CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

"And Night Becomes the Morning: A Story of the People of Watts"

A project submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Mass Communication in Journalism by Norma Lavinia Schneider

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The project of Norma Lavinia Schneider is approved:

Committee Chairman

California State University, Northridge
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This project evolved as a result of my work with the welfare department in Watts during the period from 1966 through 1970. During this time I was continually being confronted by people "outside" with various misconceptions of the ghetto residents, welfare and poverty as a whole. Realizing that few of these people had the access to this area that I had, I felt that I should attempt to tell the real story of the ghetto and in doing so, relate it through their eyes--from their perspective.

The people whose stories appear here are not unusual. They were not selected because of their uniqueness but because they so well represent the conditions of ghetto life--the poverty, the loneliness, and the frustration.

The Street scenes are composite views as seen by the residents, offering an entirely different perspective than that perceived by the outsider. A temporary welfare building set up inside the ghetto as a convenience for the residents becomes a symbol of the white man's fear of "burn, baby, burn"; a series of training programs set up to overcome the area's lack of skills is seen as a treatment, not a cure, and welfare is not freedom from "want"
but a "prison" to be avoided.

It is my belief that such reporting will create a greater understanding for those people on the "outside".

I would like to acknowledge the help and support of my committee members, Dr. Samuel Feldman, Dr. John Schultheiss, and particularly, Dr. Joseph Webb, my committee chairman, whose criticism and encouragement made this project possible.

My thanks also to the people of Watts who gave me so much more than I could ever give to them.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td></td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td></td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>&quot;Everythin's Right Here&quot;</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.</td>
<td>&quot;That Blissful' Feelin'&quot;</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.</td>
<td>&quot;The Preacher Says&quot;</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.</td>
<td>&quot;Street Scene&quot;</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.</td>
<td>&quot;Man, What A Sight That Was&quot;</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI.</td>
<td>&quot;They Ain't Gonna Do This Ta Him&quot;</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII.</td>
<td>&quot;Where Only the Wind Blows&quot;</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII.</td>
<td>&quot;Cause I'm White&quot;</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX.</td>
<td>&quot;Them Beautiful Peoples&quot;</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X.</td>
<td>&quot;An' the Wonder of It All&quot;</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XI.</td>
<td>&quot;Mother's Day&quot;</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XII.</td>
<td>&quot;Jus' Sit Here An' Be Mama&quot;</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIII.</td>
<td>&quot;That Black-Shrouded Ribbon&quot;</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIV.</td>
<td>&quot;Move It, Baby&quot;</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XV.</td>
<td>&quot;The Sound of a Fiddle&quot;</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
XVI. "Never Gonna Forget 'Em" ............ 188
XVII. "I Calls Ole' Ellis P." ............... 193
XVIII. "Leanin' 'Gainst Them Buildin's Here" ... 212
ABSTRACT

"And Night Becomes the Morning: A Story of the People of Watts"

by

Norma Lavinia Schneider

Master of Arts in Mass Communication in Journalism

May, 1975

This is the story of life in the Watts ghetto as told from "inside" - by the people who live there. It is an attempt to explain a culture and life-style which is alien to the majority of Americans.

It is written in the "new journalism" style of reporting, as opposed to the "traditional", as it is my contention that in reporting on certain areas where the average reader's experience is limited, i.e., different life-styles, foreign or alien cultures, etc. New journalism, reporting situations and experiences from the perspective of those involved, provides more understanding than would the "facts" and "objectivity" of the traditional.

The information for this project was obtained through
close contact with the people of Watts during my five years spent there as a social worker, information contained in case histories and legal documents which were at my disposal.

Hopefully, by giving a different viewpoint, this project will provide the reader with a greater insight into the lives and problems of those people confined to the ghettos of America.
INTRODUCTION

"103rd Street, Watts"

The flat, white, block-printed letters on the green city-sign scream 103rd STREET, WATTS. The sign is no different than that found in any other Los Angeles community. But is the Street different? Physically it represents the aftermath of the 1965 riot, those days and nights when this Street exploded into a cyclonic inferno. Those nights when tracers streaked through the darkness like a million tiny meteors, when the frightened screams of the uninvolved mingled with the taunts of the instigators and both were muffled beneath the commanding barks of police loudspeakers. Those days of constantly intruding television cameras, of cyclonic reverberations from rising and plunging helicopters, and the haunting cadence of police marching five abreast down the center of this Street.

Now the Street is in a state of suspended animation, as though time had stopped with the dying of the last ember of that flaming melee. It is intermittently lined with barren cement slabs, once foundations of local
markets, now appearing as huge common graves encircled by grass and weeds straining to disguise their condition. Wooden structures, which did not experience the full blast of the flames, slump in blackened despair. Rough wooden planks cover their dark, brooding windows; cover them so the curious, who still prowl this area, cannot stare into their naked, burned interiors. Brick buildings still remain standing, their smoked-smeared facades testifying to their inherent supremacy. A crooked sign reading "public telephone" dangles listlessly from a charred pole, pointing disconsolately to the empty sidewalk below. A link-chain fence rambles aimlessly from a paint-scorched post, vainly attempting to enclose an emptiness of space. These memorials epitomize the frustration of the hands which burned them; those hands which gave this Street the name of Charcoal Alley.

But a sprawling green park suddenly appears, spilling in all directions; a derelict hotel presents an intricately carved door; a thirty-foot Christmas tree springs from nowhere; shell-encrusted towers soar free above the Street's debris and softly defiant graffiti runs, rolling and looping its way over and around the buildings, providing a type of beauty which neatly ties this Street together.
But the Street is nothing without its people. People like Sandy Cummings, Mrs. Prewitt, Champlain and Benny ARE 103rd Street. It is their world. It reflects their needs, their aspirations, their lives. And all who are born to this Street, born to its squalor, its poverty, its alienation, well know that they have been shortchanged. So it is from this Street, from this maximum point of inequity that they strive for the moon, a moon greater than normal, for these people soon learn that they have to be much larger than life to be even noticed.

A few make it and they become heroes, the Clays, the Kings and the Baileys. But most fall back to the Street in a heap of human despair and it is their lives which this Street portrays. Their pathos, their humor, their hopelessness, their pride, their frustration—the whole progression of emotion is to be found here, right here on this Street.

So is it really any different than any other Street? Aren't all Streets merely reflections of people who live on them or frequent them? Like Broadway in New York, Market Street in San Francisco, or Basin Street in New Orleans, is 103rd Street, Watts, really any different?
CHAPTER I

"Everythin's Right Here"

All the smoke and glass from that riot had hardly settled 'til word was out that 103rd Street was gonna be rebuilt—gonna be better 'en ever—gonna have new buildins' an' gonna be all fixed up. Gonna have medical clinics an' hospitals an' trainin' centers too. Gonna build 'em right here, right on top of them slabs. Jus' seemed like overnight that that there government—'it jus' up an' sent all kinds a' money for whatever it was we wanted.

Started first with that welfare place—couldn't really call it a buildin'—it was one of them fre-fab things—all cut out 'fore it arrived, then they puts it together here. Kind of a mobile thing. Guess maybe they was still thinkin' 'bout that "burn baby burn" so brought somethin' in they could get out in a hurry. Anyways, they brought this thing in an' they sets it up right on one of them burnt out places, right down on top a' one a' them cement foundations an' they was in business. They put big, bright orange-colored doors on it too, so's ya'
couldn't miss it, I guess. That was just the office though. Ya' hadda wait in the buildin' next door if ya' wanted ta see one of 'em social workers. Beats goin' all the way to Atlantic Boulevard though—that was the closest place 'til now. They was always tellin' ya' ta come on inta the office if ya' wants somethin'—they never cared how far that was—no bus goin' that way so ya' always had ta get a ride somehow or else walk it. But now they's here—right here. It's not a bad buildin' but for awhile it sure got busted inta a lot. They finally had ta put bars on all them windows, it was just ta keep the peoples from breakin' in but it really made the buildin' look like what it really was—gotta kinda honest look 'bout it then—like it was sayin' "I's the worst kinda prison ya can ever get messed up with. I ain't like them other prisons—get in here an' ya ain't never gonna get out."

They said they was just gonna use this buildin' 'til they got a big new one built over there on Central Avenue. Don't know when that's gonna be 'cause rumor has it, they keeps scrapin' the plans. 'Pears that with the buildin' plans they had, the welfare buildin' would have been the highest buildin' in the neighborhood and that there ESTABLISHMENT—that was too close ta the truth fer them—
they didn't wanna throw no shadow like that. So I guess, it's gonna take a little doin' 'fore we gets that new place.

In the buildin', on the east side of the welfare buildin', the Neighborhood Legal Services opened an office. They had other offices 'roun' Los Angeles but we ain't never had one here before. It was run by new lawyers an' some were real young fellas--students, they said they was. They sure went after them store owners--been given them bogus contracts out ta these peoples fer years. Peoples here don't know no better. They wants somethin'--they jus' gets it anyways they can. They signs anythin', don't pay no 'tention ta the price or the small print. So's them young fellas, they got after them peoples doin' the buyin' too. Tells 'em, you read 'fore ya sign--ya checks the price an' ya shops aroun'. Well, them young fellas, they meant well but they jus' don't understan', them peoples here, they has ta buy wherever they can. How can ya' shop 'roun' if ya' lives here in this place? No one what sells ya' things 'specs ta get paid so they charges ya three prices--if they'll sell ta ya' at all. Then most times they find some reason ta take it back from ya and then they sells it again. But them young fellas,
they say, don't buy nothin' if ya' can't afford it. Thas' jus' like tellin' 'em, "hey you, ya' ain't never gonna have nothin', ever."

But they did stop them landlords, them young fellas did, them peoples what owns all that property out here and lives someplace else. Most of 'em charges real high rents an' they never fixes nothin'. An' the minute you're late on your rent--out ya' goes--onta the Street. Now they has ta do it right--has ta' give ya' notices an' give ya' some time ta' find 'nother place.

Then they got a lotta these women out here ta get divorces. Most a' the gals didn't have the money ta do it an' didn't know where their men was anyways so they jus' went on like they was never married. But, these young fellas, they made it so's they could get divorced by jus' payin' the filin' fees and, since it made the young fellas feel better, some a' the women went ahead an' done it.

On the other side of the welfare buildin' was another vacant slab so's they brought in a few a' them trailer houses and they set up offices ta give out trainin' programs ta the peoples. Now this was somethin' else--this was real cool. Ya' could go in there an' have coffee an' doughnuts an' jus' sit an' talk all day ta them
counsellor fellas. They had all kindsa things ya could take, typin', nurse's aids, filin' clerks, switchboard operators, truck drivin', teachin' assistants--whatever ya wanted. Ya got lunch monies too, an' busfare, an' babysittin' money an' clothes too. Them peoples sure made it easy fer ya'. 'Magine they could see a whole big army a' them trained workers marchin' right offa' 103rd Street an' right outta Watts.

Well, ain't many 'roun' here ready fer that really. Few ever went ta grade school reg'lar--ain't never stuck ta nothin' much but if that's what them peoples wanted then everybody decided ta go along with 'em. So the peoples on the Street kinda became "professional trainees"--tried all kindsa courses--most never finished any of 'em but they did try most of 'em.

Now there's one place they started buildin' here 'fore all that trouble came ta this Street. It's right across from the Welfare buildin'. It's the State Service Buildin' an' they was gonna put a lotta doctors an' dentists an' counsellors inta it--make it a kinda one-stop service center. Well they did finish that an' the doctors an' all moved in an' the peoples started goin' ta 'em too. They said them doctors was put in there so's
The peoples would get started goin' ta doctors an' getting themselves in better shape an' that seemed like a good idea so we all went all right. The doctors all got their pay from that there Medi-Cal, what the welfare pays, so they always got their money. But lotta them folks didn't know what they was bein' treated for an' they couldn't find out neither, so they jus' kept goin' on back whenever the doctor told 'em ta. After all, it wasn't like havin' ta go all the way ta the other side a' town ta the County Hospital.

They put them "consumer counsellors" in that buildin' too. Some of 'em went out an' checked on prices in the grocery markets. Well they found out somethin' we'd knowed fer a long time. Found out that we had ta pay more fer groceries than they has ta in any other neighborhood. They got real busy--writin' up papers--tellin' everybody how they was bein' cheated an' 'sploited. They printed lists a' groceries with the prices we all paid an' the cheaper prices they was payin' in the other places. Kept real busy at it too. The only thing is, we ain't got no way ta get ta them other places so's wasn't much we could do 'bout it. Cost more ta take the bus there an' back than a body could save. But them people did work real hard.
Back a' the State buildin' they put in a mental health clinic. This was fer them peoples what had real problems. Could be with drugs, or a child not doin' so well in school or if your marriage ain't goin' right, ya' could go there. Sometimes ya' went with your social worker or the teacher might take one of the kids or the doctor might decide ta send ya. They had all kindsa peoples there ta listen ta ya' an' ta help ya'. Ya' jus' sit there an' tell your whole story ta all them people, those psychiatrists doctors an' nurses an' all kinds a' trainees. They asks ya' questions, all of 'em does. It don't take long ta find out they don't know nothin' 'bout the way peoples live here so's the peoples what goes there jus' gives 'em the answers they wants ta hear.

But now somethin' good did happen ta the Street durin' this time. Down t'wards Alameda they rushed in a big trailer an' it was set up as a medical clinic. It was right next ta the Jordon Down's Housin' Project an' it was jus' set up fer a special area. All the peoples up ta 92nd Street an' down ta Imperial Highway, an' all them livin' between Alameda and Central Avenues could go there. But it wasn't really big enough ta handle even them folks so it wasn't long 'fore they started buildin' a real buildin' an' wasn't long 'fore it was finished neither.
'Fore they even got it finished though, they started trainin' people from the area. Yeah, the peoples really got with that place. At first none of 'em knew what they was doin' an' it was a sight ta see. If'n ya was waitin' in one of them lines fer an 'xamination an' one of them phones started ringin', ya never knew what they was gonna ask ya' ta hold fer them while they ran an' answered it.

Everyone what wanted ta jus' came in an' sat there in the early mornin' an' jus' waited 'til someone could see 'em. But waitin' there weren't no problem—weren't like waitin' down at the County Hospital. There ya' was met by strangers, nurses what ya' ain't likely ta never see again. Here everybody knows everybody else so ya' jus' sits an' passes the time of day. Someone's just as apt ta say, "See that gal over there, that one behind the desk? tha' s my girl." Another "mamma" might say, "My son's learnin' that there X-Ray thing here in this place." Seems like everybody's got someone doin' somethin' here. And each day they all learned an' it got a little more organized all the time an' it got better than ever—guess 'cause they was doin' it themselves.

Durin' all these fast-movin' days the folks jus' watched--most of 'em hardly believin' their eyes. Empty
slabs one day could be anythin' the next. So traffic on
the Street was really busy—everybody kept comin' on out
ta see what was happenin' an' ta try an' figure out what
was gonna happen next.

Finally though, them government peoples figured it
was all finished 'cause they quit addin' things. But even
then, fer a time the peoples here kept comin' back ta the
Street jus' ta make sure they really was done. Then,
finally, when nothin' more popped up, they figured them
folks must really be finished all right and so they
stopped and really took a look aroun' 'em. Yeah, it sure
was changed—this Street. 'Lessen ya' looked real close,
ya' couldn't call it Charcoal Alley no more. No, sir,
ya' couldn't call it that no more. Now this Street was
different, it had somethin' ta offer jus' 'bout everybody
--a body could find jus' 'bout everything he could pos-
sibly want—right here on this Street. No need ta travel
any place outside--could find everythin' right here, right
here on Welfare Row.
CHAPTER II

"That Blissful' Feelin'"

A malevolent smile clutched her lips as she stared fixedly out the window at the animal in the yard. She watched as he slunk back and forth behind the steel-link fence, his bloodshot eyes searching frantically for just one morsel of food to stop the cramping in his belly.

He was of no particular breed, his huge frame stood over two feet tall and not an ounce of flesh was evident. Each side of his belly seemed fused to the other, pulling, even tighter, the skin on his protruding hip bones. The horror of his huge, boney head was accentuated by rolling, popping, bloodshot eyes and the lolling tongue hanging from his black-rimmed, drooling jaws. The fur was gone from his back and had been replaced by the scaly cells of mange.

He was constantly moving, constantly sniffing at the rubble of torn newspapers, paper sacks, pieces of rags and other debris which populated his prison yard, his "yard" which consisted of a four-foot corridor around a small,
box-like house which had been designated for a garage. His ceaseless searching had worn a narrow pathway close to an impregnable fence. That fence, that fence that was his nemesis. It was too high to jump, even if he'd had the strength, but when the gut-pain of starvation became unendurable, he would paw and grub his nose into the hard-packed, clay dirt, clawing and scratching until his nails were gone and his paws were bloodied stumps. But then someone would always take the time to stake the fence back down over the hole and block his escape.

The neighbors complained of his constant, pained howling but nothing was ever done about it for their complaints only produced a malicious joy in the dog's owner.

She was nearly six feet tall and weighed over two hundred pounds. Everything about her seemed to accentuate her size. Her black, crumpled, grease-stained dress plunged tent-like to her ankles where her feet sunk into ratted-fuzzy, dirty-orange slippers. Her hair, in its perpetual flying "natural" served as a study in contrast to the staid, penetrating black eyes reduced to pinpoints by heavy folds of facial fat.

She never smiled unless in anger and now, as she stood at the window with the drape pulled back, watching the dog, a smile flickered across her face. Unconsciously
she shifted her weight and the movement instantly drew
the dog's attention. Momentarily, dumb, bewildered pain
met bold, defiant hatred, then slowly she dropped her eyes
and let the drape slide back across the window.

She shuffled across the floor to the only piece of
furniture in the room and sunk her tired body down amongst
its protruding springs and padding.

This place, this dirty, filthy hovel with this one
piece of furniture. Furniture!—a bedraggled, broken-down
divan—furniture? New furniture they said, they'd give me
whatever I need, that's what they said. Yeah, they said
that all right but they didn't say the price. What's the
price, that's what I should'a said. I've paid enough,
they've done enough to me already. But then it really
don't make no difference, I can leave this place jus' any-
time I wants. Anytime! That's one thing they can't stop
me from doin'. One thing I can do an' they ain't got no
control over that. They calls it "'scapin' an' broodin'"
but I ain't broodin' an I sure ain't 'scaping' nothin'.
Alls I want is some answers, that's all, jus' some answers.
I jus' goes where there's no one buttin' in, where a body
can have some peace an' quiet, where there's not someone
lookin' over my shoulder every minute. Where I can think
things out for myself. But then, even that don't work.
Maybe that's 'cause there really ain't no answers. Oh, but they have answers. They have pills, all shapes, all colors, all sizes. "Take this, honey," they says, "and you'll feel better, or would you rather have a green one?"

Ain't no matter ta them--jus' wanta get ya' where ya' quits thinkin', where ya' quits tryin' ta find the answers.... but I ain't never gonna quit and they ain't never gonna get me again--never gonna cage me in like a rabid dog, never gonna bar me away again, ain't never gonna get a chance ta do that again.

Slowly it all began to fade away, the filthy, shabby room, its torn newspapers, the piles of dirty clothes strewn about on the bare, grease-slopped floor planks, the stifling smell of burned grease and unwashed human beings. Smells that hung in the middle of the room like limp doldrummed sails in the middle of the ocean were now heated to a stifling consistency by the stagnant rays of a merciless August sun. The dog, the house, "THEY", they all vacated Mrs. Pullman's senses.

I gotta go back, back ta them other days but I ain't goin' back there ta savor them "good times", ain't no answers in the "good times" an' it's answers I wants, nothin' less. That's what I keeps lookin' for. They says I can't keep leavin' like this but I gotta know what
happened. Those four kids I had, them were good kids, an' smart too. Jus' look at Vinny. Now he's a big lawyer--an' too busy ta see his mamma. But it was different when they was all at home. Same thing with Laura an' Sally--they's too busy too. They both got good edjacations an' both of 'em married real good. Husband's both got their own businesses. An' now there's little Nellie, gettin' a scholarship ta one a' them big eastern schools. Yeah, least she called an' told me she's leavin' soon. Least she called. I told her how I hates these kids I got now--maybe she'll tell the others an' maybe they'll call. No matter, my kids has all done well for themselves. But now none of 'em has time ta see me anymore...no time ta even call me on the telephone...they jus' too busy, I guess, BUT I WEREN'T NEVER TOO BUSY FOR THEM. After their pa ups an' left, I worked days as a hotel maid, makin' up beds and cleanin' an' then, when they needed them extra things, I worked any job I could get at nights. It weren't no unhappy time though. I loved doin' for 'em an' I was proud of 'em. Weren't no other kids 'round here doin' what my kids did--winnin' things and then goin' onto the colleges and winnin' things there too. Then they left an' it was like they never even knew me. At first when each one left an' I didn't hear from them I figured they was
jus' busy but then suddenly they was all gone, right down ta Nellie and none of 'em called me, none of 'em come ta see me--nothin'. Then, when I got sick with that "high blood", the doctor said I had ta quit workin'. I jus' knew they'd come help me then. But they didn't and I had nothin', no money for the rent, fer food, nothin'. Why didn't they come then? They wouldn't even take my phone calls an' when they jus' kept on ignorin' me, I finally had ta go ta the welfare ta get help. Me, beggin'! All them years a' workin' an' they let me go beggin'. They let all them sneakin', uppity people come inta my house, askin' questions, nosin' 'round, pryin', how I hated 'em. Has ya' any children? Where are they? Can't they helps ya? Oh, God, if I could only have tol' 'em--IF I HAD THEM ANSWERS, YA FOOLS, I WOULDN'T BE ASKIN' YA' FOR NOTHIN'. But I couldn't say that, couldn't say nothin', jus' had ta sit there after all them years 'a workin' and say, "Yes, m'am; no m'am, and prays they'd give me somethin', jus' anything, so's I could stay alive and please, would they please go away with those damning questions. Wouldn't they please leave, LEAVE, LEAVE! Her fists clenched and her huge frame trembled and small, glistening bubbles of sweat broke out on her forehead and began fighting their way down the furrows of her face. The humiliation--them
questions--ain't never had answers ta them, ain't never known what I did wrong ta' them kids--alls I did was work and love 'em and now its like they never knew me, like I ain't even here--like they never had no mamma.

Dry, burning eyes stared straight ahead, no tears--no tears left--just a strange, dry, burning acid-taste in the back of her head.

It's like I ain't got no tears left. I took that welfare--no choice--but it weren't enough ta keep a dog alive. Enough ta stop the crampin' in your stomach, tha's all. Nuthin' left over ta' do nothin' with--jus' sit and look out the window. Finally took ta walkin'--went up on 103rd Street ta watch the kids playin' in the school yard but that didn't help--they weren't my kids, so I quit that, I jus' started stayin' home an' sittin'. Then little Miz Critchen next door, started droppin' over. That ole gal never sat around waitin' for nothin'. She got me outta this house and that's when I met ole Mr. Charles. He was "old" all right, but he was company. Began hangin' 'round here all the time. Somehow the kids heard 'bout him and then they started callin'. "What's goin' on with that ole man, mamma? What's he hangin' round for?" Well, fine, I jus' kept lettin' him hang around and pretty soon the twins was born--two big, bouncin' baby boys and how that
upset them kids a' mine. Later, we had two more, two little girls. Life was good for awhile—even quit talkin' 'bout them other kids of mine—but it didn't last long.

Mr. Charles, he was too old ta work, even if he could have found somethin', so we jus' stayed on welfare. Weren't enough ta' keep the kids lookin' good or doin' the things I used ta do for my own kids. Never really had enough ta eat, let alone anythin' extry. It got so I hated that too. Then Mr. Charles, he says he's had enough and he ups an' leaves, then I was really alone. No one cared, no one understood so why should I care? I didn't care, I jus' couldn't care. Oh that "not carin'" that blissful feeling, how good that was. After all them years, all them carin' years, I jus' quit. Then they come, those people from somewhere. It ain't right, they said, not ta care, ain't right. But why wasn't it not right for me when its right for everybody else? They didn't answer me, they didn't care enough ta even answer me.

They took the kids, but I didn't say nothin'. What were they doin' anyway? Always breakin' inta the house, always lookin' for somethin'. Doin' whatever they pleased ta me. Take the kids, take 'em all--take everythin'... but then they took me too. Where? They dressed me and led me ta a car and put me in the back. I don't remember
after that. Jus' buildings flying by, a big gate, a stair-
way and then a room. Oh, God, that room, ain't never gonna
forget that room. It looked out on a garden—a garden of
roses but the roses had bars 'round them, the blue sky was
framed with bars and the moon was in a square-barred box.
All the faces that looked through my door had bars 'round
'em. Can't stop shakin' for thinkin' of 'em. I couldn't
talk, them bars was always there. When I tried ta' 'scape
from them, from that world of bars, they kept comin' in
after me an' I couldn't bar MY place. They jus' kept
comin' in and comin' in and COMIN' IN—no place ta hide—
no secret, inside place ta go—more people climbin' 'round
inside my head than there was hidin' behind them bars. I
got so tired, so very tired. So I started comin' out. It
was better then. THEY liked that, liked ta see me
"improvin' ", so I starts playin' the game and "improved"
a little more each day. Then for awhile each day they
took them bars from off the roses and the blue sky but,
not until they let me leave that place all together, did
they take them bars from off that moon.

It was, how long? before they let me go? A year?
No matter, THEY DID LET ME GO and then I was here again.
Same place...all ta do over.

My four kids, they never came ta see me—even let
those four babies go into foster homes—never cared a mite 'bout them. But now I was free and that was all that mattered—free a' that place—free a' them bars and them questions and them smiles they could put on and take off so fast—free a' their pills an' their shots an' their med'cines... Now, I jus' had ta put up with one visit a month from 'em. Yes, I was free all right, free ta be lonely, to be hungry, ta be back where I had been. Free ta miss them kids again, ta start the whole thing over again. Yeah, free ta get aid again and free ta start hatin' again. Them four babies, tyin' me down again an' them other four, not even carin'.

That's been a year ago now an' nothin's really changed. It's jus' like it use' ta be and these kids'll grow up and leave me, jus' like them others did. Right now they're afraid ah me and I hates 'em 'cause I know they ain't no different from them others. Maybe if those other kids knew how I hated these, maybe they'd come back ta me. A tear slowly trickled down the pathway of her mind.

Suddenly a dog's snarl penetrated her thoughts. She resented this intrusion as much as the dog resented any encroachment on his domain. Frowning, she cocked her head, listening. She heard a woman's voice trying to calm the
dog, but the dog's whimpering snarls continued. She rose and pulled back the drape and looked out to see the dog crawling on his belly, squirming and wriggling toward the woman who stood cautiously at the gate. Seeing the woman hesitate, the dog now pulled himself up and, with his four legs spread wide apart, stood slobbering, staring trance-like at the nervous intruder.

She did not want, need, nor desire people coming to her home but somehow the action in the yard amused her. She released the drape and silently opened the door. The movement caused the animal to swing his body around and, seeing the open door, he lunged for it only to receive a resounding kick on the head which threw him yelping and writhing back into his yard.

On seeing Mrs. Pullman, the visitor had quickly opened the gate but with this sudden display of violence, she had again hesitated. Immediately the dog sensed her alarm and turned his frustration on her, growling, snipping, nipping at her heels, his eyes still glazed and bewildered from his own hurt.

Watching her discomfort, Mrs. Pullman smiled inwardly, then she stepped back out of the doorway to let the woman enter. Hurrying through the door, the woman produced a card from her purse and handed it to Mrs.
Pullman. "Mrs. Wilson", she read, from the mental health clinic. Momentarily her eyes glazed but no other emotion was evident on her face. The woman was sayin' ...what? Never mind, I ain't gonna listen anyhow. She ain't gonna shut up either, jus' gonna keep right on talkin' an' talkin' an' TALKIN'. Lord, how d'ya' stop 'em from talkin'? Wait, the water fawcet, that's how. There now, it's on full blast--that's better--don't have ta listen now...What's that? What she say 'bout Nellie callin' her?...no matter, don't care anyhow, jus' ain't gonna listen ta her lies--think 'bout her lies--don't have ta do nothin'. Now lookit what she's done--the water, it's spilt all over the floor. Why don't she go. Go, ya' fool, go! What's that paper she's wavin' 'round? Now look at that water, it's all over the place, all over the floor. There, it's off, hope she's satisfied. But she won't hush, she won't shut that mouth of hers---can't listen ta her, won't listen ta her...the TV, that's it...I'll turn on the TV...LOUD...ain't gonna listen ta HER. There now lady, ya jus' keep right on talkin'. Tomorrow? What about tomorrow? She's scared, I can see that. I've scared her. Huh lady, you ain't got no idea what scared is. You ain't never really been scared in your whole life. You ain't never known what scared is really like.
What she still sittin' there for? Why ain't she goin'?

LADY, DON'T TOUCH THAT TV! STOP IT, I SAID! Yeah, tha's right, jus' do whatever ya' wants. Come right inta my house and do jus' whatever ya' wants. Can't leave a body alone. What's that she's sayin? Comin' here again tomorrow? What appointment? Why don't she jus' go? Jus' go and leave me be...go...go...GO! What's that? What's that paper she's puttin on the divan? Well, now maybe she'll go. Yeah, that's right, she's goin' all right--thank the good Jesus, she's goin'.

She watched the door close and then stood with her head cocked to the side, listening. No sound came from the yard. It was as though her own inner turmoil had been transmitted to the animal imprisoned there and he had in accord with her, stood off in mute detachment as the woman left. The gate clicked and slammed shut. Mrs. Pullman shuddered and then turned to the divan. For a moment she stood staring at the piece of paper the woman had left lying there for her. As she stared the paper grew larger then shrunk and then grew larger again. It changed to a million grotesque shapes all in a matter of seconds. Twice she moved to pick it up and twice she changed her mind. She pulled her eyes away for a minute and then, clenching her whole body, she stumbled over to the divan.
and snatched it up. It took two readings for it to sink in and by the second Mrs. Pullman's body was beginning to shake again, then roars of hysterical laughter broke from her and she began to wave the paper in the air.

Oh no ya' don't---a-clinic-appointment-for-me-tomorrow-- oh no, lady, oh no ya' don't. More wild laughter, now mingled with tears hit the walls of the garage-turned house. Then she stumbled to the kitchen and blindly felt for another letter which she had left on the shelf. Finding it, she wiped her eyes with her sleeve and began reading it.

"Due to numerous complaints filed by your neighbors..." again she began to laugh; now the loud, sobbing peels crashed mercilessly about the room, ripping through the silence of the summer heat. What about that, can ya' beat 'em? The Pound's gonna pick up the animal tomorrow.

"YA' HEAR THAT, DOG? THEY'S GONNA GET THE BOTH OF US TOMORROW. TOMORROW'S THE BIG DAY, THEY'S GONNA GET US BOTH."

The next day when the authorities came by there was a hole dug under the fence and the door to the empty house was wide open.
CHAPTER III

"The Preacher Says"

My God, he's two years old today--I never even thought of it being his birthday. Has it only been two years since that baby was born? Seems like a lifetime. Seems like a lifetime, too, that I've been sittin' here at this window. Won't they ever get here? Those welfare people...never care if they keeps ya' waitin'. That clock keeps tickin' the time away. Two-thirty, already one-half hour late. But this time they'll be here. They're finally goin' ta take him away. Thank God, now I'll have some peace. They'll be over, those long months of worry an' misery. Now, in a matter of minutes, they'll end.

Look there at Gregory, my first son, my only son really, playin' there on the floor with his ball. An' there's Roddie, two-year-old Roddie, what a contrast! Gregory, a healthy, chubby, smiling, normal four-year-old and Roddie--look at him--a perfect example of that Korean orphan of poster fame complete with the thin emaciated body, with its oversized head and protruding belly. Well,
they asked for it. Jus' look at him, he can hardly stand on those skinny, short, bowed poles which have ta do fer legs. So! He looks the part--neglected--that's what they said. An' that purple bruise on his face an' the bandage coverin' the side of his forehead, that's part of it--so he fell in the shower, that's what I'll tell 'em if they even asks. His head's all covered with that scaly cradle cap an' the skin on his hands an' feet is shriveled just like a fulltime dishwasher. WELL, WHERE ARE THEM PEOPLE ANYWAY...I CAN'T SIT HERE ALL DAY! They have ta take him today, they jus' have ta. How many times have I called 'em, beggin' 'em ta help? God, what d'ya' have ta do ta get rid of a kid? The first time they came, they looked at him and said that he looked like he was well cared fer an' why did I want ta place him? an' why couldn't I care for him? an' why? why? WHY? Oh God, them an' their "whys". I jus' kept tellin' 'em take him, take him, TAKE HIM! Then they left but they agreed ta find a place for him. I waited an' waited an' weeks went by but no word, so I calls again. Same thing, they came, they talked, they promised an' again, nothin'. "He looks fine ta me", that's all they'd say. So I waited again, an' again nothin' happened, so I called again but this time it was different. This time they came, took one look at Roddie an' said someone
would be here in two hours to pick him up. Good. Now nobody can say he's all right. No one can say he's been cared for. No, by God, no one can say that now.

Where are they? I'm wearin' out this rug to the window. Ain't nobody pullin' up on that Street. Couldn'tta put this housin' project apartment any closer ta that Street without been right on it. Some view, too, the Street an' whatever. The door opens on two cement steps which lead right down ta that spidery-cracked sidewalk. The patchy grass of that narrow boulevard has been burned an' sanded down by the fevered sun an' the scufflin' feet of endless neighborhood kids. An' that 103rd Street, its black macadamized top looks like it's dotted with cool, clear pools of water with shimmerin', shiverin' waves risin' from it, promisin' relief ta the hot stagnant air hoverin' above. But it LIES, callously an' flippantly it LIES. Ain't no relief nowhere.

Weren't always like this though--or maybe it was an' I jus' didn't see it. Me an' Ben, we'd been high school sweethearts. From the first time we met, from that first day, we both knew we were right for each other. Somehow, we jus' knew it.

Ben insisted we both graduate 'fore we got married an' 'cause Ben wanted it that way, that's the way it was.
But when we graduated, Ben hadn't found a job. 'Jus' nothin' 'round for him ta do. So we had ta wait again. Both my family an' Ben's had been on welfare as long as we could remember an' Ben, well, Ben wasn't goin' ta start out that way. "That ain't no way ta live, honey. Can't call your soul your own," he'd said. I didn't want ta wait but I couldn't find no work neither. Then Benny did get a job, it was at the hospital as an orderlie--wasn't much but it would do if we was careful. An' Ben, Ben was always careful. He never talked much an' never got excited but when he came over that day, that day he got the job--his face, well, it was all alive an' I knew, even 'fore he said it, I knew an' I started laughin'. I jus' laughed an' laughed an' he jus' stood there lookin' at me --oh, ya' silly tears, I guess I've still gotta few. Will never forget that look on his face. Then we was married in that little ole Baptist church--that one, right there on the corner. Benny bought the material for my dress 'cause he said, "Ya' only goin' ta do this once, Patty, so's we gonna do it right." Mamma made the dress an' it was beautiful--all lace an' ribbons--don't think I ever felt like that in my whole life before. It was somehow--really special. Like, jus' for a few minutes I was EVERYTHING--EVERYTHING I'd ever wanted ta be.
Benny, he wouldn't let me work after we was married. He was set on bein' the head of the house. He had such plans. He even went ta night school 'cause he said he was gonna get us outta this place no matter what it took.

Those were the happy days. Made no difference ta me what Benny did. Everythin' was jus' fine. I kept busy in our little apartment. It wasn't much, justa one-bedroom place in this Jordon Downs Project, but I was content 'cause it was ours, our first home together. Benny didn't like it though 'cause it was full of welfare people an' he made it quite clear that he didn't want me ta have nothin' ta do with them. No, Benny sure didn't plan on stayin' here any longer than he could help. Each month he saved a few dollars towards buyin' his own house an' I remember how proud he was of me when I could save a little outta the grocery money ta add ta the house money.

It could've been lonely here, havin' no friends but I spent my free time with my parents an' then, each evenin' Benny's homecomin' was a special event. It was fun havin' the house all clean an' neat an' dinner all ready for him. There was really no time ta worry 'bout the neighbors or havin' company, Benny was all I needed.

That was only the beginnin' though 'cause one year later Gregory was born an' life was purely perfect. The
wonderment on Ben's face when he first saw that baby—he juss' kept sayin', "MY SON, MY SON, MY SON." Oh, how that quiet man cooed an' clucked over that little bundle. It was him what gave the baby his early mornin' bottle an' each evenin' he insisted on rockin' him ta sleep. He never said much, but juss' watchin' him anyone could tell how he felt 'bout that boy.

Gregory was only a few months old when Ben got drafted. It broke our hearts but Ben made all arrangements an', when the time came for him ta leave, he juss' kissed me real quick-like an' for just one moment, he stared down at his sleepin' son an' then he ran ta catch that bus what took him outta our lives.

I always shake thinkin' 'bout those first few days after Ben left. I'd never really been conscious of the Street before. All of a sudden I began hearin' the brakin' speed of screechin' tires pullin' out gut depths of black tar. For the first time I heard the crashin' of twisted garbage cans as them grindin' trucks wrenched them high in the air an' reduced their stuffed innards to gnarled cubes which it sucked into its yellow metal belly. Then the crashin' of lids bein' smashed down in a futile effort to keep the breath-snatchin' stench of that sun-rancid food forever inside them cans. Now I heard it all, them
static beeps of cop sirens in the hauntin' hours of the night, along with the bar sounds as they dumped their homeless, drunken, bewildered masses out onto the Street, jus' like they pour cheap bootleg liquor into the gutters. No, I didn't miss any of it as it continued on into the lowest ebb of the pre-dawn hours. A dozen times a night I got up to check Gregory, not that he needed all that attention, but it took my mind off that Street.

The days were tolerable 'cause Gregory occupied most of my time. He was growin' an' changin' each day an' his antics were a delight. But those nights, those nights were horrors.

Ben's letters helped some but he was even more quiet in them than he had been when he was home. Short bits 'bout his trainin' an' orders for Gregory's care was 'bout all his letters had in 'em.

I spent a lotta time with my parents durin' the day but I always got home 'fore dark 'cause I was afraid to be out at night alone on that Street. Never knew what could happen there. The few school friends I had were all married and, rememberin' those evenin's with Ben, I didn't wanta bother 'em when their husbands was home.

Ben wrote that he was savin' up his leaves so he could get out sooner so there was no break in the waitin'.
Time passed slow and nothin' ever came along to fill the void that Benny left. Then Ben's letters all but stopped an' I began ta feel kinda alienated, as if all those wonderful days with Benny were jus' memories an' no more. I began ta feel like everythin' was passin' me by, like everybody was livin' an' I was jus' sittin' watchin' 'em. Finally I decided a little fun wouldn't hurt nobody. I jus' couldn't sit there by myself forever. Not forever, night in an' night out! Nobody could do that. I'd jus' go ta some of the neighbor's parties, no harm in that. Jus' go an' have a few laughs an' be with people.

I took Gregory to my parents an' told 'em I was goin' ta the movies with a girlfriend. It made me nervous ta lie like that an' I don't think they believed me neither, but they didn't say nothin'. An' each time I dropped Gregory off the lie got a little easier.

At first I really enjoyed bein' with people, it'd been so long. Now I was out doin' things again, with people my own age an' it was fun...jus' nice fun, that was all, no gettin' involved, nothin' like that. But then I met Joe an' right away, I got involved. Joe was a loud-talkin' braggart, jus' the opposite of Benny. But he was fun ta be with. He filled my evenin's an' that's all that mattered. Soon I was seein' him three an' four
nights a week an' I had ta tell my parents I was takin' night classes at the school. They frowned but they didn't say nothin'.

It wasn't what I wanted but anythin' was better than those nights of loneliness an' fear I'd know since Benny left. Well, for awhile it was better, but as time passed I got more an' more involved with Joe. No, I didn't love him, I jus' needed him or someone, anyone, really, an' out of that need came Roddie.

Jus' thinkin' 'bout it, I can feel that same panic rushin' over me that I felt the day I found out I was pregnant. Oh man, I rushed ta the nearest pay phone, that one, right there down the Street. I tried dialin' Joe's number so many times an' messed it up with my tears, but then I finally did it right an' I heard the phone ringin' in his apartment, but no answer. My hands were tremblin' so hard but I hung up an' tried again, jus' in case I'd done it wrong but I had been right, there was no answer. I leaned my head against the cold black, care-less telephone an' watched my panicy tears scurry down its bloated box an' inta the dirt laden papers on the floor of its coffin-sized booth. Dear God, but there was no answer. His friend, that's it, he'd know where he is. The number, I had it there, there, somewhere, somewhere,
it had ta be there somewhere in that purse of mine an' thank God, it was. He was home, Joe's friend was home an' he said Joe was at the bar where he hung out. I didn't wait ta thank him, I jus' hung up an' rushed back ta my apartment, dumped Gregory with a neighbor, WHO? I can't remember. Then, like a crazed thing, I ran the two blocks ta the bar an' I burst through that bar door an' stopped. I remember I was blinded by the dim light inside and the dank odor of stagnant beer was the only thing that told me I was in the right place.

"Well, hi there, Chick," called a voice from that dark void. In that inky dark I searched for that voice an' by the time I found it my eyes cleared an' I saw Joe turn an' glance at his buddies at the bar, glanced ta see if they'd noticed that this Chick, me, was obviously searchin' for him. Yeah, Joe, I sure was an' I didn't care if they heard what I had ta say. I ran ta the bar where Joe sat an' the words came tumblin' out, fallin', trippin', gushin' until Joe finally grabbed my arm an', still grinnin', said, "Whee, baby, hold on. Let's go get a table." Still grippin' my arm, he led me stumblin' across the dimly lit room an' found a table for us. I remember I never stopped talkin'. Tears, jerky sobs, babblin' an' finally an, O God, what'll I do? What'll Benny do? Oh
Thinking back, Oh God—sounds, had they been words? What did I say ta him? Did I tell him? I must have. But that grin, that grin never left his face. I'll never forget that grin—that horrible skulking grin. Oh God!, that's all I can remember except someone said "abortion"--that grinning skullface said "abortion"—kill my baby? Then I remember beatin' him in the face, that horrible grinin' face. He grabbed my hands an' pushed me away. Then through the throbbin' in my head I heard his voice. His voice? It said, "Okay, Chick, Okay, have the baby." I tore my hands from his an' stumbled back across the room ta the door an' ran out onta the Street. Even now I can hear his last words as I left. "What a Chick," he said, "she's so crazy for me she wants my baby no matter what." Those hot, dry tears of shame—how did I get home?

 Somehow I made it back ta the apartment but, once there, I never even thought of Gregory 'til, what seemed like hours later, a timid knock on the door made me once again aware of this world. I opened the door ta the woman who had been carin' for Gregory. I remember the woman starin' real hard at me as she handed me the baby and, as I took Gregory she said so quietly, "We all has troubles, child, ain't nothin' worth frettin' like that
Then those tears came rushin' back an' I couldn't say nothin', couldn't even thank the woman, I jus' pushed the door shut.

"Ain't nothin' worth frettin' like that about"...

Oh, dear Jesus, an' then the tears really gushed.

They're gone now, them tears. I ain't got no more left---all dried up. A person's got only so many tears ta cry an' mine's all cried.

There'd still been tears then though. When I went ta my parents, they told me ta stay away from 'em an' I cried then.

"We've seven of our own ta feed an' now you've messed up with Benny an' we can't help ya," mom had screamed, "now ya' jus' keep away from here, d'ya' hear? Jus' keep away."

An' "keep away?" I sure did, from family an' everyone else. I got a few letters from Ben but I didn't have the heart ta answer 'em. Then there was more letters, anxious, worried letters. Was I all right? Was Gregory all right? Would I please write? What was wrong? Was anything wrong? On an' on they went but I jus' couldn't write ta him. Then Roddie was finally born an' with his birth came the need ta tell Benny the whole story an' so I wrote ta him, all the lonely frustrations, the fears,
an' the yearning for him an' what I had done an' finally, what had happened ta me. Days went inta weeks an' the "relief" I had felt in confessin' ta Ben changed ta worry so that when the long overdue letter did arrive from him I tore that envelope apart gettin' the letter out, then I quickly scanned it 'til I came ta the part where he said, "I still love ya, Pat." The tears blinded me but I jus' brushed 'em aside an' went back ta the beginnin' o' the letter. Funny, I remember every word o' that letter, every single word. "Dear Pat," it said, "I've talked ta the preacher here at the base an' he says things like this happen durin' wartime an' he says the best thing ta do is ta go on with our lives an' so that's what we'll do. I still love ya, Pat." Oh yeah! I still love ya, Pat. That's funny too. I learned since then. Oh yeah, I learned them were the preacher's words all right, jus' like Benny said, "that's what the preacher said." Ben thought he believed those words an' probably if he'd never come home he'd a gone on thinkin' he believed 'em. But he did come home. He came home ta Gregory an' ta me an' ta Roddie. Poor Ben, Roddie jus' never fit inta his plans.

But all that didn't come out until later. When I got that letter of Ben's it was like sunshine after a long cloudy spell, like findin' flowers bloomin' in the desert,
it was like seein' Benny smilin' down at Gregory. Now there was a joy in my two sons. That letter meant the whole world to me. Even Mamma took me back 'cause a that letter. I was back in the family an' they even took Roddie in jus' like they did Gregory. I was still lonely but even that was all right 'cause Benny would be home soon.

Now, six months had passed since Benny come home. Has it only been six months? At first everythin' was fine. Ben was again captured by Gregory's every move. It was almost like he'd never been gone.

"He's gonna be tall like me," he'd say. "His appetite is great," an' he'd chuckle.

Ben was a little strange with me but I understood, he'd been gone for a long time an' had been through so much. He wouldn't tell me much of what had happened to him so I jus' figured he wanted to forget it. After his first look at Roddie he jus' ignored him but somehow I knew that too would pass. I figured in time he'd learn to love Roddie.

Several times in the weeks followin' his return I tried to talk ta him 'bout Roddie, tried to explain how I felt when I got his letter, but he wouldn't listen ta me an' then finally he got angry. "I don't wantta talk 'bout
that kid now or any other time," he yelled.

I never heard Ben yell 'bout nothin' before. I think maybe I knew then that things wasn't gonna be easy but I still didn't think they was hopeless. But then Benny jus' kept right on ignorin' Roddie. I think I could have stood that but then I began ta feel Ben's growin' hatred for the boy. In Ben's eyes, Roddie could do no right. If Roddie came near him, he'd push the boy away. Like Gregory, Roddie would run ta the door when Ben came home from work, waitin' ta be picked up an' tossed in the air jus' like Gregory but Ben would jus' keep right on holdin' Gregory an' walk away leavin' Roddie standin' there holdin' his little arms up. Then Roddie would toddle over ta me for comfort an' Ben would frown an' storm outta the room. If I gave the boy any lovin' at all Benny would start yellin' at him, callin' him names for no reason. Finally Ben reached the point where he even resented the food Roddie ate. I didn't know what ta do so I began feedin' Roddie an' puttin' him ta bed before Ben got home.

But even this didn't satisfy Ben. One night when he was playin' with Gregory he suddenly looked up at me an' said, "I don't want that kid sleepin' in my son's room no more."

For a minute I couldn't say nothin'. Finally, I
stuttered at him, but where then? We only has two bed-
rooms.

"He ain't movin' inta our room neither, he
screamed, "so don't get that idea."

Then where? I asked him, where? I couldn't believe
that man.

"That's your problem," he'd snapped an' went
chargin' up the stairs ta our room.

Yes, it was my problem. He was right, it was my
problem all right. This whole thing, it was all my fault.
So where, where was I ta put Roddie? For a minute I jus'
couldn't think of a place ta put him. The bathroom was
the only other room in the house. Ya' don't keep kids in
bathrooms. But where? There was no other place, jus' no
other place. So that had ta be it. Every day after that,
I let Roddie play throughout the house but when it was
time for Ben ta come home I put the baby in the shower an'
closed the door so as Ben wouldn't have ta see him. I
closed my mind ta his screams an' thanked God when they
quieted ta animal whimpers. Each evenin' I had ta take
Roddie outta the shower so Ben could use it but I soor
learned that Ben hated even these few seconds that I held
the boy.
Then one evenin' when I was takin' Roddie outta the shower I heard Ben's quiet, controlled voice behind me. I couldn't believe what he was sayin'. What was that, I asked him? What did ya' say? Ben said it again. "Get rid of him." Get rid of who? I asked. I still couldn't believe what I was hearin'. Then Ben went completely outta his mind. "That bastard, that's who, get rid of him," he screamed.

I jus' stood there, holdin' Roddie against me, an' Ben, he ran back inta the bedroom an' pulled his duffle bag from the closet, opened the dresser drawers an' began stuffin' his clothes inta the bag. All the time he was yellin' 'bout that "bastard kid". "I'm leavin'," he yelled, "I ain't comin' back 'til that bastard kid's gone--gone for good, ya' hear?--gone for good." Then still yellin', he ran down the stairs an' out the door, slammin' it behind him.

I stood there, not movin', thoughts racin' through my head. How does ya' get rid of a kid? Sell him? Give him away? With all the mouths ta feed in this area, who wants another one? Not my family. And Joe? Joe's nowhere around. How long did I stand there? I don't know how long. Wasn't 'til Roddie started wigglin' in my arms that I realized I hadn't moved since Ben had started
yellin'. I took Roddie down ta the livin' room an' set him down on the devan. Gregory had fallen asleep on the floor an' I jus' sat there lookin' at him. He ain't no prettier, no sweeter than Roddie but he's Ben's an' that's the difference. There jus' ain't no way I guess but I can't thinka nothin', no place for that baby, no place. I sat there worryin' 'bout it an' worrying' 'bout it 'til I guess I must have dozed off 'cause the sun shinin' through the window woke me up an' it was mornin'. Both boys were still sleepin'. Seein' them brought back Ben's yellin' an' I shook my head an' got up an' went ta the bathroom an' washed my face. It was still early but I decided ta call Mamma. I shouldn'ta done that. Like Benny, she screamed too. "What did'ja expect," she screamed, "ya' shoulda gotten rid of him when ya' first found outta 'bout him, now ya' gotta call the Agency, them welfare people, an' get them ta do it for ya'. Ben's right an' don't ya go bringin' that kid 'round here neither." An' then she slammed down the phone.

So I called the Agency, them welfare people. It took me awhile ta learn that the Agency only placed kids what were bein' neglected or kicked around. It took two visits from them folks, two visits 'fore I found out what it was they wanted. So okay, they got what they wanted.
Soon's I found out, I jus' quit takin' care of him. I put him back in the shower fer good. He was used ta it any­way. So now look at him. He's just' like them welfare folks wanted--NEGLECTED!

But today is the end. Roddie will be gone an' Ben will come home an' we'll be happy again. No more yellin', no more fightin', it'll be jus' like it used ta be.

She watched as Roddie crumpled to the floor to pick up Gregory's ball. Sitting there, his little stick-like arm went back over his shoulder, back behind his head and, in this childish pose, he threw the ball. It bounced and rolled under the chair. He began crawling over to get it but instinctively she rose to get it for him. As she moved up beside him, he turned and looked at her defiantly and, as she reached for the ball, he brushed her hand aside.
CHAPTER IV

"Street Scene"

Days start early on this Street, like maybe nobody wants ta miss nothin'. Folks hang 'round here most all day long an' most'a the night too, jus' talkin' an' lookin' an' sometimes, jus' standin' doin' nothin'. Ain't that there's much goin' on but somethin' could happen an' if it does, they ain't plannin' on missin' it.

When the sun comes up, that's the one real quiet time on this Street. That's the only time this place looks kind'a good 'cause that beginnin' sun, it's gentle ta them ole brick buildin's. Kinda slides real quick-like 'round their jagged corners, touchin' lightly on their faded-red bricks. Then, reachin' up, it runs real fast 'cross them rippled tin roofs an' slides down easy-like ta the sidewalk below. Then it takes one giant leap 'cross the Street an' lands glitterin' on them store's steel-fenced faces.

A little later, folks starts stirrin' 'round, trick-lin' out onta the Street from all directions. Most of 'em
is headin' fer the bus stop so's they can get ta work. There's ole ladies carryin' them paper shoppin' bags, strong-bodied young men in stretched blue jeans an' huggin' T shirts, an' all them young gals in their skimpy, little skirts headin' downtown ta some typewriter--struttin', stumblin', shufflin', all makin' for the bus stop. Mornin' grumpin's, some cheery words an' sleepy silence come from the group as the rumblin' bus draws up with its shooshin' doors openin'. They mounts an' the door shooshes shut an' the bus rumbles on.

Down the Street the "Righteous Hamburger" stand flips up its plywood front showin' its counter ta the Street an' the smell a' coffee hits the cool mornin' air. The door ta the soul food cafe slams an' other folks run ta catch still another bus what's already rumblin' on down the Street.

By 7:30 a.m. the high school kids is hittin' it. Some paired up--the boy struttin' an' talkin' loud, an' the gal, jus' listenin'--slinkin' low. Some comes 'lone, not yet awake, an' still others come with eyes what never misses nothin'. Most stop at the "Righteous" for a doughnut an' coffee, gulpin' an' chewin' as they head on ta the school. Others come in screechin' cars, racin' at top speed down the center a' the Street, roarin' passed
the bus stop, leapin' over the ole red car tracks, pass
the "Righteous" an' then, 'midst burpin' dust an' buckin'
wheels, they skids ta a stop in front'a Jordon High
School. Then grinnin', they turns an' limps slow-like
inta the parkin' lot.

Then it's time for them grade school kids ta start
movin'. Some come skippin' an' a'dancin' their way down
the Street with their little braids an' their little
skirts just'a flyin', keepin' time ta their hippity-
hoppin'. Young boys chase 'long, kickin' up the dust a'
the boulevards, racin' in 'mongst them stores, runnin'
'cross them meanin'less cement slabs, balancin' on them
streetcar tracks, dodgin' early hustlers, all makin' their
way ta the 103rd Street school.

Now it's eight a.m. an', like a signal, Mr.
Patterson turns the key in the lock a' his drugstore in
the State Center Buildin' an' the Street really wakes up.
The merchants, they rattle back the steel-accordian fronts
a' their stores an' the bank manager, he shoves open the
bank's heavy glass doors an' the day begins.

By nine a.m. the heatin' sun clamps down on the
Street an' the early mornin' dew becomes jus' plain sweat.
Now that blastin' sun hits the mouldy trash a' the gut-
ters, freein' the pungent smell a' slurpped beer cans,
flung-shattered wine bottles an' glue sniffers. Soured ice-cream wrappers, empty cigarette packs, match covers, torn Kleenex, ripped sacks, bloodied meat wrappin's, plastic bottles, yellowed newspapers, hamburger wrappin's, ketchup paks an' doughnut wrappin's, now all their different smells begin ta heat an' rise, begin ta mix an' mingle --pullin', movin' then ta rollin' 'til the stench is all controllin'.

Satisfied, that burnin' body leaps, an' for just'a second, skims 'cross one a' them tall, smoked-soaked kreasote poles what lines the Street; splits through them black, buzzin' wires an' dives quick-like inta the alleys below--takin' its dampenin' heat with it. Lingerin' there fer a minute, searchin' too early for the innocent, the uninitiated, it finally flies up the sides a' the buildin's, now bent on spotlightin' the endless rows a' graffiti. "Black is beautiful", "God is black", "God is the Sun"--all of 'em rolls 'cross them buildin's walls an' that sun keeps dartin' 'cross 'em, lightin' 'em up--showin' 'em off. Then, like a burnin' arrow, it soars an' plunges down ta the fences, ricochetin' 'gainst their gauged an' splintered planks ta hit other walls of war-torn, broken, chipped brick. Then it jumps 'cross ta them rock walls with their dusty mortar sifting down--no matter
what kind they is--wherever there's space--room--there the hot-fingered sun points out the endless rounds of rampant graffiti. Hand-written, block printed, all kind'a haphazard an' defiant--like every Tom Sawyer a' the times was turned loose, each with a different colored paint brush.

Then, as the heat mounts, peoples start showin' up. Tall, slim gals with shaven heads, all dressed in tribal saris, all searchin' fer a past. Other shapes an' other sizes in flowered, striped an' checkered mumus. Short shorts an' wide slacks; long hair, short hair, wigs, blondes, brunettes, redheads, dyed, bleached an' naturals; shufflin' men, corner hustlers, early drunks, loud talkers, soft talkers an just lookers, they all comes jus' ta check out the scene.

Kids, all ages an' sizes is everywhere. Squealin', laughin', gigglin', they runs an' skips an' jumps with all that freedom what comes with jus' bein' kids.

But them older folks, they moves slow 'long here, kind'a leisure-like. There ain't no rushin', no shovin', no runnin' 'round in circles. Cars stop right in the middle a' the block an' drivers yell at some friend they sees walkin' 'long the sidewalk. All them cars behind? They jus' stops--ain't no hurry--ain't no use ta get upset, 'cause that's what they all does on this Street.
By noontime the sun's reachin' its hottest an' folks start disappearin'. A lunch wagon jingles up--momentary movement--a car groans ta a stop in front a' the post office--footsteps rush in an' right back out an' the car ambles on down the emptyin' Street. Now the angry buzzin' a' them overhangin' wires comes on stronger an' the heat waves rise silently from the gummy blacktop an' soon, a fevered hush clutches the Street.

Them buses comin' back to the Street--that's what finally breaks that hot silence. Dumps them women, an' gals, an' fellas, all the way down the Street. Now the chatterin', the scurryin' an' the talkin' hits ag'in an' the silence goes.

Some a' those people, 'fraid a' the Street, clutches their shoppin' bags an' wings it ta them side streets. Others, the young'uns mostly, they amble 'long slow-like hopin' ta pick up any gossip they might'a missed. Others, well they head straight fer the bars, hopin', I guess, ta forget the day.

Seems like that first bus is a kind'a signal for the day ta start closin' up--'cause now the bank manager, he comes out an' shoves closed his slidin' door an' them steel-grilled store fronts clang shut, an' Mr. Patterson, he carefully locks up his drugstore. An' that sun, well,
it heads out too. Back it goes, off'a the buildin's, up outta the alleys, up from the Street, back up from the rooftops, takin' its heavy heat with it.

Now with the softenin' light comes a little breeze, warm yet, but promisin'. Feeble flickers a' street lights begin ta appear 'mong them black pillars linin' the Street, tryin' hard, them beams is, ta cut them darkenin' pits below. Clickin' heels an' shufflin' foot sounds ease off, finally dwindlin' away an' the day's workin' pace ends an' a dusky silence wraps the Street.

A late bus rumbles down the Street, shooshin' doors fer no one--a dog starts howlin' as the moon comes up--an' sounds a nighttime signal. Now day is done an' night is here--the Street becomes a pander. Loners head t'wards the bars an' gangs t'wards the corners. It's speed they need an' darkness too 'cause night's a different drummer. The music starts--it's rock an' roll--it's tempo gears the Street scene. A shout is heard--some rushin' steps--an' words go flyin' high. Screechin' tires--the pigs arrive--crowd splits--gone ta hide in shadows. Now tauntin', cursin', mouthin'--the pigs move on--now mouthin's hollow laughter. A hustler bids--a rank kid gives an' sneers become satanic. A crash o' glass--a mournful blast--a "fuck, there goes the bottle." A door swings out--music
beats--silence as it closes. A husky voice--"I dig that
dude"--an' voices start competin'. A chick walks by--them
lights turn on--an' shadows leave ta follow. Corner
whispers--a fix is made--a slow pig car--the whisper
splits--music rocks--cats fight--tires screech--rot gut
flows an' churches sing redemption.

The night wears on--black moon comes--the rock is
gone--the roll remains--reachin' a crescendo. Fantasies
all reach a peak--shives're sharp--lives're cheap--the
night is late--there's really no tomorrow.

But night does pass--it's two a.m.--them swingin'
doors--an outward pass--the bars reject--the Street ac-
cepts--stumbles, curses, mumbles. Them dudes're here--
their lines the same--an' loneliness still listens. The
moon's so cold--as truth is cold--now fantasies are gut-
tered. A palin' sky--a long Street sigh--an' night be-
comes the mornin'.
"Man, What A Sight That Was"

There ain't no shortage a' men on this Street. They comes in all shapes an' sizes. From the Uncle Tom who's gonna fix it up, ta the hustler what's grabbin' every buck, right down ta the loner what thinks of it like it's his home, they's all here, right here on this Street.

Fer instance, there's Mr. Patterson, the druggist in that there State Medical buildin', he does a lot for these peoples. He saves 'em all kind'sa time, keeps 'em from havin' ta go down ta the County Hospital for their med'cin--takes the time ta call down there for them an' gets the prescription an' fills it right out there in the drugstore. Keeps that place clean too, an ain't nobody 'llowed ta hang 'round there neither.

Then there's the postoffice on the corner next ta the Medical buildin', all them fellas in there what's so busy but they always has a friendly word for ya--always got a nice word fer everybody, an iffin' ya' has ta stand in line fer somethin', they jus' starts talkin' ta that
last person in line so's they won't get impatient--could
do everythin' faster if they didn't do that but it's
friendly that way an' ya don't mind waitin' so much.

Then there's that big banker what unlocks them heavy
slidin' doors every mornin' right at eight-thirty, an'
there's them fellas in the market cross from him an' the
fellow down the Street what runs the Righteous Hamburger
Stand an' the cafe owners an' the bar owners an' the junk
store owners an' the fellas in the clothin' stores, they's
all here ta make a buck. Yeah, there's all them business
fellas here ta make a livin' every day an' they all dis-
appears every evenin'.

There's others though, like Champlain what ain't never
gonna disappear. Champlain, now he likes this Street.
It's got everythin' he needs. He's one a' them easy-goin',
laughin' fellas kind'a like that Peter Pan ya' hears 'bout.
He's married an' has five kids but he was jus' too laughin'
an' easy-goin' for that wife a' his an' so she kicked him
out. But before he left, Champlain told the whole world
how much he loved them kids an' so, his wife finally had ta
let one of 'em, nine-year-old Richard, go with him. Well,
Champlain, he didn't have no job so he's had ta go on Aid
ta feed that boy. Them welfare peoples got busy tryin' ta
find work for him but job after job went by 'cause he
didn't have no baby sitter fer Richard. Finally Champlain
got tired a' twistin' them rules with the welfare an' he
decided ta stir up a little trouble jus' for 'citement.
He went an' picked up all a' his kids for the weekend an'
then wouldn't take 'em back. Well, all hell broke loose,
his ole' lady called the poulce, them aid peoples, the
fire department an' anybody else she could think a' an'
when they all got's ta Champlain's place, there he was,
just'a sittin' there on his porch playin' with all them
kids a' his. He even got tears in his eyes when they ac-
cused him a' kidnappin' them kids. He tole' 'em, he tole'
'em he jus' couldn't bear ta part with 'em, that was all,
jus' couldn't bear ta see 'em leave.

Well, fer a few weeks after that Champlain laid low--
or it seemed like he did. But then, everythin' blew again.
They found out he'd been sneakin' off buyin' booze for one
a' them alkie ladies in the neighborhood. She didn't have
no money ta spend, her mama'd been buyin' the groceries fer
her an' her kids so's nobody could figure out jus' how she
was gettin' it 'til someone in the neighborhood saw
Champlain sneakin' up ta her place with a bottle. Well,
the alkie was sent off ta dry out ag'in an' them welfare
peoples found a job an' a baby-sitter fer Champlain, real
fast-like.
But then there's men like Mr. Lorne--now he'd never come onta this Street iff'n it weren't fer his wife. He'd always worked real steady--fer over fifteen years. Bought a big piece a' land here, built a small house on it, raised three kids an' took care a' his ole' mother too. He always meant ta build a bigger house on that property but never could get the money tagether. But he didn't let it go ta waste, he planted all that 'xtry land in fruit trees, an' vegetables, an' berries, an' Mrs. Lorne, she worked right along with him, cannin' everythin' she could. Then Mr. Lorne got laid off'a his job an' he was too ole' ta get hired anyplace else so's he an' the family had ta cut 'way back. Mrs. Lorne's neighbor tole' her 'bout them food stamps what the welfare peoples gives out an' Mrs. Lorne figured she could use 'em ta get the sugar fer her cannin', so she hightailed it right up there an' filled out all them papers at the welfare place. She was so proud that she'd thought of a way ta help that she ran all the way back home ta tell her husband. Well, he weren't. Ta him them stamps was charity, they was like what they gots durin' the Depression an' no 'mount of 'splainin' or coaxin' would change his mind. He was quiet though, jus' put on his coat an' walked up ta the Street ta that there Welfare place an' cancelled out all them papers his wife had signed.
But then there's others too, like Mr. Swanson. He weren't quiet at all. He hit that welfare place like a ten ton truck--roarin' an' yellin' so's ya' could hear him all the way down the Street. He was laid off too an', at the same time, his young daughter'd found out she was pregnant so, without him knowin' she'd come in an' asked fer aid.

"Nobody's payin' fer any a' my kids," Swanson screamed, "get me them damn papers an' gett'um fast. Ain't none a' ya' snoopers comin' 'round within an inch a' my place, I don't need nothin' from ya', now get them papers 'fore I tears this place 'part."

No sir, there's no foolin' with Swanson when he's mad an' the Street wasn't gonna forget it.

Of course the Street sees others too, like them visitin' heroes--like Cassius Clay. That time he came ta the Street, he was all sharped out in a suit an' all, slidin' down the Street in that black, fur-lined, chauffeur drivin' cadillac with that police escort. Man, what'a sight that was! There was ole' Clay loungin' in that back seat--jus' lookin' 'round like he was king. He pulled inta the parkin' lot behind the State Service Buildin' an' his bodyguard jumped out real smart-like an' stood watchin' the crowd gather. That ole' grapevine run up an' down the
Street like lightenin' an' everybody was comin' on the run. Them cops jus' stood back holdin' their bikes—stayin' clear outta the way. An' Clay cracked his window jus' enough ta let them pencils an' scraps a' paper come through so's he could write down his name. Some white gal was there, stood in line with all them others—figured she'd be waitin' a long time—but ole Cassius, he ain't like that—figures ta give 'em all a thrill—black or white, so he jus' beckoned—like for her paper an' pencil an' signed it right then an' there. He didn't say nothin' all the time he was there—never even smiled—guess 'cause he was with his own an' didn't need ta do any a' that play actin'.

Then there's some what works real hard for this Street, like Ted Watkins. He's with that Watts Labor Community Action Committee an' that's what it is all right—ACTION. One time they got that ole' railroad company ta let 'em use the land runnin' 'longside the tracks, an' the kids 'round here planted gardens on it—corn an' potatoes an' tomatoes—anythin' what growed an' kept the kids busy. An' now durin' the summers he keeps them kids busy cleanin' up the Street—the whole area. They all meets each week—day mornin' at Will Roger's Park an' if they's late—they don't get ta work that day an' they don't get ta go on the
outtin' they has at the end of each week neither. Ted says them kids has ta learn ta be WHERE they's s'possed ta be WHEN they's s'possed ta be or else ain't no use in trainin' 'em fer nothin'. Them kids, they likes Ted, an' they respects him too, guess 'cause he don't allow for no excuses.

There's them loners here too, an' ta them this Street is as much home as anyplace. Most of 'ems in their late thirties or early forties, though most a' the time they looks a lot older. A lot'ta them comes from the South with not much schoolin'. The one thing they did have though was young, strong bodies an' so, for a time they got plenty a' work. Them jobs was hard though, diggin' ditches, workin' on roads, always laborin' type things, but the pay was better'an they'd ever got before so they paid no mind ta that sweat what poured off'in' their bared, muscled backs--after all, they was young an' their backs was strong. Lot'sa them married an' had kids an' things was good. When things got slow they was always quick ta be laid off but they was used ta that from their farmin' time down South. But time passed an' them bodies weren't so young no more. Began ta take more'an what they had left ta' lift that shovel an' push up them house frames. Then the jobs started gettin' scarcer 'cause there was
always some young dude standin' 'round jus' waitin' for an openin'. It kept right on too, jobs gettin' fewer an' fewer 'til finally the Mrs. had'da go lookin' for work jus' ta make ends meet. Well, she didn't have much learnin' neither--couldn't make enough ta feed an' house all them kids. An' now the ole' man, he's jus' sittin' there watchin' this, body's broke, "no's" from foremen, wife's workin', makin' no money, feelin's risin', starts despisin', won't take welfare, can't face the family, hears the naggin', goes ta broodin', takes ta drinkin', no solution, hits on leavin', an' so the loners--the ghetto transits.

Findin' others, lot'sa others, jus' like himself, the loner joins 'em on the corners, shuffles down the Street with 'em, an' when he can hustle up the change, he leans 'gainst the bars with 'em. Sometimes he's gotta' get out real early in the mornin', standin' half shiverin' ta death in front a' the daily hirin' hall. He stands there all humped up, with his chin tucked down under his worn, turned-up coat collar, tryin' ta escape that early mornin' chill. There's usually 'bout twenty or thirty a' the loners there each mornin', all lookin' 'xactly 'like, an' all of 'em knows there ain't gonna be nothin' for 'em but they's all been ta the welfare office an' that office told
'em they ain't gonna help 'em lessin' they helps themselves. So they comes down here an' hangs 'roun' 'til alls the jobs is takin' an' then the boss signs their piece a' paper what the welfare gave ta 'em, lettin' the welfare know they'd been down ta the hall. The loner coulda tole' the welfare office they wouldn't get nothin' but them welfare peoples wouldn't listen nohow. So he goes through all this 'cause when he takes that piece a' paper back ta them they'll give him a grocery order ta buy food fer one day an' he knows it's easy ta trade that order fer a cheap bottle a' wine or a few pennies ta hit the bar that night--That bar, that bar, where for a few hours he can forget 'fore they push him, stumblin' an' mumblin', back onta the Street.

Then, on every corner there's a "Danny", hustlin' fer that buck. Whatever ya' needs, he's got it or can get it fer ya'. Ya' jus' gotta name it an' they got the connection; drugs, women, TV's, watches, they can get 'em all. These dudes is cool--they ain't gonna rack them bodies, an' they ain't gonna tie themselves down neither, a new chick a night an' a chance ta hit the big time--that's the end, man--jus' a chance ta hit the big time--ta get that big car, them fancy women, that sharp pad--the whole bit. An', since some does make it--they all keeps tryin'.
Busted? Right, that ain't no news, man--these dudes has as much time IN as ON the Street. It's that one big hit--that one big score they needs, an' that's it--that one big scene, man, an' if they holds out long 'nuff, it'll happen an' there ain't no better place for it ta happen than here, right here on this Street.
CHAPTER VI

"They Ain't Gonna Do This Ta Him"

This is the only time a' the day I gets ta myself, ridin' the bus ta work an' back ag'in. It's crowded in the mornin's, but not so bad at night--then ya' can stretch out'ta little an' let y'er whole body yawn. It's nice puttin' y'er head back an' jus' lookin' out the window at nothin' important. Hope them tomatoes Miz Jordon give me don't get smashed up in that rack. Looks okay from here though. Them peoples is awful nice, always given me things, but I don't like it when they gives it ta me in place a' my pay...well, some a' them clothes fits the girls awright, but we needs the money most.

Stretching out a little further, she let her eyes ramble along the moving city streets. Store fronts, cars and people all hazily merged together but she let nothing dent the surface of her mind, it was like water dropping onto an oily surface, rolling right off again.

It's a long trip, three transfers, but with Jackie goin' like he did I had ta move or they'd a found out
'bout him. Tole' those kids ta make sure Jackie was out'ta sight if anyone should come knockin'. Hope they remem- bers. Oh, the worry, the worry! Maybe Jackie'll...but no, I warned 'em enough. Ain't no use ta worry. That's the worst 'bout workin' days, ain't home ta watch things. But there ain't nobody what wants their house cleaned at night.

That Jackie, can't understand it, no, sure can't. Doctors don't know neither, jus' says it's somethin' what happens 'fore they's even borned but they don't know what it is. All them kids, all fine 'til they gets ta school age, five or six. They says there's somethin' wrong with everyone of 'em, all nine of 'em. That don't seem right. Well, Reggie's awright, but then he's jus' four.

Jackie's six, the second youngest. That's the same age as the others was. The doctors says they jus' stop developin'. Like Ruthie, they says she's retarded an' that's what they say 'bout most a' the others too. But Jackie, he has this other thing where all the muscles go an' he can't think no more neither. There ain't no reason ta it. Jackie was in school jus' doin' fine when all of a sudden his little legs started ta botherin' him an' then he couldn't walk at all, an' then he got ta where he couldn't talk, jus' started layin' 'round, doin' nothin',
makin' them funny sounds. Don't know what it t'is, what it could be, but I know it's gonna be for him. Yeah, dear Lord, I sure knows that.

The bus stopped for passengers and she forced her attention to the people climbing onto the bus. Sure pushin' ta get on--no sense a'hurryin' like that--shovin' an' a'pushin', ain't gonna make nothin' move no faster. Her body lurched as the bus threw itself into gear and she turned back to her window thoughts.

When I finally had'da take Jackie ta the hospital he was havin' them seizures real bad an' they did all kind'sa tests tryin' ta figure out what was wrong with him, but they couldn't find nothin'. All them machines an' things an' even they can't tell. They was nice ta me an' Jackie though. All them doctors sittin' 'round that long table. They said it was carin' fer Jackie what kept him as well as he is. That was nice. Ain't no trouble takin' care a' that little fella. That med'cine they gives him, that helps with them seizures but he ain't gettin' no stronger. I got that stroller fer him, like they said, but it ain't helpin' them little legs none. He's s'posed ta push himself 'round but he's doin' less an' less a' that. I'll have ta tell Ruthie ta make him push hiself more.

Oh, that Ruthie! They calls her retarded. Nineteen
an' still home with her mama--couldn't do without her, no, sir. Been dependin' on that gal for what--five years now? It was five years ago, ever since that school tole' me she's retarded. Ruthie'd been in special classes ever since she started school but when she was fourteen the teacher sent home a note sayin' she had ta go ta a special school fer retarded children where she'd get trainin' ta do somethin' useful. So that's what we done. Took her ta get all them medical checkups an' special things they said she had ta have an' then I took her on that special bus they has ta the school in downtown Los Angeles. It was a nice school, clean an' bright an' everybody was real nice, but Ruthie, she jus' didn't like it. Poor Ruthie, she made all kinds a' 'xcuses, new one every mornin', ta keep from goin' ta that school an' finally, I jus' didn't have the heart ta send her no more. Maybe that was wrong but that's the way it was.

Sky's darkenin', days is gettin' shorter. Soon I'll be comin' home in the dark. Don't like that 103rd Street after dark, no tellin' what can happen there. Hope Ruthie has supper started. She may not be too smart, like they says, but I don't know how I'd get along without her. I couldn't work if Ruthie didn't take care a' them kids fer me. With me leavin' at six in the mornin', it's up ta
Ruthie ta get 'em off ta school an' she sure does a good job a' it. Yeah, she sure do. Lines all them kids up an' then goes down the line checkin' on their teeth, their necks, their hands, everythin'. She musta seen them do that on TV. 'Fore they leaves she checks their books an' their lunches an' then she marches 'em on down ta the bus stop. Stays there too, 'til the bus comes an' waits 'til they's all on an' the bus takes off 'fore she ever leaves. That Ruthie, she tickles me, she's jus' like an' ole' army sergeant.

She has ta leave Jackie in his bunk while she's gone though. I don't like that but there's nothin' she can do 'bout it. She feeds an' dresses him when she gets back. That little Jackie, I can see him now, his little skinny dried-up body, them big eyes, still laughin' somehow, but still sometimes so puzzled lookin'. That head a' his what looks way too big for that little wizened body. His feet, them short, wrinkled, claw-like bones stick straight out from those longer leg bones, an' his stomach, so bloated an' out'ta all proportion ta the rest a' his body. Well, tears ain't gonna help--What's goin' on up there at the front with that bus driver? Jus' figitin', I guess. He needs a haircut--seems like he always needs a haircut.

Known that bus driver fer a long time. He's on this
run when I gets on at six in the mornin' an' he's still here when I comes home at night. Yeah, this trip's some-thin' else. Takes three buses ta get ta work in the mornin'. Would be easier if I lived closer, then I could get the kids off in the mornin'. But Jackie's safer out here, so it takes three buses an' two hours ta get ta work. The works hard too. Them five houses is dirty every time I gets there. One fer each day a' the week. I only does the heavy cleanin', the scrubbin', the polishin', an' all that. Can't see how they all gets that dirty in jus' one week. But they is kind ta me an' I'd miss any of 'em after bein' with 'em fer so long. They all gives me things fer the kids an' sometimes, at Christmas, they gives me money an' that always helps.

If only John hadn't started ta drinkin' things would'a been a lot different. He wasn't always like that though. When he was young there weren't nobody'd work like him. He didn't have no trade so he jus' worked at whatever he could get. It was hard work too, diggin' ditches, workin' on the roads but he never seemed ta get tired--jus' come home laughin' an' tellin' all the news a' the day an' bouncin' them babies 'round like he'd been sittin' 'round doin' nothin' all day. But he got old, jus' like every-body do, an' jobs got fewer an' he had ta spend more an'
more time sittin' 'round waitin' for work, so he took to

the bottle an' after that, what little money he did make

an' what he could get from me, all went to the bottle.
Then he was really old, no more laughin', talkin', or

bouncin' them kids. But them kids, they don't remember

him no other way than what he is today.

Wish they could'a seen him when he was back in

Virginia, 'fore we was married, when he was livin' with

his granny. How he loved that ole lady, only family he

ever had. Well, we got married an' when work there finally
gave out we decided to leave an' come to California. My

whole family moved with us but Granny wouldn't move one

step. John cried, yeah, he did, he cried for leavin' that

ole woman. Ruthie wouldn't believe that. She hates her
daddy an' she hates her ole granny too. Just think'a

what she said 'bout her granny 'jus the other day. "Mama",
she said, "ya' know somethin'? Granny's a son-of-a-
bitch." Wonder why Ruthie says things like that? It would

break her daddy's heart ta hear her. Wonder where John is

this time? Last time he was gone this long he was in jail

but then, I guess there really ain't nothin' fer him ta

come home ta no more. Well, here's my bus changin' point.
Up I goes ag'in. This is the last one, just'a short ways

now. Once home, them kids'll be screamin' an' yellin' an'
there's supper ta fix, the house ta clean, though that
doesn't get too much doin'. Ruthie does well with them
kids but she don't get much else done. Jus' hope nobody
saw Jackie today.

The aisle was clear now so she got up and made her
way to the front of the bus. Her other bus was parked
beside it so she just stepped off one and onto the other.
The driver nodded and she smiled. The bus was only half
filled so she found an empty seat and sat down, placing
her shopping bag on the seat beside her.

Wish I could visit with some a' my neighbors--there's
some what seems real nice but they're gettin' kinda
curious awready. I really don't have the time ta be
neighborly but it'd be nice ta talk ta some a' them women
jus' once in awhile. But there's not much goes on in that
neighborhood what I don't know 'bout--that Ruthie, she
never misses nothin'. She never forgets a word a' what
she hears. Ruthie, she ain't got no idea what they's
sayin' half the time, no idea what they mean--she jus'
wants ta tell me everythin' what happens. Now that family
livin' right next door there, they begins ta drink real
early in the evenin' an' by the time Ruthie goes ta bed
they's really battlin' an' Ruthie never misses a word.
She won't stop tellin' what they does neither. It's jus'
like 'nother television story ta her. She don't know no different.

We's comin' ta 103rd Street stop now. Get my things together an' think 'bout movin'. There, we stopped. Wait 'til it's all clear. Ain't no use pushin' an' shovin' jus' ta save a few minutes. But once I gets off I ain't waitin' 'round on this Street. There, it's clearin' out now, jus' hurry on off an' do a little joggin' 'round the corner ta my street. Hate that Street but this one's fine, can slow down now an' walk them five blocks ta the house. Funny, I always starts out slow but the closer I gets ta home the faster I goes.

As usual, Ruthie was the first to see her. She had been sitting on the porch waiting and now Mrs. Prewitt saw her long, lean legs leap off the porch and race down the walk to meet her. She grabbed her mother in a bear hug which almost threw Mrs. Prewitt off her feet. When she regained her balance she discovered that her tiredness was gone and now laughing, she handed her shopping bag to Ruthie and hurried up the walk to the house.

With the exception of Jackie, the children were all crowded on the porch and all of them began to yell at her, each trying to tell her their own day's events. Still laughing, she kissed each one of them and then hurried into
the house to see Jackie. Reggie, her youngest, stayed right on her heels, loudly complaining that he had "been sittin' on the floor, watchin' television, mindin' my own business, when Jackie come up behind me an' banged me on the head. For no reason", Reggie yelled, "for no reason, Mama, he jus' banged me on the head an' started laughin'. I hates Jackie, Mama, I really hates him."

"Hush, now, Reggie, Jackie was jus' playin', so don't worry none 'bout it", she said.

Jackie was chortling up at her from the stroller and she reached down, picked him up and hugged him to her. He had drooled all over the front of his T shirt and the rancid smell of his medicine engulfed his little body. She didn't care, she just squeezed him that much tighter. Jackie's little fists struck out at her in protest so she released him, kissed him again and set him back in the stroller. Then she hurried out to the kitchen to start supper.

Then remembering her earlier worries, she called to Ruthie, "Did anyone come by today?"

"Jus' some school kids." Ruthie replied.

"Did they see Jackie?" Mrs. Prewitt stopped preparing supper and waited anxiously for Ruthie's reply.

"Yeah," Ruthie answered and then quickly added, "but
they jus' thought he was a baby."

Mrs. Prewitt's anxiety flared into anger.

"Ruthie, I tol'ja," she screamed, "I tol'ja not ta let anybody see Jackie. I meant nobody, nobody at all, d'ya understand? NOBODY!"

Ruthie, who had moved to the kitchen door, now stepped back, away from her mother's anger. The only person she's ever heard her mother yell at was their father. She moved just in time, for now her mother came flying through the door into the living room where the children were settled around the TV set.

"Did'ja all hear me?" she screamed, "Nobody is ta see Jackie, nobody!" Inside she was trembling and the tiredness had returned. She reached over to one of the chairs to steady herself and then groped her way over to it and sat down.

"Ya' don't have ta know "why", she murmured, "jus' don't let nobody see him."

She sat with her head bowed for a few minutes and then wearily she returned to the kitchen and her preparations for supper.

Shouldn't get that mad, they jus' don't understand an' I can't tell 'em neither--jus' can't tell 'em. Nobody's ta see Jackie that's all, jus' nobody. I frightened
'em. First time I've ever yelled at 'em--they looked so scared. Guess I best go in an' ease their minds a bit.

She walked back into the living room and stood looking at the children. They glanced up at her furtively, then quickly turned back to the TV set. She chuckled and with her foot, she gently nudged her youngest daughter, Ruby. The children felt reassured and giggled.

Laughing now, Mrs. Prewitt walked over to Jackie and scooped him up into her arms. She felt his tiny, fragile body, too warm against her own and she hugged and kissed and cooed at him and baby-like, he cooed and gibbered back at her. Those eyes, they're the same laughin', lovin' eyes a' my ole' Jackie, and she crushed him to her 'til his fingers clawed defensively at her.

Loosening her hold, she stared at him. They'll help him in time, like the doctor says, there's new things comin' out everyday. There'll be somethin', there will be. As she stood there her body started rocking back and forth, instinctively soothing the baby she was holding.

Ordinarily Saturdays and Sundays were spent at home with the children but one Sunday a month, Mrs. Prewitt disappeared. The children never knew where she went and somehow they knew not to ask her.

The alarm went off at five a.m. Sunday. Quickly see
reached over to shut it off before it wakened the children. Then she got up, put on her clothes and went down to the kitchen to make some coffee. She drank it while she finished dressing and twenty minutes after the alarm had gone off she was leaving the house. The air was damp and misty whiffs of fog kept drifting against her face and she was glad to see the bus drawing up to the curb as she rounded the corner onto 103rd Street.

'Nother two busses today, one ta downtown Los Angeles an' the other ta Costa Mesa. She half dozed on the bus going down to the downtown station. She was early for the other bus, though it was sitting in the depot loading up. Robotically she climbed aboard. She knew from experience that there would be few people on the bus so she found an empty seat and curled up and went back to sleep. When she awoke, over an hour later, she was too close to her destination to go back to sleep so she just sat and stared unseeing at the few cars flying by. When the bus drew up in front of Fairview State Mental Hospital in Costa Mesa she pulled herself up out of the seat and headed for the exit. The bus door slammed shut behind her and she stood there looking at the great stretch of grass which rolled from her feet up to the grey-stone hospital buildings in the background. Through the wrought-iron grill of the
high fence she could see men wandering around inside, picking up pieces of scrap paper with hooked-tipped sticks.

Cleanin' up fer visitors, I guess. She shuddered and clutched her coat around her shoulders. Seems so dreary here today, maybe 'cause I haven't been here for 'while. For eleven years I've been comin' here every month, every month 'til Jackie got sick. Never missed 'less one a' them kids was sick or else if I didn't have no money. But, don't need them memories right now--it's cold--need somethin' warmer than this light coat. If I hurries right up ta that main buildin' an' tells 'em I's here they'll call ahead an' have him ready fer me; she hurried up the long walk and entered the main building. As she hurried into the building the receptionist smiled and greeted her by name.

"Hello, there." she said, "We've missed you, Mrs. Prewitt."

"Couldn't make it," was Mrs. Prewitt's clipped reply.

"Well, he's been just fine," the woman assured her, "we'll tell him you're here."

"Thank ya', m'am, then I'll jus' go on 'head," said Mrs. Prewitt. She continued on through the building until she came to the exit onto the inner grounds and then went through the maze of cold concrete buildings. As she
walked, she looked around her.

They sure does keep this place pretty, flowers all round an' the grass so green. How nice for Harvey ta get ta see this alls the time. This here buildin's the children' school. Look'it them little paper cutout dolls all a'hangin' 'cross the blackboards. They's so good ta the children here an' when they gets older some of 'em even gets ta learn a trade.

By now she was approaching her building and she began to move faster. The main door led right into a large ward and Mrs. Prewitt hurried through, hesitated and looked anxiously around. Then she smiled and headed towards a boy sitting in a wheelchair. A voice suddenly called her name. She turned ta see one of the nurses making her way down through the long line of adult-sized cribs which filled the room.

"Good morning, Mrs. Prewitt," she called, "there he is, we have him already for you."

Mrs. Prewitt smiled and turned back towards the wheelchair. The boy didn't look up at her approach but sat there looking straight ahead. Mrs. Prewitt bent down and gently kissed him on the cheek and felt the downy evidence of a beginning beard. The boy's head moved slightly and Mrs. Prewitt beamed.
"He knows I's here, I jus' knows he does!" she exclaimed.

The nurse, who had followed her over, nodded and smiled, saying, "I'm sure he does. Would you like to take Harvey for a walk out in the grounds?"

Same talk every time, but then she understands. I wants ta take Harvey off ta myself then I can talk ta him an' tell him 'bout the kids an' how they's doin' an' how they's growin' up so big. Ya' can't answer me, Harvey, but I knows ya' understand.

She nodded her answer to the nurse and then bent down to check the straps around Harvey's chest, arms and legs, the straps that kept from slipping out of the chair. He don't have use a' none a' his muscles an' if he should slip out, he's too heavy now fer me ta lift back up. There, ya's awright, Harvey, we can go now. She wheeled him slowly through the door and down the walk and as they moved she kept up her chatter. Periodically she reached around to wipe the boy's drooling mouth. Finally she came to a bench alongside the walk and she said to the boy, "Here, Harvey, let's sit here fer awhile." As she sat down on the bench she turned his chair around to face her. The boy stared straight ahead.

The sun was out now and with its warmth and Harvey's
unbroken silence, her chatter slowed down. Finally, looking at the boy, a small sob escaped her. Oh, Harvey, what've I done ta ya'? What've I done? Was it eleven years ago--really that long?--How much longer for ya', Harvey? Yeah, it was eleven years ago awright. Ya' was in school an' ya' came home an' tole' me y'er legs was hurtin' ya' an' then, in just'a little while, ya' couldn't walk no more, couldn't walk at all. Then, with no warnin' at all, ya' stopped talkin'. How scared I was. I carried ya' ta the doctors real quick-like but he couldn't find nothin' what was causin' it so then I took ya' ta the hospital. I had ta leave ya' there but ya' got even worse. Then, when I wanted ta take ya' home 'cause ya' weren't gettin' no better an' ya' was cryin' all the time--they wouldn't let me--they wouldn't let me take my own baby home. "No," they said, "ya' can't take care a' him." My own baby an' I couldn't take care a' ya'? That baby, they said hast'a go where he can get special care. I asked 'em what kinda "special care" but they said I couldn't do nothin' like what ya' needed. They must'a had me believin' it 'cause 'fore I knew it, ya' was gone. Never did tell them other kids 'bout ya', Harvey--couldn't bring myself ta tell 'em 'bout their big brother. Always meant ta, Harvey. Would'a tole' them finally but then this same
thing happened with Jackie. Can't let nobody find out
'bout him neither. Nobody! They ain't gonna do this ta
him, Harvey, not ta him too.

The tears flowed silently as she thought of Jackie
and then a sob burst from her. Slowly she lowered her
head into Harvey's lap and she let loose all those soft,
quiet tears. A hand moved and gently stroked her hair.
CHAPTER VII

"Where Only the Wind Blows"

This Street--it don't look like no Harlem ghetto. It's dirty, decayed an' moulderly but it ain't got no ten-story tenements all packed together. An' the kids, they's gots a place ta play without runnin' loose on the Street. Like Will Roger's Park down there, jus' down the Street a ways. Kind'a bursts out at ya' like one a' them oasis out on the desert. An' once it starts, it runs fer blocks, all covered with them lazy shade trees, with lotsa green grass rollin' in between. Got flowers an' bushes an' benches ta sit on an' then one whole end a' that park is jus' fer kids ta play in. Got bars an' teeter-totters, an' swings, an' sand-boxes an' a big fenced-in swimmin' pool where kids, what has the money, can get ta swim. The park plays a big part on this Street too. It's where them ball games is played, where the Watt's Summer Festival's held, it's where Ted's clean-up crews gather, where lovers meet an' it's where only the wind goes if there's trouble brewin'.
An' there's more beauty on this Street too. Ain't always easy ta find it but it's here. Like there, in them broken bricks leanin' so easy-like 'gainst them forgotten slabs, an' there, in them blades a' grass tryin' ta hide them rough edges a' them bared foundations. Then, all that movin' sand, jus' look at it. Them breezes keep whiffin' it up an' the sand keeps a'workin', keeps roughin' up them foundations, changin' 'em, always changin' 'em.

An' down the Street there's a door what kinda pushes out between that drugstore window an' the soul food coffee shop right next ta it. Look like it's standin' there all by itself, like it don't belong ta nothin'. But it do. It sits right down on the sidewalk an' opens ta a shuffled stairway what leads ta some cabbage-smellin' hotel rooms up over the drugstore. It was jus' a plain wood door 'til somebody took a knife an' carved its whole face, carved it all over with ivy leaves an' vines. Every bit a' space's filled with curvin', flowin', runnin' vines--with leaves jus' growin' out all over the place. Time ain't lessened its beauty none neither, 'cause the dirt an' sweat of a thousand hands has only turned that wood ta a darkenin' brown--makin' them vines run deeper an' given' them leaves a new shine.

An' there ain't nothin' prettier nowheres than ta
look up ta the southern sky an' see them three towers
just'a soarin' way up there. Them's the Watt's Towers an'
they's a sight ta see. They's kinda like that lady statue
in New York, that one what says,--give me your poor, your
tired, huddled masses, yearnin' ta be free. That one what
was a present ta all a' us in America. Well, them towers
was a present too. Ole' Simon Rodia, he come over here
from Italy when he was jus' a little boy an' when he grew
up he said he wanted ta do somethin' for America 'cause
the peoples here had been so nice ta him. Took him over
thirty years ta build them three towers. Each of 'ems
'bout one hundred foot tall. Made 'em outta old used
pipe an' covered 'em with plaster. Then he took shiny bits
a' pottery, an' tile, an' seashells, an' pieces a' glass
an' stuck 'em all over that plaster. An' he carved pic-
tures inta that plaster too, made drawin's a' flowers an'
the tools he used ta do it all with. Then, when he
finished them towers he joined 'em all together at the
bottom with arches. So, when ya' stands there underneath
'em, an' looks up, it's all lacey lookin' an' spidery-
like. An' with the sun hittin' on all them bits an' pieces
a' glass an' things, it's jus' like a sparklin', dazzlin'
rainbow, all them colors an' bits a' light dashin' all over
the place like water drops floatin' in the sunshine--'Most
fractures the eyes a' them what's only used ta the dullness a' that earth-bound Street.

Yeah, them towers an' the Street, they sure makes strange bedfellows--one soarin' so high in its happiness, an' the other--that other, grovellin' in the lowest frustration. That Rodia, it's jus' like he said, "Ya' has ta be good-good or bad-bad to be remembered."

No, this Street ain't no Harlem Street. Ain't got no open sewers, no sprawlin' tenements an' it ain't got no walls neither 'ceptin' maybe Alameda Street ta the East, Central Avenue ta the West, Ninety-second Street ta the North an' Imperial Highway in the South.
CHAPTER VIII

"Cause I'm White"

Sandy stood at her living room window, idly staring out at the Street.

It's going to be another hot one. The heat's already bouncing off the sidewalk and it's only 8:30 in the morning. Another smelly, hot day. Look at that garbage strewn around here. You would think people would pick up the trash their dogs drag out at night, or at least keep lids on their trash cans. How can they live like that, in filth, in muck, in ugliness? Black trash, that's what they are.

They have plenty of time to sit around on their porches fanning themselves, or closed up in their apartments watching TV but they can never find the time to do any cleaning up. There isn't any trash on my lawn, I have no intention of living like those pigs. Early each morning I have to go out and clean up that mess. Can't stand to see it but don't want to run into any of those people if I can help it. Don't like them any better than they
like me. Don't want to have anything to do with the likes of them. Well, I'm not here enough to worry about them.

Still staring out the window, her thoughts wandered lazily to her friends in Malibu and Palm Springs, those friends who formed the nucleus of her life. Finally, turning from the window, her eyes scanned the small, immaculate apartment. It is lovely, and so much like those apartments in Palm Springs, the same elegance and beauty. Smaller, of course, but large enough for Toni and me.

Thinking of her eight-year-old daughter, Sandy frowned slightly. She's picking up that gutter-language from the school; I'll have to watch her more carefully. I don't want her to learn the jargon of this wretched area no matter how long we are forced to live here.

This neighborhood, it's not fair to force us to live here among these trashy blacks, but they say there's nothing else available in any other area. My friends think it's quaint to live in such a colorful area. Colorful? She sniffed.

Moving across the living room, she slowed down at the bookcase, her hand reached down and absently touched the neat row of books. She stood for a moment reading the titles, one on interior decorating, another on color selection, several on the art of pottery and a few of the
classics—the complete set of Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. It's a shame I don't have room here for all of my books.

Continuing on into the bedroom, she removed her housecoat and from the closet selected a soft blue dress with a white flowered pattern. Slipping it on, she stood in front of the mirror admiring its perfect fit.

I'm glad I decided to go to that designer. I could make my own clothes but it's much more chic to have them made especially for you. I'm so glad my friends told me about him, he's so artistic and really well worth the expense. When Toni is older, he can design her clothes as well.

This time thoughts of Toni brought a smile to her lips.

She is such a darling and it's so unfair that she has to live here. Well, one thing about it, she can certainly learn about foreigners. It's like living in another country and my friends say that travel is educational. That's really what we're doing here anyway, just traveling through. Yes, that's all we're doing, traveling through.

Sandy's fingers moved up to her face, and in the mirror her eyes inspected the flawless white skin. No
wrinkles yet and she smiled back at her twenty-five year old face.

Glad I wear a hat in the sun. No matter what they say, that sun makes wrinkles, and worse, it turns your skin that ugly black. My hair looks good this way too—nothing more chic than straight, auburn hair.

Finished with her self-examination, Sandy strolled into the kitchen, poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down at the table.

About time I visited my friends, it's getting tedious around here. I haven't been anywhere for six weeks now, so it's time I took another trip. Should be nice in Palm Springs. It would be good to relax and enjoy the scenery. All the beautiful gardens would be in bloom, but then, anything would be better than this garbage all over the place. Even the thought of this place nauseates me. "Nickerson Gardens" some name for this housing project. The only flowers in this garden are those dry, scraggly geraniums that stretch out their barren, grotesque arms, as though they too were searching for some distant place to visit. Might be a little late in the season for Palm Springs though, might be better to visit my friends in Malibu. Would just go for a little while, just long enough to see how they are, do some swimming and walk on
the beach. Toni would enjoy that too and my friends love her so. They're always petting her and buying her expensive clothes and toys, leaves so little for me to do for her. Of course they're always buying things for me too.

Sandy rose and walked to the door leading to the living room and stood looking at all the art objects which her friends had sent her from all part of the world. Beautiful ceramic dishes and vases were placed artistically throughout the room.

Knowing art as I do, I can appreciate their beauty and, of course, that's why they send me such beautiful pieces. Someday, when Toni has finished school, we'll travel, but right now her education is the most important thing. In the meantime, it's nice to have these treasures to enjoy. Also in the meantime, we have to be satisfied with trips and visits in the local area. Malibu it is. Toni will be so happy.

Sandy's visit was everything she had anticipated. The beach was even more beautiful than it appeared on TV, with the summer waves whispering up over the wet sand. And the sails, those majestic white, wind-captured sails, how she had loved to watch them as they disappeared in and out of the sun's glare. At night there had been luas, ending in good conversation with her friends in the
So pleasant had it all been that she was still smiling as she walked across the porch to unlock the door of her own apartment. But the smile froze for suddenly she noted that the door was partially open and through the opening she caught a glimpse of the broken shambles which had been her elegant apartment. For a moment, the scene didn't register, then it hit her.

"I've been robbed," she gasped. Then, "I've been robbed!" she screamed. "Call the cops, d'ya hear? Call them God damn cops, somebody, I've been robbed!"

Frightened, Toni pulled away from her mother and pushed her small body against the house as though it would protect her from her mother's rage.

Sandy continued to scream.

"Somebody, d'ya hear? I've been robbed, call them cops." But only the silent afternoon heat heard her screaming commands.

Wild-eyed she turned back to the house and now mute in her complete alienation, she stared momentarily at the mess on the other side of the door. But only for a second, then she raced through that door and began to weave her way amongst the mounds of crippled furniture and smashed pottery to where the telephone had been. Strangely enough
it was still intact in its cradle but as she went to pick it up her trembling hands fumbled and dropped it to the floor. Sandy, biting her lip, very deliberately leaned over and slowly picked it up. Straightening, she dialed the "O" for the operator and stood quietly listening to the ringing.

"There it goes, thank God, it's ringin'. Yes, yes I wants the poulce. I've been robbed. Everythin's gone, everythin'. What? I said, I've been robbed, robbed, ROBBED, YA' IDIOT! Where? Where'd ya' think? My house, all my things is gone. My address? My address? I lives in Nickerson Gardens. My name? My name's Sandy Cummin's. That's where I lives an' that's who I is an' all my things is gone, smashed or gone. UNDERSTAN'? GONE, gone, gone."

She leaned her head back against the wall and the tears cascaded down her cheeks. The phone slid from her hands and disappeared into the litter on the floor.

"Oh, my God! oh, my God! them bastards! them bastards! them BASTARDS!" she moaned and yelled.

Her anger pulled her from the wall and she plunged back into the debris of the living room and hit the porch screaming every invective she knew. Now her screams penetrated every wall in the area. Drapes jerked open and heads popped out of windows that hadn't been opened since
summer's arrival. When the neighbors realized that it was Sandy that was on the rampage, they grinned, withdrew from the windows and came rolling out the doors. Quickly a crowd gathered but Sandy was only aware of the fact that all she possessed was either gone or destroyed. Now she was cussing out the whole area and every black son-of-a-bitch whoever so much as strolled through it.

Suddenly a police car smashed up to the curb. Both doors flew open and two officers hit the sidewalk. For a second they stood there, hands, meaningfully casual, hung on their hips. They could see Sandy on the porch but they were surveying the crowd to pick up its timber. Re-assured, they quickly made their way around the edge of it until they were in front of it, facing Sandy. She was still screaming every obscenity she had ever heard and, when she stopped for breath, the crowd would applaud and encourage her to continue.

"What the hell...?" one cop whispered.

Then Sandy spotted them.

"What'cha stoppin for? Why ya' standin' there with y'er stupid mouths hangin' open? I's the only decent thing what's happened ta this fuckin' neighborhood an' now they's gone an' robbed me--took everythin' I had. Ya' understand', ya' sons-a-bitches? I've been robbed. Do
somethin' ya' mothers. Jus' 'cause I's white don't mean I ain't got the same rights as them black bastards."

Her voice was now a shrill, angry shriek and the veins in her throat were pulsating in an angry, throbbing rhythm.

The crowd cheered and clapped their hands.

"That's tellin' 'em, Sandy," they yelled, "Give 'em hell, gal."

The two officers glanced at one another and shrugged. Then one of them signaled the other to talk to the distraught woman.

The officer, moving closer, tried to reassure Sandy.

"M'am," he said, "we want to help you, if you would just quiet down and tell us what happened we'll do whatever we can for you."

"FUCK YOU, Don't give me that crap. Ya' ain't gonna do nothin'. I knows it an' you knows it. Y're jus' gonna fill out papers an' stick 'em away somewheres. Well, ya' know what ya' can do with them papers don't cha'? What'ta 'bout my TV set? What'ta 'bout my stereo" What'ta 'bout all them broken things in my house? What'ta 'bout them? I ain't never gonna see them things ag'in an' ya knows that an' ya' don't care. Everythin' I got is gone--ya' understand? I ain't got nothin' left."
Sandy's voice began to tremble and she leaned back against the porch railing and slowly sank down onto the step.

"Can't-leave-y'er-place-for-a-minute"...her voice trailed off as she cradled her head in her arms and started rocking back and forth, muttering and moaning.

The two police officers stood helplessly in front of her. One of them offered a "m'am?" but received only a moan in reply.

"M'am," he tried again, "we'll have to go inside and check the damage and make out our report." Sandy just continued to rock and moan, so the officers walked up the stairs and on into the apartment.

The crowd was silent sensing perhaps that the best part was over but they remained in hopes that something else would happen to start it up again. Anything to relieve the boredom.

Finally the officers came out of the apartment and one of them walked over to where Sandy was sitting, still rocking, still moaning. He sat down beside her and said nothing for a moment, hoping she would look up of her own accord. But Sandy wasn't even aware that he was there.

"M'am," he said, touching her on the arm. But Sandy did not respond.
"M'am," he continued, "we need a list of the stolen articles but if you would rather wait and give that to us later, then you can come down to the station. Here's a card with the address," and as he spoke he put a card down on the step beside her.

When there was still no reply from Sandy, he shrugged his shoulders and got up. Beckoning to his partner the two policemen made their way through the now quiet crowd back towards their car.

As they walked away, Sandy raised her head and her dazed eyes seemed to follow them but she made no other movement. Then, seemingly for the first time, she saw the crowd, all of her neighbors standing on her lawn in mocking silence. Instantly incensed, she jumped up screaming.

"You black bastards, get the hell off'a my grass. Ain't enough I got ta put up with y'er garbage, now I has ta put up with the likes a' you standin' there gawkin'."

The crowd laughed and began yelling obscenities at her. Furious, Sandy turned, ran into the apartment and slammed the door behind her.

She had forgotten Toni and the child pushed herself even closer against the house shuffling her feet as she listened to the hoots of the crowd.

Inside, Sandy stumbled through the debris until she
tripped over something and landed face down on the floor. She stayed there as the sobs and tears stormed from her body, washing the tension away.

A shambles, that's all they left--my lovely apartment, a shambles. They did it, they hates me 'cause I'm white an' 'cause I was off in Malibu with my friends an' they couldn't stand that. They hates me 'cause I won't have nothin' ta do with 'em, an' I won't neither, the filthy, black pigs.

Once again anger came to stop the tears but the body was too spent to handle it and it slowly receded to some place in the back of her mind. She lay still, and except for the occasional sob shaking her body, she was motionless. With her face pressed against the cheap carpeting, a dusty odor permeated her nostrils and merged with the dustiness of her mind. Again she was at the beach but the whispering waves grew into giant, bowing monsters which beat upon the shoreline sending spray flying into the air until the watery tentacles came down to engulf her in its smothering depths.

She must have dozed for a few seconds for suddenly she was listening to the sound of the police car pulling away from the curb. She rolled over on her back and lay staring up at the ceiling.
Cops, they ain't no help. Don't know why I even bothered callin' 'em. They's jus' good fer pushin' folks 'round. Now if I was black, they'd a been pushin' their tails all over this place, jus' ta keep me quiet, jus' ta keep me from goin' down an' reportin' on 'em. But I ain't, so they don't do nothin'. Come ta the station they says, make out a list. Right, gotta have their records but that's all they does, nothin' ta help me, that's fer sure. Wish there was someone ta turn ta but there ain't no one 'round here. No folks, no nobody. Wonder where Frank is? Never even comes 'round ta see his own baby. Jus' disappeared. Doesn't really matter though, nothin' really matters.

As though she had gone through her complete list of memories, Sandy slowly sat up and looked around her.

This was it, this was my whole life an' now it's a shambles. 'Cept for Toni, this apartment was all I had. I checked them homes a' my friends, drawin' ideas an' sometimes, even outright imitatin' 'em, and this simple elegance was the result. It's all a matter of taste. Simplicity's the basis of elegance.

Sandy's eyes roamed sadly over the divan now lying on its back, its crushed-brown-velvet upholstery all slashed and ripped. The once-white carpeting was covered
with huge stains where someone had deliberately poured coke on it. The forest-green occasional chair had been torn apart and was leaning crazily against a wall. The paintings were scattered on the floor, marred beyond recognition by black rubber heels. White throw-cushions had been ripped apart and their foam rubber innards spewed throughout the house. Everywhere broken pieces of pottery jutted up their ugly edges. Once again her eyes flooded with tears but this time they were tears of sadness.

Can't leave nobody alone. What they can't have, they ruins. I ain't never bothered none of 'em, jus' wanted ta be left alone. That was all I ever wanted--jus' ta be left alone. This was all so nice, jus' real nice, really nice, but it ain't no more. Just'a empty shelf where the TV and the stereo was. Ain't nothin' pretty left.

It wasn't long after the robbery that Toni began asking questions. She had heard the strange remarks the neighbors had made about her mother and about the trips her mother took and she had become curious.

I don't like these questions, not even from Toni. Those neighbors, no matter what I do, I can't get away from them. How I wish we could find some other place to live.

"Stay away from the neighbors, Toni, they're just
trying to start trouble and Lord knows, they've given us enough already."

But Toni was persistent.

"Why don't people come to visit us? Why is it bad to live here? Why can't my school friends visit?"

There was no end to Toni's questions. But throughout it all, Sandy just maintained an icy silence. It will pass, no need to answer all those foolish questions. Things will go back to what they used to be.

But they didn't and finally the day came when Toni came bounding into the house, breathless with excitement.

"Mama, Mama," she called, "there's a black woman who lives up by the school who says she's my granny."

Sandy was standing by the sink in the kitchen when Toni's flying words hit her. She stiffened, her breath began to come in short gasps, instantly she felt dizzy, she grasped the edge of the sink to steady herself.

Still shouting, Toni burst into the kitchen and running up to her mother saw her pale shaken figure.

"Mama, are you all right?" she asked.

Clutching the edge of the sink, Sandy answered in a carefully controlled voice, "Yes, yes honey, you just came running in so fast that you startled me. Now what was that you said? You said this woman claims to be your
granny? That's ridiculous. That really is ridiculous, Toni. Yes, that certainly is ridiculous," and with each repetition Sandy's voice became increasingly louder until she was finally screaming at the child.

Toni backed away, again frightened by her mother's sudden anger.

Sandy noted Toni's reaction and quickly turned away from her. I'm frightening her, no sense in doing that. Damn that woman, can't she leave me alone? No, that's the trouble, no one will leave us alone. Granny!, that black bitch? Why did she have to say that? I told her she was nothin' ta me. Black bitch! BLACK BITCH! that's what she is. Granny! The old fool, the meddlin's, busy-body old fool.

Taking a deep breath, Sandy turned back to Toni. The girl was easing her way towards the kitchen door but her mother ignored this. Instead she smiled weakly at the child. Perspiration had broken out on her forehead and impatiently she reached up and rubbed it away. Her body was cold and she was still shaking. Bitch! Bitch! But why? Well, it was nothing to her. Granny, indeed. Where does she get off saying a thing like that to Toni? Well, it will be a good laugh for my friends. Oh yes, they would think it was so funny that a black had the audacity
to claim Toni as her granddaughter.

Then laughing lightly and, looking knowingly at her daughter, she said, "That's not only ridiculous, Toni, that's impossible, she's black!"

Toni crinkled her nose and looked mystified.
CHAPTER IX

"Them Beautiful Peoples"

"I'S THE EARTH MOTHER," she screamed, slamming the door in the officer's face. "Don't ya' come 'round here causin' trouble, tellin' them stories 'bout my girl. I got more important things ta do than listen ta y'er lies--ya' understand'? Ya' got no right gonna 'round sayin' them things--got no right ta tell lies like that. You out there, ya' still there? Don't start talkin' ta me. I can't listen ta ya' no more 'cause they is callin' ta me. I gotta takes a message. Now go away, ya' understand's? Jus' go 'way."

They's callin' me now. Gotta get my pencil an' my notebook--gotta get inta that rockin' chair. Jus' gives me a minute now, you beautiful peoples, just' gives me a minute. There now, I's ready.

"Go 'way out there I tole' ya'. I got important things ta do. Hush, hush that yellin', I can't hear my friends."

Maybe I better turn the TV louder 'cause with all the
noise that fool cops makin' I may miss somethin' important.

There, that's better. Yes, yes, my friends, I hears ya' now. I's gettin' it all written down, every word I's gettin'. Keep right on goin', I understan'. There now, they's finished and now with that cop gone that TV's too loud. Them cops, cause a body so much trouble. There that's better, TV jus' 'bout deafened me when he stopped beatin' on that door.

That Nellie, she ain't no help neither.

"Nellie, you come right down here now. No use tryin' ta hide up in that room. Don't think I didn't see ya' sneakin' in this door--leavin' me ta listen ta that poulce man--ta listen ta his lies. Ya' better stop playin' them tricks a' yours. Now I's had 'nuff. Nellie, is ya' hearin' me?

Better they takes her 'way. I can't stand much more a' this. I got important things ta do. I's the Earth Mother an' that's important. Yes, very important, an' powerful too. That's who I is. I's THE EARTH MOTHER, DO EVERYBODY HEAR THAT? I IS the Earth Mother. I IS, I IS! Why won't them people leave me be? That cop should'a known what that girl was up ta'--she's jus' playin' 'round --showin' off. The important thing's my work--now that's really important. Where's my handkerchief? No use jus'
sittin' 'round cryin', ain't nothin' ta cry 'bout. My work is what I gotta do. Nothin' important 'bout that silly girl doin' them silly things. My kid ain't no different than the rest of 'em.

Got'ta stay here, right here in this rockin' chair, right here in front a' the TV set. Got'ta watch an' listen, 'cause they may call me again, might call on me any minute.

Them peoples, yes, them strange, beautiful peoples. They lives on them far-away planets. Yes, it was them what raised me up ta be the Earth Mother. They made me the "receiver" of all that information, all that news what's important for Earth ta know, like comin' earthquakes, an' wars an' famines. I wonder if they knows what I has ta go through ta help these peoples down here? All these folks care 'bout is the doin's of a twelve-year-old girl. They won't listen ta me. All's they does is bring Nellie home an' tells me she's on drugs an' she's out there rollin' drunks ta get money. Can ya' believe that? ...There's just no understandin' these people. How many times does I has ta tell 'em who I is an' what I knows? They jus' brings Nellie home ta embarrass me, that's all, ta try ta make me look bad, that's all they's doin'. As fer that girl, she's jus' showin' off ag'in. Jus' like
that time she climbed up onto the roof an' threatened ta jump off. She had the police an' all the neighbors out there yellin' their heads off, beggin' her ta come down. I would'a made short work a' that prank but jus' then a message come through on the TV an', natur'ly, that responsibility comes first. Too big a responsibility ta leave jus' ta stop one a' Nellie's silly tricks. She's always been headstrong. What she needs is the firm hand a' her daddy, wherever he is.

Ain't nothin' as important as my work--unless it's that TV set, that's both my "sendin'" an' my "receivin'" machine. That's the way them peoples, them beautiful peoples, contacts me an' that's the way I reaches them. I don't never turn it off. I jus' leaves it runnin' all the time. Never knows when they's gonna have somethin' important ta tell me.

Now there's someone knockin' at the door. Ain't them cops--too quiet fer them.

"I'll get it, Mama," and Nellie's long, slim legs came darting down the stairs as she rushed to open the door.

"I came ta see how y'er mama is," said the woman on the doorstep, but Nellie, seeing the caller wasn't fer her, was already half-way back up the stairs.

"Come on in, come on in, Miz Patterson," said Mrs.
Drake.

The neighbor hesitantly entered the living room.

"Is ya' awright, Miz Drake?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes. I is fine," said Mrs. Drake, forcing a smile, "but I'd rather not have callers right now, if ya don't mind."

"That's awright, that's awright, Miz Drake, ya' jus' rest an' I'll come some other time," the neighbor replied, and scampered back through the door, quietly closing it behind her.

At least the neighbors understan' my powers. They know who I is. Some don't make no move at all lessin' they talks ta me first. Lott'sa these people 'round here in these Imperial Gardens Projects comes ta me all's the time. I tells 'em 'bout the messages an' they listens an' we discusses 'em. I always knows the answers ta their problems too. Them beautiful peoples from that outer space, they gives me that power too. Thank the dear Jesus for that. But there's some peoples, they won't come near me an' that's sad. I could do so much for 'em if they'd let me. But I guess it's jus' too powerful for 'em. Like when some strangers come here an' I asks 'em if their "travelers", some gets real 'cited an' scared an' they starts mumblin' somethin' 'bout they has ta leave--like
they has a meetin' they forgot 'bout. I jus' smiles as they leaves, but it do make me sad. But then other chosen peoples has the same problems, so I ain't gonna give up. This world needs me even if it don't understan'. I's been given special powers an' I's gonna keep tryin' ta pass this information onta the world.

When I first got this power, I was so happy 'bout it. Yes I was. I jus' went rushin' out ta tell everybody. At first, most of 'em jus' smiled, but when I kept tellin' 'em the things what was gonna happen, they began ta get scared an' then they got mad at me. I couldn't understan' that, but I didn't let it stop me--no sur! I jus' went right on tellin' everybody what would listen ta me--told 'em all 'bout everythin'. Told 'em nothin' important ever happens in this world, even in the furtherest places, without it first clearin' through me. But then, them peoples in this world what could do somethin' 'bout these happenin's, well, they jus' wouldn't listen ta me. Like that time I called the newspaper, that Los Angeles Times paper, I jus' wanted ta tell 'em what was goin' on but they wouldn't do nothin' --I could tell when I was talkin' ta 'em, they wasn't gonna do nothin'--alls the time they jus' kept sayin' "Yes, m'am, yes, m'am." like I was outta my mind or somethin'. So I calls the President--yes, I calls the President of
these United States. Jus' wanted him ta know what was
gonna happen soon. I got inta all kinds a' trouble that
time. They even came an' picked me up an' put me inta that
hospital. I understood though, it was 'cause they was all
scared 'cause I knew so much 'bout what was goin' on.

I never even needs ta read the newspapers 'cause I
awready knows that's happenin'. Sometimes I do pick one
up though jus' ta see what peoples is doin', see 'bout
what they's doin'. They's handlin' everythin' all wrong
but, when I tries ta tell 'em that, they jus' won't listen.
That's the problem, nobody ever listens. Someday it'll be
too late, won't make no difference if they listens or not.

Sometimes though, this responsibility is almost too
much fer me ta carry. Them authorities, they never gives
me no answers, so I has ta make all them important deci­sions myself. Fer instance, I always knows when there's
gonna be an earthquake, anywheres in the world, I knows it,
but even when I calls the newspapers an' the governor an'
anybody else what needs ta know--they don't pay no mind.
Then I has ta start gettin' things together, tryin' ta
figure out who else ta call an' even when I knows I's gonna
get inta more trouble, I jus' keeps tryin'. It's a heavy
load 'cause then I sees all the hurtin' what didn't never
need ta happen if they'd only listen ta me.
But then my friend, Miz Harmon, she said I should write down everythin' what happens. Everytime them beautiful peoples calls me, she says I should write down everythin' they tells me--put it all down in a book so's everybody could read it an' then everybody would know what's gonna happen an' what already happenin'. So that's what I do. I got that notebook there an' everytime they calls me I writes it down--everythin' they says--I writes it all down. Someday the whole world'll know what powers I has an' the good I can do. They'll know everythin' what's goin' on--won't nobody say, "yes, m'am, yes, m'am" ta me no more. An' it won't jus' be them big peoples what'll know, but everybody. It ain't easy keepin' track a' all them things but it's my responsibility ta take care a' this earth an' so I jus' hast'a do it. It'd be so much easier if them big peoples, them authorities, would listen ta me, but I knows they's too scared.

Between this an' Nellie, it's almost too much. But they's wrong 'bout her--she's just'a little highstrung. Jus' like when the school was gonna expel her 'cause they said she stole somethin' outta the locker room an' they calls them juvenile authorities. They wouldn't pick her up 'cause they said the juvenile hall was too crowded. They said kids was sleepin' on the floor out there. Now,
if Nellie had really been misbehavin', that wouldn't a'
made no difference, cause kids been sleepin' on them floors
for years. That jus' goes ta show ya, that Nellie ain't
so bad as they makes her out.

Then there's them kids 'round her what makes fun a'
Nellie's hair. Jus' 'cause it's short like a boy's don't
mean there's somethin' wrong with her. But they's all the
time teasin' her, she says. Wouldn't even go ta school
there fer 'while. Said she wouldn't go back 'til I buys
her a wig. I tole' her, I tole' her, "girl, y'er lucky
ta have food what with that little money I gets from
welfare, let 'lone a wig." Nothin' wrong with her hair
anyways. Such a fuss. But the law says Nellie's got ta
go ta school 'til she's sixteen, so then I has ta go buy
her a wig ta get her back there. Then, when I gets it fer
her, she goes back ta school awright an' gets inta a fight
an' someone steals it from her. They didn't expel nobody
for that though an' nobody called the authorities neither.
I was jus' out them five dollars fer that wig but I made
sure Nellie kept goin' ta school--saw her off every mornin'..
Ain't nothin' wrong 'bout her hair, lot'sa women in my
family has hair like that, it's jus' not supposed ta grow
no longer. Never does grow no longer. Whole bunch's
women in Africa got hair like that. Guess these peoples
in Africa. It's really a cryin' shame what peoples don't know, but then that's probably why them beautiful peoples made me the Earth Mother, 'cause I does know all them things.

It ain't easy though, all them responsibilities. I's always kinda glad when them peoples comes by an' picks me up an' takes me ta that hospital fer a rest. They always has room fer me, nobody sleepin' on the floor out there—not unless they wants ta, that is. It's always a good rest from Nellie. Won't be long though, for she's grownup an' I won't have no more troubles with her.

When I goes there, them hospital peoples, they tells me not ta write no more letters, an' not ta make no more phone calls neither. That's what they always says. Then they gives me some a' them little pills an' they sends me home. They's jus' like them peoples on the outside, they jus' don't understan'. That's why I's writin' in my book, an' when it's full I's gonna send it out ta everyone, then they'll understan', an' then they'll know jus' how im- portant an' how powerful I really is.
That whole Street was s'prised, ta say the least. Jus' didn't know what ta make of it. Got up one mornin' jus' 'fore Christmas an' there it was, the biggest, tallest pine tree ever was, like nobody'd ever seen 'fore. Jus' landed there, right 'longside a' the Street. Nobody know nothin' 'bout it, where it come from, how it got there, nothin'. An' it was big, man, 'bout thirty feet high, that tree was. It was so big ya' really couldn't see nothin' else--made everything else kind'a fade away, jus' like all them blackened buildin's an' broken walls 'round it was jus' a bad dream--leavin' that there big tree standin' there all by its lonesome. Real proud it looked too, like it knew it was the only pretty thing 'round there. It weren't no potted, plastic thing neither. It was real. I mean A REAL, HONEST TA GOODNESS TREE, like it were growin' right outta that dirt. An' its trunk, it was jus' as straight as a die, an' its branches stuck straight out all neat an' even from its trunk. An' the whole tree
shot way up ta a point an' then spread back out ta the
ground like a great, big, green triangle. An' them big
branches at the bottom, they was low enough fer the kids
ta touch 'em, so's they could feel an' stroke them needles.
An' ya' should'a seen them kids! The minute they rounded
that corner on ta the Street an' saw that tree their eyes
popped out an' they started squealin' an' jumpin'. But it
weren't only them kids what felt that way, all them peoples
what saw it did the same thing. An' it weren't long after
that first squeal that the Street was packed, end ta' end,
bumpered with cars, an' there was still other folks cover-
in' that whole sidewalk. Lines formed jus' so's people
could get a chance ta walk by it. Other folks was weavin'
in an' out 'mongst the cars an' when they got close ta it
they was all reachin' out ta touch them pine needles an'
then they'd throw back their heads as far as they could
tryin' ta see the top a' that tree. Kids was dancin' under
it an' 'round it, laughin' an' talkin' ta it, an' them
lower branches, swayin' in the breeze, looked like the
tree was tryin' ta thank everybody fer lovin' it so much.

Cars kept slowly caravanin' passed it, an' then
peoples would fly out all the doors an' join inta the line.
Then the car would speed up an' go 'round the block an'
come back fer 'nother look.
It was like that whole Street suddenly changed. Like that tree standin' there so proud-like put a new face on all a' them ruins, offerin' 'em all another chance. It was like them tufts a' grass strugglin' ta cover them concrete slabs was finally gonna make it, an' even them dusty whirl-winds what streaks 'cross the Street, seemed ta gentle just'a little, an' all them broked, scarred bricks seemed somehow, ta lean just'a little easier. It was like that there tree somehow softened this whole Street, like it brought a little a' that forest-quiet with it, right here ta this Street.

Most a' the kids here ya' know, they ain't never seen a forest or even a tree like this one before. They never knowed the quiet rustlin' a' pine needles as a whole valley a' them trees swayed in the bright sunshine. They never seen ground all covered with brownin' pine needles, never even seen chipmunks or squirrels neither, runnin' up an' down them trees, jumpin' from branch ta branch. They ain't never seen branches covered with soft, glitterin' snow, never seen 'em hangin' with sparklin' icicles. They ain't never heard bluejays scoldin' an' yellin' up like they was gonna burst. They ain't never heard owls hootin' as they hunted in the night, never heard them wolves callin' ta the moon. They ain't never smelled the forest,
that fresh mornin' air comin' from them dew-loaded trees
or that evenin' air when the trees gives off that throbbin'
heat a' the day. But now, jus' for a little while, they
was gettin' ta see some a' that. An' what they didn't see
they was gettin' ta dream 'bout. So, all that day they
traipsed back an' forth lookin' wide-eyed an' seein' all
them things what kids can see in anything they wants ta.
When night come, them kids, small an' big, jus' wouldn't
quit. They jus' kept right on comin'. Didn't make no
difference ta them that it was dark, 'cause now the tree
looked like a big, black giant reachin' up ta the sky--
like a huge silent wall 'gainst the night.

So the pace a' the day kept on inta the night. The
Righteous Hamburger stand stayed open ta feed them peoples,
an' the bars, they shut down, 'cause them peoples in them
too was out lookin'. But finally everybody was jus' too
tuckered out for anymore starin' an' so, they finally
shuffled on home. Then the Street was left all 'lone,
jus' so happy an' proud ta be watchin' after that tree.

But the next mornin', that was somethin' else. With
the first sightin' a' that tree another, louder squeal ran
up an' down the Street. Gasps a' "ohs" an' "aws" an' more
squeals. For once them folks had nothin' else ta say.
If they was s'prised the day before, they was speechless
now--for that there pine tree weren't jus' a pine tree no more. Now it was one big ball a' shivverin', twinklin' lights. Lights dancin' an' swingin' all over it an' all through them branches. An' it glowed--like one a' them halos--it glowed. An' the peoples, they jus' stared--tryin' ta take all that in--lookin' at that star way up in the sky, way up on the tip-top a' that tree; seein' the snow layin' soft-like an' quiet on them branches, an' them icicles--them twinklin', dartin' icicles, swayin', dancin' kinda gentle-like in the early mornin' breeze. Them peoples, they didn't miss none of it, an' then a soft, smilin' kinda silence took over as them peoples started movin' in closer ta touch--they jus' had ta touch it. They touched the snow, an' giggled as it feathered 'bout 'em. They touched them icicles, an' laughed as they jiggled back an' forth an' the rainbow of lights gleamed with their smiles as the peoples jus' kept laughin' from the pure joy a' the whole thing. Yeah, that tree really got ta 'em. An' again, all day long, that peoples parade kept movin', kept goin' 'round the block an' back onto the Street ag'in for jus' one more look.

Yeah, that big, green tree had been somethin' awright, but this, this big, white, glitterin', twinklin' Christmas tree--that's what it was all 'bout--a Christmas tree. An'
that evenin', an' every evenin' 'til Christmas, it cast its soft, blue lights down onta all the misery below-- makin' it all seem like a dream, like somethin' ya' maybe jus' thought 'bout but what never really happened. But that tree, it weren't no dream. It made that Street really Christmas. An' it did even more 'an that, it made up fer all them shade trees what had burned on the boulevard-- made up fer havin' no trees 'long here since that bad time. An' the wonder of it all--that tree really belonged here. Who brought it, where it come from--made no difference--it jus' plain belonged here. An' the tree knew that too. How proud-like it stood there. Like it didn't make no difference that it wasn't at that White House in Washin'ton nor at that there Rockefeller Center. Looked like it was happy jus' bein' here with us, happy jus' bein' here on this Street.
"Mother's Day"

They let him get away ag'in. Three times I found him three times they let him get away. That god-damn-son-of-a-bitch, he's gonna pay fer this baby if I has ta follow him 'round fer the rest'a my life. I tole' that DA where he was workin', three times I tole' him. They said they'd get him as soon as they found out where he was. Well, I went out an' found him fer them an' all they had ta do was pick him up. But NO WAY! Now they says they don't have 'nuff people ta send out everytime somebody calls 'em. Well, they has 'nuff people ta make out checks ta send ta people what's too damn lazy ta work, but no, they don't have jus' one cop ta go out an' pick up a bastard what won't even pay fer his own baby. Jus' let the whole world support his own kid. Bastards!

Ellen stormed back and forth across her small, sparsely furnished apartment, wildly waving the letter she had just received from the DA's office.

They don't care, that's why they hasn't picked him up.
They jus' don't give a damn! Bastards! Sons'a bitchin' bastards, all of 'em, the DA, the welfare, the whole damn lot of 'em!

Exhausted, she threw herself into a worn rocker and it creaked it objections as her five-foot-ten-inch form landed. Glaring at the DA's letter in her hand, she threw it on the floor in disgust. Anger intensified the determined set of her face. Brown eyes, usually calm and serene, were now whipped to a blazing red-rimmed fury.

I'll get him, that lyin', sneakin', no-good bastard! Three months I been on this damned welfare. Eight months pregnant an' he ups an' leaves me, forces me ta go on welfare. "Hate's" what's kept me going' ever since. It wasn't my baby, that was my choosin', but the welfare, the "dole" as my daddy calls it, he forced me onta that an' he'll pay fer that, oh, god, how he'll pay fer that, and her fists beat against the sides of the chair in angry rhythm to her words.

The baby, wakened by her mother's yelling, began to cry and Ellen ran to comfort her.

"Shoo, baby, it's awright, there now, there," and she gently patted the small, blanketed form. Tenderness gradually erased the anger in her face. The baby quieted and her mother's thoughts, momentarily calmed, rambled off
in another direction.

My father, if he ever hears a' this...All my life I been doin' things fer myself, solvin' my own problems, not lettin' nobody do nothin' fer me.

"Take nothin' from nobody, Ellen, an' ya' can always stay y'er own boss."

How many times did my father say that ta' me? Too many ta count. He taught me ta take care a' myself an' it became my way a' life. No use cryin' gal, that was it, that was the whole thing. Ralph, the bastard, forced me inta somethin' what my father worked a lifetime ta keep me from. For the sake a' that baby I had ta go on welfare--ta take a dole, ta ask strangers for help. Damn him! DAMN HIM! An' now I'm here, livin' in this two room hovel. He put me down ta this. This, where women watch fer the mailman twice a month, where women waits fer the dole. Here, where they waits for Mother's Day, that big day?" when the mothers a' Watts hits the stores on 103rd Street, when outside their 'partments, cars suddenly appears as every "daddy" decides ta drop in an' visit with their "mamma". Oh yeah, it's quite a life he led me ta. "Ya, lose everythin', Ellen, when ya' decides ta take the dole. Ya' loses y'erself, y'er spirit, y'er drive, everythin', baby."
Those were daddy's words an' they's always with me.

He's right too. I seen them women. I seen their needs turn ta greed an' go on 'til nothin' in the world would satisfy 'em. Always whin'in an' cryin' fer more an' more. But I'm not one of 'em. I'm not here 'cause I wants somethin' fer nothin', or 'cause I'm crippled or helpless. I'm here 'cause a you, Ralph, ya' bastard! That's the only reason. So, fer the time bein', I has ta take every dime they gives me but, an' mark this Ralph, every single penny gets paid back an' gets paid back with interest. Right, Ralph? With interest. D'ya hear that, Ralph? With interest. RALPH, DID'JA HEAR THAT? That, man, is the way I knows an' that's the way it's gonna be. "It's okay, baby, it's okay, mama' sorry. There, there, jus' y'er mama gettin' loud an' angry--won't do that no more."

Wish I was back home in Detroit, helpin' mama with them kids. But couldn't keep on stayin' there when there was no work. Daddy was only a day laborer an' though he always managed somehow ta keep workin', it weren't easy with twelve mouths ta feed. Sure, it had been a lotta work, helpin' with them younger kids, cleanin', washin' an' tryin' ta finish school, but we was all so close in our family. I worried 'bout the money, they're wasn't 'nuff ta care fer all a' us an' I kept tryin' ta quit school so's
I could get a job but each time I tried to quit, daddy wouldn't let me.

"Ya' needs that schoolin' girl," he'd say. "Ain't no use ya' tryin' to get a job lessin' ya' got schoolin'," an' he'd pat me on the shoulder an' that would be the end a' it.

So, I finished school an' then I went lookin' for a job. Nothin'. The same answer wherever I went. No experience, no job.

"Don't worry," daddy said, "there's a job waitin' for ya' some place, alls ya' have ta do is find it."

But I did worry, 'cause daddy was gettin' older an' wasn't able to do all that heavy work he used ta do, so they was hirin' him less an' less. I felt I was a load he didn't need. I kept pushin' out further an' further in every direction, but still there was nothin'. Then I heard some a' my friends was comin' ta Los Angeles ta look fer work an' that sounded like a real good idea. I was doin' some babysittin' ta help out at home an' ta pay fer my bus fare while I was lookin' for work so now I went after them jobs in earnest. All day, overnight, weekends, I took all them jobs I could find 'til finally I saved 'nuff ta pay my share a' the trip with 'nuff left over ta keep me goin' 'til I found work in Los Angeles. I never
doubted fer a minute that I'd find work.

Ta me, the idea a' movin' ta Los Angeles was the greatest I'd ever known, but there were times when I was gettin' ready ta' leave that a strange hunger would pass over me. Didn't really understand it then but sure did later. Wonder if I would a' left if I'd known then what that feelin' was? Probably not, but in the days ahead I learned what loneliness was. I met lot'sa people, an' I was popular too, but I learned that "people" never takes the place a' "family". They never accepts ya' the same an' they never seem ta be "there" when ya' really needs 'em. Maybe that's why this baby meant so much ta me. Someone a' my own ag'in. Now there'd be someone ta love me fer "who I am," not for "what I did," jus' 'cause I's Ellen. From the very begimin' that baby gave me a warm feelin' I'd almost forgotten after comin' out here--that feelin' a' bein' part a somethin' else, part of a family. Funny, it was never "our baby," somehow it was always jus' "Mine".

But I didn't know them feelin's when I was still back home, didn't pay too much 'ttention ta 'em. When the time came ta leave, I was more than ready ta go. I hugged an' kissed Mom an' all them brothers an' sisters but when I got ta Daddy, it was a quiet thing. For the first time I noticed the grey in his hair. Was it there yesterday?
Then I looked into their eyes, now so troubled-like and I answered their question. "Don't worry," I said, "I'll be awright." But that look didn't go 'way, an' then he just kissed me on the cheek and said, "Goodbye, Ellen," an' he turned an' went back into the house.

But I enjoyed the trip West. I'd never traveled much an' now suddenly the open softness of them Michigan flatlands was gone. Now there was staggerin' mountains, their unseen peaks clothed in cloudy privacy; rivers whose white, swirlin', dialatin' waters, was held back only by the greater strength a' the rocky cliffs what hovered over 'em, guiden' 'em an' gentlin' 'em 'till they got ta them green farmlands below. I saw them forests what lays like a cloak over parts a' this land, tall pines which dwindled down to sprawlin' oak trees when we arrived in California. I was so busy lookin' that I hardly spoke a word from the time we left Detroit 'til we got here ta L.A. An' I loved L.A. too, right from the first. It's big, like Detroit, but it's cleaner, greater, freer somehow. I jus' couldn't help laughin' at them naked palm trees with their feathered hats an' I wallowed in the sun a' them late September days. It was all so new, so great, so wonder-ful.

I was lucky too, 'cause even if I was sure I'd find
work, it was still a surprise when I got a job only three days after I got here. It was only a factory trainee, but it was a start. It was 'nuff ta live on with some left over ta send ta my folks.

Got that job a year an' a half ago now an' that's when I met Ralph. He was a foreman there an' the first day I was there he sauntered over ta my machine, made sure every gal in the place was watchin' him too, an' struck up a conversation with me. Some dude!

"Hi, Babe," he said, "hear y'er in from Detroit. That's my hometown."

Big deal! But all I could think a' then was the boss was talkin' ta me. Oh wow! Was I taken in, jus' a dimwit gal. That's what I was, an' when he asked me for a date, I jus' 'bout went out'ta my mind. Oh, God, how stupid can ya' be? Stupid is right an' jus' look'it what it led to.

Her eyes became black pools of molten hatred.

Somehow we drifted inta a relationship what, more or less, filled up my first year here in California. Everythin' was fine 'til I found out 'bout the baby. When I tole' him I was pregnant, oh, wow! I wanted the baby awright but by that time I wasn't too sure 'bout how I felt 'bout Ralph. We was sittin' in my apartment when I tole' him the news an' fer a minute he didn't say nothin', jus'
sat there starin' at the floor. Then he started ta say somethin' but he stopped, then he tried ag'in. Sure was hummin' and hawin' 'round, come ta think a' it. Finally, he looked up with that smile a' his an' said, "had ta think that one out, baby. I want'a do whatever's right but...well, I ain't ready ta get married right now." All I felt was relief. Shouldn't 'a felt that way, I guess, but I did. I must'a sensed somethin', jus' an inner feelin' a' somethin', like maybe I really knew he weren't no good. But whatever, it was all fine with me. I wanted that baby no matter what. My job paid 'nuff ta support both of us. Who needed him?

But as it turned out, that baby needed him. I did that ta her. Fool of a woman, that's what I did. Oh sure, I meant that he should pay the doctor an' the hospital bills, an' he agreed ta take care a' us fer the two months I was takin' off work, maybe he agreed a little too fast. But that was all I asked for, two measly months. His own kid an' he wouldn't take care a' her needs fer jus' that time. My daddy, he'd a died 'fore he'd walk out on one a' us. Wow! What if I'd married that chicken? He was so willin' ta help. I never thought he'd pull this, never even dreamed he'd walk out on a helpless baby. I went right on workin', right on up ta the end a' the eighth
month, jus' like we planned. I even kept sendin' money home, money what I could a' saved if I'd a' known what that bastard was up ta. I could'a saved that money myself. Sure, he gave me the money ta pay ta the doctor fer the first visit an' he said he'd have the rest a' it when I needed it. An' you, ya' fool, didn't suspect a thing. Why didn't ya' keep after him? Why didja' jus' let him keep puttin' it off? It's y'er own fault. Yeah, that's right, it's my own fault, but he'll pay, oh God, how he'll pay. Ya' fool woman, livin' in a cloud an' now look what it got ya'.

I remembers that last day I worked, oh God, how I remembers that. On the bus, goin' down ta the plant I was thinkin', it's been eight months, an' not a bad eight months neither, an' soon I'll see her. I knew it was gonna be a girl. Soon I'll have my own family, someone I can care fer like I cared fer that family back home. When I checked inta work I was so happy 'cause the time was al-most over. Then when I got ta my machine one a' the gals come over ta me an' asked me why Ralph quit. I laughed an' tole' her Ralph was on the nightshift fer a week. He tole' me somethin' 'bout somebody bein' sick an' he was takin' his place fer a week or so. I didn't paid much 'ttention ta what he'd said. But that gal insisted Ralph
quit. I didn't have the good sense, even then, ta believe her but I did go an' check jus' to shut her up. Sure 'muff, they told me he left the night before. No notice, no nothin', jus' picked up his check an' left. Where? I asked everybody but nobody knew, or at least they said they didn't. Liars! I still wasn't too worried though, after all he didn't have ta tell me everythin' he did. But at breaktime I called his apartment. No answer. All day long then I kept tryin' ta reach him, but never no answer. After work I caught a bus an' rode over ta his place but there was nobody there. Then, I guess I panicked. I beat on that apartment door an' finally started kickin' on the damn thing. Still no answer. The noise brought the manager runnin' on down the hallway. "What'cha doin', girl? he yelled, "Ain't no need ta carry on like that, d'ya hear?" I stopped when I saw him an' started yellin' right back at him. "Where is he?" I screamed, "Where is that no-good bastard?" That ole' manager, he jus' kept right on sayin', "There ain't nobody livin' there no more, girl, he up an' left this mornin' so's no use kickin' in that door." I didn't pay him no mind, I jus' kept yellin'. "Where did he go, an' don't lie ta me?" I screamed. Oh God, I could a' kicked the whole world in right then. The hot, bloody rage in my head had gone shootin' all the way
through my body; ta my hands, ta my feet an' now evry bit a' me was writhin' in anger. Even that baby, even she undulated as I gasped for that breath I needed ta scream at this God damn world that could hide such a bastard. "Where? Where?" I screamed, an' oh God, that fool jus' stood there, shakin' his head--my whole world goin' down the drain an' he jus' stood there, shakin' his head with his eyes full a' tears for his fuckin' door. Then he started ta' wring his hands an' beg me ta calm down. "Now calm down, girl," he said, "jus calm down, he never said where he was goin' an' I had no call to ask him, he was all paid up. He jus' said he was leaving, that's all he said."

Even then I didn't want ta believe all this was really happening, didn't want ta believe that he'd do this ta me an' that baby but them words a' the manager, they kept hittin' inside my head, "Said he was leavin', said he was leavin'"--like a broken record, over an' over I heard 'em, "JUS' SAID HE WAS LEAVIN'. That Bastard! That Bastard! Then, like it was a mile away, I heard that stinkin' manager say, "Please, please, calm down, girl, he's most likely tryin' ta reach ya' at y'er place. Now, please, jus' quieten down an' go home an' ya'll likely hear." Bat shit! I jus' stood there starin' at him for a
second then I started screamin' ag'in. "Ya' fool," I said, "ya' fool, I ain't got nothin' ta go home to, no job, no money, no nothin'. Jus' a baby comin' an' no money ta pay fer it." Them words should'a really panicked me but somehow I remember that they made me stop an' then, for the first time, I really looked at that dumb little man an' I knew he didn't care nothin' 'bout nothin', 'less it was his door, an' so I jus' pushed him aside an' ran outta that place onto the Street.

I never can remember how I got home that night. The bus, I guess, but I don't remember none a' it. The anger left but nothin' came ta replace it. My whole head was just'a void--a vacuum--a nothin'--all I felt was a cold, cruel nothin', a nothin' came ta replace that hot, bloody ragin' feelin'. No, sure don't remembers how I got home--jus' remember sittin' in that chair in my 'partment--it was still dark an' it was the silence what I remembers first--it was such an eerie sound. I moved, jus' so's I could break it. My body was stiff, even my face was stiff. I reached up an' touched it an' felt the rough, dried salt that remained from my tears. I forced myself up outta that chair an' headed fer the bathroom. Don't know why, but as I walked through the room I noticed the hands a' the clock, they pointed ta three. Why did I even care--
time was no problem now. I made it to the bathroom awright
an' leaned over the basin an' turned on the water. I
remember starin' trance-like at them swirlin', divin'
whirlpools, them huge rollin', softly swirlin', no con-
trollin' ever smaller, kinda driftin' whirlpools an' sud-
denly wham! they was sucked down--down--down--an' now my
mind was goin' the same way. I closed my eyes for a
minute ta give it time ta clear, then I reached down an'
cought some a' that shimmerin', cool liquid an' dashed it
in my face. The salt from my tears stung my eyes an' the
tears came flushin' down all over ag'in. Then the cold
reached inward an' jerked my mind an' pinpointed the
events a' the evenin' an' deep-gutted sobs rolled an' tore
through me--oh, that bastard! That bastard!

But that was three months ago an' this is today.
This is three months later an' THREE TIMES I FOUND THAT
BASTARD AN' THREE TIMES THEY'S LOST HIM an' all because a'
that stupid DA's office. Thanks ta them, I's no further
ahead than I was then. Well, so much fer that. This
time I'll take care a' the whole damn thing myself. Now
where would he go? Not far from his friends, though he
ain't got many a' those. There's Pete an' Dorsey an'
Lytton. One a' them'll come through. I jus' have ta find
the right angle. He'll be workin' nights wherever 'cause
he figures I can't get 'round at night, but don't ya'

worry none, Ralphie, I know there's three shifts an' dozens
a' places ya' could be at but I'll still find ya' an' this
time...
CHAPTER XII

"Jus' Sit Here An' Be Mama"

I jus' can't go in there. All them peoples jus' bustlin' 'round in that waitin' room. Hate hospitals any­way an' this one's the worst of 'em all. Hate comin' here. Put it off as long as I could but have ta face them sometime, I guess. My legs is beginnin' ta feel weak though, maybe I could lean here 'gainst this building' fer jus' a minute. There, there now, that's better, them bricks feels cool 'gainst my face. She must be all right now fer them ta let her come home. Must be fine. They didn't say nothin' 'bout how she's doin'--jus' come an' get her, Mrs. Fleming, come take her home. She's been here fer such a long time. Nine months, nine long months, al­most ta the day. But that's awright, so long as she's all better now. They likes her here, that's probably why they kept her so long.

Billy an' Jimmy's missed her. I missed her too. Nine months since I saw my baby. Couldn't come here ta see her. Come once an' them nurses, them nurses treated
I had a right ta go up there an' see my baby but ya' could tell what them nurses was thinkin'. "Oh," they'd say, "are you Melody's mama? Would ya' please sit down an' wait fer jus' a minute?" A minute! I sat there fer three hours an' my two boys home 'lone. They don't care. When I asked how much longer, they jus' smiled an' said they'd call me. Then more nurses kept comin' out inta the hallway an' lookin' at me an' whisperin' an' then they'd go back inta the ward again--like I was some kind'a freak or somethin'. I stood it as long as I could--then I jus' up an' left an' I ain't been back since.

Granny came though, an' she got ta see Melody. They never stopped that ole' lady--that miserable snoop. All this is her fault--always buttin' in. It was her what called the nurse ta the house. I tole' her ta stay home an' mind her own business. Always yakkin' 'bout Melody--'bout that swellin' in her stomach. Wasn't nothin', would'a gone away if they'd left it 'lone. But no, ole'
Granny had'da keep after it. Comin' inta my house when I was gone. Yellin' at me right in front a' that nurse when I got home. Jus' comin' 'round there snoopin', waitin' fer me ta be gone so's she could call someone. Well, she got her chance. Go out one night, jus' one night ta have a little fun an' come home an' there's righteous Granny an' that prim-tailed nurse sittin' there waitin'. I was so tired, didn't want ta talk ta nobody. Granny, she had ta go an' start yellin'. Drunk, she calls me. Yeah, I screamed, I's drunk an' it's mornin' an' them kids was alone, so what? Their daddy went off an' left me alone an' I'm sick an' no one comes sniffin' 'round her ta see if I'm okay--no one cares what happens ta me--no one calls a nurse fer me. I'm jus' the "mama"--jus' s'posed ta sit on my ass an' takes care a' the kids forever. Ya' understan' that? Never s'posse ta go no place, never see no one--never live--jus' sit here an' be "mama" an' die.

Granny got so mad she shoved me inta the bedroom--yellin', she was, yellin' 'bout the two miles she had ta walk ta come see if the kids was awright--Well, who asked her ta, the ole' fool.

When I woke up Melody was gone. No note, no nothin'. Wasn't 'til Granny came by the next day I found out they'd taken her ta the hospital fer some tests. That's when I
went down there but I never got ta see her. It wasn't 'til a week later when the visitin' nurse came by ta get me ta sign some papers that she told me what they thought might be wrong with her. She had a tumor an' they had ta see if it was cancer. Cancer! Melody's only four years old, she can't have nothin' like that. Six more times that nurse came by ta get more papers signed an' then, last week, I got the phone call ta come get her. Took 'em long 'nuff ta' find out she's all right. They said there was nothin' more they could do fer her. Granny says they all like her, that's probably why they kept her so long.

She's a beautiful child, yes, she is. She's small an' dainty, like a flower. Her brown, gold-glecked eyes is laced with them long, thick, curlin', black lashes an' her quick smile shows all them tiny, white, even teeth. Her face is always tellin' ya' 'xactly what she's thinkin'. Anythin' from happiness ta fear, ya' can read it all right in that little face. An' she's never still, my Melody ain't. Ta her, walkin' is dancin' an' even when she's sittin' down, her feet keeps time ta a beat what only she can hear. An' them moods a' hers, my how they can change. One minute she's a'shakin' all over with them little girl giggles an' the next, could be a quiet tear's tricklin' down her cheek.
Granny says all the nurses love her an' they all visit with her when they isn't on duty, an' they all bring her pretty presents, toys an' dresses an' things. Granny says she's got a different dress for every day a' the week an' they keeps her hair done up in three little braids with ribbons tied on 'em, an' someone always rocks her ta sleep at night too.

Well, it's nice they was good ta her anyway but they could'a let me see her too an' I knows they could'a let her come home 'fore this. Granny says they kept checkin' on me ta see what I was doin'. That was none a' their business, had no right ta do that. Anyway, Granny says they kept makin' 'xcuses ta keep her 'way from me, her mama. But Granny says they got a new doctor up here an' he won't let 'em keep Melody here no more an' he made them nurses call me ta come get her an' that's jus' what I's gonna do. I don't have ta stand out here no more. She's my baby an' I'm goin' in an' get her outta this place.

With that Mrs. Fleming stood up and, turning again to the heavy plate-glass door, pushed it open and walked quickly through the lobby to the waiting elevator, entered, pushed the button and stood waiting as the door closed. But once inside, her courage began slipping away. That doctor wants ta talk ta me but John's waitin' outside in
the car an' I've already kept him waitin' too long. They can call me if it's somethin' important. Can't always get a ride--had trouble gettin' this one--been lookin' fer someone since last week when they called me 'bout Melody. Nobody gonna use gas an' their time ta come up her jus' fer me. John, he's doin' me a favor, so can't keep him waitin'.

The elevator stopped and opened onto the children's ward. She stepped out and again hesitated, but seeing a nurse sitting at the desk in the waiting room, she walked over to her.

"I've come ta get my daughter, Melody," she mumbled.

The nurse slowly looked up at her and with those cold, steely, blue eyes staring rigidly at her, Mrs. Fleming's stomach clenched.

"M'am?" the nurse snapped.

"Melody, my daughter, I's come fer her," gulped Mrs. Fleming.

"But you were due here last Wednesday," the nurse accused.

"I had no way ta come then but I's here now. I's here an' I wants Melody," she said, gaining courage by avoiding those cold, reproaching eyes.

The starched uniform rose and, turning from the desk,
caused a minor tornado-like breeze as it angrily brushed
by Mrs. Fleming, through the swinging doors and on into
the ward.

Feeling weak again, Mrs. Fleming sat down on one of
the hard, wooden benches provided for waiting, anxious
parents.

Will they bring Melody ta me? No tellin'. She didn't
have'ta be so uppity. I should'a come Wednesday, then it
would'a been over by now. Jus' couldn't though. Every-
time I thought 'bout it, I got scared. They all hates me
here--blames me 'cause Melody got sick. I jus' took one
drink ta steady myself an' then I got ta figurin' they had
no right ta treat me like they does so I jus' figured they
could wait. They never tole' me nothin' what was goin' on
--why should I tell them? But then, that doctor, he called
'gain an' said they was gonna put Melody inta one a' them
foster homes if I didn't come down an' pick her up. So
here I is an' it's jus' like I knew it would be.

Just then the nurse returned and her eyes, as stiff
and as cold as the uniform she wore, looked down at Mrs.
Fleming. Her mouth cracked open and she said, in her cool,
dry voice, "The head nurse wants to see you in her office."

"I ain't got time tonight, I got someone waitin' in
the car for me," sputtered Mrs. Fleming.
"You have to..." the nurse attempted to continue, but Mrs. Fleming interrupted.

"I ain't got time, tell her ta call me tomorrow," she replied, now rising from the bench.

"You must..." but again she was cut off.

"I ain't got time, I tole' ya'," Mrs. Fleming screamed.

As the nurse turned in disgust, the door to the ward flew open and Melody came running out. Seeing her mother, she ran laughing and squealing into her arms. Her mother lifted the tiny body and kissed her again and again until Melody, still laughing, covered her face with her hands.

The door to the ward had remained open behind Melody and Mrs. Fleming looked up to see all the nurses in the ward watching them.

"Come Melody," she said, "I gotta car waitin' fer us downstairs. A friend's gonna drive us home."

Melody slid down from her arms and raced over to the elevator door. Glancing back, she saw all the nurses standing in the doorway and she ran back again to hug and kiss each one of them promising that she would be back in a few days. Then, running over to her mother, both of them stepped into the waiting elevator.

The closing clang of the elevator door left a
momentary silence in the usually bustling waiting room, but--there were other children--and silently the nurses returned to their work.

The clang of the elevator resounded within the descending cage and mixed gleefully with Melody's giggles and handclapping for her mother had just told her that her two brothers were waiting for her in the car.

Even before the doors were completely open, Melody squeezed through them and, escaping her mother, ran out through the two great glass doors and on to the parking lot.

"Melody, Melody," her mother called but the child kept right on running. Chuckling, Mrs. Fleming followed her.

Jimmy and Billy were standing by the car as the little figure came dancing across the lot and they both started running towards her.

"Jimmy," she screamed, and she stopped, "Y'er so big!"

And turning to Billy who was standing there grinning at his little sister, she giggled, saying "Y're front teeth is still gone."

Billy hid his grin behind his hand causing Melody to go into spasms of laughter. Finally their mother got them
all herded into the car—all three in the back seat,
Melody still chattering away to her brothers. Even the
stranger in the car did not subdue her vivaciousness.

She wanted ta come back ta us—foster home!—ain't
no place fer Melody but with me an' them boys.

Down the Harbor Freeway, over to 103rd Street, down
Graham to Imperial Avenue, Melody hardly drew a breath
as she happily recounted all her experiences. Then they
were home and the car slowed to turn into the long, pit-
rutted driveway which led to a little, nondescript shack
sitting at the rear of the lot. Lurching to the squeals
of the children, the car rose and fell as it made its way
past rusted, wrecked cars, old wheels leaning crazily
against mounds of dead earth and rolls of baling wire in-
tended for a long forgotten fence. Finally it came to a
stop in front of the shack. Dust, cycloned by the car,
half-hid the structure, but in a few seconds it began
settling back down and the shack peered through at the
oncoming car.

The shack at one time had been painted a drab green
but the paint was now sagging as badly as the foundation.
A sad, disgruntled, lean-to porch, minus any evidence of a
stairway, led to the one door which served as both back
and front entrance.
foster home, that silly doctor. She don't belong no place but right here. Them boys is happy too. Things hasn't been this good since she left. It's good ta have her home, won't be so lonesome now. Has ta take care a' her but she looks fine--jus' fine.

"Granny!", yelled Melody, running to the door, "I knew you'd come," and the child threw herself against the small, frail, ancient-looking woman who had just entered.

What she doin' here. Ya' ole fool, whatcha doin' here? Ya' saw her every week alls the time she was gone an' I wanted her ta myself fer jus' a little while. But then, Melody's happy ta see her so won't say nothin'.

"We was jus' gonna make Melody take a rest," she muttered instead.

The old lady didn't say a word, just picked Melody up and headed for the chair and began rocking and singing softly to her.

Ain't seen granny that happy for a long time but she don't need ta worry no more 'bout that baby, she's fine now. Look how happy an' smilin' she is. Ain't no need ta call that doctor, she's jus' fine.

I thought with Melody home, things'd be like they used ta be, everythin' back ta normal ag'in but it seems like the whole world knows she's here an' they's all comin'
by. Someone comin' by every day. If it ain't that nurse, it's the social worker. If it ain't her it's someone to drive us to the hospital. They ain't gonna get into my house to nose around, I just keep sendin' Melody out to the porch to talk to 'em. They say they just come by to see Melody, well, that's all they's gonna see. I watch 'em through the window though—they just plays with her. Like yesterday, they had a bubble gum contest. Melody liked that an' the boys played too. Melody won though. She said the nurses used to play that game with her all the time. Then sometimes I sees 'em playin' jacks with her—grown-ups sittin' 'round playin' jacks—must have somethin' better than that to do. After that they tol' stories an' they left a book fer the kids to read. Those kids can't read so's I read to them last night. They really liked that—all them silly fairy stories, how them kids laughed, silly stories! Wonder what they is gonna do today?

But Melody likes goin' back to the hospital best a' all. She's always ready long 'fore they's due to come fer us. It's almost like she's goin' home but how I hates those trips. Every week an' fer what? Melody's fine, tires easy—but she's been in bed fer so long—takes time ta get used ta being' up an' 'round, an' those boys ain't
easy to keep up with either. They keep trying to get me
to go in and talk to the doctor, says there's somethin' I
should know 'bout Melody but there ain't nothin' I don't
know 'bout that girl. I'm her mama, ain't I? Got nothin'
to say to him. That nurse too, the one who visits here,
keeps talkin' 'bout bein' careful—make sure Melody takes
her medicine, gets her rest. Don't she think I know how
to take care a' her? So, now I just waits downstairs in
that hospital. They don't want me 'round anyway.

Should tell 'em, all them people comin' 'round every
day is killin' me. No peace, no privacy, someone always
beatin' on the door. That nurse, she's one a' the worst.
Keeps tellin' me Melody's real sick, now I know that ain't
true—just look at her, playin' all the time, laughin' an'
singin', nothin' wrong with that youngster. She's been
home two months now an' all them peoples been hangin'
'round here every day. Well, not on the weekends but
Granny comes over then. Need some time ta myself, jus' a
little time...

I didn't think it hurt nobody but Granny was there
when I got back. How that ole' lady screamed an' yelled.
What she mean, that baby ain't gonna be here long? I
ain't gonna listen to that ole' woman she jus' don't under-
stand', that's all, she jus' don't understand'. She's old
an' wrinkled an' ugly an' she jus' don't understan'.

That's why she don't understan', 'cause she's ugly an' she don't care no more. All she does now is stick out that ole' chicken neck an' squawk. I ain't ole' and I wants things. She ain't never been left 'lone ta care fer three kids. She don't know what it's like ta be alone--jus' left ta sit. Well, ole' Granny, yell all ya' wants, I ain't goin' inta that rockin' chair yet.

The next time I stepped outta that house Granny come over an' that ole' lady called the hospital on me. The whole town hit me. Melody go ta a foster home?--that's what they kept sayin' but that baby ain't leavin' this house, she ain't leavin' me ag'in. Ain't no one else leavin' this house. Jus' a few minutes ta myself an' the whole town comes down on me. Them nurses, I ain't goin' down there again--they can pick Melody up here. She don't need me ta go down there. Let that nurse take her an' maybe I jus' won't be here when they gets back.

The shack was empty except for Melody and her granny. The old lady was helping the child pack her clothes into a large cardboard box. The only sound came from the muffled sobs escaping from Granny. When Melody heard these she reached over and patted Granny's arm as though to reassure her. Finally Granny's sobs became
uncontrollable and Melody stopped her packing all together and patiently explained to her.

"It's a nice place where I's goin', Granny. They have a turtle big enough fer me ta ride on an' the lady cooks all kinds a' good things."

Granny's shoulders kept heaving and the sobs continued to escape but she blinked away the tears so she could see to tie the string around Melody's box of clothes. When this was done, she took the child's hand and, carrying the box, walked out to the waiting car.

No one else was in sight but Melody looked around quickly as though half expecting her brothers to jump out of hiding to say goodbye to her. But the quiet noonday sun blazed down only on the dry, barren earth, the lean-to porch, the old lady and the tiny child. Nothing stirred so Melody climbed resignedly into the front seat of the car. Turning to wave goodbye to her Granny, she saw the tears rolling unchecked now down the old lady's wrinkled cheeks. Instantly she jumped from the seat and ran once again to comfort her.

"Don't cry, Granny," she pleaded, "'member what the lady said, ya can come visit with me anytime." After giving her grandmother a parting kiss, Melody returned to the car but this time she didn't look back as the car
pulled away from her home.
CHAPTER XIII

"That Black-Shrouded Ribbon"

Martin Luther King was assassinated, an' this Street could'a been raped all over ag'in--could'a been all messed up ag'in--all smoked an' cindered ag'in--instead'a like the silent, mournin' thing it is. Wouldn'ta taken much ta start the ole' hate up--peoples here weren't far from it but jus' look'it what happened instead--almost overnight it started an' stopped an' jus' look at it now.

Now it looks like it joined up with them barren slabs 'longside it. Looks like it turned inta the longest, blackest an' biggest grave of 'em all. Not a sound travel-in' down this Street, jus' them shivverin' heat waves risin' up off a' it. No cars movin' on it nor parked on it neither. Not a car as far as ya' can see. An' jus' look'it them traffic lights, jus' like robots, keep right on changin' colors all fer an empty Street.

Here it is now, nine in the mornin' an' them stores is still hidin' behind them steel jail-fronts a' there's. Ain't nobody even thinkin' 'bout openin' 'em today. Ain't
no people sounds neither--no talkin', no laughin', no shufflin', no runnin' fer buses--no buses. Ain't nobody goin' no place--'cause Martin's bein' buried today.

But when the news a' his killin' first hit this Street weren't no tellin' what was gonna happen here. The peoples kind'a went inta shock--hearin' that on the radio, watchin' it on TV an' seein' it screamin' up at 'em from all them newspapers. Folks started out whisperin' but they kept gettin' louder an' louder, askin' questions an' more questions, like they jus' couldn't believe none of it.

When that first shock kind'a wore off, then the peoples 'round here began ta go back ta that hatin'--blamin' everybody OUT THERE for the killin', sayin' all them things what don't do no good, jus' servin' ta bring that ole' hate up in 'em--nothin' else. Course the hatin' wasn't jus' here on this Street--it kinda caught on all over. In no time at all the MAN sent in cops with rifles an' put 'em up on them rippled rooftops a' them buildin's--right 'long there--right 'longside a' the Street. They stood there, all the time jus' watchin' the Street--stood tall too, like they meant business. It was bad 'nuff durin' the day but when night came on, them shadowy figures with them long rifles almost stretched clear down ta the Street.
Them cop cars too, they was all over, goin' up an' down, flyin' up out'ta them ally's an' sidestreets. They's always lookin', watchin', but now they was really lookin', like they was bound they was gonna find somethin', gonna get somebody.

An' the Street, well it weren't no different here neither. Voices lowered down ta whispers, kids was scurryin', grownups hurryin', glances shiftin' backwards, plans was made, then was changed, while hate an' color mounted.

An' then it happened, suddenly it 'came clear that this Street had had it--it weren't gonna take no more, an' so from outta its guts; from its shacks, its hovels, its alley, its corners, its schoolyards, its parks, this Street spit out its "Sons". Them Sons, what was the bad 'uns at Jordon High School when they was jus' kids an' what had still been kids too, durin' that last bad scene. But now they was grown and they knew hate; had chased it, tasted it, lived with it an' finally rejected it, 'cause they learned it weren't no answer.

So they came out--all of 'em, an' they covered that Street like a swarm a' bees. They hit it an' they tole' THE MAN--"YOU leave this Street, this is our bag an' we's gonna handle it." An', THE MAN?, he did--he left this
place. Then the Sons reached out ta the peoples, goin' in 'mongst 'em--soothin', talkin' soft-like, listenin'. On the corners, in the markets, bars, churches, homes, any place, them Sons was there softly assurin' the peoples. "Cool it, man," got ta be a password. An' the Sons kept talkin' an' listenin' but never backin' down from nobody.

Slowly, it all began ta cool down an' them peoples on the Street? Well their hate turned ta sadness an' their anger melted into tears an' finally they all went into their houses an' closed their doors an' left the Street in silence.

An' the Street? Well today they's buryin' Martin an' that black-shrouded ribbon sure reflects a towerin' absence.
CHAPTER XIV

"Move It, Baby"

He heard the sirens shrieking and saw the police car careen around the corner and head towards him. Though the car was still a block away, the sound struck sharply against his head and his brain felt as though it were ricocheting causing all manner of crazy, spiraling, dancing lights before his eyes. Confused, it was a moment before he realized it was he they were after. The robotic stance of indifference which he had planned to adopt in just such an emergency, shattered, and for an instant his body was rigidly encased in fear. Muscles grabbed and clenched spasmodically and clammy sweat broke through his skin. Vaguely he felt instructions. From where? "Move, Benny, move an' move fast. They's comin', Ben, get loose, man, now, NOW, N-O-W," and the words began to reverberate in Benny's head, for his synapses had suddenly relaxed and now he got the message clear and fast. Jarred from his momentary freeze, he obeyed. The head lowered, the legs extended and instantly reacting, Benny took off down the
street. In seconds his feet were beating a rhythmic tattoo on the cement sidewalk, each push of his foot giving him more traction, more momentum, more speed. Over and over the motions were repeated until Benny's feet were only dirvishly visible. Where fear had previously reigned over him, now it was his driver, his means of release, his salvation. Now fear shifted to a raging, mechanical drive which repudiated the apparent and certain doom for Benny--POLICE--WHITIE--THE FUZZ--and worst of all--THE MAN. The word-thoughts acted as adrenalin to Benny and his body crouched even lower and all of his muscles contracted to project this flying-missile to search for some secure place to hide.

New instructions were coming fast and furiously,—"Get off the street Benny--go where ya' know--no one knows this place like you, Ben--every can an' bottle dump in it--get goin', Ben--off the Street, Ben--off Ben off." The message was sporadic and he caught it only between gaps in his mind which somehow correlated with the gasps of air his body was snatching. That voice--he knew that voice—that was his voice telling him to get the hell off the Street. Without slowing an instant Benny veered away from the Street and headed into the vacant lot which lay between the Street and the railroad tracks. His pumping heart kept
pace with the thud of his feet on the sun dried earth.
"Where, where, Benny, where to now, not home--no chance ta get that far--where, Benny?" Desperately he searched for an answer. Then it came to him, the ditch--shouldn't be too full, his gasping mind surmised, anyhow ain't no place else ta go. So Ben flew over the railroad mound to the deep gulch which was partially hidden by the dried, brown grass of the field around it. Quickly, he slid through the grass into the stinking, slimy, mucous-like mud below. Rolling over, he pulled himself back up the side of the ditch and peered furtively to see if he had been followed ...

"no-one," he gasped, "nothin'. No-one. Nothin' but that hot sun beatin' down on that hard ground, no sound but me wheezin', nothin', I's safe," and he fell on his face and let the weight of his body pull him down into the muck.

It was awhile before he caught his breath but along with it came the stinking, nauseous smell of the stagnant ditch. The putrid air plunging into his lungs was agonizing. Trying to stifle the fits of coughing and gasping almost pulled Benny's chest apart but his body craved air and so it continued gulping not caring about either the pain or the venomous stench.

Quieting, he lay still for a moment. He could feel
the cool, slimy mud penetrating his clothes and oozing into his shoes and though the smell was sickening, he was responsive only to the coolness. The wet sickly mud against his cheek cooled the fever of his fear and shutting his eyes, he wished the ditch were a bottomless pit where no one would ever find him. Finally, he rolled over on his back and used his dirty shirt sleeve to wipe the mud and sweat from his face. Then his entire body collapsed and he lay staring at the little patches of blue he could see through the grass overhanging the ditch, but his mind refused to relax.

What happened? That ole' woman was jus' pokin' her way 'long the street, collectin' her rents, jus' like she does every month an' so I grabbs her purse...so what? Why did that ole' mother scream so loud? You'd think I was grabbin' her instead a' jus her old purse.

He quickly ran his hand along the outside of his shirt and muddily grinned when he felt the reassuring bulge of the roll of bills snuggling against his body. Even if he did have to share it with the rest of the gang, there'd still be plenty left for his share.

Suddenly he heard loud breathing behind him. THE MAN? Benny's collapsed body instantly revitalized and he leaped into a run. The mucous mud sucked at his shoes
and every step pulled on his guts but all Ben could see was the face of THE MAN and in his mind he saw it between the intermittent strobe lights of the police car and then his head was the center of the crazy, dancing, spiraling lights he had seen before and Benny wrenched up his foot and sloshed frantically through the muck. He kept running --must run Ben--don't stop this time, don't stop Ben--no such thing as a safe place now Ben--got to keep--"WAIT!" a voice shrills and Ben still running, peers back over his shoulder to see, not THE MAN, but his buddy, Will Timms.

Relief, the antidote of fear, surged through Benny and his stressed muscles ceased to function. His straining foot sank back into the ooze and he fell forward into the muck.

Oh, God. IT'S WILL, it's Will, it's Will, and this one though permeated his entire mind. No room for fear, for terror; no room for anything but relief--and his body sank back deeper into the mud.

But the relief was only momentary for his dazed mind was again registering pain and a voice was hissing at him and his mind tried desperately to assimilate the words. He rolled over and through a muddy veil he saw the tracing of a boot headed for his body. The added pain shot through
him. "What the hell?" he gasped, shaking his head to rid
his eyes of the mud and sweat—"What the hell's goin'
on?", for by now both feet AND fists were hammering on
him.

Will, seeing Ben move, stopped his attack on him and
hissed, "Whatcha' stopping for, can' cha hear 'em?, move
ya' stupid-son-of-a-bitch, MOVE!"

Benny moved, his fingers grasped the mud as though,
with its help, he could pull himself along the ditch but
he watched helplessly as the muck oozed uselessly through
his fingers.

Again, Will kicked Ben and his hissing voice con-
tinued to jeer at him. The message of pain came through
and Benny's body began to function. "Yeah, Ben--move Baby
--they're still there, searchin' an' beepin'--searchin'
an' beepin'--move it, Baby" and his feet began to move to
the recurring rhythm of his fear.

He grabbed the side of the ditch and his fingers tore
into its damp, rough surface. The rocks cut his fingers
but he didn't feel the pain—he was beyond pain—he had
reached the extreme—now, there was no room for pain, just
terror. Gotta move, gotta keep goin', and he scratched
his way up the side of the ditch, grabbing for the over-
hanging grass to steady himself.
Will stayed on his back, his rasping voice, pushing, driving, herding Ben until Ben's own rhythmic ploddings were replaced by the grinding, grating, jeering beat of his companion's voice. Ben's feet, so coated with mud, so heavy...Benny's mind...so far out...began to wander...

Looking down to see what held his feet, he thought of the spacemen he had seen on television--now he understood their movements--their feet were as heavy as his--H-E-A-V-Y--O-H--S-O--S-L-O-W--T-O--R-E-S-P-O-N-D...What had their's been covered with? All of a sudden Benny felt like he was floating, like spacemen...that was it, Benny--you're in spacefloat, Benny, relax--you'll get there--no one to bother ya'--pick up that heavy square foot, Benny--no hurry, Benny--no HURRY. Benny stumbled for suddenly a hand had reached out and was pulling him down to the muddy depths of the ditch and then he was back to the moment.

He saw they had reached the point where the ditch ran under the road and apparently Will thought they had reached a safe place. "Safe!" It was just a word but it covered Benny like a blanket and he fell down under it and to the shelter of the mud.

For a moment neither of them said anything, they just lay there gasping for air. In the distance they could hear the persistent "beep-beep" of the police siren. It
reminded Benny of the war movies with the German gestapo... that's what it was !!! the GESTAPO... They're all over this place... patrols screechin' up sideways ta cafes, cuttin' off streets, speedin' into alleys--beepin', all the time, beepin'... always there, jus' like now.

Both Ben and Will continued leaning against the side of the ditch, eyes closed, listening to the police car's searching siren which was now beginning to fade into the distance.

When the sound was completely gone, Will asked, "Where's it?"


"The money, stupid, the money," said Will, glaring at him.

"Inside my shirt," came Ben's slow reply.

"Well, give it ta me," snapped Will.

Ben reacted to the violence in Will's voice and hurriedly reached inside his shirt, pulling out the roll of bills he handed it to Will.

Will's face brightened as he saw the size of the roll and his hand shook as he removed the rubberband which the old woman had used to keep the bills together.

"Jeez," he gasped, "that ole mother's been pullin' a fast one on all a' us, lettin' on she never had nothin'."
Now, Ben sat up straight, fascinated by the sight of the bills.

"That outside one, that's a hundred dollar bill!" he said.

"Right," cooed Will, "an' that ain't the only one. There's five of 'em an' look'it the rest of 'em." Will's eyes gleamed as he flipped through the bills.

"How much, Will? How much's there?" and Ben's body jerked upright as he watched Will count those bills. Suddenly a high-pitched laughter came out of Will and he threw his body back into the mud where he lay laughing and kicking his legs in the air.

"How much, for Chris' sakes, Will, how much?" cried Ben. But Will just lay panting and laughing gleefully as he hugged the bills.

"How much, Will?" and this time it was Ben's voice that was rasping.

Finally, Will sat up and, looking wonderingly at Ben, said, "That ole' mother--there's fifteen hundred bills in that roll, that's how much."

"Fifteen hundred!" yelled Ben, "FIFTEEN HUNDRED! WOW!" and Ben's eyes grew big with astonishment.

"Lemme see," he begged and Will laid the money out on top of the mud. Ben stared at more money than he had ever
seen at one time in his life. He reached to touch it but Will pulled it back. Ben didn't really care. Fifteen hundred! He had seen it and part of it was his. Fifteen hundred and he thought of the meager monthly welfare check his mother got to support seven kids.

Ben marveled as he thought of that but as he watched Will recounting the money he quickly figured out his share. Five hundred dollars!—and his mind gasped—five hundred—and a grin appeared, cracking his muddy face. Five hundred bills, and thinking of how his mother needed that money, his grin got bigger.

Suddenly his smile faded, for though his thoughts had wandered to his mom for a second, his eyes had never left Will. Now he noticed that Will was just sitting there caressing the roll of bills. For some reason Ben's stomach tightened and his eyes narrowed. There was something in Will's face—something Ben didn't like. Suddenly he blurted, "Gimme my money now an' then we can split up." When Will didn't look up, Ben wiggled nervously and lamely added, "It'll be safer if we splits."

Will slowly raised his head and looked at Ben. Ben's stomach lurched again as he saw the slyness of Will's eyes.

"Come on, Will," he said, "Let's move." Ben, now the
impatient one, fidgeted nervously.

"Yeah, man," said Will, rising abruptly to his knees. Then he peeled off three of the bills and tossed them at Ben. Ben's hand darted out to catch the bills and even before they were in his hand he knew something was wrong. Clutching them, he saw they were all tens. For an instant he was stupified and then the tightness in his stomach turned to spasms that quickly engulfed his entire body. The fear and anger verbalized and a primal scream of anger shook his thin body.

"Thirty dollars!" he screamed, "thirty fuckin' bills, ya' mother-fuckin' bastard," and his nine-year-old voice screamed like a young girls'. "How the hell d' ya' figure that? It was me what tole ya' 'bout that ole' lady collectin' rents! It was me what grabbed the purse!" Now the sticky grip of the mud was forgotten as Benny jumped up and down in a frenzy.

Without a word, Will's body uncoiled from the bottom of the ditch and he leaped for Benny. His hand caught Ben's throat and as it landed, it tightened and Benny's body, trying desperately to break the hold of those clutching fingers, kicked and clawed at Will but those fingers kept tightening their hold. Ben's breath was soon gone and again those crazy, spiraling, dancing lights were
before his eyes as his body began to sink floatingly into the ditch.

Now keep y' er big mouth shut an' I'll let ya' go," whispered Will to the crumpled form at his feet. Slowly he released his grip and seeing no movement from Ben, kicked him in the side. Ben gasped and then gulped in air along with mud and slime. Spitting and coughing he tried to turn over--have ta get my face outta this mud--have ta have air, but his body collapsed and he fell back into the muck. Will grabbed his collar and rolled him over.

Ben's clouded eyes stared up at Will, seeing only his silhouette against the patch of blue light above the ditch. Will's hissing voice continued, somehow penetrating Ben's dormant brain.

"Ya' got all y' er goin' ta get, boy, so shut up. You ain't nothin' but a cry-baby an' if I hadn't a found ya' in that ditch, you an' that money would'a been grabbed up by them cops. So just figure y' re lucky."

While he was talking, Will was carefully peeking out of the ditch to see if Ben's outburst had attracted any attention. Satisfied that it had not, he turned back to Ben and said, "I'm leavin' now, boy, an' ya' d better keep y' er mouth shut or you'll be back in this ditch fer good." Ben's still-glazed eyes just stared, and Will, once more
checking the outside, wriggled up the side of the ditch and was gone.

Benny continued to lie on his back, staring once more at the patch of blue sky. Tears welled up in his eyes so that the patch of blue was distorted into fantasies of shimmering lights with the blades of grass becoming giant geometric patterns. The tears rolled silently down his face, making no inroads on the caked mud. Why, why didn't I take my share a' the money 'fore Will caught up with me? Why? Why? Why? I knew what Will is--the bully a' the neighborhood. That's why I got him ta come inta the deal. Will was big, a big guy fer fourteen, an' he'd been around. Ben thought of the stories that Will had told. He had bragged of hold-ups he had been in, the drug deals and the cars he had picked up and takin' across the border into Mexico and all the money that he had gotten for his part in these things but, and the tears came back to Benny's eyes, I never thought Will would "take" a buddy. Never thought that. He shook his head at his own stupidity.

He squeezed the tears from his eyes and thought of his mother. He was the oldest of seven kids and it was up to him to help--the man of the house--that's what his mom always called him and he could see her throwing her head
back and laughing that deep, roaring laughter. Man of the house! Just like my ole' man, never do nothin' right! and he rolled over and beat the mud furiously and the mud flew, spattering the dried, yellow grass above. Tiring, he lay still and suddenly, drifting before his eyes, he saw his father's grinning face. Ben's thoughts were bitter now. He never comes 'round 'ceptin' when Mom gets her welfare check, then he getsa bottle an' they drink an' laugh it up. He stays for a few days an' then he's off ag'in. Ben recalled the days when he had hoped his dad would come back and stay but, as time went on and he kept leavin' each time, a little, bitter lump grew in Ben's chest and it got bigger and bigger until he reached the point where he hated to see his dad come through the door. Always braggin' 'bout what he's doin', what he's goin' to do an' never doin' nothin'. God, how I hates him. But, Mom, how I wants ta do somethin' for her--jus' ta help--ta really be the man a' the house...an' now, when I got the chance I's gone an' messed it up, ruined it, jus' like him. Great, dry sobs shook Benny's body. Why, why did I give that money ta Will? and again his fist beat the mud until even his frustrations could no longer command the necessary strength and slowly he calmed down and lay still. A semi-sleep came over him for a moment but then he heard that voice
again forcing him to think...THINK, it's too late to think. I should'a thought 'fore Will caught up ta me, even 'fore that, when I was plannin' this job or, even as late as when Will asked for the money, but now, now it's too late ta think.

But the voice was persistent, probing Ben, pushing him until wearily, he sat up. He saw one of the crumpled ten dollar bills lying beside him. He picked it up and rubbed it off against his muddy shirt and felt around for the other two. Finding them, he stuck them in his pocket. His body ached but it was nothing to the anguish of his mind. Now on his knees, he closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the side of the ditch and was grateful for the damp coolness. Again he heard that voice..."Move, Benny, that ole' lady knew ya, Benny. They'll find out where ya' lives--get goin'--." It's true, she did know me but not where I lives. Have ta get home, get ta mom, she'll know what ta do.

He shook his head to clear it and then reached for the top of the ditch and slowly pulled himself up to where he could look out over the edge. Cautiously he checked the scene. Nothin' out there, jus' the barren field with its brown grass coverin'. He glanced down the road running up to the ditch. Nothin', not a car in sight. 'Cross the
street--a few houses bakin' in the sun. No need ta worry if them people there saw me. They's used ta anythin'. They minds their own business. Don't get involved. Don't see nothin' an' don't ask no questions. Jus' play it cool, that's the way they lives.

Benny checked around again, just to be sure and then slowly pulled his body out of the ditch and quickly flattened it against the grass. The grass was tall enough to hide him and he rolled over on his back to get his first gulp of clean air. He lay still for a moment feeling the cool, dry air cleansing the inside of his body and he became conscious of the caked mud which covered him. He slid his body along the grass, trying to rub the mud from his clothes. Then grabbing a handful of grass, he tore it up by the roots and wiped his face and hands. The coarse grass against his skin seemed to alert his senses and re-assert his need for speed. Get movin', can't stay here, Move! And Ben got up and stumbled out to the road. Got ta get home and that thought gave Benny new strength and he ran across the street and headed for the alley which led to his apartment.

His body, now filled with anticipation, quickly picked up its former rhythm and he felt the breeze his body stirred up as it cut through the air. The air dried the
mud in his hair and his face and the mask-like feeling reminded him of Halloween...but nothing mattered now except that he get home.

He stayed in the back alleys until he reached the corner down from his apartment house, then he stopped and peered cautiously around, checking for police cars or any strangers lingering in the area. No cars. No strangers. Just the usual fellows leaning against the front of the apartment. Benny knew them, not by name, but they were always there during the day, laughing, talking, bragging, ogling any gal that passed. "No-gooders", his mom called them, "jus' lazy no-gooders". So he never talked to them though they always made laughing remarks at him when he walked into the apartment. Hate and fear were mixed now but Benny had to go through that door.

Straightening himself, he sank his clenched fists into his pockets and pushed himself across the street. They saw him coming. They never misses nothin'. But he walked slowly, scuffing his feet and the expected jeering began. "Where ya' been, boy? Rollin' her in the mud, huh? Some bit." And they laughed mockingly and Ben's stomach began to spasm. He smiled weakly as their obscene remarks continued until he went through the main door of the apartment.
Once inside he quickly checked the foyer, no one.

Glancing up the dark stairway, no one. With one silent leap Benny was halfway up the stairs. Grabbing the bannister he pulled himself up to the second landing and stopped. He peered around the staircase and checked the hallway in both directions. It was clear and a sigh, bigger than Benny, escaped him.

Swiftly he ran down the hallway to his apartment door. There was no knob on the door, just a hole where the knob used to be. His mother kept a knife stuck in the door casing to keep it closed.

He could hear the radio blaring so he banged loudly on the door. When there was still no answer, Benny frantically began to kick it. Finally, the radio was lowered and his mother's boisterous voice yelled, "Who's it?"

"It's me, Mom," he answered, almost in a whisper.

He heard the scrape of the knife as it was pulled from the frame and the door swung open. His mother stood inside holding a baby in her arms. Seeing Benny she started laughing and said, "What is it, honey, they kick you out'ta that school ag'in?"

For a moment it was too dark for her to see Benny clearly but when she did her eyes flew over the small
muddy form that was her son.

Ben remained standing in the hall. His eyes filled with tears as he looked up into his mother's smiling face. Slowly he reached into his pocket and pulled out the three, limp, muddy bills and slowly handed them to her.
CHAPTER XV

"The Sound of a Fiddle"

A dusty, rock-protruding driveway runs back from the front house, barely swerving to acknowledge the shack. No trees shade it, no bushes relieve it, no grass softens it, it's as though nothing in nature will verify its reason for being. Its unpainted clapboards play tug-of-war with the occasional nails which seem determined to hold the structure in some semblance of form. The only bit of color, the green tar-paper roofing, rolls back in wind-tattered strips, revealing its black-tarred underside. Two gaunt windows stare passively from under the drooping porch roof. Four broken steps, each precariously supporting the other, lead from the rock-held yard to the door of the shack. The door, composed of three planks; heavy, rugged, splintered, aged-grey planks of varying length all fused together with rusted spikes, sits heavily in its worn groove on the porch. A slit carved in the door, now worn smooth by many hands, serves as a door knob and, with an upward heave, the door lifts and plunges back into the
darkening stench of the interior.

The glare from the open door funnels into the darkness, ricocheting from the low-down ceiling, spotlighting the numerous and diverse pieces of linoleum patterns which cover the floor of the main room. Inside and immediately to the left of the door is a large easy-chair baring its broken coils through shredded upholstery with a folded, thread-bare blanket half-heartedly attempting to cover it. A sagging double bed takes up the rest of the room. Directly in front of the door and to the right is another bed-filled room and diagonally is the door to the kitchen. The kitchen is separated from the main room by a once pale-green plasterboard wall, now intricately designed with watermarks from the leaky roof, with the door's unexpected light, cockroaches scurry up and down, animating the maze of designs. A sharp-nosed rat flies bat-like through the air, its clawed feet outstretched reaching for the safety of the pitted, quilt-covered mattress. In the kitchen are two single cots, a sink, a wringer-washer, a wash tub perched on a rough-hewed stand, a card table and four mismatched chairs. It's a house, four walls and a roof all tied to the earth.

So it ain't no castle—it's been home ta me an' Calvin an' them nine kids, by God. Could'a taken one a'
them five bedroom 'partments in the project but Calvin wouldn't have no part a' 'em. Those kids livin' in them places, all them families crowded together, nothin' fer them kids ta do alls the time 'cept get inta them gangs an' get inta trouble. No, Calvin said, not fer his kids.

It was hard findin' a place with all them kids too. We had'da live in the car fer the first week we was out here but we jus' kep' lookin' an' we finally finds this one fer seventy-five dollars a month. Lucky thing we got work right 'way an' with no babysittin' problems neither. I got that domestic work durin' the day an' Calvin, he got on cleanin' the school at night--maintenance man, he was. Some complains 'bout domestic work but they ain't never worked ten ta twelve hours a day in them fields--workin' right 'longside a' the men. This here work's a lot easier. An' the kids, no field work fer them no more neither, now they goes ta school an' learns things. Mean' Calvin, we made 'nuff ta keep things goin' an' I took care a' the kids at night an' he took care a' them durin' the day.

The weekends, them was the nicest. Yes, this place fairly jumped then. Calvin, he was a natural on the fiddle, that's what they all use ta say back home in Texas. That Calvin, they'd say, he sure knows how ta
They was right too, there was no better foot-tappin', hand-clappin' fiddler than my Calvin. On the weekends when he was playin' fer them kids it was jus' like he was part a' the music, jus' like they was one. That's what he an' that fiddle an' that music was--jus' all wrapped up together an' how them kids loved it. Right down ta the youngest, little Elmer, they'd begin ta dance, clappin' their hands an' laughin' jus' every time their daddy whipped inta a tune. On Sundays Calvin played at the church an' I had ta keep a firm eye on them kids, only 'llowed 'em ta clap in time ta their hallelujahs. But at home, they hopped an' danced an' sang ta the jigs he played an' there was times when this ole' shack fairly danced right 'long with 'em.

Yes, this crumblin' shack's somethin' special fer life'd never been so good, so full an' so kind as it was here. An' fer two years this place built up them good memories. Durin' the day Calvin was both mama an' daddy ta them kids. He got 'em readied fer school in the mornin' after I left fer work, an' he was there ta meet 'em when they come home in the early afternoon. He washed scraped knees, wiped up hurt tears, listened ta small failures an' replaced each of 'em with big dreams. With the older kids he turned country thoughts inta city ways
an' he was with the baby, Elmer, all the time, playin' an' rockin' that child. An' Elmer, how that child loved him.

In the evenin's when I got home, I'd fix supper an' Calvin'd get ready ta go ta work an' when he was ready ta leave all them kids'd stand on the porch an' wave ta him 'til he was outta sight.

Life in the house would'a stayed like that too 'ceptin' for that Saturday evenin' when Calvin ran 'cross ta the grocery store. Comin' back he cut 'cross the Street an' the driver what hit him, never even saw him. Nobody in that house could believe it. I must'a done all them arrangements but I don't remember nothin'. The church members helped all they could but no one could help with the loneliness. Many a night after them kids was sleepin', I cried, an' it seemed like this ole' house wrapped its crippled ole' shape right 'round my shoulders.

If only I could'a kept on workin'. I tried, God knows I did that, but there weren't nobody ta care fer them kids. A neighbor cared fer Elmer durin' the day but them other kids jus' run wild. Nothin' ta keep 'em home, nobody here--no laughin', no music, no nothin', not 'til seven in the evenin' an' then only somebody too tired ta listen.

Neighbors tried ta tell me ta go on welfare but I
had'da job an' didn't need no handout. I guess I knew my money weren't gonna be 'nuff fer rent an' food fer ten peoples an' bus fare fer me an' clothes an' med'cine an' all but I jus' kept on hopin'.

Then somethin' happened, Lonnie, my oldest boy, he was caught robbin' a neighborhood grocer store with two other boys an' then I didn't have no choice. Them kids meant more ta me than what little money I could make each week, more ta me than what I thought 'bout welfare, so's I quit an' went on aid.

Well them agency peoples, they started hittin' that door an' right 'way started yellin' 'bout this house. They kept sayin' I had'da get out'ta this place, had'da take the kids out'ta this dirty hovel, as they called it. But I jus' didn't listen ta 'em, so much was happenin', I jus' couldn't listen ta 'em. Jus' seemed like they'd never leave us alone. There was so many more things ta worry 'bout than a house. Lonnie was sent ta one a' them youth camps fer a year. But where? An' when did he go? No one tole' me nothin', so how could I find him? I ain't had no learnin', no readin', no writin', ain't got no phone an' I couldn't ask the church ta help, couldn't have them knowin' 'bout Lonnie. Seems like I was cryin' myself ta sleep with only that ole' shack a'watchin'.
Few days after I got news 'bout Lonnie, a man from the youth authorities came by but alls he wanted ta talk 'bout was what a mess the house was. No decent place, he says, ta raise a boy. I kept tryin' ta talk ta him 'bout Lonnie but he wouldn't hush long 'nuff fer me ta get the address where Lonnie was at. 'Fore I knowed it, he was up an' gettin' ready ta leave. Well, I jus' couldn't help it--them tears jus' started fallin' an' finally he started ta listen a little. He did write down Lonnie's address awright but he kept right on talkin' 'bout raisin' kids in nice clean places, but I got the address an' that was the main thing.

After he went I could hardly wait for them kids ta come home from school. It was only two o'clock an' they wouldn't be in 'fore three. I got busy fixin' their snacks but that only took a few minutes. I pulled the chairs up ta the table an' hunted through the drawers 'til I found a stub of a pencil. Then I walked over ta the bed an' looked down at Elmer takin' his afternoon nap. That was 'nother problem and I didn't know what it was. He'd been actin' strange lately, like he couldn't hear me. Thought he was goin' deaf but them doctors at the County Hospital, they say there ain't nothin' wrong with his hearin'. Took that baby every week ta the doctor, spent
whole days there, every week for weeks. They says he ain't deaf but they don't know what's ailin' him. Always jumpin' up an' down an' squealin' an' runnin' off every chance he gets. Then sometimes he jus' sits an' rocks back an' forth, cooin'-like. An' he don't talk no more, nary a word, don't seem right ta me.

Then I heard them kids hit the porch an' the door scraped open an' they all come rushin' inta the house. They all had somethin' ta' tell me 'bout their schoolday but I hushed 'em an' told 'em I had some real good news. While they was eatin' their snacks I tole 'em 'bout gettin' Lonnie's address an' how, soon's they finished eatin', we was all gonna write ta him. But first I sent Marsha, my oldest girl, ta the store ta get writin' paper. We all tole her ta get somethin' pretty, somethin' Lonnie wouldn't be 'shamed of. An' she did too. She come back with the prettiest paper ya' ever did see--all different colors, jus' like a rainbow.

"He's gonna like that, Mama," the kids all yelled, "That's real pretty."

Then I got 'em all quietened down an' all gathered 'roun' the table. The chairs was all filled up an' so the rest a' the kids jus' leaned 'gainst the table. Marsha, she's the best writer so she got ta do the writin'.
Them kids was so 'xcited--each of 'em had somethin' they wanted ta tell Lonnie. They jus' squealed an' laughed, it was almost like it use ta be. Oh, the yellin' that went on.

"Tell 'em Smudge had puppies," Linda yelled.

"Yeah," said Peter, "an' tell him I's gonna keep one a' them puppies jus' fer me."

"Tell 'em I got'ta black eye," screamed Jason, "an' tell 'em Elmer's gettin fat."

That letter jus' went on an' on 'til Marsha she jus' couldn't write no more, so I jus' tole' 'em they had ta stop an' sign their names so's I could get up ta the post office an' get it mailed. Then I folded it an' put it inta the envelope an' sealed it. I tole' the kids ta take care a' Elmer an' I ran up ta 103rd Street ta the post office an' bought a stamp an' mailed that letter right there.

Well, that night we all had the best night's sleep we'd had in a long time--even the shack settled down--kind'a snuggled right down 'round us. But I was still thinkin' 'bout Elmer, so the next day I took him out ta that brain place at that school, that UCLA an' fer the next few weeks they did all kind'sa tests on him. I had'da make a lot'ta trips out there 'fore they found out what was
ailin' the boy.

I still don't understan' what's wrong with him though. They says the tests show he's "autistic", whatever that is. But that's why he does them things. Why he rocks back an' forth an' squeals fer no reason, an' is always rubbin' his fingers 'long soft things an' runnin' off every chance he gets. Never hearin' me neither, least ways, lettin' on he never hears me. They asked me ta let him stay in their hospital-school fer six months so's they could see if they could help him. He's gettin' so hard ta handle I thought maybe that'd help some an' he can come home on the weekends, so I s'ppose it's awright. It's a nice place, them bedrooms all has pretty colored walls an' all them animals painted on 'em an' they got reg'lar school rooms too where they teaches all them kids. The doctor says Elmer's ailment could have somethin' ta do with him losin' his daddy--I can understan' that, I knows that loss real well.

Things happened so fast an' 'fore I knew it we'd been livin' here in this house fer nearly four years. Jus' found out that Elmer's doin' so good they wants ta keep him fer 'nother six months an' now the authorities tells me Lonnie's comin' home in jus'ta few weeks. They's pushin' me real hard ta find 'nother place ta live so has
ta take care a' that now.

Didn't have no way a' gettin' 'round ta look fer nothin'; no car, no phone, think they'd a' left a body alone. Alls they wanted was ta put ya' in them projects an' I weren't takin' these kids inta them places. Calvin wouldn't a' done that an' so I weren't gonna do it neither. Couldn't ask them neighbors ta help, they didn't have no gas nor time fer that kind'a thing. Did think maybe Brother Townsend would help, that's the preacher over at the church, he tole' me when Calvin passed that if I needed anythin' jus' ta call on him. But when I walked up ta the phone booth an' called the church that woman up there tole' me Brother Townsend lives in Pasadena an' he won't be at the church 'til Sunday. Took me a week an' a dozen phone calls ta get 'hold a' that man. But he did say he'd send somebody ta help me. I didn't know jus' what ta do when I found out that the man he sent ta help was a rental agent --one a' them peoples what charges ta find a place fer ya'. But I didn't have no choice what with all them peoples sayin' I had ta move an' right then too, an' I didn't want nothin' ta keep Lonnie from comin' home. It turned out that one a' the houses was only a few blocks 'way an', from the outside, it looked like jus' what we needed. It was ole', like maybe it was new when this part a' town was
new, but it looked big an' roomy. A huge front porch spread clear 'cross the front an' pretty green grass grew on both sides a' the cement walk leadin' up ta the porch. It really was jus' what we needed an' pretty soon I was wantin' it real bad. Weren't 'til I was walkin' 'cross the front porch that I saw they'd changed it an' made it inta two places. When I got inside I saw it was jus' one bedroom an' a kitchen an' a small livin' room which use ta be the dinin' room an' when that rental man tole' me, in that flowery way a' his, that this rented for "only" two hundred dollars a month I jus' turned 'round an' went right back out that door. The next place was jus' a little ways up the street an' it was a new place or, least new compared ta that other house. They was all apartments but not like them projects. The rental man said they hadda' place fer rent in the back part a' the buildin'. They sure did have an' as far as I know, they still has it. It was two little bedrooms 'bout the size a closets an' looked like somebody'd stole the tile right off the floor --just'a whole floor a' that black goopy glue a'sittin' there, an' every window in the place was broke. I didn't even ask how much that place was an' I didn't listen ta no more a' his talk neither. I jus' hurried right on out that door an' climbed back inta his car an' tole' him ta
head fer my place an' I shut him out all together. An' when I got home I jus' hurried right outta that car, didn't listen ta nothin' he had ta say. Hurried right up ta that ole' shack an' on inta it an' sat right down on that easy-chair, right inside the door an' sat there, jus' sat there lookin' roun' that ole' place. This ain't no worse'n them other places. Yes, I looked at that ole' place an' I said out loud, "this ole' place is a comfort," an' I think that ole' shack kinda straightened up jus' a little.

But anyway, them authorities didn't think this place was no comfort. They kept right on pushin' an' they said I was gonna have ta move ta that project an', they says, they weren't gonna offer that ta me ag'in. I was glad ta hear that so I said "no" an' that was the last time I figured I'd hear 'bout them projects but the next thing I knows they called the health authorities an' them peoples jus' give me seven days ta be outta that shack. Jus' one week ta finds a place. But I still weren't goin' ta no project so's I walked this whole neighborhood just'a lookin' fer anythin' what I could get inta in a hurry. Every day from the time them kids left fer school 'til they was due home, I was out lookin' an' finally I founds a place. It's a reg'lar house, got two bedrooms, jus' like I got really, but it's got some fresh paint so's the
authorities thought that was fine. Cost me 'nother fifty
a month but they didn't say nothin' 'bout who was gonna
take care a' that, but at least they'd leave me in some
kind'a peace.

Me an' them kids got busy packin' all our stuff an'
them kids found all kinds'a stuff hidden 'way in all them
cracks an' crannies that ole' shack had. Yes, them kids
had quite a time but then it was all done an' it was time
ta leave.

For the last time I puts my hand through that slit in
the door an' lifted the door shut behind me. As I started
ta walk away, I stopped, funny, thought I heard the sound
of a fiddle but that's silly, so I jus' hurried off ta
catch up ta them kids.
CHAPTER XVI

"Never Gonna Forget 'Em"

That Watt's Summer Festival, now that's really somethin' ta see. Surprisin' when ya' think that the spark what burned down this Street was the same one what started that festival.

After that blaze finally burned itself out, folks 'round here felt mighty bad 'bout them what got killed so's they decided ta hold a kind'a memorial ta 'em, jus' ta show 'em they wasn't never gonna forget 'em. So they all got tagether an' they decided ta hold a Street festival each summer at the same time as them troubles happened. It was only right too, ta hold it here on this Street an' they decided ta make Will Rogers Park the center a' the whole thing.

Well right away they started formin' committees ta get in touch with everybody in the area. They decided ta get as many a' them peoples ta be part a' it as they could an' it turned out that jus' everybody wanted ta do somethin' fer that festival.
Them merchants, they give as much money as they could
spare an' then they decided they was gonna set up booths
in the park too, an' sell things or show things or what-
ever.

Then them business offices, like the welfare an' the
Legal Aid Society an' the trainin' program offices, they
says they'd stay open in the evenin's an' on them weekends
of the festival so's the people could see what went on be-
hind them closed doors. An' they was gonna put up dis-
plays too so's the people would know all 'bout them good
things they had ta give away ta the people. They was
gonna have a big counter tellin' 'bout them food stamps,
like maybe they was places where ya' didn't have ta stand
in line fer three hours ta get 'em. Things like that.

An' the schools, well they all wanted ta be part of
it too. An' they was real happy when they was tole' that
one a' them high school gals was gon'na be picked ta be
the queen a' the parade. Never saw such goin' ons after
they heard that one. All'ava sudden them gals began
hittin' them schools dressed fit ta be tied. No more a'
them sloppy jeans, no way, now's they came with high-
heeled shoes an' them nylon stockin's an' them neat slacks
an' dresses an' not one hair outta place. An' they acted
like ladies too, or queens, I guess, 'cause they started
talkin' soft-like, none a' that high screamin'. O yeah, it put them gals right back on the track, an' real fast too.

An' then when everybody knew 'bout the festival, the peoples all got tagether ag'in an' they started plannin' fer that parade. It had ta be BIG, a long one with floats an' drums an' soul music--jazz. An' they figured out things fer the little kids ta do an' the big kids too, an' there was gonna be dancin' in the park, an' shootin' gal­

eries with prizes, an' art shows, an' horseshoe pitchin', an picnics, an' food an' somethin' fer jus' everybody-- so's everybody'd have a good time.

Then some others got tagether what could paint an' draw an' they started makin' pictures an' posters an' signs tellin' 'bout the festival an' then all of a sudden the Street started lookin' like one a' them reg'lar free­

ways, lined with all them billboards. Them signs an' posters an' pictures was everywhere, nailed up ta them poles, glued all over them buildin's an' all over them fences. Some of 'em was even coverin' up all that graffiti. An' every store window on that Street was filled with 'em signs--"Come ta the festival." "Join in the fun." "Big names a'comin ta town." "See 'em crown the queen." "Come listen ta pure Soul music." "Watch the
parade an' see them big, beautiful floats." "Booths in
the park servin' food an' drink." "Games an' fun fer
everyone."--an' on an' on them signs went. That whole
Street was all mixed up in that comin' event. Then when
the whole thing really gotta rollin' the people of the
Street decided it was jus' too good ta keep ta themselves,
so they decided they was gonna invite that whole city--
they was gonna let the whole city know they could do good
things too. So's that's jus' what they did, they invited
the whole city ta come an' have fun at their festival.

Well it was 'bout this time the poulice decided if
the Street was gonna invite the whole city ta come out
they'd better be sendin' some more poulice out there too,
jus' in case any troubles came up. Kind'a blew the whole
thing, all that happiness, all that plannin' so's every­
body could have a good time, stopped the whole thing fer a
minute. That's all too, jus' fer a minute, 'cause them
Sons, they came through ag'in an' they stood right up ta
the MAN an' they says "NO--NO MAN--we takes care of our
own, an' we can take care a' anythin' what happens at
that festival." Well, no tellin' what them cops was
thinkin' but they did pull back an' 'greed ta jus' watch
the action.

Well that whole festival was a big success that first
year. Lot'sa peoples did come an' all them peoples on
the Street was real happy 'cause they knew that bein' as
it was a success they could have it 'gain the next year,
an' the next year they was gonna make it even bigger.

So's the next year it was bigger 'cause more an' more
peoples wanted ta get inta it. Big peoples, like them big
corporation companies, an' them advertisin' firms, an'
even the fed'ral government--all got inta the act--all
kept puttin' more an' more money inta the festival--'til
finally, there was so much money 'round that the peoples
here on the Street forgot all 'bout what the festival was
really fer.
CHAPTER XVII

"I Calls Ole' Ellis P."

What happened? Where is I? Feel so strange, so weak, so sick. Feel's jus' like I's floatin'. Oh, no! Now everythin' goin' ta whirlin', my head, my stomach! Oh, God, the pain--my whole body's on fire--throbbin' an' throbbin'! Need somethin', somethin' ta stop this pain. Damn that Marvin! Oh, dear God! Dear God! Where's somebody, anybody? Has ta have somethin' ta stop this pain. Wait, now wait, it's easin' a bit now. Don't ya' move, Bertie, not even a little bit. There, there now. That's better, that's better. Damn you, Marvin!

Well, don't even need ta open my eyes ta know where I is. I knows that smell, that stinkin', clean smell. It's the same damn place I always ends up in--the damn emergency ward at that damn County Hospital. Iff'en I'd open my eyes I'd see that same damn dead-white ceilin' starin' right down on me. But I ain't gonna open my eyes, leastways not right now I ain't.

There they goes ag'in, them pains, they's all over me
ag'in. Oh, God! My arms, they's throbbin' most'a all. Can't stand that!—Oh, God, dear Jesus, how sick I feels! It's jus' like I been beat all over...that damn Marvin! Damn him!—Needs some help. Where's everybody? Wait now, they has a buzzer here somewheres. Suppose' ta be right up at the top a' the bed. Iff'en I could jus' turn my head an' see where it is fer sure, maybe I could reach it. But my arms is hurtin' so bad, hard ta move...What! I can't even lift 'em—feels like they's tied down. No, they's jus' numb from the pain, that's all. I jus' gotta keep tryin' ta move 'em, maybe if they gets ta movin' they'll quit hurtin'. Why won't they move? They DO feel like they's tied down. Gotta open my eyes an'-sit-up-a-bit-so's-I-can-see-'em. Oops, what the hell? They IS tied down!—got tubes comin' right outta 'em. Ain't never had that before. That's what's hurtin', them tubes. Stuck right inta my arms, RIGHT INTA MY ARMS! What'ta they up ta now? Well, makes no mind, has ta get movin' anyways—has-ta-get-that-buzzer—has-ta-get-somebody-in-here—has-ta-get-somethin'-fer-this-pain—'cause-I's-jus'-burnin'-up. My-mouth's-so-dry. Gotta-get-ta-that-buzzer. Ah, there it is—nothin'—ever-changes—'round-this-place. Now-if-I-can-only-reach-it-with-these-here-tubes-in-my-arms. Them-damn-tubes,—they-hurts-when-I's-still-an'—

They ain't comin', they never does answer that damn buzzer--never has an' never will. I REALLY must be sick tryin' ta get help in this place. County Hospital--two thousand miles from ye'r house an' helps still two thousand miles 'way when ya' gets here. Damn 'em, they ties ya'all up like this an' then they goes off an' leaves ya' ta die. Don't make them no difference. Wish I could recollect what happened ta me this time. Can't remember nothin'. That's the way it always is when I comes here. Everytime, I has ta try an' recollect what happened. If this pain'd slow down I could think a little easier. Oh, thank the good Jesus, that's better, seems like it jus' kinda comes an' goes. Wonder if it was that epilepsy or that Marvin. No way a'tellin' an' don't make no difference no how, one's as bad as the other.

That epilepsy, that's what they finally figured I got. After they poked 'round on me fer so long, they
finally come up with that. Can't rightly remember what happened this time but then never can when that hits me. Never can remember when Marvin hits me neither.

My God my mouth's dry! Has ta try that damn buzzer ag'in in a minute--soon's I get ta feelin' a bit stronger. Can't remember nothin' 'cept that doorbell ringin'. I remembers goin' ta answer it. Maybe it was that Marvin--drunk. But I don't remember seein' Marvin--can't remember if I ever got ta the door. Them stairs! That's right, I was upstairs in the bedroom an' the doorbell rang an' I started ta run down ta answer it...Oh, my head! Between the throbbin' in my head an' the throbbin' in my arms--can't think. Needs some water. I's gonna have ta try that damn buzzer ag'in--there,-has'ta-pull-myself-up-ag'in--has'ta-do-somethin',-can't-jus'-lie-here-dryin'-up-like-this--damn-'em!-damn-'em! Gonna-ring-that-damn-buzzer-'til-somebody-takes-a-mind-ta-answer-it. Gonna-raise- this-whole-place-'til-somebody-gets-me-somethin'-ta-drink. A-sip-a'-ice-water,-that's-alls-I-needs,-they-sure-charges-'nuff-fer-me-bein'-here-they-can-at-least-get-me-a sip-a'-water. There,-this-time-I's-gonna-lay-on-this-damn-buzzer-'til-somebody-does-come. Oh,-God,-my-arms-is-throbbin'-like-they's-gettin'-ready-ta-bust. Ya'd-think-iff'en-they-was-gonna-dig-holes-in-ya'-they'd-
give-ya'-somethin'-ta-kill-the-pain,-but-no,-they-jus'-
does-what-they-does-an'-then-they-goes-off-an'-leaves-ya'-
without-nothin'. Oh,-that-pain,-that-hurtin'-pain,-jus'-
runs-right-up-ta-the-top-a'-my-head-an'-then-jus'-throbs-
an'-beats. Damn-'em! Damn-'em!

"HEY,-YOU-OUT-THERE. NOW-CAN-YA'-HEAR-ME? IS-THIS-
LOUD-"NUFF? WHY-DON'JA-ANSWER-THE-DAMN BUZZER? IFF'EN-
YA'-CARED, YA'D-ANSWER. YA'D-COME-IN-TA-SEE-IF-WE-WAS-
LIVIN'-OR-DEAD."

Ain't-no-use-shoutin',-they-ain't-'bout-ta-come-in-
here. Probably-out-there-drinkin'-coffee-an'-smokin'-
them-cigarettes-an--laughin'-an'-talkin'-with-nary-a-
thought-"bout-us-sick-folk. Might-jus'-as-well-lie-back-
down-an'-calm-down. They-sure-ain't-gonna-pay-no-mind-
ta-nothin'-but-themselves,-that's-fer-sure. There...
that's better, jus' ya' calm down, Bertie, lie still fer
a minute now.

Speakin' a' buzzers, they says I should get a warnin',
a' buzzin' or somethin' in my head jus' 'fore I gets one
a' them A-attacks. Never had nothin' like that. Jus'
falls over wherever I's at--on the Street, in the house,
any place. No buzzin', no warnin', no nothin', I jus'
ends up here ag'in. Betcha I's been in every bed in this
here room; every single one a' them an' none sleeps worth
a damn neither. Lookit 'em, all lined up there an' jus' like always, they's all filled up, filled up with some misried body. Soon's they can, they'11 empty 'em all ag'in, they'11 kick all them bodies out or carry 'em out, whichever's quickest. Nobody here cares if ya' lives or dies, jus' keep fillin' an' emptyin' beds, that's all they cares 'bout--never even cares 'nuff ta come an' check on a body.

Them stairs--maybe I felled all the way ta the bottom. Maybe I jus' went head over heels all the way down. Jus' can't remember anythin', but my head's clearin' some now but Oh, God, how them arms is throbbin'!! Never did get no help in this place. Ain't no different now neither. Ya'd think they'd do somethin' fer ya' when ya' comes in here. All they ever does is 'xperiment--stick needles or somethin' else inta ya'. That's all they ever does, they never does nothin' what does ya' any good. I jus' gets outta here an' hasta turns righta 'round an' come back an' go through the whole thing ag'in.

Wish I was outta here so's I could do fer myself. Sure ain't gonna get nothin' done fer me here. Wait row! "Outta here," who said somethin' 'bout gettin' me outta here? Marvin! That's right, I can jus' hear him now, jus' hear him now, jus' hear him sayin' that. He must'a
been here. No way! When Marvin puts me here he sure don't come up here with me. But maybe he didn't do it this time. Wait! Maybe that was Marvin what rung the doorbell an' maybe it was Marvin what brung me ta the hospital, maybe I did have an A-attack an' fell down them stairs. Well, anyways, I sure does recollect him talkin' an' sayin' somethin' 'bout gettin' me outta this place. I must'a been yellin' 'bout what I thinks a' this I-N-S-T-I-T-U-T-I-O-N. Sure hopes I heard him right. Can't see stayin' here when they ain't doin' nothin' fer me. Can't jus' lie here neither--them pains is buildin' up ag'in--gotta get somethin' fer this pain.


Wonder if anybody's takin' care a' my boys. Not those neighbors a' mine, that's fer sure. They don't have nothin' ta do with nothin' belongin' ta me. They's scared
a' me an' my FITS, like they calls 'em. Like last time I was in this place, the welfare paid ole' Miz. Robbins ta take care a' the boys an' so when I got home I thought I'd jus' go thank her. Least ways she wasn't 'fraid a' my kids. Most folks act like this sickness a' mine rubs off onta them boys. Well, I jus' thought I'd go over an' thank her an' maybe she'd have me in fer a cup a' coffee. Her shades was up so I knew it wasn't too early an' then I saw her standin' lookin' out the window an' so I calls ta her. Hello there, Miz Robbins, I says, an' I started walkin' 'cross the Street. Jus' wanted ta go over an' thank her fer taking care a' the boys fer me. Well, she waved an' nodded her head then she reached up an' pulled them curtains closed. Fer a minute I thought she was comin' ta the door so's I stood there waitin' but she never did come out--she jus' left me standin' there like some jackass. So I jus' hadda turn 'round an' head home. On the way 'cross the street though I saw an ole' tin can lyin' there on the sidewalk, so I jus' kicked it--kicked it right up onta her ole' dead grass. They can all go ta hell fer all I cares. Who needs 'em anyhow? I'd jus'ta soon watch TV than be bothered with the likes a' them.

Don't get no more carin' fer here than I does at home neither. That pains let up but oh, God, my mouth's
dry an' now my whole body's burnin' up. Wonder if there's any use ta hit that damn buzzer ag'in? Pain's less when I ain't movin' but I needs a sip a' water or somethin' ta cool me off. Should hit that buzzer anyways, even iff'en they don't answer it--they ain't suppose ta be jus' sittin' 'round doin' nothin' when I needs carin' fer. Really ain't no use though. Ain't no different here than home. Nobody nowhere has a minute ta spend with ya'. Well, there's Marvin, but that ain't always so good. Then there's the social worker, but ya' has ta watch what ya' says in front a' her, besides, she gets paid fer listenin' ta me. Marvin's really the only one comes 'round jus' 'cause he wants ta, he's the onliest one what ain't scared a' me.

Shoulda phoned them two gals a' mine. They's probably worryin' 'bout me. They don't never drop 'round no more but that's jus' 'cause their husband's won't let 'em come. Guess it's 'cause a' my sickness. Sometimes they picks up the boys at school an' takes 'em home fer the week-ends. Louise's husband keeps sayin' they's goin' ta take the boys 'way from me 'cause I ain't fit ta have 'em. Don't know why he says things like that. I got both a' them gals raised up okay, without no help from their daddy neither. Same with them boys--I's doin' all right. They gets mad 'cause I keeps 'em home from the school sometimes
but I jus' likes ta have 'em 'round fer company--can't watch that TV all the time an' besides I wouldn't need ta do that iff'en them girls would come by sometimes. Jus' as well I didn't call 'em, they might'a got started on that ag'in. An' Marvin, they don't like me seein' Marvin neither but they's always too busy ta talk ta me. So what am I s'possed ta do?

Sometimes I calls the social worker but her supervisor, she don't like me callin' everyday. That supervisor, she's one mean mother. She knows what I think a' her too 'cause I tells her off when she gets smart with me, weren't fer me she wouldn't have no job. She knows I calls her boss if she gives me too much trouble. I calls ole' Ellis P. Murphy an' I tells him how things really is an' he listens too--then she don't give me no more trouble fer awhile at least. Yeah, ya' jus' gotta keep after 'em if ya' wants ta get anythin' done. Jus' like now, I's gonna sit up an' push that damn buzzer ag'in iff'en it kills me. Can't-get-nothin'-iff'en-ya'-don't-keep-pesterin'-'em. They's-always-pesterin'-me-fer-somethin'. Snoopin'-round, gettin'-me-ta-sign-this-an'-sign-that. Oh, God,-there-goes-them-pains-ag'in! Answer,-ya-damn-bastards! Ya'-don't-care-nothin'-'bout-nobody-but-y'er- selves. Answer-me,-answer-me,-damn-ya! Oh,-I-ain't-got-
no-more-left-in-me,-gotta-lie-back-down. There. Damn 'em!

What's that? Don't tell me somebody's finally comin'?

"Who's it? MARVIN! What YOU doin' here?"

"Hi, sugah, I come ta take ya' home. Ya' wouldn't stay 'til I promised ta come back an' get ya', so here I is, jus' like I said," Marvin whispered, "but quit y'er hollerin' they can hears ya' clear downstairs."

"Hear me?" Bertie screamed, "Ain't nobody gonna hear me. I been lyin' on this damn buzzer fer the last hour an' ain't nobody heard me yet. Wouldn't nobody hear me iff'en I was playin' the "Star Spangled Banner" on a set a' kettle drums. Oh, God, I hasta lie still fer a minute--my arms is throbbin' an' that damn buzzer's been 'most the death a' me."

"Yeah, Bertie, jus' like there quiet-like an' cool off fer a minute, ain't no use gettin' all upset like that," Marvin agreed.

"Okay, Marvin," Bertie said meekly, "But, Marvin, does ya' know what happened ta me?"

"Don't rightly know, Bertie. Rang y'er doorbell an' was waitin' fer ya' ta answer an' then I heard a big thud-like an' then a crash, then nothin'. So's I waited an'
ya' didn't come ta the door, so I rang ag'in an' nothin' ag'in. Then I figured somethin' might'a happened ta ya' so I jus' opened the door an' went on in. I guess ya'd had one a them A-ttacks all right 'cause there ya' was lyin' on the floor at the foot a' them stairs doin' what ya' always does when ya' has one a' them things. I fixed ya' so's ya' wouldn't hurt y'erself an' called an ambulance an' they brung ya' here. Jus' same as always," Marvin explained.

"Figured that's what happened," Bertie mused nodding, "but where'd these tubes come from?"

"Well, ya' wouldn't let go a' me so's they let me come inside with ya' an' when they started puttin' them tubes inta ya'--ya' wasn't gonna have no part a' that. Ya' jus' started yellin' an' carryin' on so's nothin' I could do but promise ya' I'd be back fer ya'. So here I is an' let's get movin'," Marvin urged.

"Okay, okay, Marvin," said Bertie reacting to the impatience in his voice. "But didja' bring me any clothes?"

"Sure did, honey, didn't I tell ya' I'd take care a' everythin'? Here," and as he spoke Marvin opened a brown paper bag and tossed several articles of clothing onto the bed.
"That's good, Marvin, honey, now jus' give me a minute ta pull myself up an' get-my-legs-over-the-side-a'-the-bed. There now, got more strength than I thought, she sighed.

"Ya' sure ya's all right, sugah, sure ya' should be goin' home?"Marvin asked.

"Sure?" Bertie yelped, "Ya' damn right I's sure--gets no carin' fer here. It's that pain in my arms what's makin' me feel so bad, gotta get them things out an' then I'll be jus' fine. Now you jus' look what they did ta them arms, Marvin, stuck them rubber tubes in 'em an' now they's all black an' blue. Look, Marvin, can ya' believe that?"

"Awright, honey, awright," Marvin whispered, "Don't worry 'bout 'em, get rid of 'em an' get y'er clothes on so's we can split this place."

"Okay, Marvin, but how's I gonna get these tubes outta my arms?"

"Well, baby, jus' pull off them tapes an' them tubes will fall out by theirselves," said Marvin, matter-of-factly.

"Ya' won't help me, Marvin?" she asked, looking helplessly at the tubes.

"I didn't say that, sugah. Sure I'll helps ya',"
and he leaned over the bed and briskly tore off one of the tapes holding the tube in her arm, bringing the tube with it.

"Whatja' do that fer, ya' bastard?" Bertie screamed.

"Ain't no cause fer ya' ta do that. Weren't bad 'nuff what they done ta me now you has ta hurt me even worse. Damn you, Marvin!"

"Hush, you' se gonna wake up the whole place, an' anyhow, sugah, ya' asked fer it," said Marvin, grinning, "Now let's get that other one."

"Don't ya' touch me," she screamed, "I'll do it myself."

"Okay, okay," he said, "but shut-up an' let's get goin' or I's goin' alone."

"I can do it, jus' needs a minute," she gasped.

"Best way is ta jus' pull it fast, sugah. Ain't no use a' sittin' there lookin' at it, jus' go on an' pull it," Marvin said, grinning as he watched her.

"Jus' one quick pull, huh? Oh, God, well there it is an'...Oh, God! Oh, God! Wait jus'ta minute, Marvin, haste- get my bearin's...There, there now, I's fine."

"Ya' don't look fine ta me, Bertie, ya' looks like y'er gonna pass out," said Marvin, peering into her face.

"I's awright, I said, jus' don't wantta step down
onta that damn cold floor, that's all," she answered.

"Well, let me slip y'er shoes on then I'll ease ya' down really easy-like. Hold still now, we's gotta get goin', Bertie," Marvin warned. "There, there now Bertie, y'er shoes is on now hold onta me an' I'll help ya' down ta the floor. That's right, put y'er hands on my shoulders, there now."

"Good, Marvin. Hold still--don't move. There-now-I-can-ease-my-way-off-this-damn-high-bed. Easy,--Marvin,--hold-it. We-ain't-in-that-big-a'-hurry-now-jus'-hold-on," Bertie begged.

"Listen, Bertie," and now Marvin's voice had lost all patience, "Either ya' moves," he threatened, "or I's leavin'. I ain't gonna get inta no trouble doin' this, ya' understand?"

"Okay, Marvin, okay," she mumbled, "Help me outta this nightgown an' hand me my clothes."

"That's better, Baby," Marvin said, reaching for the rest of her things. While y'er dressin' I'll go check the hall an' see if everythin's all clear."

Marvin turned and headed towards the door.

"Wait, Marvin," Bertie begged, "Jus' get me a quick sip a' water while ya's out there--I's so dry."

"No way, Baby, ya' can get that when we gets home.
We has ta split this place an' right now," and now anger had replaced the impatience in Marvin's voice.

"Okay, okay, Marvin, jus' go check the hall an' let's go," she agreed.

Marvin was gone for only a second and then he was bouncing back into the ward.

"Come on, Bertie, it's all clear. Hurry up," he whispered.

Bertie had been leaning against the bed and, seeing Marvin, she tried to straighten up. Marvin grabbed for her just as she started to fall and then, glaring at her he said, "Ya' ain't well 'nuff ta be goin' home. After all this trouble I's gone ta, ya' can't even walk."

With the threat in Marvin's voice, Bertie's mind cleared instantly.

"I am too awright, jus' must'a sprained my ankle when I fell down them stairs. Ya's jus' gonna have ta carry me out ta the car, that's all," and as she talked Bertie reached her arms out towards Marvin.

"Carry ya','" Marvin spluttered, "Ya' ain't no cripple." But by this time Bertie was leaning against him, so grudgingly, he reached and picked her up. He pushed the ward door open with his foot, stumbled across the narrow hall to the door marked "exit", pushed it open
and began to stagger down the stairs to the outside exit. Another door and they were into the parking lot. Marvin had parked the car right beside the exit for just such an emergency and now he propped Bertie up against the car door until he got it opened and then eased her into the front seat. She hadn't said a word since he'd picked her up and he looked at her sitting there so quietly.

"Y'er sure y'er okay, Bertie? Ya' don't look right ta me," he said.

"Hurry up an' get this car goin' Marvin. It was you what was in such an all fired hurry. Now let's get gone," Bertie groaned.

Marvin slammed her door and ran around to the driver's side and hopped in.

"We is off, sugah, we is on our way," he yelled laughingly. Then he looked at Bertie's drawn-up form and his voice softened as he said, "now ya' jus' lay y'er head back 'gainst the seat an' relax. Ain't nobody gonna bother ya' now."

Bertie sat sideways with her cheek pressed against the back of the seat and stared at Marvin's profile as he quietly backed the car out the parking lot.

He's sure a nice fella when he ain't drinkin'—kind'a like that Dr. Jykell an' Mr. Hyde though. But folks
jus' don't understand 'bout Marvin. When he ain't drinkin' he's real good company. He's good-lookin' an' smart too. An' he always has money—must have a good job somewheres but he don't never talk 'bout that. An' he knows everythin' what's goin' on 'round the Street too. Nothin' ever happens up there without him knowin' all 'bout it. It's the only way I ever hears anythin'. He don't take me no place but that's awright, "cause like he says, "Ya' could fall on y'er face any ole' place, Bertie, an' then what would I do?" He's right, too—but at least he ain't 'fraid a' me like all them others is. Jus' like that one ole' mother, she says I's marked by the voodoo, whatever that is—but Marvin, he don't think like that. When he's drinkin' though, that's bad—he's one mean man then. Like that last time he come knockin' on the door. I knew when I saw them glassy, pinpointed eyes a' his, I knew there was gonna be trouble—trouble fer me that is. Weren't no reason fer him ta give me trouble—he jus' wanted what money I had—wanted it fer more likker an' I'd a' given it ta him without the beatin'. Didn't have no reason a-tall ta beat on me...never does. Jus' the likker in him what does it. He come right at me with them glassy eyes a' his an' I dodged an' ran passed him, out the door an' inta the street. I ran as fast as I could, yellin' fer
help, yellin' fer the neighbors ta help me--fer somebody ta
open a door an' let me in. Even pounded on some a' them
doors but not one of 'em would give me any help. I even
heard some a' them lock them doors an' me standin' right
on the other side jus'ta poundin' away, beggin' fer help.
Screamin' fer help I was with that ole' Marvin jus'ta
standin' there beatin' and a poundin' 'way on me. Yeah,
but they was all there awright, peekin' through their
windows, watchin' the whole thing, like it was some kind'a
free boxin' match or somethin'. I saw 'em all but that's
was the last I saw 'cause by that time Marvin had me down
on the sidewalk, justa stompin' me ta death--an' that's
the very last thing I remember. It's always the same when
he's drinkin' an' then I wakes up here jus' like when I
has one a' them A-ttacks. But Marvin, he ain't always
like that an' that's what them folks don't understand.
Like that social worker, she says I ought'ta bring charges
'gainst Marvin but I ain't never gonna do nothin' like
that. Like I says ta her, I say, "Why should I do some-
thin' like that? He ain't no worse than the rest a' 'em
an' at least he comes ta see me."
CHAPTER XVIII

"Leanin' 'Gainst Them Buildin's Here"

Well, after all them big changes came ta this Street, right after that bad time, them government peoples kinda slowed down a bit. Oh, there was still some changes but seems like all that hurry was gone. Fer instance, they decided ta build a new hospital here, right out here not too far from the Street, an' they decided to call it after Martin Luther King. Well, seems like they couldn't get together on where they was gonna build it. One day it was gonna be one place an' the next day it was goin' some place else. They didn't seem ta be in no rush 'bout it, nobody seemed ta worry 'bout "when" it was gonna get built, jus' seemed ta care 'bout "where". Well, anyway, they finally got together on it an' they got it built all right.

They finally got that welfare office built too--right 'round the corner--right there on Central Avenue. They jus' kept figurin' an' figurin' on them plans a' there's 'til they got that buildin' small 'nuff ta fit in with them other buildin's 'round it. There was no big hurry.
Jus' took their time an' built that solid, red-brick buildin' an' then, when they got 'round ta it, they moved that other mobile place right on outta here--barred windows an' all.

An' then 'long with that hospital an' that welfare office they starts buildin' some new houses--sixty-four of 'em--right on this Street--down by Grand Avenue. Called 'em Rodia Homes after that fellow what built them towers. These was started right after that trouble here. These was reg'lar houses, they wasn't gonna be in no public housin' projects neither. These was separate homes an' most a' them's big too--like four bedrooms. Gonna start livin' right--gonna give kids room ta grow, give 'em their own yards ta play in 'stead a' havin' ta run an' play down them long, dark, grease-smellin' corridors what joined them projects together. Now them kids wasn't gonna have ta see all them ugly writin's what some peoples put on them stairway walls an' they wasn't gonna have ta dodge them "no-goods" what was always leanin' 'gainst them buildin's, them what got their kicks outta teasin' them kids--throwin' words an' thoughts at 'em--words an' thoughts what them kids was too young ta handle--tauntin' 'em inta doin' things what they didn't understand--teach-in' 'em to savvy the ways a' the Street 'fore they was
hardly big 'nuff ta walk on it. No, there weren't gonna be no more kid gang-meetin's in stair-well corners, no cramped up livin', no pushin', no pullin'--no more metal garbage cans in kitchens--with their weekly garbage stinkin'--'fraid ta put them out 'til trash night--knowin' fer sure they'd all be stolen--ain't got money ta do the payin' an' stolen trash cans must be paid fer, like broken windows an' broken light bulbs--Public housin'--rents keep risin'--almost all is on the welfare--get them "cost-alivin" raises--rents go higher--'cordin' ta your income--ain't no winnin', jus' defeatin' 'til them houses gets completed. But, it was jus' like all them other things they done 'round here--turned out they didn't see no real need ta hurry. Took 'em almost ten years ta get them first houses done--ta get them first families in there an' by that time, them kids what was lookin' ta live in 'em--well, they's 'bout all growed up now.

It took 'em awhile too, 'bout ten years ag'in, but they finally put some a' them mini-buses out here so's we could go shoppin' on the outside--so's we could get groceries an' things cheaper than we has ta pay here. Course, by the time we got them buses, prices was high all over an', like they says, 'bout one-third a' all that pet food sold out here, we eats ourselves an' the price a'
that stuff's 'bout the same all over.

Well them peoples may have been kinda putterin' 'long but this Street sure wasn't. Been pickin' up speed fer quite sometime 'til now it's a crowded, buzzin', movin' mass. But it ain't buzzin' an' movin' like it used ta, with women and kids an' drunks an' all. No, it ain't that kinda movin', an' it ain't the kind like them older folks does, movin' leisure-like, visitin' an' talkin' friendly. An' it ain't on account a' them store owners neither 'cause they ain't got 'nuff business ta do any bustlin' an' crowdin'. No, this Street's got a new beat now. It ain't that soft, easy swingin' bit--ain't that friendly, laughin' bit no more--no, there's a new beat now, it's a beat ya' can find most any place right now but here, on this Street, it's like five times stronger. Here ya' can feel it, hear it an' then ya' sees it--all them young fellas, all standin' round, leanin' 'gainst them buildin's--all kinds of 'em doin' nothin', jus' standin' there. They ain't the "Dannys", the hustlers, they's them strong-bodied young fellas in stretched blue jeans an' huggin' T shirts--them what used ta catch them early mornin' buses. Well, they ain't catchin' them buses no more 'cause they's been laid off and so far, even their young, muscled bodies ain't found no work. So they's here, all right
back here on the Street.

When them first few started driftin' back when they lost their jobs, they checked fer work everyday--went every place--kept hearin' the "nos" from foremen--kept right on checkin' anyways--same ole' answer. Well, then they was out every other day, then every third day--then once a week--then...noticed others--new faces--every day--new faces on top a' strong, young bodies--all comin' an' stayin'--all hittin' the corners or leanin' 'gainst them buildin's all 'long the Street. Every day more an' more a' them kept coming--'til nearly half a' all what lived here was on the Street the whole day long. Finally, some took ta hustlin', joined the "Dannys", but the others, well, they gots their unemployment 'til that runned out an' then, when they still got "nos" from foremen, they joined the "loners"--wives is workin', not 'nuff money--feelin's risin'--starts despisin'--won't take welfare--hears the naggin'--goes ta broodin'--takes ta drinkin'--no solution--hits on leavin'--joins the "loners" an' so now, they's all right on this Street. An' the Street's a crowded, buzzin', moving mass of 'em--a crowded, buzzin', movin' mass a' angry, edgy, restless loners. An' all they has ta do all day is lean, lean 'gainst them burn-scarred buildin's of the Street. They jus' leans there, watchin'
them peoples what putters 'round here, watches 'em take all the time in the world to do what work they does here while the loners jus' watch, leanin' 'gainst them build-in's here, right here on this Street.