

Ruth Jespersen

GRANDCHILD

"This is my son Euclid's daughter," the tiny grandmother said--rather irritably--to the stout whitefaced lady in the beads and the salmon-colored satin, as Grandchild stepped into the room.

The visitor put down her teacup, which made a small surprised sound landing in the saucer. She wore a glittering black net over her hard black hair. The net was bound low across the middle of her bulging forehead, and gave the impression that it grew as a part of her.

"Dear," she murmured, smiling rigidly.

The grandmother added: "She came this afternoon. She is going to live here. We are going to take care of her for awhile."

The way she said "take care of" sounded ominous.

"How perfectly nice."

The ladies continued their conversation, which was about a local cleric, not their own Lutheran minister, who had gone into the real-estate business and then had himself elected to Congress. The visitor queried, "But will he end up right?"

"No, he will end lying down like everybody else," said Grandchild.

"She always was too smart for her age," remarked the grandmother mysteriously.

Grandchild spoke coldly. "Grandma, I don't know this lady's name."

"Oh! I'm sorry!" She swished about the room in her black silk crepe. Her hair like mowed brown grass was held in a brown net which throbbed up and down to show that she was upset. Even the neat cat-whisker bows on her scuffed brown oxfords trembled a little from her distress. Grandchild realized the apology was to the visitor, not herself. "This is Mrs. Lamb. She used to live in the house next door."

Mrs. Lamb exclaimed, "Why dear, I remember you, of course I do! Your mummy used to bring you over here on Saturdays with your two bruvvers for your grandmummy to take care of so she could go to New York. Why, of course! You used to play 'Flow Gently, Sweet Afton' and 'Liebestraum' on the pianner. My. Can you still play 'Liebestraum'? I always loved that song. I used to listen to you while I sewed my satin patchwork quilt. You played real well. You couldn't of been more than six or seven at the time. Can you still play it?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Lamb, you're very kind, but you know, I, well really, I've never fancied myself as a musician particularly, and well, you know, really."

"Oh do sit down and play it, there's a dear girl."

Grandchild played a little of it and she roared sentimentally from her armchair: "My dram of love...."

Grandchild glanced at her. The black hairnet had slipped upward, leaving a horrifying long red line on her constricted white-powdered face.

"Grandma, will you have the piano tuned for me? I'll pay you for it, honestly I will. I simply cannot play it when it is in this condition."

The two old ladies were settling their hairnets.

"What? What's the matter with the piano? It sounds all right to me. That piano, I'll have you know, was good enough for your poor grandfather when he was alive, with all those sinotts and things he used to play, and your Aunt Daphne never complained about it either."

"Daphne--she's the one that married the Spanish feller," Mrs. Lamb remembered funereally.

"Besides, girl," said the grandmother, ignoring the interruption, "how can you pay me for anything? Didn't you have to move out of your Green-witch Village apartment because you had no money left and were near dead from starvation, and am I not accepting you here out of the kindness of my heart?"

"Really! Well now, isn't that interesting," observed Mrs. Lamb.

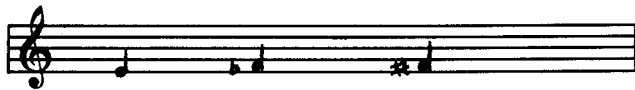
"Oh please, Grandma, you know the piano hasn't been touched since 'Semper Fidelis' was number one on the hit parade. A piano now and then feels tired and needs a tonic, so to speak. Say you understand, Grandma? I'm learning to play all sorts of things, and can play some of them andante, andantino, largo, larghetto, larghissimo and others of them in the Phrygian mode. I'd like to present a special program in your honor, Grandma, consisting of the 'Marche Militaire,' the 'Saber Dance,' the 'Light Cavalry Overture' and the 'Anvil Chorus.'"

"In all the many years we've had this piano nobody else ever found anything wrong with it," the grandmother said indignantly. "That piano, I'll have you know, was a very expensive piano, even if we did buy it secondhand at Bosanquet's Auction House. Your Aunt Daphne used to play 'Home, Sweet Home' on it and a lot of other pretty hymns, and we'd all stand around and sing on Sunday nights after supper."

"'Home, Sweet Home,' now that's a real pretty song," simpered Mrs. Lamb. "Uh, about Daphne and her Spanish hubbie. Do you ever see her anymore? I understand they're living over in Brooklyn Heights."

"Certainly! We see them nearly every Christmas!" replied the grandmother, continuing her indignant tone.

"Look, Grandma, here's what I mean. I'll play
and now I'll play and now I'll play



"--Hear it, Grandma?"

"That's gratitude for you," cried the grandmother. "And after all I'm doing for you. Oh winter wine, you are not so unkind, as man's ingratitude. How thankless as a tooth it is to have a serpent child," upon which words her dental plate slipped and she clicked it into place.

"Uh, well, guess I have to be getting home to supper," said Mrs. Lamb, reaching beneath the pink satin bodice to give a hitch to her stays and hauling herself out of the armchair. "Now don't forget to come see me, and you too, dear."

The grandmother pulled herself together and revealed a radiant assemblage of perfectly square white teeth and extremely red gums. The ladies embraced and adjusted their hairnets once more.

"We surely will, Cora dear, and thank you so much for coming."

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"How could you disgrace me before that woman?" said the grandmother. "Why did you have to make a scene? Disgracing me before the neighbors--you've done it a hundred times. Well, and you haven't turned out any better than I always said you would. What a terrible child you were! You'll probably wind up like your Aunt Daphne, marrying some man who isn't even white--"

"Grandma, as I am familiar with your ethnology of the foreign-born, and with the sweet reasonableness of your mind in general, I imagine it pointless to mention that Uncle Bienvenido is in fact a member of that division of mankind comprising the peoples known as Caucasian, as are most native Asturians--"

"That's exactly what I mean!" cried she. "Why did he have to be born in a place like that? Astoria, Long Island I wouldn't have minded, but Asturia, Spain!" She concluded, her face and manner melancholy: "Oh well, what's done can't be helped," sighed, and produced a couple more of these scrambled platitudes: "There's no use crying when some rain must fall. Whatever will be is the way it is."

She remembered Mrs. Lamb, and railed at Grandchild: "Don't you know that woman is the worst gossip in the whole neighborhood? Comes in here just to see the inside of my house. So proud of her Irish lace curtains. You ought to see the way that woman acts! Gossip! Irish lace! House! Gossip! You ought to've seen her face when I showed her the elevator I installed, she practically died with envy. They haven't got as much money as they pretend to have, you can be sure of that!"

"Why Grandma, I always thought Mrs. Lamb was an old friend of yours."

"So she is. I've known her nearly thirty years. What a detestable woman! Can't bear to let anyone get ahead of her. Thinks she has the nicest house in the neighborhood. And what an odd-looking creature! The way she gets herself up--ha ha ha ha ha! She's the laughing stock of the whole community!"

"Oh . . . well, as long as she's a friend of yours."

"Certainly."

"I do remember her, I found. She made a powerful impression on my young life. You sent me over there to deliver a message once--and I couldn't find her downstairs, so I went upstairs. I met her in the hall. She was en déshabille. She screamed loudly on seeing me. It shook me up a great deal, so that I delivered the message in a trembling voice. She used to take a bath every day. Her whole upstairs smelled of soap and powder, it was heavenly. At that time my mother used to bathe the boys and me once a week, once every two weeks when it was very cold. She bathed all three of us at a time, in the same tub, until we became too big to fit into it together. I never knew until I met Mrs. Lamb that there were people who took a bath every day, and with nobody else in the tub."

"I don't intend to sit here and listen to any of your criticisms of Euclid!" said the grandmother, her hairnet beginning to throb. "People who criticize Euclid should only have half as much brains!"

"Shouldn't it be half as *many* brains?" inquired Grandchild, but the grandmother had stalked from the room. Grandchild went on musing aloud:

"I wasn't thinking about criticizing anyone,

Grandma. I was thinking about Mrs. Lamb and the way she brought to life for me my mother's girlhood, my mother before she emerged from her wealthy family and her growing renown as a musician to marry my harsh father . . . my pretty young smiling mother of the photographs, in her boating dress, in her wedding gown, in her fur-trimmed tunic suit. . . .

"Let me tell you about the day of the message, Grandma. Mrs. Lamb calmed down and gave me a box of crackers, but I could not eat them because they were animal crackers. She asked me what else I might like and I said that alphabet soup would be all right, but she did not have any. She asked me if I would like to see her closet and I said yes indeed.

"Mrs. Lamb was wearing dainty glove silk bloomers and a hand-stitched camisole with wide shoulder straps of mauve ribbon and lace, and a rose-and-white batiste dressing sacque, and mercerized lisle hose. I sat on her Kurdistan carpet in my sunsuit and marveled as she revealed to me the glories of her closet which were reflected in the silver glow of the pier glass between the sunlit windows and the gold glow of the brass bed: her street frocks of navy blue tricotine and tricolette, her dinner gowns of georgette crepe with crimson figured chiffon, of pongee silk and amber beaded crepe de chine, her evening wraps of black chiffon velvet, her day dresses of white Irish linen and white soft-finished nainsook, her afternoon frocks of pale green georgette with flowing sashes and especially one poplin peplum blouse model in silver gray with leaf-design embroidery, and then her wool velour suits, fox-collared, her box-model coats with taupe nutria and natural raccoon, her delft blue dolman coat with its pretty polka-dot lining, and then the things to go with these, the charmeuse blouses in all her soft shades tastefully piped with contrasting colors, her rosegarden shelves

of envelope chemises and nainsook lingerie of the loveliest sort, her French kid gloves, her modish gun-metal kid walking boots with military heels and her pale gray colonial pumps and her short vamp boots, and then the steamer rugs of bright blue silk plush and mohair for the Hudson River Day Line and that tour abroad and the zibeline motor robes in which she went riding in her Willys-Knight or was it her Pierce-Arrow--"

Uncle Osric entered the room.

"Well darling, making yourself at home, are you?"

"Not exactly, Uncle Osric. I was thinking about my deceased mother and hunting down some eternal truth, using a temporal sartorial approach."

"An estimable pursuit, probably. Reality can sometimes be grasped, though never held, by its minutiae. The latest minutia here is the elevator. Come along and let me show you."

They had installed it in an alcove under the stairs, in the place formerly adorned by a magnificent black walnut combination chair, hatrack and mirror.

"Uncle Osric, Uncle Osric, what has become of the combination chair, hatrack and mirror? I cannot suffer it to be stricken thus suddenly from my soul."

"Darling, see how amazing it is to operate, look, you can do it yourself. It's no more difficult than folding away a Murphy bed and even a child could operate it, the man from the company told us. It's quite an enhancement really, and even Hannibal likes it. Nobody here uses the stairs anymore, that's old-

fashioned. The man from the company expressed astonishment that some suburbanites manage to live without an elevator. Ah yes. Your grandmother is in some ways a very brilliant woman."

They rode up and down between the first and second floors for twenty minutes.

"Science, technology, progress, improvement, public utilities, private utilities," said Grandchild.

"I take it you're not impressed."

"No, I find it quite inspirational. But I am sorry about the combination chair, hatrack and mirror."

"This too is the mind's product," said he.

"Yes. Although it has such ugly gears. But you are right, Uncle Osric. It may be a reverberation of the genius of Grandpa, who chopped his kitchen window into a door and sowed an Eden in his tiny backyard."

"Oh, it's not so tiny," said he.

"It was, before Grandpa touched it. Let's go take a look at that porch he built, that he called the verandah."

"You see, darling, it really is a verandah. The style is late British Colonial with some Eastern influences, as in the pyramidal roof and minaret."

"I didn't know you knew anything about architecture."

"I don't, really. When I was a ship's doctor I learned a few things here and there."

"I wish you'd tell me them, Uncle Osric."

"Oh, nothing really crucial."

They went out to the porch and sat in old white wicker chairs.

"His verandah needs another coat of dark green," mourned Grandchild. "And the strawberry blossoms are dead, and the apple trees look like scarecrows, and the lilies languish, and the rosebush is ravaged, and weeds wave where willows were, and the moth and the rust, and the cherry tree burgeons not and neither does it bear, nor the vines of melons, nor the deep dahlias nor yet the honeysuckle, and where are the goldfish in his white stone fountain?"

"I know Father would care for them from beyond the grave if he were able" was his answer.

"Above all minutiae, above all the rose. The combination chair, hatrack and mirror still meekly affirms its existence in Bosanquet's or some other moldy auction warehouse but ashes of roses are blown away. Where is the savior who will heal the sick rose? Tell me, are you still practicing medicine, Uncle Osric?"

"Yes, darling--that is, I am in a way, but I have almost no patients, and those that do come to me I don't charge. Sometimes a patient asks me for a prescription for a drug or something that I've never heard of. Then, if he knows how to spell the name of the drug, I give him the prescription. About the best you can do for people, poor things, is give them whatever they think they want."

"Then are you enjoying life, Uncle Osric?"

"No, darling, not really. Nobody is. Why do you ask?"

"I was thinking of something Walt Whitman said: 'You must not know too much, or be too precise or scientific about birds and trees and flowers and water-craft: a certain free margin, and even vagueness--perhaps ignorance, credulity--helps your enjoyment of these things.' You claim to be ignorant and credulous, don't you? At least you haven't read a medical journal in many years. You are ignorant, and yet you are not enjoying life."

"Well darling, I don't know that I'm really in any disagreement with your man of the open road. Maybe I'm not as ignorant about life as I ought to be--as I'd like to be. Medicine is the most ancient of the mysteries but there are very few people who can be helped anyway and when it happens I always say to myself, 'Osric, can you beat that, you cured him of it, he was sick and you cured him, I can't believe it.' And I'm quite wrong of course, because he is going to die of what I cured him of, he is going to die because . . . nature is illness. Birds and trees and flowers and water-craft are merely manifestations of the illness that is nature, about which we know almost nothing, except that we are sick. Better not to know even that, as then life becomes likelier to enjoy Your Mr. Whitman was right, darling. Look at how much enjoyment the Otis Elevator Company has given to your ignorant grandmother--why, that elevator is practically her raisin detter. And it too will end up in somebody's attic. A large attic, probably."

"I am very fond of you, Uncle Osric. . . . By the way, did you know that the archaic meaning of the word *fond* is foolish--or ignorant?"

"You mustn't always be looking on the dark side of life, darling."

There appeared in the doorway of the porch a smallish man heavysset and thick in his limbs, his knobby pale blue eyes twisted up into a blank displeased stare, his bulldog face topped by a round ring of barley-colored hair. He bowed low to his brother in a most eloquent manner and flung a question at Grandchild.

"Have you been taking any courses lately?"

"Why yes, Uncle Hannibal. I took a course in ethnobotany. But it had no political content, I assure you. Philosophical, maybe."

"*Everything* has a political content," he stated emphatically in his flat voice. "The mere existence of ethwhatever-it-is is a political *fact*. Furthermore, the taking of courses--for reasons other than the obtaining of a salary increment, a consideration which is certainly irrelevant here--implies certain attitudes. Yes, *attitudes*," said he, glaring. "The place and number of this so-called ethno course, if you please, and the full name of its so-called professor."

He jotted down these details on a small pad as Grandchild gave them, and turned disdainfully and sped away.

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Aunt Butterfly, Aunt Rochelle, Aunt Yerma, Cousin Eve and Cousin Lilith stood ranged along the wall. The windowed sunlight flourished wanly on their drab cheeks and their examining eyes were small slits of blue ice.

"What's this?" asked Aunt Butterfly. She took a brown notebook from the bottom of the suitcase, which lay open on the blue chenille bedspread.

Grandchild turned quickly from the closet where she was hanging up her other pair of blue jeans.

"Oh, just an old budget-book in which I keep accounts and things. It wouldn't be of any interest to you."

"That so?" said Aunt Butterfly. "But I understand you had to move out of your apartment in Green-witch Village because you didn't have any money left. How can you keep a budget if you don't have any money, hey? Listen to this girls: 'Last night I wept because I was so struck by the dissimilarity of the real to the ideal. Today I laughed at the same thing.'"

Grandchild could not move, she went dead with grief and horror, but spoke gently.

"Oh Aunt Butterfly, it isn't decent, it isn't human, to go prying into people's things. Please give me that book."

Aunt Butterfly laughed a crazy little laugh. "And here's another: 'My love and I wept in each other's arms. My love got up one morning and went to church alone. Come ye to church good people. . . .' Saaaaay, what kind of a life did you lead in that Green-witch Village anyhow, hey? A lot of weeping, hey? And what other hijinks?"

"Aunt Butterfly, I implore you," said Grandchild. The stout gray-haired woman handed her the book, laughing her crazy little laugh.

"Supper," said Uncle Hannibal, appearing in the doorway.

Grandchild, who was frightfully hungry, steadied herself for a second against the dresser.

"Osric--oh Doctor! Doctor, thy supper is served!" called Uncle Hannibal, under the impression that *thy* is a sarcastic word.

They filed down the hall without speaking, Uncle Hannibal walking with a surreptitious lightness as though spying on the workers of his buttonhole and pocket factory. He liked to come upon his employees or members of his family or anyone dreaming, resting, doing nothing, wasting time, and always had some cogent things to say. His blue orbs were popeyed and his clayey freckled arms with the white shirtsleeves rolled high above the intricately-notched elbows were flat and thin at the top, swelled as a bellows at the bottom. As he walked he swung these arms back and forth in a somewhat uneasy gesture which showed his brutal bulbous tan hands. Alighting from the elevator, he made a general announcement which seemed to intimidate everyone and to which no one responded.

"The pleasure of my company will, I fear, not be yours at this evening meal. As you know, I have my meeting of Americans Anonymous at midnight tonight in Hexagon, and while supping I wish to review a paper I wrote last night and am scheduled to read to the Committee for the Abolition of Compulsory Education--or, as we prefer to call it, the Posse for the Abolishmint of Compulsive Eddication. It is likely that I shall join you post-prandially," upon which threat he turned disdainfully and sped away.

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"Oh Uncle Osric, the cut-glass minutiae, the little dishes just as I remember them. The dear cut-class dishes filled with slippery sliced peaches out

of cans for dessert, and another cut-glass dish in the middle of the deal table with homemade pickled cucumbers. The cocoa so boiling hot you can't touch your cup for fifteen minutes--why, this alone takes me back a decade-and-a-half. Grandma has always believed in the bracing powers of 'warm drinks.' And, of course, the steamed fishcakes and Danish sausage and herring and the red pudding rødgrod and hot homemade gingerbread and gedeost, the brown, smoky goat's milk cheese I always called 'chocolate cheese.' Grandma furled in a white apron from her pointed chin down to her tiny tippytoes in scuffed brown oxfords. And the faintly tarnished mirror over the sink, the tattered sewing-basket in the corner, the stereopticon with several views of Egyptian pyramids, the brown floral linoleum on the creaking floor, the creaking shelves of Octagon soap and Jell-O and Ralston's cream-of-wheat, the carved mahogany box for grinding coffee beans, the framed clipping from the *Brooklyn Eagle* describing my parents' wedding and showing my mother strangely pretty and smiling, the photograph of my father bitterly scowling and singing in the oratorio society of the Lutheran Church, another one of him as a boy reading *Hamlet* and sneering and twiddling his thumbs, another one of Grandma washing the kitchen floor with ammonia while Grandpa watches, the silver napkin rings with everybody's napkin for this week rolled up inside them, the hideous calendar showing a side of beef donated by somebody's meat and poultry store--

"All these dear, dear, dear, dear things."

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Grandchild sat on the maroon carpet and cross-legged like a child and her relatives huddled in arm-chairs watching her lowered head.

Uncle Osric entered the parlor late.

"Well darling, making yourself at home, are you? That's right, that's right."

"Uncle Osric, you are very like your name. A minor character in an important drama. Here I mean the great tragedy of life."

"What is there that's so tragic or so important, darling? Life is more like a penny dreadful. No, it's like a practical joke. Although if you're an intellectual you could see it as an anagram or an acrostic, probably."

"Doctor, if you please, if thou will remove thy big feet from off of mine," said Uncle Hannibal. The parlor was small.

"Oh, sorry," said Uncle Osric.

"As for the rest of you," continued Grandchild, "the trouble with you is that you don't have enough of the aboriginal human marrow in your bones. Or at least, that's the way I put it when I was twenty-two. These days I tend to think of you as extremely human--as representative Danish-American Lutherans of the first half of the twentieth century, people who rose in life through hard work, intelligence, and a scion's marriage to the daughter of an old American family. But I haven't said that in this story, because it isn't this story I'm writing when I say it. . . . I'm here to tell you I feel kidnapped, incarcerated, doomed, because you don't have enough of the aboriginal human marrow in your bones. Oh, you faithless, hopeless, uncharitable people--I see that I have escaped from nothing! I have simply been transferred to another prison, this one an unfathomable dungeon in which the barriers to freedom seem infinitely insuperable. I called you all those things because you never liked me, any of you . . . do you remember,

Aunt Butterfly and Uncle Hannibal, the time I tried to show you my monograph, published in installments, in my school paper, on the artistry of the Andrews Sisters, and you refused to look at it? Do you remember, Grandma, the time you put me in the stocks for taking apart your hourglass, your pocket watch and your cuckoo clock? You may wonder just what did happen to me in those days, and if you don't I'll tell you anyway. I was putting myself through college for quite awhile, my father having taken his stand against any effort on my part to improve myself. Then I broke under the weight of my eight part-time jobs. I had met an excellent writer . . . who was interested in me. He made me quit my eight part-time jobs and he put me through the final year of college himself, on his salary as a professor. He thought I was a genius, and expected me to start shaping up immediately upon graduation. I mean to say, he anticipated that I would write novels and have no difficulty getting them published. Mostly he liked me because I am short. And also because I am obedient and usually sweet-tempered. I asked him to marry me and he said of course. On University Place he said, 'You'd be wonderful to have around the house, because you combine the virtues of both child and woman.' On Horatio Street he said, 'I can be your literary mentor, and you ought to be the same for me.' On Jones Street too he said something that caused me to turn and stare into his dark eyes, and this is not to speak of all the things he said on Greenwich Avenue. Oh, I sang in my heart and was pleasing as *Punch*--the magazine I used to find in the homes of my *mother's* relatives. Truly we were in heaven, each blissfully cultivating his own garden for the other's delectation, until . . . he began to ask me when I looked forward to having a book published. I pointed out that I was working as a newspaper reporter and was also spending a lot of time with him. I mentioned that I *had* sent a story to the *Saturday Evening Post* but that it had been returned with a comment on how poorly it was typed. My excuses were to

no avail. Nothing would do except that I produce on the spot a novel for which I had signed a contract. Perhaps I'm exaggerating a little, but he did become cold, and colder. It began to be understood that we would not marry. I began to be ridden with guilt and despair. My editor Mr. L. Jacobs, later of the Associated Press in Washington, fired me for not succumbing to his advances. I got a job in a small bookshop. Every night I'd take home something to read, and some mornings I'd forget to go back to work. I began to stay home all the time, so that I could think about Gerard and read. I'd left him after an excessively brilliant evening we had. I compared him to Swift, Christ and Tolstoy, and thanked him for the part he had played in my life. He did not care. I was alone. I lived in a prison of books and began to be mad as a hatter or a maker of hairnets--for it is obvious that no one's head should be covered, not even Grandma's. But how alone I was . . . oh, I will write all this down someday. Anything that is true must be written. But no half-truths. Unlimited my vision, O Lord. I want to be as clear as glass. Something's missing here--the money he subsidized me with in senior year which, except for the first hundred dollars, I never got around to repaying. Uncle Hannibal, I perceive that you are taking notes."

"These remarks will be carefully examined by one of the youth interpreters of Americans Anonymous," he stated flatly.

"What a magisterial personage you are, Uncle Hannibal. I remember when I used to sit on your lap and count the chins on your Arrow-Collar face: 'Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief.' Why have you only four chins? Because of you my mathematical skills are completely undeveloped."

"And that's why you didn't have any money left

and had to move out of your apartment in Green-witch Village," said Aunt Butterfly, twirling a grizzled curl with a beefy index finger. "We are waiting, hey, for more about Gerard and all--is he your love that you wept in the arms of? Tell us."

"How if I answer no?" said Grandchild. "By the way, Uncle Hannibal, 'How if I answer?' is a quotation. *Hamlet*, Act Five, Scene Two."

He thereupon crossed it out, frowningly pondered for a second, then wrote it again.

"Ah come on, hey," said Aunt Butterfly.

"I was remembering the Widow Nielsen, a middle-aged blonde with a tic in her face, whom Grandpa used to visit during the last years of his life. He would tell Grandma he was going to the Brooklyn Navy Yard and instead he'd visit the Widow Nielsen. These skulking, sacred, secret, silky, sulky trysts were not in my dream. For I have dreamed of you, my kinsmen. Shall I tell you my dark dream?"

"No, I wanna hear about Gerard."

"Dreams often reflect nothing more than slight alterations in the physiological condition of the dreamer," said Uncle Osric in a manner suggesting he was beginning a lecture, immediately concluding with: "I think I remember reading something to that effect, anyway."

"I dreamed of a little boy who is sitting at the deal table drawing a picture of a forest over which the sun and moon are coming up at the same time. It is a good picture."

"'It is not right for you to be in the house alone all day,' says his grandmother entering the

kitchen. 'As you know, Grandpa went to the Brooklyn Navy Yard this morning to look at the ships and won't be back until suppertime. Come then, get up and go out to play with the other children.'

"So he leaves his picture and goes out and sits on the front step. He looks up and down the long, long rows of houses on both sides of the street. There are twenty-five houses on each side, and every house is like every other house--all the sparkling windows fall in the same pattern, each green lawn has the same number of square inches, each red roof is set in the same way. This street is a miracle of dull unimagination. And yet there is one house that shows a desperate rebelliousness against this austere monotony, and that is his grandfather's. This man has planted violets and peonies and hydrangea on the tiny front lawn and larkspur and lady's-slipper and ivy grow against the walls of the house--but more than that, he has built an elaborate, jewel-like little porch in the back, facing the yard which is full of peaches, apples, strawberries, raspberries, melons, green tomatoes, more larkspur and lady's-slipper, a luxury of red roses and pink roses, honeysuckle and hydrangea, snapdragon and sweet alyssum, a pomegranate tree that will not bear, a dogwood tree with a nest and baby birds in it and scampering squirrels and sometimes an owl at night and fireflies too, and golden caterpillars and sometimes the croak of a frog, and dahlias and calla lilies which droop over a little goldfish pond in the middle of the short green grass. The effect is rather too exotic for its surroundings--but no matter, it is interesting and original and soulful and besides, to a child all things are large in size and equally acceptable. He wants to retreat now into this beloved garden, crawling on hands and knees under the midget peach trees or the stunted apple trees or among the thick flowers and berry bushes to lean over the pool and seek his reflection in its

clear waters. He would like to look until he can look no more. But his grandmother has warned him to stay in front of the house with its heavy cloak of foliage and bright blossoms. He thinks it strange that the other children do not come up to him and ask if he, he is the grandson of the man who wanted to be different, and planted an Eden with a porphyry pool in his crowded backyard, and apple trees to eat of. . . .

"Lonely and languid, he watches them playing in the street or on the sidewalk. Most of the little boys are rollerskating or playing ball, most of the little girls rollerskating or skipping rope. Another boy, a short fellow in knickers and gym shoes, has devised a more ingenious pursuit--he is walking around in a long cardboard box that reaches down to his knees and has two holes cut out for his eyes. The box looks as though it has suddenly sprouted legs and come to life. It seems to be quite funny and delightful to perambulate in public thus tightly enclosed, and he would like to try it, but he does not know where to get such a marvelous box. And also, he is afraid, for he does not know anyone except his grandparents in this neighborhood.

"A little girl opens the door of the house across the street and comes out upon the steps. She wears a shiny white silk dress and has a flowerlike face and long pale brown curls. Presently she is joined by two other girls, a bit older and nothing like the first one, and they all sit down upon the top step. They seem to be playing some sort of game with their hands and they are laughing and talking. Two little boys drift by, turn back and stop at the steps, and then another girl, and then others, until finally the steps seem to be swarming with children, and they are all laughing and playing the game with their hands. The flowerlike girl with the brown curls

is always the center of attention, it is she who directs the game, commands devotion and rules as she pleases. The other children all seem to be her subjects. In her shiny white silk she is a beautiful princess or a bride or a calla lily. He wishes she might speak to him, might see him sitting there on the step of his grandmother's house and call across the street, 'Oh What's-Your-Name, don't you want to come over and play with us?' But she does not see him and he goes on sitting, watching and languid and lonely.

"And yet he is not unhappy, for he does not mind being alone. He is a dreamy sort of child and lives much in his head. And the thing that preoccupies him at this time is not rollerskating nor ballplaying nor walking around in a box nor little girls who look like princesses, brides and pale and tender calla lillies, but a much more elusive and difficult problem. He wants to defy and perhaps overcome natural forces. There is nothing the least bit profound or philosophical in this desire, for he does not even realize it for what it is, its manifestations being very simple and some of them just a little morbid. Once, when he was younger, he had started digging a hole to China: all day long and even before bedtime, for hours and hours, he had dug with his toy red spade, and the spade made quite a deep hole which his father forced him to fill in, but never reached Oriental light. Now he attempts such exploits as finding out how long he can hold his finger in excruciatingly hot water, so that he almost screams with pain. He sees how fast he can talk and still keep his words intelligible. He tries to stay awake all night, or to discover how much water he can drink at one time. Sometimes he lies in bed at night and counts as high as he can while holding his breath, thus making it a test not only of physical endurance but also of speed, and in this art he has become proficient. So far most of his tests have been challenges

to his own physical limitations, yet he hopes in the future to defy much, much more than these. Perhaps, someday, he will become a great aviator, or a great poet, or at least someone who soars out of range of this stupid and hopelessly conservative life. . . .

"After supper his grandmother takes him by the hand and says, 'Come then, we are going to visit a friend of mine.' And they walk out into the summer evening and down the street to a house three doors away. This house is different from all the other houses on the block only in that it has red curtains at the front windows instead of some other color. A tall lady with a lot of black hair in a knot at her neck and a long pale face opens the door. She says, and her voice is pale and silly too, 'Why Anna! I'm so glad to see you, dear, I've been expecting you, oh do come in, dear.'

"His grandmother says something about having been very busy these past few evenings and the lady says, 'Oh well, better late than never. Who's the dear little boy?'

"My little grandchild, Euclid's son. Here for the day while his mother is in the city to have her music lesson and shop at Macy's and meet his father for dinner. I always take care of him for her while she has her romantic day in the city. He's a quiet boy, not a bit troublesome really.'

"Charming child!' says the lady, beaming at him with her large black eyes. 'And do you go to school, dear?'

"Yes,' he says. 'Not during the summer, though.' He feels seriously embarrassed for her for asking such a foolish question. Absolutely everyone knows that education in America is compulsory, although of course

his Uncle Hannibal is working to abolish this lamentable stricture. But the lady does not seem to notice his embarrassment and they all sit down in the parlor. She beams at him and asks him how old he is, and whether he likes to go to school, and whether he likes to stay at his grandmother's. Then she gives him some peanut brittle and a large oatmeal cookie and seems to forget all about him, and she and his grandmother fall into a conversation regarding some matter he does not understand. Although his grandmother talks almost as much as the other lady, she does not seem very friendly but strangely determined and cold. The other lady flutters and has nice manners, but he thinks that she does not really mean what she says either. He cannot comprehend this. Why do ladies call on each other and act polite if they do not like each other? He gives it up and gazes round him at the room. He has a queer feeling that he is back in his grandmother's parlor--the furniture has merely whirled round him and changed its shapes, for this room is exactly like the other one except for the things in it. There are a wine-red rug and a plush sofa instead of his grandmother's blue flowered rug and straight old-fashioned sofa and chairs with antimacassars on them. There is a parlor organ just like the one his grandmother has, but with a green landscape in a gold frame instead of a green seascape in a gold frame hanging over it. He wonders whether his grandmother too does not feel dismay at the dreadful basic similarity of the rooms and at the futility of their superficial differences.

"But his grandmother is listening with acute interest to something the other lady is saying. The lady holds her head back and laughs, a tinny, measured laugh. She says, 'Oh well, the first hundred years are the hardest.'

"He grows restless and begins to squirm. He

tries to interest himself in the conversation, and because it is so full of prosaic thoughts and platitudes he has the idea it must be very subtle and wise and fraught with grownup significance far beyond his reach. He has finished the peanut brittle and the large oatmeal cookie and nothing more is offered. He sighs and drums his fingers upon his bare knees. He yawns and slaps his sandals against his heels. He wishes he were back home with his grandfather, working in the cellar or playing with the cats kept there or in the parlor learning how to play 'The Lost Chord' by Sir Arthur Sullivan, his grandfather's favorite composer, or in the beloved garden, O that thick and silken, shiny and warm and fragrant place, that heartbreaking heaven of softness and light, that bower of bouquets and nosegays and posies and bright blowing flowerets, with buzzing bees that don't sting you if you don't bother them, if only he were there, crawling about in the abundant sweetness--or anywhere, but always with his dear grandfather, who has come home this evening talking about the ships in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Oh, when will it be time to leave? He wishes his grandmother would decide it is time to leave now. This lady has no cat and does not know about ships and music, does not worry about the pomegranate tree which will not bear fruit and which his grandfather refers to as 'this individual,' does not worry about gorgeous Aunt Daphne who cannot bear a child and about her sad husband Uncle Bienvenido, does not worry about him the little boy who is lonely and lives in his head--oh, when will it be time to leave? This room is altogether uninteresting because his grandfather is not in it, and he is tired and restless.

"The clock in the kitchen begins to strike, and suddenly he is awake and thrilled, a swift joy flashing through him as he jumps to his feet and dashes out the door. Can he make it? It is striking nine in his grandmother's house too--can he get there before that

clock stops striking? Oh hurry, hurry! He runs up the street and up the front steps of his grandmother's house and just as he closes the front door behind him the last note is struck.

"There, that is something! He feels as though he has run around the world so fast that he has met himself coming in the other direction, or as though he has actually seen the sun and moon rise at the same time, as in his picture. He stands in the parlor exulting over his achievement. Then all at once the horror of his deed hits him: he has bounded up without the slightest leavetaking, in the most ill-bred manner imaginable, and rushed out of a house in which he was a guest, a guest moreover to whom peanut brittle and a large oatmeal cookie were given. It is not merely discourteous, it is caddish, coarse, and conduct unbecoming a gentleman. No thoughtful person would ever do such a thing. And for what crazy purpose was it done? His reason no longer seems rational or right to him, and he foresees the awful consequences of his action, which he will never be able to explain. He hears his grandmother at the door and stands facing her, small and humble and shaken.

"'Whatever is the matter?' says his grandmother. 'Aren't you well?'

"'I'm all right,' he says glumly.

"'But what happened? Why did you hotfoot it out that way?'

"She is demanding the explanation that she will never, never understand. He remembers a story told him by his grandfather in the garden: before Aunt Daphne met Uncle Bienvenido, one of her suitors asked her to accompany him to *The Barber of Seville*. His grandmother forbade her to go. In the letter she

forced her to write to the unfortunate young man were the words: 'My mother says opera is vulgar, vain, foolish and wicked.' His grandmother disapproves of so many things. Oh, she will never, never understand his explanation. But he must speak it.

"'I--I was trying to beat Time.'

"'You what?' asks the woman in alarm. He tells her that he'd wanted to see if he could reach home before the two clocks stopped striking nine, and she stares at him with her mouth a little open and something like fear in her eyes.

"'I've never heard of such a thing!' she finally declares. 'Come then, you will go right back and apologize to Mrs. Jensen for leaving her house that way.' And she pulls him down the street again to the house with the red curtains.

"The lady is sitting on her sofa meditating, and she is much aggrieved--her very toes seem trod upon, her bristles up. She rises and looks at his grandmother with a hurt air and she does not look at him at all.

"'Now apologize!' says his grandmother, holding him tightly by his bare arm, and he winces as always at the touch of her flesh.

"'I'm sorry . . . I . . . er' He stammers a few sheepish words about having been sick.

"His grandmother glances up at the tall lady to see if this fabrication, which she thinks the Lord will probably excuse in the circumstances, is enough. It isn't, so she says:

"'Lavinia dear, I want to express my own regrets

as well. Don't worry, he will do penance for this for the rest of his life. . . . Too bad this had to happen just now, when I'm nervous because someone is coming tomorrow to stay with me. Yes, did I tell you? My other grandchild young Cassandra, the one you never met, the one I never liked, is coming to stay with me. I hope she doesn't stay long. Seems she can't keep a job because she is mad at present, as the result of a disastrous love affair in Greenwich Village, serves her right for living amongst the crackpots is what I say. Oh yes, quite mad. She always was a strange one, an expert on the works of Walter Savage Landor when she was but ten years old, and forever down in the dumps, and changing her hairstyle and hair-ribbon every few hours, and constantly composing her last will and testament, and sitting at the parlor organ days searching for what she said was the lost chord. . . .'

"Again she glances at Mrs. Jensen's face to see if this--a most useful piece of neighborhood gossip, offered in chummy propitiation--is enough. And again it isn't, so she kneels down on the wine-red rug and proceeds to give the culprit what his father calls a good licking, at first roundly boxing his ears and then striking him with firm, hard blows on the seat of his sailcloth shorts. He remains as quiet as death, staring stoically. Her little fists continue to rain punishment on him until the other suddenly speaks--whereupon she nimbly rises from the floor straightening her skirts and seeming satiated and content.

"'Oh, it's all right.' Mrs. Jensen is fluttering sadly, her large black eyes downcast and perhaps swimming with tears. It occurs to him that he would like to ask her how she can be Danish and look so much like Uncle Bienvenido, who is Spanish. Should he ask her now? He is startled to see that she is

gazing at him. Her eyes are so dark he cannot be sure there are any tears in them. 'Spare the rod and spoil the child,' she says, nodding and looking like one of the Three Wise Men. He recoils in terror, for although he does not know what the words mean--could they refer only to a licking?--they have a peculiarly menacing sound.

"They all sit down again, but no one says anything. He huddles in his chair, knowing well that his grandmother suspects him of some form of juvenile insanity and that Mrs. Jensen has taken the incident as a severe reflection on her hospitality. He sits admiring his grandmother's decorum and prim poker face and thinking that this matter will be reported to his parents. His mother will bawl him out and his father will. . . . Oh, he was not surprised at the licking, that is nothing to be surprised at, in his family. The Boy Scouts are right when they say, 'Semper paratus,' which his grandfather has told him is Latin for 'Clear the decks for action, boys, and sharpen your tools.' He could have expected that licking. He did not cry nor make any sound during it, he is used to lickings because they are a specialty and perhaps the raisin d'etier of his father, a man brought up by a woman who was forever giving him lickings. So he did not cry, and now he hardly dares to breathe, fearing to disturb the solemn hush of the room. The three sit listening to the ticking of the clock in the kitchen which sounds something like the thumping of a shamed heart. Ticktock, ticktack, yackety-yak. Soon it will be ten o'clock. After a long time his grandmother rises to leave, explaining that her son Euclid and his wife Leilani will arrive at ten-thirty to pick up the young scalawag--and Mrs. Jensen, showing the anguish of the sorrowful experience she has suffered in every strained and fluttering line of her long pale face, bids them good night.

"The old woman and the little boy walk home together without speaking a word. There is not a star nor a moon in the sky, the summer night being what his father calls the palpable obscure, as sultry and dark and seething as a cup of his grandmother's cocoa. He follows her into the kitchen. His grandfather is down in the cellar fixing something, perhaps his seed plow or his grub hook which are both broken, and she calls for him to come up. He appears with a screwdriver in his hand and wearing an old, dusty checked cap which for some reason he always wears when he works in the cellar.

"'Søren,' she says, 'will you please not wear that hat in this house.'

"He takes it off with beaming nonchalance and she continues: 'I want you to hear this boy's story. He says--and this is really one for Ripley's *Believe It or Not*--he says he was trying to beat Time.' And then he is forced to spell out for his grandfather what he has done and the unsatisfactory reason for it.

"When he has finished the painful tale his grandfather, this large, radiant, silver-haired man who knows so much, and who has been staring at him curiously throughout, bursts into a great powerful melodious laugh of pure and unfeigned joy, and roars and weeps with this fine Homeric laughter for a full minute, and then he stops, ponders, and inquires with interest:

"'And did you make it?'

"'Yes!' he says proudly, and then laughs too, and thinks how sad it is that not everyone in the world is like his grandfather. The evil children he mostly had, he reflects, are mostly the fault of his grandmother, a peevish, parched-looking little Lutheran woman in a hairnet. That is the end of my dream about

you, O my kinsmen. Actually, I must say in all fairness that I find the dream libels Grandma, who in real life never wears anything quite so gross as a hairnet. But somehow a hairnet seemed true to the spiritual reality."

"Now tell us about Gerard, hey," said Aunt Butterfly.

"I am interested in the art of the short story, and not especially in its confessional uses," answered Grandchild.

At this point Uncle Hannibal leaned over to Grandchild and briskly tapped her on the shoulder with a blue cane from the nineteen-thirty-nine New York World's Fair.

"I should like to ask you to leave us immediately. Go to your room, close the door, and stay there until I say you may come out."

His voice had grown weak with exasperation.

"Why, what an absurd demand!" cried Grandchild, looking up and laughing through her tears. "I shall do nothing of the kind. I am a grown person and no longer subject to such intimidation. . . ."

"Of course, of course," said Uncle Osric. "Hannibal, you've really gone too far this time. Ah yes. Come, darling, we'll go to sit on the veranda and admire the desquamated starkness of the trellises uncorrupted by vines."

"I don't happen to like that word, Osric," Uncle Hannibal warned. "I'll thank you not to use it in my presence again, and furthermore I think it a most unsuitable word to use in the presence of a young lady."

"What word?" asked Uncle Osric. "Desquamated? I assure you--"

"No, no, no," said Uncle Hannibal, blushing fiercely to the roots of his barley-colored hair. "Uncorrupted!"

"Oh," said Uncle Osric. "Come along, darling."

"Wait, Uncle Osric. Let go my hand."

All the relatives had risen in alarm and were standing in a circle round Grandchild and Uncle Osric and Uncle Hannibal, although the last-named was the only pugnacious-looking one of the three.

"Know what I think, Osric? I think you're an anarchist. That's what I think, you doctor thou."

"Hannibal was always the brainy one," commented Aunt Butterfly.

"What is it, darling?"

Waiflike she stood among them, her long hair bound by a slender blue ribbon floating down her back like flaxen-hued flotsam and jetsam, and now the warm expression of her face upon which the tears were drying changed in a trice, becoming cold and soft as a witch's kiss. She spoke in a toneless voice.

"I don't want to sit on the verandah now, Uncle Osric, bethinking myself of Grandpa and beholding that brave beauty turned to blight. Uncle Hannibal, I retract none of my remarks, but I acknowledge your dictum, for there is that in me which strangely yearns to explore the truth that in the nature of things this action is axiomatic. For have I not failed in the love affair that was the most splendid enterprise of

my life? And am I not dying, as did my mother die ignoring the fact that he was practically Adolf Hitler, of the need of a certain man's love? And was I not ever thus, born to render the exegetics of the inexorable ineluctability of the universe? I have, and am, and was, indeed. I have proven that love is not love that lack of alteration finds. He loved me too little with his soul and alas, I could not stay. And therefore I accept my drubbing, my defeat, crawling away into the thick, abundant sweetness of my memories, into the night that lays the blond beside the dark, into the deepest depths of my thrall'd and sequestered self, into the dense cultivation of a tender garden of fresh and shiny works for you to read, full of powerful male and female beings, a pushy and uppity lot they are, every one of them dear as the apple of my eye, and among whom a shrouded skeleton bearing a scythe seems to walk. You see me vanquished and shuddered, O my blackhearted kinsmen, but with the remorseful tears already dried upon my face, and with a sense that this particular story is at its end, and that I have found a sort of home at last, a prison though it be, with a verandah and an elevator and cut-glass dishes and red ashes of flowers which could be love, they are so dead. I thank you for taking me in. Now I shall go to my room, close the door, and stay there until you say come out. There is nothing else I can do."

And with these words she walked slowly from the parlor, and seldom was seen again until much, much later--about thirty years thence.

