Donalds' residence; one completely unsatisfactory family after another moved in and then out. Mrs. Donald suspected, and said publicly, that it was because the landlord rented it too cheaply for Pepper Street standards; it was a white elephant, she said, because it was badly planned and dreadfully dark. Someone obviously aiming at another effect than he got had intended it to be beautiful rather than comfortable; it was a thin greyish building with, blessedly, four thick trees crushed between itself and the Donald house, and a wall made of rough stones cemented together between itself and its other neighbor, Miss Fielding. The front of the house was also built of the same rough stones; Mrs. Donald had remarked accurately that it looked like a reform school.

Miss Fielding paid her rent and was never known to dislike her house and had probably never looked carefully at the outside of it. Pepper Street was one of the few neighborhoods where an old single woman like Miss Fielding could live alone in a house that suited her. By some architectural sleight-of-hand, Miss Fielding's house seemed to be set high above ground, as though she were living in a tree, or on a houseboat: there was a long flight of shallow steps shielded by a stone balustrade, and

at the top the incredibly small house perched, with its small windows and door looking kittenishly down at the street. Miss Fielding had a little front porch with a continuation of the stone balustrade protecting it from falling down into the street, and the whole was colored white, with green frames around the windows and doors; it was on the front porch that Miss Fielding sat, day after day, with her cat — one of the Ransom-Jones's Angel's kittens — on her lap. The small space of ground in front of this house was bare earth, but her neighbors forgave Miss Fielding this on consideration of the steps, which were really too much, they thought, for a woman her age.

The Merriams had the corner of Pepper and Cortez opposite the Desmonds, but the Merriam house made no attempt to compete with the grandeur of the Desmond semi-modern. For one thing, the Merriams lived officially on Cortez Road, that being where their front door was. For another, Mr. Merriam, although he owned his house and would not live in a rented one, owned other houses at various places in the county, and lived in this one because it was the slowest to rent, and the least likely to sell. It had been built before the Desmond house by about ten years, and remodeled when Mrs. Merriam took it over; consequently it had the appearance of age which none of the other houses in the neighborhood had attained as yet. It was grey and weatherbeaten, and, since it had been modeled originally after someone's grandfather's manor-house, looked even older than it was.

Finally, next door to the Merriam home, defiantly on Cortez Road, was the house inhabited by the Martins, a stolid family who lived where they had to and held on to what they had; the house belonged to old Mr. Martin and his wife, grandparents to George and Hallie Martin, fourteen and nine years old, children whom Mrs. Merriam found regrettable; she would have preferred to keep her own fourteen-year-old, Harriet, far away from the Martin children, but this was almost impossible, since both Harriet and the Martins played communally with the other children in the neighborhood. Moreover — and this was one of Mrs. Merriam's objections — the house next door was also the dwelling of young Mrs. Martin, mother to George and Hallie, who worked as a waitress somewhere downtown. The house itself was yellow, and ended with two apple trees by the back door; it was a step downward from the Merriam house, and certainly not fit to go around the corner on to Pepper Street.

Because Cabrillo was perhaps thirty miles from San Francisco and was, in 1936, halfway between a suburban development and a collection of large private estates, and because Pepper Street was, in turn, on the borderline between these two, it possessed an enviable privacy; beyond the Martin house, and running along behind all the houses on the south side of Pepper Street, was a heavily wooded section, probably unexplored except by the Pepper Street children, which included a dried-up creek and ended far south in a golf course. Backing on the houses of the northern side of Pepper Street — that is, the Desmonds' to the Perlman's — was a row of apartment houses which in turn faced a main highway. Pepper Street was rarely troubled with invasions from this quarter, probably because the apartment houses and the people who lived in them and the cars traveling the highway were all intent in another direction, toward the center of town, with little concern about what went on in back of them. One of the apartment houses had stolen around the corner near the Desmond house to have an address on Cortez Road; it had even gone so far as to stretch a numbered awning out across the sidewalk, but people rarely went in or out that way, preferring the larger, double-awninged entrance on the highway. This apartment house, the Merriam house, and the Martin house were the only three places in the world to have addresses on Cortez Road. On the side of Cortez Road opposite these three was the wall.

The wall was the limit of a large estate which had originally encompassed all the property around Pepper Street, and which had been sold off lot by lot. At present the wall ran down one side of Cortez, along the highway for a block, and then up the corresponding street on the other side; it was a thin high brick wall, taller than Mr. Donald, who was the tallest man on Pepper Street, and never scaled within the history of the neighborhood. It was called the wall, and the highway was called the highway, and the gates were called the gates. These stood at the head of Cortez Road, where the wall reached its own estate and became self-important, having more ground to circle than a city block. The gates were square piles of brick on either side of the street, with no bars between, nothing to indicate that they were a barrier, but they were an effective end to Pepper Street life. Beyond them lived the rich people, on a long curving road from which you could not see any house; beyond them was a neighborhood so exclusive that the streets had no names, the houses no numbers. The people who owned the wall lived there; so, although no one knew it very surely, did the people who owned some of the houses on Pepper Street, and the man who owned the bank that owned the house-for-rent. Mr. Byrne's employer lived there; so did Hallie Martin's future husband.

The sun shone cleverly on Pepper Street, but it shone more bravely still beyond the gates; when it rained on Pepper Street the people beyond the gates never got their feet wet; beyond the gates all the houses were marked "No Trespassing."

In any case, at two-thirty in the afternoon, Pepper Street was very quiet and pleasant, with the California sunlight of early summer almost green coming through the trees, almost painful straight from the sky. The trees lining Pepper Street on either side, which the children called locusts and the parents regarded vaguely as peppers, had spent the spring through with tiny pink blossoms, meeting to make a bedroomish arch overhead for a month, and then, suddenly, turning green and leaved, abandoning the pink blossoms overnight, so that the street was rich with pink blossoms underfoot. For a few days the pink blossoms would be everywhere — in the gutters, on the lawns, tracked into pleasant living-rooms, lying on the tops of bags of groceries carried home — and then they would vanish, again overnight, and the trees would continue to be greener and greener until school started in the fall, and then the street would be full of leaves and the trees bare all winter, preparing new pinkness for the spring.

The pink blossoms were underfoot now on Pepper Street, which made middle June almost certain. Mr. Ransom-Jones and Mr. Merriam and Mr. Desmond had all breakfasted in their homes by early morning sunlight before driving together to San Francisco, as they did every morning. Old Mr. Martin, who left before dawn for his greenhouses, regarded the warm weather as encouraging for the roots of growing things. Miss Fielding's cat liked the weather, and so did little Caroline Desmond.

It was the last day of school; fortunately the weather was to continue warm and fair until the end of summer, when school began again.

## CHAPTER ONE



MRS. MERRIAM CAME to her back window, which saw Miss Fielding's house and Pepper Street beyond, and looked anxiously down Pepper Street. Mrs. Merriam's clock had stopped; it was easier to look out the back window than go upstairs to the bedroom clock. Mrs. Merriam's kitchen had a built-in electric clock (and a built-in dishwasher and a built-in refrigerator) but the electric clock had broken long ago, and when the refrigerator broke and the electrician came to fix it Mrs. Merriam could have him fix the clock. So that when the living-room clock stopped Mrs. Merriam was without the time downstairs.

At quarter-past three Mrs. Merriam had gone back to her sewing, but she heard the children coming up Pepper Street. They came from Winslow Road, from the school, and they came past the vacant lots first and then down past the Ransom-Joneses on one side and the Perlman on the other (Marilyn Perlman, however, was always home last, because she left the school a few minutes after everyone else, and walked home alone), and then they passed the Robertses and the Byrnes on one side and the Donalds on the other, and the Roberts boys dropped off, and Pat Byrne, and Tod Donald went home while Virginia Donald and Mary Byrne came along the street slowly with the girls, Harriet Merriam and Helen Williams, and the girls stood on the corner of Pepper and Cortez and talked while the boys went home to leave their jackets and receive from their mothers an apple or a piece of cake, or, in the case of Pat Byrne, a glass of milk and two graham crackers. Miss Fielding heard the children coming when they reached the Donalds' house; she went inside with the cat, and lay down on the living-room couch. Mrs. Merriam, who was anxious, heard the children when they passed the house-for-rent, and from her back window saw Harriet coming down the street, carrying her books, along with the other girls, while the two Martin children, always the least enthusiastic and with the farthest to go, hesitated constantly — George outside the Desmond house till Johnny Desmond put his head out of the kitchen window and said, "Go on home, Martin," and Hallie, who was only nine, around the group of girls on the corner, trying artfully to get a word into the conversation, until the group broke up and Hallie came tagging up Cortez Road with Harriet.

Mrs. Merriam prevented herself from going to the door to meet Harriet; she sat in the long light living-room with the basket of sewing on the floor beside her, unaware that with her tall thin body silhouetted against the big window, and her narrow severe head bent slightly to the sewing, she looked bleak and menacing after the cheerful sunlight outside. She heard Harriet say, "Bye, Hallie," and come noisily up the front steps and open the door with a crash. Mrs. Merriam kept her eyes down on her sewing; Harriet would know she was offended. She heard Harriet's steps in the hall, and then the hesitation that would be Harriet in the living-room doorway, recognizing that her mother was offended.

"I'm home, Mother," Harriet said. "No more school till September." It was her nervous voice, trailing off at the end of the sentence with a little giggle. Harriet was a big girl, large-boned and stout, and Mrs. Merriam braided Harriet's hair every morning and dressed her in bright colors. For the last year or so, from twelve to almost fourteen, Harriet had begun to speak awkwardly when she was uneasy,

missing her words sometimes, and stammering. Mrs. Merriam thought of it as Harriet's nervous voice, and it made her own voice even more precise.

"I see you're home," Mrs. Merriam said. "That is, I *heard* you."

Harriet looked down at her large feet, in heavy-soled oxfords. "I'm sorry I slammed the door," she said.

"Of course you are," Mrs. Merriam said. She leaned over and selected a spool of thread from the sewing-box beside her on the floor. "You always are, afterward."

Harriet waited for a minute, politely, and then said, "Can I go on down to Helen's? They're waiting for me. I just wanted to tell you I was home."

"You *can* go to Helen's," Mrs. Merriam said. She heard Harriet's gusty sigh of relief, and added daintily, "but you *may* not."

"Why?"

Mrs. Merriam tightened her mouth over her sewing. "I think you know what you've done, Harriet."

"Mother," Harriet began, only what she finally said was, "M-m-m-mother," and she stopped helplessly.

"Please, Harriet," Mrs. Merriam said. "There's nothing to talk about. Go to your room."

"But—" Harriet began. Then she said, "Oh, Lord," and started heavily up the stairs.

"You might spend the time writing letters," her mother said, raising her voice slightly.

The word "letters" carried Harriet hastily up the stairs and into her room; if there had been a lock on the door she might have been able to lock herself in, but she slammed the door violently, and then walked miserably over to her desk, although she knew, had seen from the doorway, that it was open. The slant-top, which should have been securely locked, was dropped down to make the table surface, and Harriet's small papers and notebooks lay as she kept them, mercilessly neat, put back in the pigeonholes, perhaps even put back more carefully than Harriet, who loved them, ever did. Harriet went to the bed and looked under the pillow; the key was there, where it belonged. Harriet sat down heavily on the bed and said aloud, "What shall I do?" not because it was meaningful to her, or because she was concerned about what to do — she knew now, without question, the eventual series of acts to be forced from her — but because "What-shall-I-do?" seemed the formation of sounds most likely to apply to a situation like this.

From where she sat on the bed she could see out of the window which looked down on the corner of Pepper and Cortez; Hallie Martin, eating what seemed to be a doughnut, was rounding the corner, apparently bound for Helen's. For a minute Harriet thought of calling to Hallie ("All is discovered"? "Burn the evidence"?), and then she said, "What shall I do?" again and got up and went over to the desk.

She put her hand lovingly on top of it; it had been a present from her father, who probably supposed that her mother had a key to it, from long knowledge of her mother. Harriet sat down in the desk chair and picked up the letter she had begun last night; her mother had set it open in the center of the desk, the only thing left out of place. It was a letter to George Martin, and it was written on shiny pink paper, and it began, "Dearest George." Helen set the style; it was the way love letters were written, she said, and sometimes Helen's letters to Johnny Desmond began, "Dearest dearest Johnny." Harriet had chosen George to write to because he was dull and unpopular and she felt vaguely that she had no right to aim any higher than the one boy no one

else would have; if she understood this feeling at all, she thought of it as “George always liked *me* best.”

Virginia Donald was writing to Art Roberts, and Mary Byrne was, cautiously, writing to her own brother. Hallie Martin carried the letters around, and Helen had written one for her to James Donald, who was seventeen and in third year high and the neighborhood hero. Hallie gave her letter to James Donald one evening when he came home at dinner time from football practice at the high school, and he read it while Hallie lurked excitedly on Helen’s front porch; and when James tore the letter up and dropped it in the gutter Hallie sneaked down and got the pieces and took them home. “They *always* do that,” Helen said wisely. “Men who don’t care, they’re callous.”

Harriet looked down at the “Dearest George” on the pink paper, and read on, in her own writing, “Let’s run away and get married. I love you and I want to—” The letter ended there, because Harriet had not been able to think of what she wanted to do with George; Helen’s letters ended, “kiss you a thousand times,” but Harriet could not bring herself to write such a thing, at least partly because the thought of kissing George Martin’s dull face horrified her. She felt, although she had not confessed it to Helen, that she could possibly bear to kiss James Donald’s face, but then Hallie had already written to him. Harriet tore the letter up slowly and threw it into the wastebasket. It was written, it had been read, she had no doubt that her mother would remember the words, and it was unpleasant to look at.

It was when she reached out for the other papers in the desk that she began to cry. She took down a notebook with “Poems” written on the front of it in pink and blue letters, and turned the pages slowly, reading and trying to pretend that she was her mother reading. The notebook labeled “Moods” she put aside unopened; it was dedicated “To my unknown hero,” and perhaps if she did not read it now, her mother would not have read it earlier. There were more notebooks, one called “Me,” which was the start of an autobiography; one named “Daydreams.”

\* \* \*

“Pat,” Mrs. Byrne said softly, “you’re not drinking your milk.”

“I’ve got to hurry, Mother,” Pat said. He put the books down on the table and picked up the milk to drink it standing.

Mrs. Byrne reached out one of her hands, chapped and red from much housework, and took the glass away from him. “That’s not the way my boy does,” she said. “Sit down, son.”

Mary Byrne looked up from her crackers and milk. “For heaven’s sake sit down or get out,” she said. She was small and anemic and she had sinus trouble and she sniffled when she talked. Mr. and Mrs. Byrne both loved her dearly, but Pat was tall for his age and dark and almost handsome; both Pat and Mary were top of their classes in school, but Mary wore glasses and her hair straggled on her neck. “Golly,” Mary said, “other people are in as much of a hurry as you are.”

“I’m going to the library,” Pat said. “Artie and me.”

“You can drink your milk first,” Mrs. Byrne said. “Mary, finish before you go out.”

“What’s for dinner?” Mary asked. She moved her chair to see what Mrs. Byrne was doing at the sink. Her brother poked her arm, and she turned.

Pat gestured with his head at his mother, her back toward them, and took the folded papers out of one of his books. “Yours,” he mouthed at her.

Mary's letters were written on blue paper; she recognized them and picked them up, thinking from her brother's clandestine attitude that she might risk a knowing grin, but his eyes were looking away and his mouth was turned in disgust. Mary Byrne added another brick to her hatred for her brother and said, "Thanks." She put the letters in to the pocket of her dress and said, "Bye, Mom," as she left the kitchen. Pat watched her go out the door into the front hall and then he said quietly, "Mother?"

"Pat darling," said his mother without turning around.

"Listen," Pat said quickly, "I don't want to be a tattletale, but you better stop Mary from writing letters to boys."

His mother turned, paring knife in her hand, and regarded him. "And what kind of letters is Mary writing to boys?"

Pat looked down at the table, at his hands moving nervously. "Letters," he said, and wriggled. "*You* know."

"And how do *you* know?" his mother said.

Pat's face was red, and his voice went more and more quickly. "All the girls are doing it. It's that Helen Williams. I just happened to see the letters."

"And what boys?"

Pat stood up and picked up his books, but he said, "That's the trouble. I don't know *what* other boys."

"I'll speak to Mary," his mother said. "But you mind your own business after this."

"But it's dirty," Pat said.

"I'm not worried," his mother said. "I want you to be a gentleman. A *real* gentleman. Don't go out without your jacket."

Pat hesitated and then said, "I didn't mean to tell on her."

"That's my fine fellow." His mother put down the knife and came over to kiss him. "Now don't get all interested in the library and forget to come home for dinner."

Mrs. Byrne had her potatoes pared and set on top of the stove, and the string beans cut and ready to start, when the phone rang. Drying her hands on her apron, Mrs. Byrne went into the hall and picked up the phone.

"Hello?" she said, and the telephone said steadily, "Hello, this is Josephine Merriam. Harriet's mother."

"Of course, Mrs. Merriam." Mrs. Byrne bowed politely to Mrs. Merriam at least once a day. "How are you?"

"I am very much disturbed, Mrs. Byrne, and I think you ought to know the facts immediately, which is why I called. Our daughters have been doing some rather indiscreet things."

"Yes?" said Mrs. Byrne.

"This morning," Mrs. Merriam went on, "I happened to discover a letter my daughter had written to one of the neighborhood boys. It was a childish," and Mrs. Merriam laughed shortly, "but improper letter. She tells me that the other girls in the neighborhood have been writing the same kind of letters."

"Mary?" Mrs. Byrne said.

"Mary indeed," said Mrs. Merriam. "And Virginia Donald, and of course, the source of it all, Helen Williams. I don't know, naturally, whose *fault* it is," she said lingeringly, "but of course I think the girls should be spoken to."

"Of course," Mrs. Byrne said. "I'll speak to Mary, of course."

"Harriet also tells me," Mrs. Merriam said, "that your son has been *getting* letters."

"Who from?" Mrs. Byrne's voice was suddenly flat.

"I think *he's* the person to tell you *that*," Mrs. Merriam said. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Byrne, to be the one to tell you."

"You couldn't do anything else," Mrs. Byrne said.

"After all, my own daughter is in it too," Mrs. Merriam said.

"I'll speak to Mary," Mrs. Byrne said.

\* \* \*

Marilyn Perlman came into the house quickly, opening the front door with her key. She put her books down on the hall table and read the note sitting there: "Dear, have gone to Mrs. White's, back about five. If anyone calls take message. Love, Mother." Marilyn wondered vaguely why her mother always ended even the slightest notes formally; her father had once told her solemnly that the notes left for the milkman always ended, "Yrs. sincerely, R. Perlman."

The Perlman's home was probably the wealthiest-looking on the block, although presumably the Desmonds had more money than the Perlman's, and Mrs. Merriam was vaguely noted for her "taste." The Perlman's living-room was pale green and beige, and Mr. Perlman liked to see a wood fire in the fireplace, although the Donalds had theirs stacked with imitation logs, and the Byrnes had a grate with a red light behind it. When Marilyn came into her living-room she was able to take a book from a bookcase; it was a limp-leather bound volume of Thackeray, but Harriet Merriam, after all, spent Saturday morning dusting the photograph album which lay on a side table in the Merriam's living-room, and the first secular book in the Byrne house was Pat's copy of *Robinson Crusoe*.

Marilyn was reading through Thackeray for words; from *Vanity Fair* she had gleaned "adorable" and "fearsome" and "horrid"; from *The Virginian* she already had half a dozen. Her word for today was "storied"; it had turned up in English class in school, and Marilyn had written it on the margin of her English book, for copying later.

With the Thackeray under her arm, Marilyn went into the kitchen and opened a bottle of coke, and took the bottle and the book out to the front porch. The Perlman's porch was heavily screened by vines, and in the glider Marilyn was hidden and secure to watch the movement of people up and down the block. She knew some of the people very well; the Ransom-Joneses across the street, and Harriet Merriam, toward whom she felt a respectful sympathy, and James Donald, whom she loved desperately. The Perlman's were far down the block from the Desmonds and Helen Williams, but Helen Williams was a terror to Marilyn and young Mrs. Desmond an ogress. Mrs. Desmond cut Mrs. Perlman on the street, almost certainly not intentionally, but Helen Williams followed Marilyn around the schoolyard, into the schoolroom, and up and down the halls. At home, Marilyn rarely went past the center of the block; to go below the Donald house meant probably meeting Helen. One day, at the noon recess, Helen and a group of friends had found Marilyn reading in an empty classroom and sat down around her, and Helen said, "Perlman, we've been looking for you." (Thinking about it, on her own front porch behind the vines, thinking as she did almost daily, Marilyn remembered the sudden sickness, looking up from her book to see Helen and, cruelly, Harriet Merriam.) "We've been wondering," Helen said, looking at the other girls, who laughed, even Harriet, "we've been wondering about Christmas."

"What about it?" When Marilyn remembered herself in this scene, she saw herself as small and frightened and ugly; Harriet, on the other hand, remembered herself as dirty and fat and overbearing; and perhaps Helen Williams, if she thought of it, remembered *herself* as friendly and teasing.

“Well,” Helen said elaborately, “in about ten months it’s going to be Christmas again, and you know around here at Christmas on the last day of school all the kids give each other presents.” The story had not been planned; so much might be Harriet’s defense; the girls listened to Helen with smiles and some wonder. “And we thought,” Helen went on, watching first Marilyn and then the other girls, “that maybe when we all got together to draw names for the Christmas presents you maybe would think it was nicer of us just not to put your name in. So you won’t be embarrassed.”

For so long a story it had very little point; Harriet was confused and looked at Helen, frowning. Marilyn put both hands down on the open pages of her book and looked around at Helen and at Harriet frowning and at the other girls, one of whom was fidgeting toward the door, and said, “I don’t know why you want to do *this*.”

Helen laughed. “Maybe you have two Christmases,” she said. She turned around to the other girls, to Harriet, and said, “Marilyn has *two* Christmases. One of her own and one she gets in on with us.”

“I don’t get it,” one of the girls said, and the one edging toward the door said, “Come *on*.”

“Marilyn knows what I mean,” Helen said.

It was the feeling of having them all around her that bothered Marilyn; they were all together, and when one of them left they would all go, even Harriet. They were all looking at Marilyn at once, and she could only look at one of them at a time. She looked at Harriet and said, “If you’re through, I can go back to my book. I was studying.”

“I’ll tell you all about it,” Helen said. She stood up and gathered the other girls and led them out. Perhaps she stopped them outside the door, in a little group in the hall, perhaps she wrote it in a note and sent it around the schoolroom, perhaps it was nothing at all, but Marilyn was afraid of her, and when she wanted someone to die it was always Helen Williams.

She finished her coke and read her Thackeray, and went inside with the book and the empty bottle at half-past four. She put the book back in the bookcase and the empty bottle on the back porch, and went upstairs to her own room, which was the prettiest place she knew, and out of her top dresser drawer she took her notebook and sat down on the bed with it. She opened it to the first blank page, and “storied,” she wrote, and “grisly.”

\* \* \*

Mrs. Roberts was a big woman fortunate enough to be married to a big man, and when Mr. and Mrs. Roberts sat down at either end of their dinner table, the dining-room seemed full and the table setting dwarfed. Jamie Roberts, their younger son, showed signs already of continuing the family tradition: he was broad-shouldered and long-legged, at ten, and looked so emphatically like his father that Mrs. Roberts frequently addressed all her remarks to him when she was quarreling with her husband.

Artie, the older boy (and Mrs. Roberts supposed always that it was because she had never really wanted Artie and then only kept on to have Jamie because Artie was such a disappointment) looked like Mrs. Roberts’s brothers and uncles, small and thin and pale, with colorless hair and eyes and the mouth that in Mrs. Roberts’s Uncle Frank was always half-open. It was difficult for anyone as hearty as Mrs. Roberts to see a puny son at her dinner table and not be angry; Artie was already fourteen years old, and Mrs. Roberts honestly despaired of making a man of him. She and Mr. Roberts

both spoke to him gently, when they remembered, because secretly they were both a little afraid that a boy who read books instead of playing baseball might someday turn on them with a dreadful sure knowledge that would cut away their confidence and their muscles and leave them insecure and frightened, their stronger son as weak as they.

“*Eat, Artie,*” Mrs. Roberts said. “You’ve got to get some meat on you.”

“Little exercise,” Mr. Roberts said. He put down his butter knife and looked at his older son appraisingly. “If you’d get outdoors more and get a little exercise, you wouldn’t look like a bag of bones.”

“I eat,” Artie said defensively to his plate.

“Artie would rather play with the girls,” Mrs. Roberts said jovially. “What’s this I hear about you and the girls, Artie?”

“Artie?” Mr. Roberts said.

Jamie looked up with his mouth full, turning his head around the table to hear every word. “Artie?” he said thickly.

“Our son,” Mrs. Roberts said formally down the table to her husband, “has been getting love letters from some young lady.”

“Good for you,” Mr. Roberts said. He laughed and pointed his finger at Artie. “Make them chase you,” he said.

Artie knew that across the table his brother’s broad face was shining with unbelieving delight. “That silly stuff,” Artie said inadequately. He felt himself blushing, his face hot and horrible, and there was a sudden gleeful shout of laughter from his mother and father and brother.

“Look at him,” Jamie howled. “Look at Artie!”

“Why, Artie,” his father said. “Kiss and tell?”

When the laughter died down Mrs. Roberts said with apparently meaningless amiability, “Well, just the same it’s nice to see the *girls* doing the chasing for a change.”

\* \* \*

“John,” Mr. Desmond said soberly, “your mother has asked me to speak to you.” He had taken Johnny into a corner of the living-room where no one usually sat, in a spirit of manly formality. Johnny sat on a stiff chair, looking his father in the eye, his expression all attention. Mr. Desmond, who found the experience completely enjoyable, went on gravely, “It’s a serious responsibility, John. The responsibility of a father talking like this to his son. And you know you *are* truly my son.” Mr. Desmond laid his hand on his son’s knee for a minute, and found his own eyes almost tearful. “A *man*, John,” Mr. Desmond said, “must never take admiration lightly, whether it comes from a silly young girl, or a maturer young lady, or even from a mother or sister or aunt. It is the duty of a *gentleman*, John, to regard all this admiration as a compliment. It *is* a compliment, John,” Mr. Desmond went on very earnestly, “in the very deepest sense of the word. I’m *proud* to know that my son is admired. We must never dismiss the emotions natural to the feminine heart—” Mr. Desmond stopped to chuckle paternally, and lost the thread of his sentence, so he began again, “You’ll find, as you grow older, John, that many women will feel the same way, and you must never dismiss—”

\* \* \*

Helen Williams grabbed her little sister by the hair and shook her wildly back and forth. "Did you tell?" she said. "Did you go and tell, you bad, bad girl?"

Mildred stared wild-eyed. "Grandma," she whispered.

"*She* can't hear you," Helen said. She shook her sister again. "*No one* can hear you. You tell me now, did you tell on me?"

"Grandma," Mildred whispered again. "Mommy."

Disgusted, Helen let go of her sister and looked down on her, with her hands on her hips. "You just listen to me," she said in her normal voice, "if you ever tell on me again, if you ever tell anything, I'll cut out your tongue and I'll slice off all your fingers and I'll cut a big hole in your stomach with a carving knife and I'll hit you with a hatchet."

\* \* \*

"Look," Pat Byrne said viciously to his sister, "You cut it out, do you understand?"

"Cut what out?" Mary Byrne said innocently.

Pat looked around to make sure that his father was still reading his paper in the living-room and that the kitchen sounds were going on peacefully where his mother was finishing up the dishes. Pat and Mary were in the hall, and because Pat spoke almost in a whisper Mary kept her voice quiet. "You just cut it out," Pat said.

"Pat," Mr. Byrne called harshly from the living-room, "Mary! No secrets whispered around this house!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Mary said. She put out her lower lip and turned her back to walk away, but Pat pushed her shoulder and she turned around, her face ready to call her mother.

"You cut out all this dirty stuff," Pat said. He put his face close to his sister's and said again almost helplessly, "You just *cut it out*, that's all."

"You're crazy," Mary said. "I didn't do anything."

"I don't want any more of those dirty letters," Pat said. "I don't care what happens, don't *you* write any more to *me*."

\* \* \*

Hallie Martin walked slowly down the block, scuffing the loose sole of her shoe through the pink flowers, cautiously experimenting with a side tooth that might very well be coming out. She stopped for a few minutes, open-mouthed, across the street from the Desmond house, watching little Caroline moving around the flowers. Caroline was little and delicate and clean, and Hallie was lean and dirty and wet-faced, and after a minute Hallie moved on down the block without crossing the street.

Hallie, who was nine years old, Jamie Roberts, who was ten, and Mildred Williams, who was seven, were the youngest children around except for Caroline; they were an in-between generation, awed and overruled by the thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds, expecting in their turn a younger generation to bully and educate. If Hallie had crossed the street and stood outside the Desmond yard, Mrs. Desmond would have come out on the side porch to sit quietly until Hallie was gone away; if Hallie stayed Mrs. Desmond would finally take Caroline indoors.

"Old Caroline," Hallie said to herself as she went down toward Helen's, where the older girls would be, "old Caroline wets her pants."

At Helen's house you didn't bother to ring the bell or call Helen outside; you opened the door and went in, walking around inside the house until you found whomever you were looking for. Mrs. Parnatt, whom the children called Old Lady

Parrot, and who was Helen's grandmother, spent most of the day in a back room with the door locked; when she came out to the bathroom or to the kitchen to make herself coffee they saw an old woman with a tiny head and shoulders and huge from the waist down; an aged Pekinese following her in and out of her room. The dog's name was Lotus, and when the girls were in Helen's room next to her grandmother's, they could hear the old lady crying over the dog, or sometimes stamping around the room and screaming because the dog had fouled the rug.

"That dog snaps," Helen was fond of saying to her friends. "Some day she's going to hit him with a chair or something and he's going to bite her hand off."

When Harriet Merriam came to the house — the other girls thought this was funny and tormented her with it — she would open the door a crack, peering down the long dark hall inside to see if the grandmother's door were open. If the door were open that meant that Lotus was abroad, and Harriet would wait outside. "I don't want him to snap at *me*," she said reasonably.

"If he snapped at *me* I'd kick him in the head and kill him," Hallie said wisely. "That's how you kill dogs anyway, kick them in the head."

"You just kick my grandmother's dog," Helen said. She laughed. "My *grandmother* would bite you."

In Helen's room at the back of the house were old fashion magazines and pictures of movie stars and collections of lace and ribbons the girls used to dress up in; Helen's mother worked in the city, and she bought Helen neat young girl's clothes which Helen decorated with bows or lace collars or five-and-ten jewelry and wore to school. Sometimes the girls at Helen's house would go into the dark front room where Helen's mother sat alone in the evenings, and play records on the phonograph and dance together. Once or twice they brought George Martin in to dance with them, although he was clumsy and had to be bribed with penny candy before he would stand up patiently for a minute or two and walk around the floor holding one of the girls.

"When I go live with my *father*," Helen said frequently, "I've got to know how to dance and how to dress pretty, because my father is going to take me out a lot and we're going to travel and everything."

"Where is your father?" someone, probably Harriet, would ask, and perhaps Virginia Donald would add respectfully, "You're terribly lucky."

"My father goes everywhere," Helen said. "Maybe Paris, or New York. Paris is where they have men who kiss your hands." She giggled, and it made the other girls giggle too. With a lace shawl over her head, Helen stood up and curtsied, holding out her hand. "Why, Mr. Paris," she said in a high voice, "you mean you want to kiss *my* hand?"

Hallie stood in back of her, shouting, "Why, Mr. Johnny Desmond, you mean you want to kiss *my* hand?"

And Helen said seriously, "Boy, I'm not going to stay here much longer. I'm going to find my father pretty soon now."

The Williams family was moving soon; Mrs. Williams had mentioned to Miss Fielding, who was the only person outdoors in the very early morning when Mrs. Williams left to catch her bus to the city, that it was too hard to try to get back and forth every day, and she wanted to put the girls into a city school. Miss Fielding told Mrs. Desmond, who said timidly that perhaps it was just as well. Little Mildred Williams, Mrs. Desmond said, was entirely too sweet and kind to be away from her mother all the time, and Mrs. Desmond added, with a stronger note to her voice, that perhaps the grandmother (out of respect for Miss Fielding's age Mrs. Desmond did not say "that almost bedridden old lady," as she did later to Mr. Desmond) was not

quite — Mrs. Desmond lifted her hand gently — not *quite* the person to deal with dear little Helen.

The word that dear little Helen had for Mrs. Desmond was “horse’s behind.” “Thinks she owns the world,” Helen said.

Helen’s little sister Mildred came home the last day of school and went immediately out into the back yard, where for the last month or so she had been building an elaborate playhouse, partly underground, dug out with a spoon, and partly put together with pieces of board salvaged from vacant lots and other back yards. The playhouse was just big enough for Mildred to crawl in and lie down, and her dolls were in there and what pillows and dishes she could take from her own house. “It’s for my mommy and me,” she told Mr. Donald over the fence. “When Helen and Gram go away my mommy and me will live here.”

The afternoon that Harriet’s mother found out about the letters, Hallie found Helen alone in the living-room, dancing solemnly around to “Missouri Waltz” on the phonograph. Hallie fell into line behind Helen, imitating her and saying, “Bet when you find your father you’ll be the best dancer there.”

“I’ll dance all day long,” Helen said. “I’ll never stop dancing till I’m hungry and then I’ll eat ice cream and chicken and chocolate creams.”

“I wish I could go with you,” Hallie said.

Helen stopped dancing and fell down on the couch. Hallie lifted the needle off the record and set it aside. She came over and sat down next to Helen and said, “Listen, Willie, can’t I go with you?”

“You want to know something?” Helen said dreamily.

Hallie nodded, leaning forward.

“Don’t tell,” Helen said, and Hallie nodded again. Helen looked around sharply, and Hallie crossed her finger over her heart, and Helen said impatiently, “Don’t do that, baby. Swear on your honor.”

“I swear on my honor,” Hallie said obediently.

“Well,” Helen said, “you know where I was last night?”

Hallie shook her head, her mouth a little open.

Helen laughed excitedly. “Well,” she said, “I went out for a walk and I went over down by the stores.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Helen said vaguely, “I just *felt* like going that way. And you know this guy, the one in the gas station, the one we stopped and kidded with once?” She waited while Hallie nodded again, and then went on, “Well, he was there and we got to talking and he says he’ll take me to the city some night and we’ll go somewhere and dance.”

\* \* \*

“I don’t know, sweetie,” Dinah Ransom-Jones said to her sister, “I really don’t know, you have such a *sense* of flowers.”

“But it’s *your* garden, dear,” her sister said gently. “You’ll be here a good deal longer than I will.”

“Brad always says the flowers look prettier when you do them,” Mrs. Ransom-Jones said.

“But I won’t do them always,” her sister said. “He loves the way you plan them.”

“Sweetie,” Dinah said, “you’ve just *got* to decide. Nothing *ever* goes well around here unless you help. You know that.”

“Well.” Her sister hesitated. “Over *there*, then.” She pointed to a far corner of the garden, near the street hedge.

“Really?” Mrs. Ransom-Jones said. “You really think *there*?”

“Not if you have a better place,” her sister said.

“Of course not,” Mrs. Ransom-Jones said. She picked up the gardening basket and the bag of bulbs. “Don’t you lean over,” she said, “I don’t want you overtiring yourself.”

“It doesn’t matter, really,” her sister said.

Mrs. Ransom-Jones moved with determination, and her sister said, quickly, “Not *that* way, dear. By the street hedge.”

“Oh.” Mrs. Ransom-Jones stopped and looked around. “I thought you said over *here*,” she said.

“Well, I *did* say by the street hedge,” her sister said, “but if you have a place you like better....”

“Of *course* not, sweetie,” Mrs. Ransom-Jones said. She started off again toward the corner of the garden. “Brad will think this is wonderful,” she said. “That’s just the spot for shy flowers.”

“He loves everything you do,” her sister said, following.

\* \* \*

It was evening, and the kids were all outside; Harriet could see them from her bedroom window, Miss Fielding could see them from her chair on the porch, Marilyn Perlman could see them from the living-room window, past her father’s head bent over papers at the desk. Early evening and twilight were always longer on Pepper Street than anywhere else; dinners were early up and down the block so the children could play longer; even Miss Fielding, who did not play, felt uncomfortable sitting down alone to her dinner later than anyone else, hearing the noise of dishes being washed at the Merriams’. Mrs. Perlman served dinner early because Marilyn might want to play with the other children.

They played tag and hide-and-peek and long involved games with a line across the street from curb to curb and elaborate systems of bases and penalties. Mr. Desmond, who walked out for the evening air, met Mr. Roberts halfway down the block, and together they stood on the sidewalk and watched the game.

“If those young animals could put half that creative ability into their school work,” Mr. Desmond commented drily.

“Healthy kids,” Mr. Roberts said. “Good to see.”

They stood quietly in the half-darkness, smiling vaguely. Past them their own children and the children of their neighbors moved swiftly back and forth, following some ancient ritual of capture and pursuit, dance steps regulated as far as the placing of the feet. With a wild howl little Jamie Roberts made a capture in the gutter near his father, and Mr. Roberts took the pipe out of his mouth to say, “Good boy, Jamie.” He lifted his eyes to where, across the street, his older son sat with Pat Byrne on the Donalds’ lawn. They were half-watching the game, half-talking. Mr. Desmond followed his attention, and said quietly, “That’s a very good boy, that Art of yours. Bright kid.”

Mr. Roberts sighed and turned to watch Jamie shrieking up the street.

“I guess just anywhere where you could find a job,” Art Roberts was saying. “Anywhere not here.”

“They send you right back,” Pat Byrne said. “You can’t get a job because you’re too young, and they send you right back.”

“In another year, maybe,” Art said. “I could say I was eighteen.”

“They take you in the navy at sixteen,” Pat said, “I *think*.”

Hallie cornered Helen for a minute, away from the glow of the street light, and said insistently, “Are you going to take someone? A friend?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Helen said, turning away.

“Tell me,” Hallie said insistently. “You said to him you’d take a friend?”

Helen looked down on the top of Hallie’s head. “I said I’d take a *friend* with me, not a dirty little baby.”

James Donald came out of his house, spoke to Art Roberts and Pat Byrne on his way down to the sidewalk. He was all dressed up, and when Mr. Roberts and Mr. Desmond saw him they smiled at one another and waved across the street to him. He stood uncertainly for a minute and then crossed over to where they stood and said, “Evening, Mr. Desmond, Mr. Roberts.”

“How’re you?” Mr. Desmond said. “And your family?”

“Dad’s not well again.” James turned, hands in his pockets, and surveyed the game as though he belonged with Mr. Desmond and Mr. Roberts instead of with the kids in the street.

“Got a date?” Mr. Roberts said cheerfully.

James moved nervously, and swallowed. “Thought I’d go out for a while.”

“Young men,” Mr. Roberts said, and he and Mr. Desmond laughed.

James straightened his shoulders and laughed with them.

“Have a fine time, son,” Mr. Roberts said, and began to walk on. “Good night,” he said over his shoulder, and James and Mr. Desmond both said, “Good night.”

“Come in and see me some evening,” Mr. Desmond said to James. He smiled tolerantly and added, “Sometime when you’re not so busy.”

“Thank you,” James said awkwardly, “I’d like to.”

“Still set on architecture?” Mr. Desmond asked.

“Guess so,” James said.

Mr. Desmond put his hand on James’s shoulder for a minute before he turned away. “Good fellow,” he said. “You come in and see me.”

“I will,” James said. He watched Mr. Desmond go down the street, and then he looked ostentatiously at his watch and began to walk in the other direction, proudly aware that the children in the street were watching him over their game. He had not gone as far as the Perlman’s house when he heard footsteps behind him and Helen Williams caught up with him.

“Hey, James Donald,” she was yelling.

He turned with dignity and waited, his head held back and his arms folded across his chest in a manner strongly reminiscent of Mr. Desmond. “You running away from me?” Helen asked.

“You’re very much mistaken,” James said.

Helen looked up at him from under her eyelashes. She was very blond and wore her hair in a long straight bob, and when she bent her head down her hair fell softly along her cheeks. “You never came over to see me at my house like you said you would,” she said.

“I don’t have much time any more to play with the kids,” James said.

Helen put out her lower lip; all her gestures were very much exaggerated because she practised them alone in front of a mirror. “I wouldn’t play with the kids, either,” she said meaningly, “if there was anything else to do.”

James looked at his watch again. "Well," he said.

"Where you going?" Helen demanded.

"I am going," James said elaborately, "to an orchestra rehearsal at the high school. Now are you happy?"

"Bet you got a girl there," Helen said to his back, and when she saw his shoulders tighten she said more loudly, "You got a girl at school, James has got a girl."

When he was past hearing her she turned and went back to the game still going on. Tod Donald ran up to her and said loudly, "We missed you, Willie, you don't want to talk to my old brother."

"Let me alone," Helen said. "I'm going home."

\* \* \*

"I suppose I should be used to this by *now*," Mrs. Merriam said. She took out her clean handkerchief and put the damp one down on the table next to her. "After all," she said, "I've been your wife for eighteen years, Harry, and I think by now I deserve a little consideration. Every sort of humiliation and insult..." With a wail she lifted the clean handkerchief and began to cry again.

"Oh, Mother," Harriet said irritably, and her father began heavily, "Josie, honey."

"Don't *call* me that," Mrs. Merriam almost screamed. Harriet looked at her father, but he turned his face away and sighed.

"I try to make my daughter into a good decent girl in spite of—" Mrs. Merriam sobbed, "— in spite of everything, and I work all day and I worry about money and try to make a good decent home for my husband and now my only daughter turns out to be—"

"Josephine," Mr. Merriam said strongly. "Harriet, go upstairs again."

Harriet went upstairs away from her mother's sorry voice. Her desk was unlocked; instead of eating dinner, she and her mother had stood religiously by the furnace and put Harriet's diaries and letters and notebooks into the fire one by one, while solid Harry Merriam sat eating lamb chops and boiled potatoes upstairs alone. "I don't know what it's all about," he said to Harriet and his wife when they came upstairs. "Seems like a man ought to be able to come home after working all day and not hear people crying all the time. Seems like a man has a right to have a quiet home."

Alone in her room again Harriet sat down by the window. Outside, the eucalyptus trees in the first rich darkness were quiet and infinitely delicate, a rare leaf moving softly against the others. Harriet was accustomed to thinking of them as lace against the night sky; on windy nights they were crazy, pulling like wild things against the earth. Tonight, in their patterned peacefulness, Harriet rested her head somehow against them and stopped thinking about her mother. Lovely, lovely things, she thought, and tried to imagine herself sinking into them far beyond the surface, so far away that nothing could ever bring her back.

"Harriet," her mother said from the foot of the stairs. Her voice was steady. "Harriet, dear, come downstairs."

Harriet came down the stairs, hitting every step violently with her great shoes. Her mother waited at the bottom, newly powdered and very tall and gracious. "Dear," she said, "I want to apologize."

In the living-room her father was reading the paper. His face was very tired and his mouth stiff, but when Harriet came in with her mother's arm around her he looked up and said, "Now everyone's happy," and went back to his paper.

“Your father,” Mrs. Merriam said meekly, “has made me feel that I have been too severe with you today. I was very much upset, of course.”

“Oh, Mother,” Harriet said. Now that her mother was calm Harriet felt at last like crying. She loved her mother again, as one should love a mother, tenderly and affectionately. She put her arm around her mother and kissed her. “I’m sorry,” she said.

Her mother patted her shoulder. “We’ll spend more time together from now on. Reading, and sewing. Would you like to learn to cook, really *cook*?” she added brightly.

Harriet nodded, and her mother laughed deprecatingly. “We can write together, too. I used to write poetry, Harriet, not very *well*, of course, but that’s probably where you get it.”

Warmly Harriet smiled at her mother, and thought how pleasant it always was after these scenes, how for a little while the three of them would live together in vast amiability.

“You’ll show your mother everything you write, of course,” her father said.

“Everything,” Harriet said earnestly. The room was so quiet, so friendly.

“And we won’t see that Helen Williams any more,” her mother said. “Now that there’s no more school, there’s no need for my girl to run around with that sort of person.”

“She’s not going to be here much longer, anyway,” Harriet said. “She’s going to live with her father.”

Mrs. Merriam raised her eyebrows delicately and said, looking obliquely at her husband, “And perhaps next year, some really *nice* private school.”

There was a long silence, and then Mrs. Merriam sighed and went on, “I’m not going to punish you any more, Harriet. As I said, I feel that some of this is my fault.”

“I’m really sorry,” Harriet said. She put her head on her mother’s shoulder, and her mother touched her hair lightly.

“I’ll try to make it up to you, dear,” Mrs. Merriam said.

\* \* \*

“I do not know why,” Mrs. Roberts said with a deadly level voice, “I really do not know why a grown man is not capable of conducting his affairs so that his women know their places.”

“I don’t know anything about this ‘women’ business,” Mr. Roberts said sullenly.

“Arthur took the message,” Mrs. Roberts went on. “*Arthur*. Someone named Jeanie.” She said “Jeanie” with a great casual gentleness, as though the name itself were precious to her.

“Arthur wouldn’t know,” Mr. Roberts said. “Why don’t you mind your own business?”

“It is my business.” Mrs. Roberts stopped and said, “Be quiet. Here come the children.”

Artie and Jamie hurried in, taking off jackets as they came. Mrs. Roberts called Jamie over to her and pushed his hair back out of his eyes. “Both boys look mostly like you,” she said reproachfully to her husband.

“Why weren’t you playing with the other fellows tonight?” Mr. Roberts asked Artie.

“Talking to Pat.” Artie had his foot on the bottom step, his hand on the stair rail. He waited.

“You might come in and talk to your mother and father once in a while,” his father said.

“I was just going upstairs to read.” Artie came reluctantly into the living-room and sat tentatively on the piano bench.

“If we’d been going to a movie you’d be down here fast enough,” his father said.

“Mike,” Mrs. Roberts said.

Artie looked at Mr. Roberts solemnly. “There was a phone call for you,” he said. “Some dame wanted you.”

“Bedtime, darling,” Mrs. Roberts said to Jamie. “Artie, you may go upstairs now. Turn off your light in half an hour.”

She went to the foot of the stairs with both boys. “I’ll be up to kiss you good night,” she said. She watched them up the stairs, and then turned back to her husband.

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*End of Sample*