



**CASSANDRA AT
THE WEDDING**
DOROTHY BAKER

AFTERWORD BY
DEBORAH EISENBERG

DOROTHY DODDS BAKER (1907–1968) was born in Missoula, Montana in 1907 and raised in California. After graduating from UCLA, she traveled in France, where she began a novel and, in 1930, married Howard Baker, a critic, professor, and editor. The couple moved back to California, and Baker completed an MA in French at UCLA, later teaching Latin at a private school. After having a few short stories published, Baker turned to writing full-time, despite, she would later claim, being “seriously hampered by an abject admiration for Ernest Hemingway.” In 1938, she published *Young Man with a Horn* (also available as an NYRB Classic), a novel about a white jazz musician, which earned critical praise and eventually became a movie starring Kirk Douglas. She won a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1942 and, the next year, published *Trio*, a novel whose frank portrayal of a lesbian relationship proved too scandalous for the times; Baker and her husband adapted the novel as a play in 1944, but it was quickly shut down because of protests. Her final novel, *Cassandra at the Wedding*, examined the relationship between two exceptionally close sisters, whom Howard Baker asserted were based on both Baker herself and the couple’s two daughters. Baker died in 1968 of cancer.

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CASSANDRA SPEAKS

I TOLD them I could be free by the twenty-first, and that I'd come home the twenty-second. (June.) But everything went better than I expected—I had all the examinations corrected and graded and returned to the office by ten the morning of the twenty-first, and I went back to the apartment feeling so foot-loose, so restless, that I started having some second thoughts. It's only a five-hour drive from the University to the ranch, if you move along—if you don't stop for orange juice every fifty miles the way we used to, Judith and I, our first two years in college, or at bars, the way we did later, after we studied how to pass for over twenty-one at under twenty. As I say, if you move, if you push a little, you can get from Berkeley to our ranch in five hours, and the reason why we never cared to in the old days was that we had to work up to home life by degrees, steel ourselves somewhat for the three-part welcome we were in for from our grandmother and our mother and our father, who loved us fiercely in three different ways. We loved them too, six different ways, but we mostly took our time about getting home.

It wasn't three-part any more—the welcome. Our mother died three years ago (much too young but I'm not sure she thought so) and she would therefore not be present at Judith's wedding. Unlike me. If I went, and of course I had to, I'd be very noticeably present in official capacity—the bride's only attendant. She asked me by letter, and I didn't give her a straight answer, because I'm shy, particularly of weddings, but I did say I'd be home the twenty-second, and I had unconsciously cleared the way by the twenty-first, which in June is the longest day of the year. After I got back from taking the examinations to the office, it began to feel like it. I walked around the apartment and looked two or three times inside the refrigerator, so cold, so white, so bare, and more times than that out the big west window at the bay with the prison islands in it and the unbelievable bridge across it. Unbelievable, but I'd got to believing in it from looking at it so often, and it had been looking quite attractive to me off and on through most of the winter. All but irresistible at times, but so was my analyst, and they canceled each other more or less out.

I went out and stood on the deck and thought it over—how hot it would be at home, how searingly, curingly hot, and how nice it would be to see the dog and the current cat and my father and my grandmother. And my sister. Judith.

The bridge looked good again. The sun was on it, and it took on something of the appeal of a bright exit sign in an auditorium that is crowded and airless and where you are listening to a lecture, as I so often do, that is in no way brilliant. But lectures can't all be brilliant, of course; they can be sat through and listened to for what there is in them, and if the exit sign is dazzling it can still be ignored. Besides, my guide assures me that I am not, at heart, a jumper; it's not my sort of thing. I'm given to conjecture only, and to restlessness, and I think I knew all the time I was sizing up the bridge that the strong possibility was I'd go home, attend my sister's wedding as invited, help hook-and-zip her into whatever she wore, take over the bouquet while she received the ring, through the nose or on the finger, wherever she chose to receive it, and hold my peace when it became a question of speaking now or forever holding it. I'd go, in all likelihood, and do everything an only attendant is expected to do. I'd probably *dance* attendance.

I didn't even know who the groom was beyond that he was a graduate medical student she met in New York, and his name was Lynch, or maybe even Finch. Yes. Finch. John Thomas Finch. Where'd she meet him—Birdland?

I left the deck and went back into the apartment and locked the door and pulled the cord that closed the curtain across the west window. I'd had enough of the view for this semester. I wandered around and ended up at my desk, looking at the page that was in my typewriter, specifically page fifty.

seven of my brute thesis, my impressions of the novel in France—my big academic lunge. I turned on my lamp, my desk lamp of countless adjustments, and read what there was of page fifty-seven and laughed out loud, but not because it was amusing—because it was such busywork, this whole thing of writing a thesis so that I could become a teacher instead of a writer, particularly when the thesis is about writers, very current ones, women mostly and young, not much older than I am but whom I was exploiting ruthlessly to provide me with a thesis. I'd really have preferred it the other way around, to be myself the writer and have all those others writing their theses about me; but I have a peculiar problem in that my mother was a writer—author of two novels, and three plays, and quite a few screenplays, all quite well known, and it's not easy for the child of a writer to become a writer. I don't see why; it just isn't. It's something about not wanting to be compared. And not wanting to measure up, or not measure up; or cash in either. It's not that I have anything against my mother. I loved her, I think, but my mother's only been dead three years, just short of three years, and I'd rather wait a decent interval and then try. Or not try. But first write the idiotic thesis and get the gap-stopping degree.

I pulled the page out of the typewriter, crumpled it up and dropped it into the wastebasket beside the desk, shuffled the other fifty-six pages until the edges lay smoothly together, put them into a folder and then into the top drawer, and snapped the cover onto the typewriter. If the apartment should catch fire while I was at the wedding, the world would never know what it was I was at such pains to say about the novel as currently practiced in France by mere girls, and some boys. But it wouldn't catch fire. And when I got back I would undoubtedly pull the crumpled page out of the wastebasket, uncrumple it, copy it word for word, and be back in business. Two weeks from now, maybe only a week.

It was increasingly clear to me that I intended to go, that I didn't intend to spend another night, at least not this one, in the apartment. There were all kinds of indications: I stripped the sheets off my bed and put them into a laundry bag; and I folded the cover over the keyboard of the piano, a piano which was half mine, but which I'd scarcely touched, as they say of pianos, since Judith, who owned the other half, went to New York. I should have folded the cover over the keyboard nine months ago, and locked it. There was a key someplace.

But I didn't stop to look for it and by three that afternoon I was halfway home, and sitting in a bar, one of the ones we used to stop at in the old days. It was quite dark and air-cooled and I had in hand a lemon squash with some vodka in it in deference to my grandmother who hates the smell of alcohol on anyone's breath—particularly girls' breaths. I'm very fond of my grandmother, we both are, and I'd picked up a box of chocolate cherries for her before I left town. They were out in the trunk of the car, melting, while I sat here in the cold bar getting solidified and hoping that I had not put the chocolates on top of the box with the dress in it—dress I'd picked up before I left town and charged to one of my grandmother's accounts as she frequently implored me to do. It was a white dress, and it would probably do for the wedding. In fact I didn't even have to wonder about it—it was very simple and elegant and costly, it would do for anything anywhere, and my grandmother, high as her standards are, would know it when she saw it and thank me for doing her so much honor. She liked to see girls look nice, she said so all the time, and whether or not this had anything to do with it I developed a taste for sweatshirts a full ten years ahead of the trend. Also for sneakers, and if I knew my grandmother, she would love this dress. It would be a big relief to her, besides serving to keep the account active.

I looked across the space behind the bar and saw my face in a blue mirror between two shelves of bottles. The bottles looked familiar enough, but I didn't immediately recognize the face, mostly, I think, because I didn't want to. It's a face that's given me a lot of trouble.

But I looked again in a moment or two, unable not to, and this time I let myself know who it was. It was the face of my sister Judith, not precisely staring, just looking at me very thoughtfully the way she always used to when she was getting ready to ask me to do something—hold the stop watch while

she swam four hundred meters, taste the dressing and tell her what she left out, explain the anecdote about the shepherd and the mermaid. They were the kind of thing a younger sister asks an older sister and it was all right with me except that I wasn't all that much older. I was only eleven minutes older. It was on our birth certificates that way. The one named Cassandra was two ounces heavier and eleven minutes older than the one named Judith.

By a firm act of will I forced the face between the shelves to stop being Judith's and become mine. My very own face—the face of a nice girl preparing to be a teacher, writing a thesis, being kind to her grandmother, going home a day early instead of a day late or the day I said, and bringing something decent to wear. But it can give me a turn, that face, any time I happen to catch it in a mirror; most particularly at times like this when I'm alone and have to admit it's really mine because there's no one else to accuse.

I lifted my glass and said, "Here's to you, Narcissus," and it was by no means the first time I'd been called by the wrong name, though it had never been this one. Lots of people refuse to commit themselves to any name-calling at all in our case. "Now which one are you?" they say, and when I say I'm Cassandra they always say that's what they thought, which would be exactly what they'd say if it had been Judith saying she was Judith. Or for that matter Judith saying she was Cassandra, or Cassandra saying she was Judith. They'd say that's what they thought. We got very tired of it quite early in our lives. We never dressed alike. I was messy on principle, so that Judith could be neat; and then they'd forget which was the neat one, and have to ask. And we'd have to tell them. Very tiresome.

I finished off my lemon squash and moved down a few stools to a place where the cash register cut off a direct view of the mirror, but a man sitting a couple of stools over interpreted the move as a desire for companionship, and offered, quite nicely, to buy me a drink. I'd been intending to have another, at least I'd been wondering whether another would make the rest of the trip cooler or hotter, and once you start wondering you have more or less decided in favor of another. But the offer changed all that. It made me realize I had some place to go and that I should be getting there, not consorting with strangers in bars, and I thanked him and paid up and went out into the heat without ever looking at him. The truth is, I'm afraid of men, strange men and ones I know, though I know there's nothing about them to be afraid of. But I am; they set my teeth on edge; and I got into my car and made what felt like a getaway without even waiting to fasten the seat belt. I figured that I could do that when I left the next bar.

I was driving my mother's car—a Riley she exchanged one of her last royalty checks for. It was four years old now, no, five—it was a year old when she bought it, she drove it a year and Judith and I'd had it three years, but people still looked sidewise, puzzled and interested, when it passed them—classic that had begun to use quite a bit of oil. It was half mine and half Judith's, I supposed, but nobody had ever said so. Our father told us to drive it back to Berkeley when we went back after our mother's funeral, and we'd had it ever since and thought of it as our car. But it was not at all the same as the way we thought of our piano. We *chose* the piano. Nobody gave it to us. We found it in a Sunday *Chronicle*, slightly misspelled, but not every typesetter can be trusted with a name like Boesendorfer, it's long and you don't see it every day. We saw it, though, hiding among the classified advertisements, waiting to be identified and claimed, and we went to the address with our fingers crossed; and it was one. It was unmistakably a Boesendorfer, meant for us, and we became its co-owners right away. Without conferring. Without the slightest need to.

Next day we didn't go to classes. It was the day we took possession of what we'd bought and saw hoisted with pulleys and a winch from the street up to the deck of our apartment. It was wrapped in thick pads, very dusty, and the winch creaked and curses rang and dignity was nowhere about. I watched from the street, because I wanted to be there if it fell. But Judith watched from the deck and she was there when it was put down, legless, on its side. I was there, too, all out of breath, a few

seconds later, and we watched two men named Otis and Carl put it on a dolly and roll it into our living room, and screw the legs into it and push it to the wall we'd cleared for it. Then Otis picked up the pads and the dolly and took them out and hooked them onto the winch, and Carl looked the apartment over, and us too, while I wrote him a check.

"You girls twins?" he said when I handed it to him, and I said no, cousins—cousins-german, as a matter of fact, and then he left and so did Otis, and Judith and I were suddenly alone with it, all black and scrolled and three-legged and ours. We were quite shy in the face of it, feeling all the weight of commitment, and not able, either one of us, to find much to say. I wandered around the place, into the bedroom, back to the living room, out to the deck, and Judith was standoffish too. She ran some arpeggios, standing up, but she didn't do anything serious. And then sometime that afternoon we went down to the University, to the practice rooms and the music lockers, and Judith brought back a pile of her music and began to play the preludes and the fugues and all was well. I didn't do another thing all day; I only listened and knew how good she was and what a piano we had, and later that night when she quit playing and came out onto the deck where I was looking at the lights and listening, she said, "We ought to live this way, don't you think?" It was as if I'd been waiting all my life to hear her say it, and I said yes, oh yes, how could we imagine it ever being any other way? Let's never get stuck with outsiders, just be ourselves and keep it honest, now we've got this piano.

We stood leaning against the rail of the deck looking at the lights below and the stars above, the lights thicker and brighter and the stars cooler and more separate, and I remembered how bright the stars are on summer nights at the ranch with no ground lights to dim them out. We even had our own stars. Our father showed us how to find them at different seasons—Castor, there; Pollux, there, only we knew them by our own names. I looked now and couldn't find them. They were probably somewhere behind Grizzly Peak, so I stopped looking for them and looked at Judith instead, and began to feel myself getting star-crossed. And she knew it.

"We could live someplace else, couldn't we?" I heard her say. "We could live in Paris."

"We'd look just as much alike in Paris as we do here."

"But it wouldn't matter; they'd overlook it. That's why colored people go to Paris."

"To be overlooked?" I said. "I'm not sure I want to be overlooked. And I don't want you to be either."

"We wouldn't be. You could break down and start writing—and—"

"Start writing what?" I said, and I could feel my old chip in its place on my shoulder.

"The thing you threw away," she said, very simply and unemphatically, as if she thought I shouldn't have, and almost immediately there was no chip.

"What about you?" I said, "would you work too?" and I didn't get a fast answer but I got one that must have taken a great deal for her to put into words. She knew what she wanted, she said, at least she thought she did, and it wasn't anything very hard and specific like giving concerts and having people pay to hear her. It had more to do with belonging to a tradition in music and staying in it and working at it in any capacity you can fit into—playing what's being written, and what's been written, composing too if you want to and can, but mostly trying to keep it alive and separate the chaff from the grain and keep them separate. Know which is which, and care, and that's a life work.

While I listened to her I was wishing our father were listening too—it was so exactly the thing he'd been telling us since we were too young to remember, and not just about music, about everything. The pure faith of a skeptic. Maybe you don't believe in concerts but you believe in music; you care what happens to it and you're willing to contribute what you can for whatever it may be worth. Probably not much.

"What are we having here?" I said. "A revival meeting?" and she said very quietly that she hoped so; it was time for us to decide on one thing or another, either be what we should be or become

something else.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to say,” I said, but I did know. We’d been fraternizing, call it, with all kinds of strangers. I had, particularly, for all the good it did me. I had been thinking of it as my Rimbaud phase—period of expansion—but it wasn’t only that. We had both been concentrating on going separate ways, having separate points of view, friends of our own, and likes and dislikes of our own. We’d been trying hard to break it up, and all we had to show for it was exhaustion and disgust. No other way of life would work, no other way felt right, and all it took to put us straight was a misspelled piano in a want ad. We know a misspelling when we see one, if it’s important, and the air was clear now; we’d made the decision, we owned a piano. We were committed to it, and it wasn’t as if it were just any piano; it was an incomparable piano, immaculate, peerless. The odd thing was that Judith is the pianist, I’m not, but I saw the ad and it never occurred to either of us to do anything but buy it together and have it be ours.

That’s how clear the air was, that first night of possession. I felt intoxicated, but not from natural causes. From the preludes and fugues and the mention of Paris, where they take you in and accept the fact that you’re being yourself and then overlook it, whatever it is. Wonderful city to establish one’s piano in.

“Paris will do fine,” I said, “though I remember when we were there they thought we were awfully cute.”

“We were ten years old,” Judith said. “We’re not cute now.”

I thought that over without looking at her to see for sure. I didn’t feel cute. I never felt so serious in my life; I’d never had the excitement of an earth-shaking decision, and while I was having it the telephone rang, and I told Judith to let it ring because it would be Liz Janko. It had been being Liz Janko for two months.

“Janko Junko,” Jude said, very perspicaciously, and I nodded in agreement, and we listened while the phone rang twenty times, and then quit.

“Did you ever really like her?” Jude asked me, as soon as it was quiet. It sounded like something she’d been wanting to ask me for two months.

“No,” I said, “not much.”

“Then why?”

“I’m polite. I was trying to stay out of your way.”

“You can’t be that polite,” she said. “I don’t have any way.”

I had to wait a minute before I could talk. I walked over to the deck door and closed it in case the telephone might ring again, and when I came back I said, “It’s not just her. I can’t stand any of them,” and I went on, because there was no reason not to now that we had a future and some plans for it, and told her as honestly as I could how I’m constituted. With men I feel like a bird in the clutch of a cat, terrified, caught in a nightmare of confinement, wanting nothing but to get free and take a shower.

“Birds don’t take showers,” Jude said, and I had to give her instances of birdbaths and lawn spray and sprinkling systems and fountains in parks, before I could get to what I had to tell her, which was nothing so simple as the cat-and-bird relationship, even without the shower, because I’m not afraid of women; they don’t terrify me slightly. Up to a point they fascinate me, and I said so.

“Up to what point?” Jude said, really wanting to know, and so I dredged for it, and said it seemed to have something to do with the old advice about not speaking to strangers and remembering that women are worse than men. Well—I could ignore the advice about women; and had. I could speak to them all right, but at the point they stopped being strangers I always wished they’d be strangers again.

“They impose themselves,” I said. “I get to feeling chased.”

“How?” Judith said, and I was spelling it for her when the telephone rang again, not more than ten minutes after we’d let it ring itself out.

“They take over,” I said, between rings. “They get pushy.”

“Do you want me to answer it?”

“No,” I said, “but let’s unlist it, early tomorrow. And be different. Just us. Nobody else ever.”

The phone stopped after five or six rings, and Judith turned to me and said, “Thank you, thank you very much.” And later, much later that night I woke up alive and went into the living room to make sure, and it was there against the white wall with a beam on it, a little halo of moonlight, or street light, that let me see J. S. Bach spelled across the book on the rack, and above the keyboard the name of the maker stretched out long in baroque lettering. Very correctly spelled. *Bösendorfer*.

I sat down on the bench for a while and then I went back to the bedroom and got into my bed. I was still in the revival mood, but very sleepy, and I said to myself, *This above all*. “This above all: to thine own self be true. And it must follow.” But I didn’t precisely know what must follow, and I didn’t want to think. Just leave it the way it was, and sleep on it.

That was two years ago. Before New York, before any of this, and Judith told me sometime the next day that it had been the same for her—she got up that first night and went into the living room to see if it was really there, just to be sure she hadn’t dreamed the whole thing.

I didn’t stop at any more bars after the first one. Nor even at any orange juice stands. I fastened the seat belt during a red light in the next town and then kept moving because I wanted, consciously now, to get home and get it over with, the first part at least—see Judith, meet what’s-his-name, show gran the dress and give her the chocolates, and do whatever it might be with, or for, or to our father, depending on the mood I found him in, which of course I couldn’t know until I got there, quite a moody man. But in whatever mood I wanted quickly to see him, get him aside and have him explain things to me, how he felt about this wedding, mostly, and how he thought I should feel, and what the chances were, by and large, of Jude’s going through with it. He could bring me up to date and straighten me out quite fast if he didn’t happen to be engrossed in his work. He’d seen Judith, he’d talked to her and to the boy, or man, he’d know how it looked. Our father’s a philosopher, retired professor, in fact, of philosophy, but this makes him sound older than he is, he retired at an unconventional age, unconventionally early, and he’s lived almost since we were born on our ranch, making notes for a book on Pyrrhonic Skepticism, but mostly thinking, and drinking. He quit teaching because it irked him to have to meet appointments—to shave by the clock and put on a tie and arrive at a particular place at a particular time over and over. It wasn’t that way in Athens. A teacher in the golden age could stay in his bath however long he happened to wish to, and when he got out, some youth would be there with a towel and dry him off, and by the time he was dry and robed, the word would have got around and the young men would have gathered to question and to be questioned and end up convinced that the unexamined life is not worth living. We were raised that way ourselves; our father was Socrates, we were the youth and we sat at his feet. So did Jane, our mother, when she was home, which was probably more often than it seemed to us in those days. We liked to have her there with us at papa’s feet, because the questions were always so much trickier. Answers too. She was an incorrigible youth, the best youth we had.

The top was down on the Riley and I knew I was getting a burn on my nose and forehead. It came out in the valley papers the next day that this was the hottest June twenty-first since 1912, and if I’d known it I suppose I’d have stopped at one of our places and had another drink and put up the top before I went on. But I didn’t. It wouldn’t matter too much how I looked, an only attendant doesn’t have other attendants to compete with; she doesn’t have to be evenly tanned; if her forehead is flaking and her nose is peeling, *tant mieux*, so much the better for the bride. It’s her show anyhow. And besides, as I understood it, it wouldn’t be much of a show, no wedding guests at all, just gran and papa and Judith and I, and of course the famous medical student from Medicine Hat, or wherever. Who would we invite, though, if we wanted anybody? It would have to be old friends of Jane’s from

Hollywood or New York, or old colleagues of papa's from Cambridge. We didn't have any friends around Putnam. Gran did, some, but we didn't. We went all through grammar school and high school in Putnam, closest town to the ranch, we swam four years on the Putnam swimming team, but we just never mingled somehow. Everybody in town spoke to us and we spoke to them, but we didn't hang around after hours. We never went to Sunday school, and not much to the movies or anybody's slumber party, and we never served any soft drinks or had anybody stay all night at the ranch. We were insular, put it that way. We always came straight home from school because we liked what we had there at papa's feet. We didn't need people.

People came in droves, nevertheless, to Jane's funeral, but that was because she had become something of a celebrity, even in Putnam where writers don't count, and also because in our bereavement at the time of her death (though papa and gran had known for six months that she was going to die) nobody thought to tell the master of ceremonies that we naturally wanted the funeral to be private, the way we always wanted everything. We got to the chapel late, I remember, and they took us in by a side entrance and put us into a little room of our own behind a scrim and someone was playing "Sheep May Safely Graze" quite imprecisely on a Hammond organ in some other room. I felt identified with the organ, droning along unable to be very clear. But I was clear enough to know that granny was close to collapse, and I knew from the smell that our father had been seeking comfort in his accustomed way, and I was aware that we were at a conventional funeral and that it had nothing in common at all with the only other funerals we'd been to—the one for the cat, and the bird, and the various frogs, and the mouse that got drowned in the bucket. But this couldn't very well have been in that class, because Jane herself helped plan those, and this one had been thrust upon us while we weren't looking—organ, words, people and all. It was big, mainly; when we had to come out from behind the scrim and go forth into the light of day it was like Armistice Day outside, people overflowing the sidewalk and out into the street. We made an inexcusably poor appearance in the face of such a turnout, Judith and I with no hats, no gloves, no dark glasses—our father with no chlorophyll lozenge, and our grandmother unable for once to take any pleasure in a tribute to her daughter's reputation.

But that was a funeral and this was going to be a wedding. I sang a snatch of "Sheep May Safely Graze" and allowed myself to imagine how I'd handle it if it were my wedding. Not this way, I knew that much. I'd either have one or not have one. I'd either come down an aisle, all the way, stop at an altar, repeat my vows with greater unction than the unction they were given me in, and allow all the people to watch me lift the veil. And once the pronouncement had been made I'd sail, as if walking on air, back up the aisle to the Mendelssohn recessional with a smile that would exactly indicate whatever the guests might like to think of it as indicating. Let them believe in it, let them throw rice and honk horns. Or. Or make it a simple appearance before a justice of the peace, with pick-up witnesses, no exhibitionism, no intruding of this ritual on anyone except the principals. Either this or that. But. But I'd never try to have it both ways, I'd never, I swear I'd never choose to come home with a stranger and enact before our household gods the brutal double ceremony of the destruction of Athens and the founding of something that could never at its best equal it. Or come anywhere near it. Or be spoken of in the same breath. From heights you can only descend. Ask anyone. Ask me, preferably.

The sun was low now. It lay on the horizon out to my right, a little shapeless the way it gets when it hits the ground. I was close to the place where I could leave the highway and take the cross-country road to the ranch. You come to a billboard that says IN TIPTON IT'S BURDICK'S. The sign has been there as long as I can remember, and that's all it says. And then you come to a dairy, and very soon after the dairy you turn left across the northbound traffic, and you're on a road that goes toward the mountains. Our ranch is in the foothills.

The sun was at my back now, off my nose, off my forehead. I was fifty miles from home and I slowed down, all alone now, and let the Riley drift between fields of alfalfa, dark blue-green, like lakes, exchanging swampy breezes over my head and pulling me together. If now there would be a place to stop and have a drink, I'd stop drifting and go in. I'd find a place to comb my hair and put on some lipstick and see to my forehead and my nose and then I'd go out to the common room and take care of my thirst. I'd heed the demands, speak to a stranger and confide in him or even her that I was going to a wedding. But I knew this road like the place it was leading to and there were no common rooms on it, no taverns, no inns. The alfalfa fields would yield after a few miles and become cotton fields, and on beyond there would be vineyards with leafy vines delicately espaliered on a length of wire, looking young and adaptable to the basic training. I knew this road. The only buildings on it are pumphouses, unless you count as a building the emergency telephone booth at the crossroads near the power line. The one where we stopped and telephoned from the time Judith forgot her vaccination certificate on the way back to college our second year. We made the call and waited on the corner throwing rocks at targets until Jane came charging up with the certificate and quite a few other things we'd forgotten. Driving this car, too; wearing shorts, I remember, and a blue polo shirt of papa's with the tail out almost as long as the shorts.

Other times, other emergencies, and suddenly I was wondering about getting home a day early without telling anybody. Or asking. I hadn't thought about it as being anything peculiar, because I was going home, and one of the things about belonging somewhere is that you can go there without permission because it's where you belong. But did I? Did I belong, at such a time, where plans were being made and questions of policy being decided, matters of great moment like for example do they have sterling silver or stainless steel? That kind of thing, white towels or solid colors or stripes; planned parenthood, or children? They'd need to talk. They'd want to get things straight. They hadn't known each other very long.

I heard myself dismiss John Thomas Finch and his bride-elect with a word I don't remember ever having said before or ever having wanted to, and I was shocked to hear it coming from me less than fifty miles from home with such bitterness and so little warning. What a way to talk about someone I don't even know, and someone I know quite well.

I don't know when I stopped drifting. Probably at the same time the word came out, but I was moving again, kicking up dust along the edges of the vineyards and slamming along between them, past the power line and past something green and shining. I was a good way beyond it when the green and-shining got through to me for what it was—the old emergency booth, the one to use when in trouble. I stopped as soon as I knew it, left rubber on the road, and twisted around and looked back, and I was right. Our booth, there by the power line. I put an arm over the back of the seat and backed up the whole way and pulled in on plowed ground beside it and cut the motor. It was twilight now, or almost; vespers after a roaring day, and I let it come in on me—my homeland, after all. It was still hot, but the edge was off, and I sat quiet for a minute while the dust settled. I stripped off my gloves, pulled the belt apart, found coins for the phone, and kept hearing a sound I thought I knew and then knew it—the moan of a pump, not far away, quite close.

It wasn't far to seek, just across the road, a plank pump-house with a pipe sticking out of it spilling a clear head of water into a high cement weir, and I got out of the car and went straight to it and looked up at it—water, without which nothing for us farmers, and also for us vagrants. There was a sun-beat ladder leaning against the weir, and I went up four or five rungs, very gingerly on the one that was split around the nail, until I was high enough to touch the flow with a finger, and then with a whole hand. There was weight behind it, and enough force to push the hand away, so I took it away and grabbed the sides of the ladder and went on up and leaned far in. My mouth went to pieces with such a push against it but I made it hold while I drank. I made it hold again and again, and then

without even deciding to I stuck my head in and let the water tear through to the roots of my hair and sluice one ear. I didn't stay long and on the way down I forgot all about the rung that was split. It was very dusty where I landed, and I'm not sure but I think I cried a little. At times like this someone like me needs to be picked up and brushed off and gently told not to be so headlong, not so intrepid, to wait for a tavern or hang on until she's at home where goblets are and monogrammed glasses, and vagrancy is something you only read about in newspapers. I looked up at the ladder from where I sat and saw that it was in worse shape than I was, with a rung hanging loose below the nail like a broken rib; and I picked myself up and brushed myself off gently enough and crossed the road to the booth and went in and remembered what to do—leave the receiver on the hook, turn a crank on the battery box quite vigorously, then lift the receiver and listen for a voice to ask you what number you want and tell you how much it will cost. I did everything right and it worked.

“Yes?” I heard my grandmother say. It's what she says instead of hello, and I've never understood exactly what she means by it, so I always ask. Jane always asked too. I got it from her.

“Yes what?” I said. It should have identified me but it didn't, and she repeated the question, if it was one, and I dealt directly.

“Granny, this is Cassie,” I said.

“Whom?” she said.

“Not whom,” I said. “Who. Who this is is Cassandra Edwards. Of Berkeley California.”

“Just a minute,” she said and I heard her say: “Jim, it's Berkeley, I'm afraid something has happened to Cassie.”

“No no,” I called, “don't talk to papa, talk to me.” But I said it to nobody, and a moment later I heard another aside, still from my grandmother. “Just get a towel,” she said, “and come to the phone.”

After this there was silence, nothing. I hallooed a little and swatted some mosquitoes against the wall of the booth, but only two or three out of fifteen or twenty, and the next voice I heard was the voice of my sister Judith, a little breathless but intensely recognizable. I felt my knees buckle with recognition. Then I took a deep breath and firmed up.

“What's the towel for?” I said.

“What towel?” she said, and then: “Oh, I just came in from the pool and granny didn't want me dripping all over everything.”

“That's understandable,” I said. “At least to us housewives.”

“Where have you been,” she said, “I've been trying to get you ever since morning.”

“I've been away.”

“I know. I rang the house down. Is anything wrong?”

“Not very,” I said. “What did you want?”

“I wanted you to come home. Today. Quick.”

I couldn't say anything to this, at least nothing easy, because I couldn't think what it might mean. Besides, I was suddenly aware that there was a second telephone in our grandmother's bedroom and I felt certain that someone had by this time set John Thomas Finch up at the other one to listen in on the conversation until the time was ripe to introduce him. Be prepared for gaiety.

“Is anyone else on this phone?” I said, to get it over with.

“I don't think so. Why?”

“I thought I heard a click. Did you hear a click?”

“Well, what if you did?” Judith said: “They've had the whole line to themselves all year. We get our turn.”

“I didn't mean the party line,” I said. “I meant the phone in gran's room. Is somebody on that one?”

“No. Granny's in the kitchen and papa's at the bar.”

“Who with?”

“Nobody. He’s just sitting there. On a stool, like.”

I took the plunge.

“Where’s what’s-his-name?” I said, much too audibly.

“What’s whose name?” I got back, just as audibly.

My turn.

“Oh you know,” I said. “George. The sorcerer’s apprentice.”

I had not intended to say anything like this. It just happened and it created a silence on the other end.

“Jude,” I said, “are you still there?”

“I’m not quite sure,” she said. “Should I be?”

“Yes, please be.”

“I was afraid you might be this way,” she said. Her voice was very sad. Very remote. But nothing like so sad as I felt, nor so remote.

“Let me start over,” I said. “I was asking about—John Thomas Finch.”

“The one you think of as George what’s-his-name?”

“Not at all. The one I think of as John Thomas Finch—constantly.”

“I call him Jack. So can you.”

“Lucky day.”

“Stop it.”

“Oh I will. I want to. Tell me how.”

I meant it, and she could tell I did, I think. But she didn’t answer, and I was still afraid he might be listening.

“How will this sound to *him*?” I said.

“Sound to whom?” she said, and I was supposed to give the answer.

“To Jock,” I said, “or whatever we call him. Jack?”

“George.”

“Listen, Judith, we can’t both do this. Where is he?”

“He’s not here. That’s what I’ve been calling all day to tell you.”

I couldn’t say anything or even feel anything, but the mosquitoes lifted a song while I remained in suspension and tried for a way to speak. In the end, though, I didn’t have to say anything because the telephone operator cut in to tell me that my three minutes were up and that if I wished to continue for another three minutes I should deposit thirty cents. It took me a while to find it in the right-sized coins. I had to go back to the car and root through my purse, but I got it together finally and dropped into the slots and the line was still open. Judith spoke as soon as the ring of the last coin died.

“What’s this thirty cents,” she said, very full of life. “Where are you?”

“Me? You remember the place we called from when you forgot your vaccination certificate?”

“You’re there?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. It’s all full of waltzing mosquitos and I just fell off of a ladder.”

“*What?*” she said, quite a lot like granny. Concerned. I loved the sound of it. Loved it.

“Also,” I said, “one of my ears has been sluiced.”

“Sluiced?” she said. “What is it?”

“I’ll tell you later. I just called to see if it was all right to come home tonight. I mean instead of tomorrow.”

“Are you crazy?”

“It’s possible I am. In fact, I—”

“Just a minute,” Judith said. Then—“I just told gran and she wants to know if you’ve had dinner.”

“Yes, indeed, but thank her.” I couldn’t remember ever having eaten.

“How soon can you be here?”

“It depends how fast I go.”

“Go fast.”

“One thing first—”

“What?”

“If he’s not there, where is he, and don’t ask me who, just tell me.”

“Don’t talk so fast. What did you say?”

“Where is Jack?” I said. “Did you hear that?”

“Yes indeed. You’re coming in fine.”

“I asked where he was, or where he is. Where is he?”

“He’s gone to Los Angeles—West Los Angeles, to the University Hospital.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“Nothing. He wants a job—for a year from now.”

“Orderly?”

“No, resident. They live in.”

“Intern, don’t you mean?”

“The point is he’s not here. He’s in Los Angeles.”

“When did he go?”

“This morning. Sudden decision.”

“When will he be back?”

“Tomorrow sometime.”

“When’s the wedding?”

“Come on home and we’ll figure it out.”

“You don’t mean I get a vote?”

“Cass—?”

“Here.”

There was no sound for a moment, but when I heard her again it was as if she had crawled inside the telephone to come closer and give the word directly to me, as if we were accomplices in a dangerous enterprise and precise instructions were of paramount, so to speak, importance.

“Here’s what you do. Hang up now. Don’t say one more word. Just hang the receiver on the hook and come straight home. I’ll wait until I hear you hang up and then I will. Now—go!”

It was very full of life, the line between her mouth and my ear after she stopped instructing and waited for me to hang up. It was so charged up, so open, so electric, that I couldn’t bring myself to ki it, and I knew she wouldn’t quit until I did. It was very nice, listening to her waiting for me, and I fel very good about it because I was partly doing what she laid it on me to do. I was not saying one more word and nothing could have induced me to. But on the other hand I was not hanging up either, not while I could hear this beating silence, this close connection between where I was going and where I was now stuck, enchanted and under instructions, partly heeded. Let her wait. Let her stick it out, or let her break down and ask me if I was still there. But she didn’t and I didn’t really think she would. We both waited until time ran out and someone else spoke up asking me, and only me, if I wished to continue the conversation for another three minutes. I couldn’t answer, of course, but Judith did, very quickly.

“Oh no, nothing more. Thank you, operator.”

Then, right on top of it she tossed, obliquely, a last instruction.

“The other party,” she said, as if the operator would be delighted to hear it, “is practically home.”

~~I heard the line go dead then, really dead, and I leaned back against the wall of the booth with the receiver still against my ear. I was the other party, and how well I knew it—awaited, instructed, invited, and possessed of some priceless information having to do with Jack Lynch or Jerk Finch, a name I would never be able to master no matter how hard I might try. But I might try.~~

I hung the receiver on its hook, gave it a small pat, and unfolded the glass door and stood in the frame of it, looking out at my mother’s car, so nicely parked, ready to take me, and beyond it at the lovely head of water spilling endlessly into such a tall cup. Then I banged myself on the ear with the heel of my hand the way they taught us years ago to break up a water lock, and got into the car and fastened the seat belt and went toward home. It was all but dark now. The country smelled hot and familiar. I followed the beam and went singing a song of good sentiment and high courage—the “Marseillaise” itself.

THE ROAD takes a slight curve just before it comes to our buildings. It's an uphill curve and it doesn't allow for any perspective of approach. You get to the top of the curve and suddenly it's all there behind a fence on the left side of the road, starting with the corral, then farther on, the house, then the shop and garage, and beside the gate the little adobe house where Conchita Padilla, a highly accomplished shirt ironer and floor waxer, lives with her husband, Tomas Padilla, an indifferent gardener. There's a slightly feudal aspect here, this house by the gate. It gives the sense of a gatekeeper, guardhouse, drawbridge, and difficulty of access, though all you have to do is turn in at the gate, which is always open, and crunch along the stones of the driveway to our house, which stretches out quite long and is made of railroad ties.

Before I hit the top of the curve I could see a glow, like a fire, or lights above a town, and a minute later I knew what it was—somebody's idea of leaving a light in the window for me. Everything very bright—floodlights on the lawn and over the corral, coach lights beside the door, rural electrification all over everywhere, and it stabbed me to think that someone had flipped all these switches to guide me home and get me there. But someone had. Not my mother, for good and sufficient reasons. Not my grandmother, because she is not prodigal with lights the way she is with charge accounts. Not my father, because he never thinks of this kind of thing.

I gave up the "Marseillaise" at the gate and crunched down the drive, pulled up at the door, and hit the accelerator twice, quite hard, before I cut the motor. The dog came first, around the side of the house, very fierce, hackles up, but when I got out of the car she stopped barking, released the hackles and shook hands, quite cordially. By that time my father had come out and was moving around the car toward me. He was wearing white pants and a white shirt and dark glasses, and he held me off at arm's length and looked at me a minute before he spoke.

"Now which one are you?" he said. I don't know why he said it. It stopped being funny years ago, if it ever was.

"I'm Cassandra," I nevertheless said, "the one who wailed from the walls of Troy. And you stuck me with it yourself, so don't look at *me*."

He pulled me in, then, against his beautiful shirt.

"It's a good name," he said. "I like it."

"Then that's all that matters," I said. And I stayed there happily trapped against his collar and some of his neck, inhaling the pure distillation which has always, as long as I can remember, come consistently one-hundred proof from his pores to let me know who it is. For a moment I was back in Athens with the other two youths at the sage's feet, and the sage must have known how it was with me because he released me one split second before I burst into tears. I don't know for certain what they would have been tears of if they had burst and flowed, but I suppose of relief—the relief of having some philosophical arms around me, for a change. Arms I could trust, I mean, and a distillation I could understand and identify as being something as universal as Five-star Hennessy, after a bleak season of essences called Joie de Patou or Femme de Rochas that I could tell apart without greatly caring which was which. Or whom it was on.

I don't know when my grandmother came out, but when I looked around, after the release, she was standing on the bricks between the coach lamps, looking very fragile and elegant, and being battered by moths. My grandmother does not admire moths. She believes they eat people's clothes and spin webs in people's uncooked Cream of Wheat, but she waited there surrounded until papa released me and I came to release her.

"Let's go in out of the moths," I said, after I kissed her, and she was wonderfully willing, but she

stopped to bat some away from the door before she opened it.

~~“Try to think of them as the emblem of summer,” I told her, going in. “They’re pretty.”~~

She closed the door on them, though, and on my father opening the trunk of the car, and we were inside, and I was like the one who is it in a game of hide-the-thimble, looking around, at the piano, at the desk, at the chairs, at whatever offered while my grandmother was telling me how adorable it was of me to come home a day early; how clairvoyant for me to arrive like this, when Judy wanted so much to have me to herself for a little while before the wedding, while the young man was away.

This caught my attention.

“Why would she want me to herself?” I asked. I think there may have been a small snarl in the question, but if there was, my grandmother either didn’t notice it or elected not to. I walked across the living room, the full length, and looked out the big windows at the lawn, and out beyond it, at the pool and on out farther at the river bottom which I couldn’t see in the dark. These are in descending stages. The pool is two steps down from the lawn and behind a railroad tie fence, so that you can’t stand at the window and look directly at it. Ties get in the way, but I could see that the underwater light was on and the water was churned up. I saw the flash of an arm, or it may have been a leg, and then a lower leg stopped it and I watched farther on in the direction I thought it was going, while my little grandmother was not exactly answering my question but talking around the edges of it in what struck me as quite a tiresome way—telling me how important it is for a girl who is going to be married to have a little last time alone with her family—particularly her mother, before she takes the big step.

“What mother?” I said. I saw the leg again, or the arm. Leg, I think. Then I stopped looking and turned to gran, who was looking as sad as I knew she would now be looking and telling me that that was what she meant. Without Jane, or as I believe she said it, with Jane gone, it put a great deal of responsibility on her, and on me too, to play a mother’s part, to substitute for the loss. At such a time a girl needs advice and training.

I couldn’t remember Jane ever giving either of us much advice, but I didn’t say so. I went over to the piano and looked at the music on the rack. Mozart K 475.

“If she’s so wild for advice,” I said to gran, “why’s she staying out there under water?”

“She told me to tell you to come out the minute you got here.”

“She did?”

It must have sounded stiff, or unbelieving, because granny came right in on it telling me how Judith had been calling me every half hour all day long. . .

“I know,” I said, “she told me.”

. . .and how when the young man decided to go to Los Angeles, Judith could not be coaxed into going with him, because she wanted so much to get me home and have me to herself for a little while.

“That’s what you said the other time,” I said, but easily, and with no bite, or not much. “What kind of advice does she need? Like whether to get married, or what to wear to the wedding?”

“Oh,” gran said, “it’s all decided. We went to Fresno yesterday and got it at Magnin’s. It’s very plain, but she’s happy with it.”

“And that’s what counts, isn’t it?” I said.

“We’ll have to find you something, too,” gran said, and I told her I’d already found it, and charged it to her account also at Magnin’s but in Oakland, and that I was happy with it, which is what counts.

She looked very happy, and then, suddenly, worried.

“Cassie,” she said, “you look tired. Are you sure you’ve had dinner?”

I nodded. Papa was coming in with my things. I didn’t want to display any clothes right then, and so I went and took the box of chocolates out of his hands and told him to put everything in my room and I’d unpack later.

“Here,” I said to gran, and held out the box, “are some bitter chocolate cherries. But keep the box

level until they settle down.”

“I’ll put them in the refrigerator,” she said and thanked me quite lavishly for always remembering what she likes best and even what brand. I don’t know why this always touches her so, if it does. There’s nothing hard about it. But I seldom get praised for the hard things I do, and I do some of the hardest things. Things like waking up in the morning and going to sleep at night, all alone except when I’m with someone; and it’s getting harder and harder for me to be really with anyone. And more or less impossible, on the other hand, not to be frequently with someone. What’s left is hardest of all—writing that dumb thesis, between times.

Papa came back into the living room empty-handed.

“How’s your thesis?” he said, and I told him I’d tell him in minute detail some other time, but that right now I probably should go out and pay my respects to the bride. Elect.

“She can wait,” he said. “Let’s have a drink.”

“Lovely,” I said, and it did seem lovely, suddenly, the whole idea, getting here, being in this house where I know everything so well, the wastebaskets and the paintings and the herringbone wood on the ceiling; my sister out there breaking her lungs in the pool waiting for me, and me inside about to have a drink with our father.

Our house spreads around a lot. There’s the big long living room with the entrance door at one end and the wall of windows at the other, then two steps up from it, like a little stage, there’s a minor living room with a stone fireplace and bookshelves and a mosaic counter which marks off the limits of the kitchen without excluding it. That is to say, you can sit at the bar on the minor living room side and look into the kitchen; or you can sit at the bar on the kitchen side and look into the minor living room and on down into the major one where the piano is and most of the paintings and the headless wooden statue Jane brought back from Mexico. It’s a good house, and you can look around in it for a long time without discovering whether it’s predominantly Mexican, or Japanese, or Roman, or what. It’s a lot of things.

My father was on the kitchen side of the counter, out of sight, down on his haunches, I suppose, getting bottles and glasses out of the cabinet underneath. And I supposed right, because bottles began to appear on the counter, and then glasses, and then my father himself rose up with a tray of ice cubes and started putting them into an ice bucket. I took a little last look out the window at the pool with the light shining up out of it and part of a human body flashing on the surface, and then I turned away, jumped up the two steps to the little living room and went to the bar and stood there running my hand over the tiles. They felt very familiar. This is where I almost always did my Latin when I was in high school, with the textbook and the notebook and the verb wheel and the props and the pencils spread out all the way from the copper sink to the last stripe of tile. Very fine place to study Latin. I leaned across the counter and turned a handle and watched a ribbon of water unfurl from the goose-necked spigot to the little copper sink, all soundlessly and with no splash. But my father noticed it anyhow and told me to quit playing in the water and announce what I’d have.

“Brandy and soda, if you please,” I said. It’s not my favorite drink, but it’s papa’s, and it seemed polite to follow his lead, since it was just us.

“Very civilized choice,” he said, and he put back two of the bottles—the gin, that is, and the vermouth—and splashed enough brandy into my glass to make my grandmother, at the far end of the kitchen, take notice and offer me dinner again, quickly.

I declined again. I’d got more or less out of the habit of eating. I could come quite close to taking my skirt off without undoing it and the bridesmaid’s dress was a size smaller than I’d been wearing for the last five years.

“I’m really not hungry. I’m just thirsty,” I said, and I held my glass up while papa poured soda into it and then gave me some ice cubes.

It's true, I was very thirsty. I didn't wait to propose a toast or clink my glass against my father's, even let him drink first. I took a drink quite fast and told my grandmother if she'd like to see my wedding shoes or the dress they were in the brown-and-white striped boxes, and that the bills were inside, or the sales slip, or whatever they call it when you don't pay cash.

"I O U," papa said, and granny left immediately for my room, while I drank again and realized my father was right, that brandy is a civilized choice, very complex and rewarding, much more twisty than scotch.

My father drank too, but deliberately, as if he had all night, and all day tomorrow—a lifetime, in fact, of nights and days. He'd made the civilized choice long ago and he could make it last as long as he lasted.

He looked very colonial with his mustache clipped so short it scarcely looked like one, and the black-and-white hair quite short too and showing more white than black, and a ruddy outdoors look which never came from outdoors. I imagined, looking at him, that I just might have an outdoors look myself. My hair had been through a long hard day of sun, wind, dust, and finally water, all the elements but fire. And so had the rest of me.

"Would you like it," I said, "if I went and combed my hair?"

"I'd like it better if you'd settle down," he said. "Your hair's all right. You look like a dryad."

He'd picked one of the very few images that might content me, and I thanked him, and relaxed. But only for the space of a swallow, because I immediately began to wonder what I could find to tell him about my thesis to give it some importance, where none was.

I sat there trying to remember what was on the page I'd pulled out of the typewriter and crumpled up before I left the apartment, before I folded the cover over the keyboard of a piano that is half mine before I jumped ship a day early and lit out for home to let myself be introduced to someone who departed before I arrived, and whom I would now not have to meet until tomorrow. It gave me a certain freedom, the reprieve, and I decided, since I couldn't remember anything much about my thesis, to forget it.

"Well, what's he like?" I said.

My father didn't ask whom I had in mind, but he didn't answer the question either. He got philosophical instead and gave me a speech about how it's not easy to say what anyone's like, even among people you think you know well; and this hit me because, like most of papa's propositions, it was infuriatingly true. Judith Edwards, for example, whom I once thought I knew like myself, like the back of my hand, as they say. What made her decide to try New York, alone, for a year, before we tried Paris, together? Who knows what anybody's like?

I took an ice cube out of the bucket, closed my fist over it, and let it drip into the copper sink. This comes under the head of playing in the water, but papa didn't apparently notice, and it had the effect of rallying my forces and not letting me give up.

"Granting all that," I said in the way I seem to have to talk to my father, always having to grant him something before I can get on with whatever it is, "granting all you say about the difficulty of saying what anybody is like, still you must have formed some opinion about him in three days, or however long he's been around."

"Five days," papa said. "Gran and I met them at the Bakersfield airport last Sunday."

"Do they have a license?"

My father looked at me curiously and said he didn't think they needed one; it was a commercial plane; and this left me in the position of having to tell him I didn't mean a license to fly, I meant a marriage license. The law requires that you file an intention to wed at least three days before you do so, as I understood it.

My father nodded, but I couldn't tell whether it was in agreement with my understanding of the

law or in answer to my question. There was nothing to do but ask again.

“Do they have a marriage license, do you know?”

“I suppose so,” papa said. “They went to Visalia to the courthouse Monday.”

I felt my hand tighten on the ice cube. To go to a county courthouse, sixty miles away, and apply for a license to marry is practically as serious an avowal as the very wedding. They got here Sunday. They applied Monday. They were not easily distracted from their purpose, or purposes, apparently.

I dropped the ice cube into the copper basin and it lay there in the drain looking so useless that I turned on the water to help it melt and get it over with. Papa didn't say anything, but I turned it off fairly soon and got back to my drink. And then back to my research.

“Do you like him?” I said, and I knew immediately that this was no way to have put it. My father never was one to deal in such simple terms as personal liking or disliking. He'd want to have the terms defined—by liking him did I mean did he find him congenial socially (which, of course, was what I did mean) or did he approve of him in various respects—did he approve, for example, of his attitude toward medicine, or toward monogamy, or money, or mountebanks? He'd want the terms defined, and then either broadened out or narrowed down.

But he didn't do any immediate cross-questioning. I finished my drink and set the glass down nearer to him than to me, and he interpreted the move correctly and made me another drink, this time with slightly more brandy and slightly less soda, and the same number of ice cubes. Two. It was an unfatherly amount of brandy, and while I was thanking him for it, he splashed some more into his own glass without adding any soda and answered my question in a way I hadn't at all expected.

“You shouldn't ask me whether I like him or not,” he said. “The way you mean it, I don't suppose I like anybody.”

It made me like him very much to hear him say that, so concisely and so briefly. I looked across at him and saw that he was looking on out behind me, quite pointedly, and I swung around on my stool and saw my grandmother coming up the steps between the lower living room and the upper one with a shoe in her hand, one of my wedding shoes.

“Rowena,” my father said to my grandmother from behind me, “Cassie is very much concerned to find out what Jack Finch is like.”

“He's all wrapped up in Judy,” gran said in a fluty voice, “and that's the most important thing.”

She was coming toward us with the shoe, and I swung the stool around toward the counter again, so that I didn't have to look at her saying things like that. They were her kind of thing, and I'd no doubt be hearing a great many of them, but I could separate them from the coquettish facial expression that went with them just by not looking at the face.

“Is Jude wrapped up too?” I said. I said it possibly a little too loudly or pointedly just to let her know how a phrase like wrapped-up sounds to the sensitive ear; but though I meant it only for her, it was my father who answered.

“I don't think we need to be too much concerned,” he said. “They seem to understand each other.”

This was the second time he'd used the word concerned, and I considered asking him why he kept using it on me. Was the implication that what Judith did was no concern of mine, because if that was what he meant I should make it very clear that I could not possibly be less concerned. If a person of her stature and of her gifts chooses to sell herself short and go the way of all suburbia, who am I to speak up for what I think of as virtue? Who am *I*? Or, possibly, who *am* I? Make it who *was* I, because once I was somebody.

I kept thinking things like this, but not letting them really get to me. And I didn't say a word, I know that. So I was quite surprised to hear my father speak to me in the sort of voice people use on children.

“What's the matter, Cassandra?” he said. My name sounded good and his voice saying it sounded

so kind, and so full of his word, concern, that I think I might almost have told him how I felt—not just about this but about everything—my classes, my job, my entanglements, my nights turning into days and then back again with no firm markers, no dawns or sunsets or landmarks, except maybe the bridge, and the endless belt of plates and glasses and toothpaste and towels and couches. I think I might have, but I didn't, because my grandmother came up to the end of the counter and stood between us holding the shoe and saying she thought it was exquisite, beautifully made, but did the man make me step down on a measuring stick, because it looked miles too long for me.

In Rowena Abbott's feeling, small feet are an unfailing sign of gentle birth. Her daughter Jane's feet were size four and a half, quite narrow, and a great satisfaction to her.

"Did the man?" she said, and I gave up thinking what I could or couldn't tell my father and said yes, and then no, because it wasn't a man in the first place, it was a woman and she had simply brought out shoes she thought I might like and had me try them on to see if they fitted.

"If the shoe fits, charge it," my father said quite pleasantly, without concern, and I took the shoe out of my grandmother's hand and explained to her that the inch on the end was all design. I showed her a place an inch or so up from the end and told her I didn't go personally any farther than that, and then I kicked off my shoes and put the new one on and walked around the rug to let her see.

"Walk on out," she said, and I did, to the edge of the steps and took a quick look out the window, saw the light coming up through the water, but nothing else.

"Beautiful," my grandmother said, "very striking," and my father said he thought I'd look even better if both my legs were the same length.

I had taken the shoe off, demonstration over, and was walking back barefooted to the bar when the telephone rang. Four short rings.

"That's for us," my father said, and sat where he was.

"Answer it, Cassie," my grandmother said.

I set the shoe down on the counter, and started toward the telephone, and then stopped. I had a quick frightened feeling it might be someone I'd neglected to say goodbye to in Berkeley, and I didn't care to say goodbye from here, nor to explain any neglect.

"You answer it, Granny," I said, "and if by any chance it's for me, say I'm not here."

The ring came again, four shorts, while my grandmother stood looking puzzled.

"They might want me to come back and correct some more examinations," I said, "and I don't want to, I want to stay home."

She moved toward the telephone then, and I sat down on the stool, and took a drink while she said yes, whatever it means, and then whom and who. It was clearly a longdistance call, with an interlocutor involved, and a faulty connection.

"What's this about your having to go back?" my father asked me, and I told him it was nothing, I corrected all the examinations in the world, but that I just didn't like answering telephones on my vacation, and I thought gran would answer it for me if I made it sound threatening.

Nothing much was happening on the telephone. Granny was waiting, apparently, for the operator connect the other end.

"Where's it from?" I said, and she shook her head, nervously, as if she were trying to hear something being said to her on the line. I passed the time looking at my handsome long shoe. It was made of white ribbed silk and there was a very small gold tip on the heel which I placed in the exact center of one of the little square tiles, where it could not possibly have appeared to better advantage, round peg on a square base.

"Shoes belong in closets," my father said, "if not on feet," but I left it where it was and kept an ear cocked toward the conversation which had not begun, but appeared to be going to, and then did.

"Yes, she is," my grandmother said in a very gracious voice. Then, "Just a minute, I'll call her."

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