

BILL AND CARL

"I wonder where she lives. Isn't she pretty, Bill?"

"Oh shut your trap. You'll screw the whole thing up, worrying about a skirt. Keep your mind on this, will you please!"

"No harm in thinking, Bill. Just thinking. If things were different. That's all."

"Well they ain't. Now snap out of it!"

Carl grunted. The crease in his brow returned. The sparkle in his eye faded. He was back. "Right." He lit a cigarette and rolled down the window.

"Get going, Bill. This place gives me the creeps and all those people are swimmin' over there."

Bill got out of the car. Carl looked surprised. Bill went around to Carl's side and opened the door.

"You drive. I need to think."

Carl moved over to the driver's side and started the engine. Bill got in, shut the door. Carl turned left at the next street; by the town square, turned onto Broad Street and drove out of town.

More houses, fewer and further apart and then trees. Just trees. A few miles of silence.

"We're not hitting the bakery tonight, Carl. We're hitting the store. There's more money there."

Carl's eyes widened and he had started to talk, but then Bill swung his arm to dismiss any argument and shook his head.

"I also think that the whole damn town will come after us if they think we left. They'll follow us and they won't stop until they find us. I think we have to stay one more night here to make it look like it wasn't us did the robbery. Otherwise, it's a public announcement that it was us."

"That's just plain dumb, Bill. We already checked out. No go. If we do it late, we'll have six or so hours of time to leave before anyone even knows what happened. We could hop over to Jersey at any point up here."

"I don't want anyone on our asses. I'd rather stay and say 'Isn't that a shame, such a nice place' to all the yahoos who will be looking for the thieves."

"So then we go back now?"

"Yup, we go back. Pull over. We have to get this right."

Carl turned right at the next dirt road and drove past fields of corn to a dead-end. He supposed that this was a continuation of River Road. He turned right. They came to a quiet spot and pulled off the road to the left, by the river. They both got out and Carl took two rolls out of the bag from the bakery and leaned on the side of the car.

"Now look, let's get our stories straight. We sell kids shoes. We were in Philadelphia for a sales meeting. Our load got stolen right out of the car. Some guy with forty kids must have needed those shoes real bad. We're heading back to the home office in Boston to file the claims and get more samples. We bought the car in Morrisville after our car gave it up. You got all this, Carl, or are you still moonin' over that creature?"

Carl sneered, his mouth full of roll and soda. "I got it, Bill."

"We'll go back to the hotel, tell them it's too damned hot to drive and stay one more night. Then we'll do the store later. We go back to the hotel now. Afterward, instead of hopping in the car and skidaddeling like we normally would, go to sleep just like everything's nice. In the morning, we do just what we did today. We check out, have breakfast in the coffee shop and then leave. It's simple. The town law might even question us, being new in town. We'll just tell our story and that will be that. We'll be on our way and Maple Grove will be a memory."

"All right. But promise me you won't kill the baker this time, Bill. No blood."

"I have no interest in killing anyone. Gunther was an accident, Carl. We just need some money to get to Canada, that's all."

"All right, then. Let's go back."

The heat of the day started to show on them. Their shirts were stuck to them and sweat shined their faces. They went back into the hotel and saw the old man again.

"Hi. We liked your town so much that we thought we would do some relaxing while we could. Too hot to drive."

"Well," Herbert Potter smiled brightly, thinking of another night's pay coming into his pockets, "A good decision. Would you like the same room or would you like two rooms tonight?" Wouldn't that be grand, two nights' pay.

"No, one room's fine. We're on a budget. Same room'll be fine."

They signed the register and Bill had to check the name that he signed yesterday, for he had forgotten it. He hoped his ink spill didn't blotch it up too badly. George. George Newman.

"We'll find our way back upstairs. Say, where could we get some fishing gear around here? Anything worth sitting out in that heat for in the river?"

"Sure is! Shad, mostly. Stick to the narrow sections, not like up at the bridge. Too wide there. Down here, right by the tack shop around the corner, you'll find everything you need. But them Shad'll give you a run for the money. They don't come up easy. And if you do get some, the cook over to the kitchen here will cook it up for ya's."

They went to their room again, number 203.

They closed the curtains to shut out the sun. The room was stuffy and they switched on a ceiling fan. They removed their shirts, shoes and socks, and lay on the beds.

They both dozed for a while. Carl nudged Bill.

"Bill, I just thought of somethin'."

Bill came to. "What?"

"We didn't know that Gunther lived upstairs. What if Natalie and the old lady live upstairs? I want to go watch them leave and see where they go when they close the store."

"You can't, Carl. You can't do it and not be seen here. We stick out like a couple a sore thumbs. No, we'll just have to be careful is all."

Carl lay back down. They dozed again. When they got up the heat was unbearable. Even with the windows wide open, there wasn't air to stir.

They decided to go to the river, the only water nearby, but once they got there, it was just too hot to fish. They passed the tack shop without going in. They walked to the picnic area and to the water. They splashed water on their faces.

They walked to the car, bundled their arms with the coffee pot, coffee, sugar, soda, rolls, and cakes. They left the corn. They went back to the room, ate and dozed, They spent the rest of that overheated afternoon in the hotel.

When the two men had left Taylor Mercantile, the baker, Avery Smith, and Herbert Potter's wife Mabel, came in. They passed around opinions about what the strangers did for a living, if anything. Blanche held her tongue. They went round and round, took turns speculating and spent their afternoon with no new information.

Natalie went next door to the soda shop and got drinks for them. The owner, a thin man in a white apron, joined them for a while. Their afternoon passed nicely, having new topics to inspire idle gossip.

Bill and Carl woke, washed, and went out of their rooms. They looked for the back stairs. They found them, went through the door, down two flights of stairs, and found a laundry room at the bottom, through a door. Another door to the right led out to an alley. To the right was Broad Street. To the left was the river, a block away.

They went back in, careful not to be seen. They went back up the stairs, past their room and went down the front steps to the lobby. The counter was to the left, the newsstand to the right, the coffee shop just past it. The hallway was to the right that led to the bar. They went to

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the coffee shop and ate dinner. Then they went into the bar and had cold beers.

The bar was mostly quiet. The bar was just filling up when they left.

"Good night," Bill said to Herbert Potter at the desk as they passed by, toward the staircase.

"You sure are turning in early. It's only eight o'clock. Got a long day, tomorrow?"

"Yeah, we're just beat, I guess. This heat'll do it to anyone. Too lazy to do anything in this weather."

"You're right about that one. Good night young fellas."

They walked to their room, went in.

"Ain't that a hoot, Billy Boy! That geezer sounds like such a hick, like he was from the mountains or something."

Natalie and Blanche had enjoyed the company of the others in the store that day and their spirits were high. At six on the nose, they closed up the store, closed the lights and locked the front door. Natalie turned the sign around in the door that read *CLOSED*, same as every night. They walked through the curtain, through the back room and out the back door to the alley. They locked the door and walked to Maple Ave. Turned left and walked to River Road.

They turned right and walked past the three houses before theirs, same as a thousand times before; they went home.

The house that Blanche and Natalie shared was inherited from Charles' family. It had been his childhood home. It was large, three floors, and had a back stairway to the kitchen. Natalie often would play tricks on her mother when she was a child. She would sneak down the back steps and surprise her mother with a `BOO! and a loud laugh. Her mother always acted scared and surprised.

After dinner, Natalie meant to sit on the porch and read the rest of the article in the magazine about the new movie with Clark Gable and an actress named Vivian Leigh. She was so jealous of Vivian Leigh! She had been distracted that day, had forgotten all about it; she had left it in the store, on the counter by the register. She sat on the wicker rocker on the porch and watched the late afternoon turn humid and misty again. She saw Anna.

"Anna! Come sit a while!"

Anna was Natalie's best friend and always had been. She lived two houses down. She waved and skipped up the long walk from the street to the porch, singing "Not that dress again, not that dress again!" She bounded up three steps and plopped down into a wicker rocker next to Natalie.

"I swear, Anna, I never should have called you up here. You wouldn't have seen this dress if I had kept my mouth shut."

"Natalie did you see them?"

"Who?"

"Those two men from Trenton."

"Oh yes, I forgot to tell you. They were in the store today. But I think they left already."

"No they didn't. Mama said that Missus Potter said that they changed their minds and are staying longer. I didn't see them but someone said that one of them is six foot tall and has blond hair and is gorgeous!"

They laughed and talked until eight, when the mist got too heavy and the fog started coming off the river like a blanket. Anna ran home and said she'd see Natalie tomorrow but only if she promised not to wear the same darn dress again.

Natalie went in to her mother who was cutting a pattern for a dress. Blanche's head was down and she had scissors in her hand, pins in her mouth.

"Mama, I left that magazine in the store. I'm going back to get it. Do you need anything?"

Blanche spat the pins from her mouth.

"Don't you dare, Natalie Michelle. You're staying right here. I need to measure you for this dress if you

want it done by Sunday next. Now go make some iced tea for us, darlin', and you can get that magazine tomorrow."

"Oh mama, I really wanted it. I was reading about that new Civil War movie and that baby that was kidnapped and killed. It really had me all shook up, really. They executed that man but maybe he wasn't the one did it. Can you imagine?"

Blanche pointed to the kitchen. Natalie sighed.

"You want iced tea or lemonade, mama?"

The night passed slowly and Natalie thought about that magazine more times than she could count. It was like candy and she hated not having it.

By eleven, when the humidity was about to drive her crazy, she made up her mind to get the magazine. She would go nutty if she didn't. She couldn't sleep anyway. It wouldn't take long, six minutes at the most. Mama wouldn't even miss her, had fallen asleep by ten o'clock. Natalie knew that she should not and she might really get in trouble for it if mama found out, but she knew the way to and from the store as she knew her own face. Beside, she thought, mama wouldn't find out. She pulled off her nightshirt, yanked on the old pink dress that Anna hated, tied her hair back with a ribbon and left her room.

She crept down the stairs, got the keys to the store, and left the house.

Bill and Carl had seen a few other people at the hotel besides the people in the bar. There was the old couple who ran the place and the people in the coffee shop. The other guests in the hotel came and went but that was good because it masked their own movements. They'd seen a fat old cleaning maid once or twice in the hallways who dusted the rooms. Bill thought that she did her work during the nights because that was when he would see her doing the rooms, at night. He thought it odd. They had passed her on the way up to their room at eight o'clock, but her cart was at the far left end of the hallway. They had the second to last room on the right.

At ten-thirty, they dressed and went out of their room. Closed the light. Left a DO NOT DISTURB sign on the doorknob. Wedged a rock in the side alley door.

Left the hotel. Turned left at the alley. Walked to the end of the buildings, walked in darkness, in fog. They went silently in the mist. Their shirts soaked through in no time at all. At the store, at the back alley door, the lock was in place.

Bill took off his jacket and wrapped it around his hand. He broke the window, unlocked the door from inside. Opened the door. Carl caught his arm. Bill stopped. He shook out his jacket and put it back on.

"I'll wait here. Be quick," Carl whispered.

Bill nodded. He went in, held his arms out in front of him until his eyes adjusted. It was hot and stuffy. The familiar smell of coffee and polish came back to him. He walked through the room, past the curtain, and into the store. He was at the register and had it open quick as that. He removed all of the cash and stuffed his pockets. Closed the drawer; movement caught his attention. Natalie was going to unlock the door of the store!

Bill barely had time to get behind the curtain.

Natalie walked in, stopped dead in her tracks.

The curtain moved. In darkness she glided past the counter, cursed her idea to get the magazine. She moved behind the counter, grabbed the magazine. Noise in the back room. She walked to the curtain, to the storage room, eyes open wide, alert, heart pumping.

Bill stood on the other side of the curtain.

Natalie walked through the curtain and was face to face, nose to nose with Bill.

He spun her around and put a hand over her mouth.

"I don't want to hurt you. Don't scream."

She whimpered.

Bill took his hand and ran it along the table, felt a length of fabric there, put it over Natalie's eyes while he held her mouth shut. With his teeth, he held on to one end of the fabric, with his free hand tied it tight.

Carl heard the scuffle and came in. Bill motioned for silence and Carl saw him tie the scarf around Natalie's eyes.

He motioned questioningly to Bill...money? Bill nodded and they turned to leave. Carl took Natalie's arm to lead her out. Bill stopped him.

Carl looked at Bill and bared his teeth, eyes wide and expression that left no tolerance for doubt. Carl would have his way or kill him.

Bill thought to leave her there; they would be gone in ten seconds flat. After all, he thought, she hadn't seen them, didn't know that it was they.

Natalie knew nothing of this silent conversation, but knew that there was more than one person. Her mind flew home to her mama and she saw the error of her way. She should have tried to sleep once more.

She was dragged out back and then to the right. She heard no words being spoken. She heard the door slam shut. Oh, god, what was this? Where was she being taken? Walking, both arms being held. Tripping. More walking. Turning left and more walking. She could feel rain. Not mist any more. Rain. She smelled the river and the rain. Walking.

Turning left. *This must be River Road.* She's three houses away from her home. Tripping. Her mama. *Three houses away. Walking. Grass. Bumping noises. Boats. The dock. Rain. Water slapping against pilings.* A hand over her mouth. *Hurrying. Walking. Turning left. Walking on wood. The pier. The river. Water, rain. The turning of a handle?*

Mama! She tried to scream. She could not. A hand over her mouth, so strong, insistent, Shut up; don't say a word, his strong hand felt like. Smells, familiar smells. *Rain, sweat. A man? Two. Walking on wood. Turning of...a doorknob. Inside. No more rain.* Pushed onto the floor. Her dress lifting up. Hands sliding on her legs. She tried to wiggle away. A fist. Pain, a white-hot pain on her face. Hands soothing her wet hair and now on her face. Ripping. Underpants being torn off.

Natalie was raped and sodomized. The pain was unbearable. She felt the trickle of blood. She screamed. Punched. Her nose was broken; tasted blood. Paralyzed, could not move away. Too scared to move, too scared to stay. Her back was grazed by splinters in more spots than she could think of. She didn't know how many men. She smelled two, but thought that there could have been more. She endured it, trying to free herself. She could not see her attackers but heard panting, breathing. She sensed

another holding her legs apart. She squirmed, dug her nails into the floor, and ripped her nails off. Searing hot pain.

So this is what it was like. She had been curious. She hadn't wanted to find out like this. Would they kill her? She hoped so. Who were they? They didn't speak. No voices. She didn't recognize the scent of them.

Mama. Oh, Mama, I'm so sorry. Again, oh God in heaven, don't let them kill me, please don't let them kill me. He's in me again. Another one. Two men? Again. Smells like the first one. They're taking turns. Good Lord, Mama! They're taking turns. Again. Hurts.

Licks and wetness everywhere. Her dress torn off. Their tongue on her body. Someone holding her arms up, hard. Turning her over.

Please, no more.

Turned over again. Someone else. The second one. Again.

Please, no more, no more, can't! She clamped her mouth down on flesh and heard a scream. Pain as a punch hit her cheek. Her last thought was of the new movie with Clark Gable and the new dress Mama would make for her.

Carl and Bill were on the other side of the shed when she came to. They were talking softly and it was apparent that they were about to leave.

She looked around. It took a moment for her to realize where she was and what had happened. Shovels, ropes, the

tack shop shed. She was naked and her arms, legs, back and face were bruised. She raised herself up silently, in a dream state of unreality. She felt on the floor next to her, a shovel. She picked it up, stood without taking her eyes off the two men and with disregard for her nakedness, swung with all that she had in her and rammed it into the back of Carl's head. He fell over.

She turned to escape, reached for the door, tripped and fell. In a flurry of activity Bill turned, aimed, and fired the gun.

Outside, lightning and thunder split the shed into daylight.

Natalie fell against the door, dead. The single bullet devoured half her head. Bill was shocked that he'd hit her at all, let alone dead on the back of her head.

Carl got up, rubbed his head. There was blood all over his hands.

"Christ, Bill, what happened?"

"Just shut up and let's get outa here."

Thunder. Loud thunder. The windows shook.

Bill helped Carl up and they left the shed, stumbled. They looked for people, hoped no one heard the gunshot. They could have mistaken the sound of a gun for thunder.

They went from tree to tree, found their way silently along the alleys back to the side door of the hotel. The

stone that Bill wedged in the jamb was still there. Up the stairs to their room.

Carl peeked into the hallway, remembered the old cleaning lady. A door was open in the middle of the hallway. Their room was close by. They slipped in to the hall, unlocked the door, closed it silently and stripped their clothes down to their trunks.

"Jesus Christ, Bill, I told you not to shoot the baker!"

"Well, who in the hell gave you permission to change the rules of the game the way you did? What did you expect? She scared me."

Silence. They both thought, remembered, looked at each other and then again thought, remembered and looked more.

"Get yourself cleaned up, Carl. We have to think what to do now. I'm gonna count the money. Shit, I hope she was worth it."

"Was she ever, sweet thing. Shame she's gone. I would have had more in another ten minutes. She was the sweetest damn candy I ever had. Tasted like sugar. To you, too, don't forget. I shared my candy with you, Bill."

"Now she's dead candy, Carl. How's your head?"

"A bump, that's all. The blood dried up already. How much did you get?"

"Ho, ho, ho, it's Christmas in July, Carl. Ninety smackers, big boy! Got any cards with you?"

"I wish. I'm tired, Bill. I'm goin' to bed."

"Oh no you're not, Carl. Help me clean up these clothes. In the bath. Tomorrow we should look as though nothin' happened. Crisp and clean. Things are different now, Carl. Now it's murder and robbery. When we go downstairs in the morning you just keep your mouth shut and act like you have a real bad headache."

He talked as they cleaned their clothes in the tub. The storm worsened, lightening and thunder rolled across the sky like tumbling angels crying in the night.

Thunder woke Blanche. The curtains blew inward, not from the wind. There was no wind. The curtains blew inward from rain. She rolled over, smelled the river and the rain and thought about how pretty Natalie would look in her new dress on Sunday. A stab of pain caught her square in the chest. She looked at the clock. It was 11:17. She thought that the pain was heartburn, rolled over and slept fitfully for the rest of the night. She dreamed of the river, of rain, of Natalie and of ropes and shovels hanging from a ceiling and from hooks on a wall, swaying from wind and storms.

Bill and Carl hung their clean clothes over the tub and slept naked and clean. Carl dreamed of Natalie, all pink and softness. Her scent was still with him and he wished that Bill hadn't shot her. This was beginning to be a habit with him. His mind wandered back to her again. His hands on her thighs, the softness in the middle. Her smooth skin and the way she felt when he was inside. How she had wiggled! Had she enjoyed it, too? He thought so, thought her wiggling meant that she liked it, liked him. He would have had her ten more times that night until he couldn't any longer, but he felt as if ten more times wouldn't have been enough of Natalie. A hundred wouldn't have been enough. He could have lived there, inside Natalie, inside that shed forever. He didn't even care that he had shared her. He just wanted her again and again. Sweet thing.

Bill awoke first, as light crept up the curtain of night. He checked the clothes in the bathroom. They were dry, had some semblance of cleanliness. Carl woke at 9:30 hungry and grumpy. They dressed in silence. Bill reminded Carl that he should feel joyous that he had had Natalie at all and to please get the grouchy face off his head or he would shoot it off.

"Bill, I think we should leave. Now. Out the side door before anyone knows we've gone. Now, Bill. Let's go, huh? What d'ya think?"

Bill turned squarely around to Carl and grabbed the front of his shirt, brought him up close to his own face. His expression a true reflection of him, no humor or good intent there.

"We stay. You got that?"

He tossed Carl across the bed and finished dressing. When they finished making themselves as presentable as possible, they gathered their few possessions, cleaned any traces of last night from the washstand and tub, and prepared to join the rest of the world.

Carl looked out the window overlooking the square to the right. The day was hazy, hot and humid. The sky was a grey and undistinguishable color of luminescence, the air thick. There were a lot of people milling around the town hall across the other side of the square. They had found her. He just knew it. He looked at the clock. They knew she was dead already.

"Now look, Carl, this is it. Do you remember how we ducked the chicken deal with the principal?"

"Sure do, Billy Boy, sure do! That was a close one!"

"We have to do it again. You ready?"

They both took a deep breath, stood tall and went down the front stairs to the lobby.

The old couple was at the desk. Several people in the lobby huddled in small groups, spoke in whispered tones. Other guests were sitting in the lobby areas. Bill and Carl went directly to the coffee shop, chose the same table and ordered breakfast. The same waitress served them, but her jubilant manner had changed. Her face was ashen and drawn. She was abrupt and suspicious, but still courteous. There were no words between them today. No bantering, no flirting.

Bill and Carl looked at each other.

"What do you feel like?" Bill asked.

"Flap jacks."

"Good choice."

They ate with no more conversation, paid and left the waitress the same tip as yesterday.

Bill bought a paper, threw the dime on the pile and watched it as it again flew to the floor, chuckled and went to check out. The old man cleared his throat and excused himself uncomfortably.

"Sorry, son, but I can't help you with that."

Bill looked bewildered and Potter continued.

"Something's happened and the sheriff asked me not to check anyone out as yet." He nodded and indicated the sheriff who was out on the street speaking with two men who appeared to be official, although they were in suits, not uniforms.

"I see. Must be bad news by the look of everyone. My problem is that I don't have the money for another night. Will I get charged for not checking out?"

Potter looked at him incredulously. "No, of course not," he muttered.

"Well, can I pay you for the night now so that we can be on our way?"

"Sorry, son, like I said, I can't do that. Maybe you'd better speak to the Sheriff. The others have to wait, also." He nodded to the couple sitting in the chairs across the lobby and to the other guests as they milled around. He realized that they didn't look happy about it but there they were.

"I see. Well then, I guess we just have to busy ourselves for right now. The sheriff looks too busy to interrupt."

"I'll let you know when it's all right for you to check out. I'm real sorry about the inconvenience." Potter shrugged.

"It's not your fault." Bill said.

Bill and Carl split the newspaper, found seats across from the honeymooners and tried to look busy.

At eight o'clock that same morning, Blanche woke up feeling at a loss for why her chest hurt her so. It was not

a heart attack hurt and it was not a heartburn hurt. It was a different hurt and it bothered her greatly.

Blanche had been a very attractive woman, knew that she'd marry Charles since the time that she was ten years old. He was so dashing, so handsome, and he had so much promise for a good future. Then he went off to the war and when he came back in 1917, he was not the same man. He was just as dashing but the character was flawed as though life no longer held the wonder it once had.

The traveler had been a Bible salesman. He was charming the way Charles had been before the war. Blanche had been working for her parents in the same store that she went to every day and it had gotten her into trouble.

She had an affair with the traveler, Newton George, which lasted for two weeks. He said that he was going to settle in Maple Grove. Their meetings were secret, of course. No one knew but them. They would meet in the shed by the docks. It was right across the street from Charles' parents' house but she was always careful.

She had fallen so in love with him that for her, Charles faded into the background. She didn't think that Charles knew and that was good, especially when the traveler left town. She had no idea that he was leaving. She'd believed him. She had trusted that when he moaned his love as he made love to her on the blankets in the shed, he'd meant it. She was wrong to trust him but by then it

was too late. When she cried, he merely told her to grow up. Did she really think that a man like him would stay in a hole like Maple Grove forever with the likes of her? No, he had to spread God's word through his Bibles and there were many more towns like this all around the state. They all needed a little of Newton George.

After he left, she was devastated for weeks, her heart broken in a million pieces. She lost weight and felt sick for two months. Charles was always there, tried to cheer her up buying her a soda at the shop next to Taylor's, flowers from the flower shop or candy from the candy store. He had a new mission, to revive her spirit. He asked her to marry him and she did--immediately upon suspecting that the baby would be due in the spring.

To all around them, Natalie was a honeymoon baby. But Blanche knew differently. If Charles suspected otherwise he never said.

After a long dark time, Blanche let herself believe that Natalie might have been Charles' and never, never, hinted otherwise to anyone else. The baby looked enough like Blanche to let it go at that, thank God.

Blanche's ways were curbed from the experience. She let herself be happy with Charles, secretly felt foolish and embarrassed by Newton George and her behavior. She swore that she would be a good wife and mother. She vowed to spend her life making it up to Charles. She loved her

child with all her heart and her only regret was that Charles could not produce another child of the marriage.

Charles was wonderful with Natalie, took her in as though she were his own, treated her as his own. Maybe he believed she was his own? Blanche let him. And when asked about siblings, he only said one child was enough for him. That way, he did not have to explore or explain his own sterility to anyone, a condition that he'd been well aware of before their marriage, a condition that was a result of his stint overseas during the war.

Their life together was good, happy. They inherited the store and kept the name on it, as it had been when her father had purchased it from Thaddeus Taylor in 1908. Charles grew up on a farm but had no taste or talent for it when he returned from the war. When Blanche's parents died they took over the running of the store. Together, the three of them grew up in Taylor's.

Blanche rose from her bed, washed, dressed, brushed long gray hair, braided it and wound it around the crown of her head.

Was Natalie sleeping late? She looked at the clock. Eight-fifteen; not like Natalie at all. Blanche hoped that she wasn't coming down with a summer cold. They're

horrible, miserable. The pain in her chest returned. A cold rush seeped through her chest. Must be from the humidity.

She went downstairs, surprised to find a light on. That's odd, she thought. That too was unlike Natalie.

"Oh well, she must have forgotten to close the light." She went to the kitchen, made coffee, toast, and squeezed four oranges for juice.

She knew Natalie should be up by eight-thirty to get ready to open by nine. Should she wake her? She decided to have her coffee first.

There was a knock at the front door.

Now who in the world would that be, this early, she wondered? She tripped and almost killed herself over the cat, Lion, as she walked through the dining room, living room, foyer, and to the door.

"Lion, really, do you have to get under my feet?" She stepped over him.

She opened the door. Standing there with his hat in his hand was Thomas Harding, sheriff of Maple Grove.

"Hello, Thomas. How are you, today?"

"Mind if I come in, Blanche?"

"No, of course not, Tom. Would you like some coffee?"

She led him to the sofa. He did not sit, fiddled with his hat as though it were very important that he examine the very weave of the fabric.

"I was just getting a cup, myself." She indicated the sofa again and started for the kitchen when Thomas Harding interrupted her.

"Blanche, come sit down, would you? We need to talk."

She turned. "Of course, Tom. What is it?"

"Now Blanche, this is real hard so listen carefully. Something happened last night. Something bad." He took hold of her arm, brought her to the sofa and sat next to her "Blanche, Natalie is dead. Someone hurt her last night and she's dead, Blanche."

"Really, Thomas Harding, that's not funny. Why, Natalie is sleeping upstairs right this minute in her own bed." She turned to the stairs but something in Blanche's walk faltered as she started the long walk up the stairs that led to Natalie's room.

Tom caught her as she whimpered. "I know, Blanche, we all feel the same way."

Blanche ran up the stairs anyway, knew that Natalie would be asleep in her bed, the dark hair falling across the pillow, the soft lids closed against the sweet lashes that Blanche used to tickle when she was a babe.

Upstairs, the bed was unmade; linens crumbled and scattered. She looked at the window. It was open, the curtain gently waving in and out; screen intact.

Blanche fell down by the side of the bed and clutched the pillow to her chest. Her chest. Now she knew what the

pain was. It was grief. Total overpowering grief. She shrieked to the ceiling a sound that was not right to ever hear.

Tom ran up the stairs two at a time. When he kneeled at her side she held the pillow out to him.

"It smells like her, Tom. Roses. My sweet Natalie.

Blanche stood up to her full height, tears streaming down her face. She sniffed, wiped them off, looked at Tom with the determination of a bulldog and demanded;

"Tell me what happened to her."

"Get your purse, Blanche."

He took her to the Doctor's office where Natalie had been taken, wrapped in a blanket.

The doctor, John Mulherrin, and the nurse, Ida Neddleton, were there waiting. Tom winked at Ida, a sad acknowledgement that he'd ease her pain later when they were alone.

Before he let her see Natalie, he related the events of that morning.

None of them knew that the store had been robbed; Blanche hadn't opened yet. They figured that either Natalie went out on her own or was taken out of the house while Blanche was sleeping. Or, worse yet, that it had happened in Blanche's own house.

Tom told Blanche what happened.

"At seven this morning the Morgan twins went fishing. They needed new line so they went to the Rod and Reel. Bobby wasn't there when Skip and Gerry went in. They got what they needed, thinking that Bobby must've been at one of the boats. They were going to wait for him so they could pay for it. Bobby ran in the shop to get a blanket and saw the boys.

He yelled for them to come get me. She don't look good, Blanche. You don't want to go in there. You don't want to see her."

"Go on, Tom. Tell me."

"Let me take you over to the station why don't we?"

" just tell me and get it done with."

He nodded. "Forgive me, then."

"You're forgiven, for Christ sakes, Tom, now just get on with it!"

"All right. She was raped and shot in the head."

Blanche's breath sucked in. She held her head, her lips clenched into a tight frown. Her head shook. Her fists clenched. Her chest. The pain. Damn, Damn, Damn, those wandering salesmen! There ought to be a law.

"There's more, Blanche," he continued, because he had to get it done with. "She was found with a shovel in her hand. There was blood on it. She defended herself."

The dream of the shovel came back to Blanche. Rope, the river. Rain. The clock. Eleven-seventeen. The shovel. The pain in her chest.

"What time did this happen at, Tom?"

"We're not sure. The county coroner is on the way up from Eddinborough. He'll be able to tell us more in a while. We think between eleven and two." Tom hesitated.

"Blanche, can you answer a few questions?"

All that came out was a wracked nod.

"What time did you go to sleep?"

"Ten."

"Did Natalie go to sleep also?"

"I think so, she usually does. Did."

"Did you hear or see anyone last night?"

Blanche shook her head, no. She was too out of control to do more.

Tom patted her shoulder. "All right that's enough for now. I'll take you home.

"Not till I've seen my baby you won't."

"You don't want to do that. Let me take you home.

"Tom, for God's sakes, if you don't step aside I'll mow you down myself."

He nodded. "Hold onto my hand then." He led her through the door to the table and uncovered Natalie.

Blanche looked at what used to be her living, breathing, lovely Natalie and passed out cold.