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Dateline: Spring Training

MARTIN ROBBINS

Taking a wide turn around
Winter’s shuffling corridor,
An unseen announcer’s voice
Catches us off base with words
That float like hopeful flyballs.

Over the fence—that’s where we
Want the old apple to go,
Our knowledge of work with it,
Sailing like gliders out of
School windows in late April.

Brokers in boardrooms who plot
Future curves of power pick
Us out by our grins, rapping
Their tables, pinning us down
With their deadpan projections.
EVERY THREE OR FOUR MONTHS, Mrs. Steindorf would work up a short piano recital for the hard core of retired music-lovers from Los Angeles, as well as the local professional set and an occasional cultivated cowboy’s wife. They all sat in her living room in concentric semi-circles around a nine-foot Bechstein, fashioned for Mrs. Steindorf’s father by Otto Bechstein himself in 1903, and the only relic from her first life in Germany. The programs ran to Brahms and Chopin — after all, Bishop was a cattle-and-alfalfa town where the old men chewed toothpicks and at night you still heard coyotes in the foothills — but nonetheless she threw in an occasional dose of Hindemith, and they would even sit still for some early Bartók. They arrived early and they did not cough or clap between movements.

These same people also attended the recitals of Mrs. Hargy, who lived fifty miles to the south in the town of Independence and had performed similar programs on the first Thursday of every month for a decade. It was suspected that the two pianists did not get along; thus a rustle went through Mrs. Steindorf’s audience one Sunday in late February when, during the second movement of a Beethoven sonata, Mrs. Hargy made an entrance.

Both women were nearly eighty, and both were refugees: there the resemblance ended. Mrs. Steindorf had studied in Leipzig with “the great Schnabel,” as she invariably called him. She was tiny and bird-like, and still spoke with a heavy accent. Mrs. Hargy, a Hungarian, was a former pupil of Bartók. She’d learned her manners and her English from a nanny and spoke like a BBC newscaster. She had bright white hair and great bearing. She entered Mrs. Steindorf’s living room as though it were empty, and sat near the door. When the piece ended, the two women acknowledged each other with nods. At intermission, instead of mingling with the audience, Mrs. Steindorf retreated to her bedroom while Mrs. Hargy held court. When asked, she paid Mrs. Steindorf small compliments: “She’s quite . . . expressive, isn’t she?” She spent some minutes in conversation with Lydia Mangin, Mrs. Steindorf’s star pupil, a shy twelve-year-old whose parents had conservatory ambitions for her.

When the program resumed, Mrs. Steindorf played Bartók.
Afterwards Mrs. Hargy went to congratulate her, and the crowd around Mrs. Steindorf parted like the Red Sea. The women kissed cheeks. The burgers beamed. "I enjoyed the program immensely," Mrs. Hargy said. She was perhaps ten inches taller than Mrs. Steindorf.

"Ah, but I felt very nervous, especially with the Bartok. I felt like I was poaching."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Hargy.

"I'm looking forward to your program next week, if I can get a ride. Eight-thirty?"

"Eight o'clock. As usual."

"Righto," said Mrs. Steindorf, who used slang to neutralize her accent. "On the nose. I won't be late and make an interruption."

LYDIA MANGIN was Mrs. Steindorf's principal joy. Only music could explain the bond between this withered and wary survivor, this daughter of Leipzig's Jewish elite, raised to evenings at the Gewandhaus, lessons with the Great Schnabel, dinner parties for the Duke's brother, walks through the University where her father, the Rector and a famous Egyptologist, presided like a prince, between Mrs. Steindorf, victim of terror and displacement, and Lydia Mangin, twelve, blonde, daughter of an optometrist, child of the open range, companion to cattle and alfalfa. In a strange way they communicated like members of the same family. Lydia would arrive for her lesson and plunk her books on Mrs. Steindorf's table, squirm out of her jacket, and play through the piece she was working on. Conversation was formal: good afternoon Miss Mangin, good afternoon Mrs. Steindorf, how are you today, fine thank you. Mrs. Steindorf stood looking over her pupil's shoulder. Lydia chewed on her lower lip as she played. At the end of the lesson Mrs. Steindorf would bring out four small oatmeal cookies with orange-rind, a family recipe, on a hand-painted Dresden plate, and they would each have two while Mrs. Steindorf critiqued Lydia's progress and sipped tea. "The adagio is pure Kitsch, Lydia," she'd say, tracing arcs in front of her face with liver-spotted and arthritic hands. "You know what it is, Kitsch?"

"Not exactly."

"Pretension. Tail fins. Windows with shutters that don't close."

Lydia nodded again, still in the dark.

For the parents, Mrs. Steindorf felt pure contempt. "These drayhorses have produced a thoroughbred," she thought to herself as she watched Lydia drive off with the optometrist, bouncing on the seat of his pristine pickup. She had once tried to explain Lydia's talent to them. "She can sense the personality of the music. Do you under-
stand? She has all of the right instincts. She plays Strauss as though she grew up in Vienna and Bach as though she were in church.”

“Wasn’t Bach a Catholic?” the optometrist asked with suspicion.

“You better believe it,” Mrs. Steindorf said, and changed the subject forever.

One day shortly after the recital, Lydia was late for her lesson. After fifteen minutes Mrs. Steindorf’s irritation gave way to fear — ambulances, masked men — so she phoned the parents. Mrs. Mangin explained that Lydia was sick.

“Next time, please call to cancel. Now if I can speak to her, I’ll give her some exercises for next week.”

“She’s sleeping just now,” Mrs. Mangin said after a short silence.

Three days later a note arrived in the mail. It was typed on flowery stationery, from the optometrist’s wife, informing Mrs. Steindorf that Lydia would no longer be studying piano with her. Enclosed was a check covering three months’ lessons in advance.

Never before had Mrs. Steindorf lost a student in this way — one she liked, one who had promise. She brewed a cup of tea and reread the note. She had a palpable urge, located, she was surprised to notice, just below her throat, to telephone the Mangins and demand an explanation. Instead she returned the check in a plain envelope and went about her business. Still, during the next weeks, she discovered how much Lydia’s lessons had sustained her. Mrs. Steindorf’s life was precise and regular. There were few peaks: the weekly shopping trip in the Senior Citizen’s Mini-van, random telephone calls from her children, a monthly haircut, recitals. Lydia’s lessons had been her weekends; they’d marked passing time; the weeks rose toward them and fell away. Now, she found herself feeling flat. She tired easily and snapped at her students. When the last one left at the end of the day, she’d sit at the piano and watch the sunset behind Mt. Tom, and vow to be milder. Formerly a fastidious eater and a consumer of literature in three languages, she now began to improvise dinner — a can of tuna, a frozen entree, a couple of slices of bread with butter and sugar — and eat it watching TV. Frequently she fell asleep in front of the set, only to wake up in the middle of the night, stumble out of her clothes and into bed, and then lie awake until dawn. Lydia’s lessons lurked in her mind like a lost lover.

Finally she telephoned. She identified herself to the mother and with no preliminaries said, “I honestly believe you’re making a big mistake. Your daughter has a gift and she was developing it rapidly. I don’t say this for the money. I have more students than I can handle.”

Lydia’s mother put the optometrist on. He mumbled something
about “second opinions.”

“Did she want to quit? She always seemed delighted to be here.”

“It’s nothing personal,” he said. “We were very happy with her progress.”

“So?”

“We just thought it might be time for a change. We felt Mrs. Hargy might have something to teach her, too, and we can’t afford two teachers.”

“She’s taking lessons from Mrs. Hargy?”

“That’s right.”

“But Mrs. Hargy is not a musician! She’s a corpse! There’s no life in her playing! She’s a . . . robot! And you—you’re a kidnapper!” She slammed down the receiver and as it hummed faintly into the evening she stared out at the mountains.

SEVERAL WEEKS PASSED. At night she imagined confrontations—with the parents, with Mrs. Hargy, with Lydia. In these she was always forceful but calm. She maintained her dignity. She prevailed, and when she did, and the optometrist was apologizing, she was gracious but distant. She drove a hard bargain. But none of this ever happened, and finally Mrs. Steindorf made a decision. Reviewing her life, she decided that she had too often merely survived where she should have struggled; she had hoped and begged and fled where she should have schemed and fought. She took out her finest notepaper and had a cup of tea to steady her hand and wrote a letter to Mrs. Hargy. She overpraised the April recital; expressed hope that two people with such similar backgrounds, and practically neighbors, might cultivate more of a relationship; and suggested that by way of a start they get together soon for some four-hand. Mrs. Steindorf volunteered to make the trip to Independence. She closed with a long Teutonic formality: “With great esteem, sincerely, your most devoted admirer, Mrs. Hilda Steindorf.”

There was no answer.

She waited a week and then another; finally she telephoned. For two days nobody answered, and Mrs. Steindorf found herself suspecting that the Hungarian, notoriously frail and much operated upon, had died. She confronted this possibility with mixed emotions: to die alone, to lie undiscovered and rotting, was one of Mrs. Steindorf’s greatest fears. She wished it on nobody. But the thought of inheriting Lydia tempered her dread.

On the third day, just as she was going to make her final try before alerting the police, Mrs. Hargy called her. “I’ve been in hospital,” she explained. “I haven’t had time to answer my mail.”
“Nothing serious, I hope.”
“Ulcers,” Mrs. Hargy said. “I’m afraid we’ll have to delay our four-hand.”
“T’ll take a rain check.” Mrs. Steindorf hoped the expression evened the score for Mrs. Hargy’s flawless inflections. “Should we wait a couple of weeks?”
“At least.”
“OK then, how about two weeks from Sunday? As you can see, I’m determined. We can’t wait forever, at our age.”
After a brief silence from Mrs. Hargy said, “I’m not certain I’ll be ready to travel by then.”
“Then I’ll come to Independence.” When she said this Mrs. Steindorf actually had to squeeze her eyes shut, as if in pain. “Unless you’re otherwise tied up.”
“No, of course not. I was about to suggest it myself. Shall we say three-thirty?”
“I’ll be there,” Mrs. Steindorf said. “On the nose.”

SHE HAD NO STRATEGY. She had no ideas. She had only the powerful urge to talk to Mrs. Hargy about Lydia—to explain, to confess, to gossip. To confess what? she thought, riding down to Independence on the bus. Confess like some Catholic? Although it was a warm afternoon in the valley, there was fresh snow in the mountains and the bus was slowed by a steady traffic of skiers heading back to LA after the weekend at Mammoth. Mrs. Steindorf sat on the west side and watched the Sierra. The highway followed the aqueduct, next to the old narrow-gauge right-of-way. Just north of town was a camp ground and an historical sight: the mass grave of victims from the 1872 earthquake. Mass graves made Mrs. Steindorf think in German.

She climbed down in front of the Whitney Vista Motel and walked three blocks to Mrs. Hargy’s house, a white cottage on a corner lot. The lawn was green and there were jonquils in the flowerbed. Lilacs were in bloom. Mrs. Hargy answered the door and the two women kissed at each other’s cheeks. “Your garden is beautiful,” Mrs. Steindorf said, pulling off her white gloves. “In Bishop nothing is up yet. It blows like crazy for weeks. The apple trees blossomed one day and that night it was twenty-three degrees Fahrenheit. How are you feeling?”
“I’m well, thank you.” Mrs. Hargy replied. In fact she looked pale and ancient. “Let me take your coat. Shall we play first and have tea later?”
“Fine.” Mrs. Steindorf rubbed her hands together and the women slid onto the bench. “Could we raise this a little?”
“I’m afraid that would be too high for me. I’ll get you a phone
book.” But the Eastern Sierra directory was only a half-inch thick, so Mrs. Steindorf sat on an old English-Hungarian dictionary. The piano was a Steinway, a nine-foot concert grand; it filled the half of the room nearest the window. Late afternoon sun filtered through the curtains; for a second Mrs. Steindorf imagined a scene in similar light, from her first life: twelve years old, on the bench with The Great Schnabel, nervous but at the same time at home, cared for. In the next room, hunched over a papyrus, her father, the Rector.

They began with a Mozart concerto. Mrs. Steindorf had practiced it and she played well. The Steinway was stiffer than her Bechstein, but a piano is still a piano. Mrs. Hargy made technical mistakes and lacked her usual precision. As Mrs. Steindorf realized this she began to pick up the tempo. At the end of the first movement, Mrs. Hargy lit a cigarette, and set it on an ashtray next to the music rest. “Let’s take this adagio,” she said.

Mrs. Steindorf sang a few measures in a croaking soprano. “I think that’s too fast. We don’t want to lose anything here.” Mrs. Steindorf fanned cigarette smoke away from her face and capitulated. Midway through the movement Mrs. Hargy missed an entrance and stopped. “I’m terribly sorry,” she said, taking a puff on her cigarette.

“Three measures after G,” Mrs. Steindorf said, and they began again.

As the afternoon waned, Mrs. Hargy seemed to regain her facility at the same time that fatigue robbed her of its benefits. She played beautifully but made stupid mistakes. Between each movement she lit a cigarette which burned to an ashen cylinder as she played. Once she tilted it carelessly on the edge of the ashtray; in the middle of a scherzo it burned past its fulcrum and tumbled onto the carpet. Mrs. Steindorf stopped at once but Mrs. Hargy kept playing until she came to a rest and then scooped it up without missing a beat.

When there was no longer enough window light to see the music, Mrs. Hargy suggested a break. “I have trouble at dusk,” she said. “I must take my glaucoma drops.”

“My eyes,” Mrs. Steindorf said, “are as good as ever. The rest of me is falling apart.”

“You seem quite strong.”

“Knock wood,” she said, tapping the piano bench.

Mrs. Hargy served tea and cake. “This is my special almond torte,” she said. “I can’t eat it but I enjoy making it.”

“You must give me the recipe,” Mrs. Steindorf said automatically.

“That I can’t do, and I’ll tell you why.” She set down her teacup
and pivoted toward Mrs. Steindorf. "There was a cafe in Budapest that was famous throughout Central Europe for its pastries. Even in Vienna it was spoken of with respect. The most famous item of all was this chocolate-almond torte. Winston Churchill, before the war, used to have it flown to him in London." She paused to sip tea. "The proprietors of this cafe had a daughter, and since they were rich and had aspirations, and this was Budapest, they assumed she would be a talented pianist. They sent her to Bartók, and he passed her to me."

"Like a hot potato," Mrs. Steindorf said, slicing herself another small wedge of the torte.

"Just so. The girl was not hopeless and after three years she played creditably. When she became engaged—to a magistrate's son—her parents decided she'd charmed him with an afternoon of Chopin, and out of gratitude they gave me the recipe to their famous torte. I was sworn to secrecy. I had to sign an oath."

"I eat mostly from cans and TV dinners," Mrs. Steindorf said. "I never learned to cook."

"One secret I will reveal: it hasn't a speck of flour in it."

"Tell me," Mrs. Steindorf said, "I had an uncle in Budapest who was a very well-known physician: Dr. Kleiner."

Mrs. Hargy set down her cup. "The Dr. Kleiner?"

"The bone doctor."

"Of course I knew him. Everybody knew him. I went to him once myself. I'd caught my little finger in a door and all the other doctors were talking about amputations. They were debating about whether to cut at the first or second joint. Their favorite word was 'gangrene.' I went to your uncle finally and when I mentioned amputation, he said—I'll never forget it—'those butchers would probably have it ground into their sausage!'"

Mrs. Steindorf cackled and clapped her hands one time.

"He set the bone and I was playing within the month. He was guest of honor at my next recital."

"He was a great music lover," Mrs. Steindorf said, "and a wonderful doctor. In the family he was also known as something of a louse."

"A louse?"

"He got a divorce, which was a disgrace to the whole family, and we were forbidden to mention his name. Persona non grata."

"What a pity. He was such a gentleman with me. Of course I was only ten or eleven."

"And then," Mrs. Steindorf said, "very early we heard he was taken in a concentration camp."

"Ah," Mrs. Hargy said. "I'm so sorry."

Mrs. Steindorf drained her cup and set it down on her saucer.
"Another slice of cake?"

"No, I'm full," she said, leaning back. "When I left Germany in 1938 the first place I went was Milan. My Italian was not so good. When I ate in restaurants and couldn't finish I'd tell the waiter I was full—'sono piena.' Immediately they would begin to dote on me and offer me congratulations. Finally I found out that I'd really been saying, 'I'm pregnant.'"

Mrs. Hargy lifted an eyebrow.

"'Full' and 'pregnant' are the same in Italian slang."

"How long were you in Italy?"

"I went there to wait for my husband. He'd stayed in Leipzig to finish closing up his business. He was going to meet me in Lugano after two weeks and then we were going to England." Mrs. Steindorf hesitated, and looked out the window into the dusk. "He was one of those people who never really believed in the Nazis. He'd been decorated in the First War. Big deal: an Iron Cross First Class, and the Hohenzollern with Crown and Swords for nine air victories. The medals were inscribed, 'The gratitude of your Fatherland is assured you.' After two months of waiting for him my visa expired and I had to leave. It was three years before I found out what happened to him."

"He was captured?"

"Rounded up," Mrs. Steindorf said. "Along with my father. The Rector and the war hero. To the Nazis just a couple of Jews."

Mrs. Hargy poured herself more tea and lit a cigarette. Her hand was not steady.

"Luckily my boys were with me and not him," Mrs. Steindorf said.

"Your children?"

"Franz and Nicholas."

There was a short silence. Mrs. Hargy stood up to clear away the tea service.

"Lydia Mangin," Mrs. Steindorf said, and paused, not knowing how to finish the sentence. "Lydia Mangin is progressing, I hope?"

Mrs. Hargy spoke from the kitchen. "She is indeed. I'm concentrating on her technique and her self-discipline. She could become an extraordinary pianist."

"She's terrific, but she's only eleven," Mrs. Steindorf said with a trace of heat. "How much self-discipline can we expect?"

Mrs. Hargy re-entered the living room, wiping her hands on a dish towel. "I expect a great deal," she said. "Shall we play another piece?"

"She has a natural touch. I wouldn't tamper with it."
“No,” Mrs. Hargy said. “I suppose not.”
“She doesn’t tire you out?”
“Not at all.” She leafed through a pile of sheet music. “Shall we try some Brahms?”
Mrs. Steindorf glanced at her watch. “Holy Toledo! It’s five-fourty! I must catch my bus.”
“You have twenty minutes,” Mrs. Hargy said. “I’ll get your coat.”

At the door they shook hands formally. “I hope we can do this again soon,” Mrs. Hargy said. Mrs. Steindorf nodded in silence.

All the way to Bishop, she stared at the Sierra and reviewed the conversation. Finally she blushed at her lie. Her husband, Franz, had not been “rounded up”; under cover of chaos, after Mrs. Steindorf had fled to Italy, he’d eloped to Sweden with his secretary. He’d died there, of old age, in 1978. The shame! Mrs. Steindorf cowered in her seat and cried.

A WEEK LATER LYDIA RETURNED. Her mother called to ask if Mrs. Steindorf could “make room”; she offered more money. “You know my rates,” Mrs. Steindorf said. “I make no exceptions, up or down. My concern is that I don’t think Lydia should be changing teachers all the time. Learning the piano is not like smorgasbord. If I take her on, I want it understood that I am her only piano teacher.”
“That’s our understanding.”
“OK. It’s a deal. Tell her the usual time.”

And so the lessons resumed. Mrs. Steindorf conceded to herself that Lydia’s playing had profited from Mrs. Hargy; her phrasing was cleaner, more positive. The girl herself was unchanged; she remained polite and reserved, a proper tourist in Mrs. Steindorf’s old world. Mrs. Hargy was not discussed.

Every Wednesday, Mrs. Steindorf availed herself of the County Senior’s Door-to-Door Mini-Bus to go to the Safeway for her shopping, and it was on one of these excursions shortly after Lydia’s return that she discovered from snatches of an overheard conversation that Mrs. Hargy was back in the hospital. When she got downtown, Mrs. Steindorf immediately splurged on a taxi—her first since moving to Bishop—and made it to Mrs. Hargy’s bedside in time for the end of visiting hours.

The Hungarian was the only occupant of a double room. She looked pained and pale, and it took her a few seconds to recognize Mrs. Steindorf. “Hilda,” she said. “How thoughtful of you to come.” For a moment it looked as though she were trying to stand up and be gracious.

Mrs. Steindorf, fighting off a rush of nausea, gave Mrs. Hargy a
quick peck on the cheek.

“Once more into the breach,” Mrs. Hargy said.

“What is it this time?”

“The usual.”

“And what’s the usual? Since when do they operate more than once on an ulcer? Iren,” Mrs. Steindorf said, “Lydia Magnin has resumed her lessons with me. For that I have you to thank. She . . . ”

Here Mrs. Steindorf did not know how to proceed. She had planned to say, “she will cheer up what’s left of my life,” or “she gives me something to look forward to,” but these phrases, at the last minute, would not pass. “She learned a lot about playing the piano from you.”

“She’s very talented,” Mrs. Hargy said.

“When do they operate?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Well,” Mrs. Steindorf said, “I wanted to come by and look in on you.” She stepped briskly across the room and the two women kissed cheeks again. “God Bless,” she said, and left. As she hurried down the hall past the nurses’ station, she thought to herself: “Kaput, that one.” She was on the verge of tears. In spite of history’s most systematic teachers, she had not learned to deal with death.

A WEEK PASSED and then one morning Mrs. Steindorf got an early phone call from Father Torrens, the priest at St. Anthony’s and one of the local music lovers. “Hilda,” he said, “Iren died last night.”

“Ach,” she said. “Cancer?”

“Cancer.”

“Of what?”

“I don’t know, Hilda. Of everything, pretty much.” After a pause, he added, “Listen, Hilda, I know you and Iren had your differences . . . .”

“But we were friends,” Mrs. Steindorf interrupted.

“So Iren told me.”

“She did?”

“Hilda, she asked me to see if you’d play something at her funeral.”

“In the church? This was her idea? Are such things allowed?”

“I was somewhat surprised,” Father Torrens said. “It’s a bit irregular, but I told her it was OK with me. She assured me you’d do it.”

“Of course,” she said. “Of course I’ll do it.”

Mrs. Steindorf was not comfortable in church under any circumstances, and the day of the funeral was worse than usual. She was confused: was she a mourner or a performer? a friend or a hired hand?
Too, she imagined that people resented her, suspected her of feigning Christainity. If there had been a separate section conspicuously marked for visitors and Jews . . . . Instead she was front and center, surrounded by people who knew when to kneel, cross themselves, pray. She sat tense and silent, looking out past the alfalfa fields to the mountains. She began to think about the Italian Alps. She had spent a month at Lake Como, waiting for her husband, and it was there, on the terrace of her hotel, sipping caffe latte and watching her boys at their sailing lessons, that she had received the letter from him in Sweden. She could still not think of that moment without a small but persistent part of her mind honestly believing that there had been some mistake, or that it was all a cruel joke.

She shifted in her seat and folded her hands on her lap. Lydia was sitting between her parents near the exit. The father, a plump scrubbed man with a fastidious little beard, was wearing a powder-blue blazer. To a funeral! thought Mrs. Steindorf. Contempt rose in her throat like bile. Then she noticed the priest was cuing her.

She adjusted the seat and sat for a few moments to compose herself, staring at the crest and logo: Steinway. The familiar name was a comfort. She struck the first chord and at once she knew she would play better than she had since Leipzig. She could hear every note and phrase before she played them, hear them shape themselves into song; her fingers, liberated and supple as though she were twenty-one, were drawn through the music by momentum. Phrases flowed from her fingers through the instrument and filled the room like heat. They spilled out of the church toward meadow and mountain. Mrs. Steindorf was shocked at her own intensity. “Not dead yet,” she muttered to herself, and thought: Listen to this, optometrists, kidnappers, Christians. I’m not the dead one after all. I’m the winner.

night images

George Staley

sparks blue orange
off a downed wire
ebb
in ever fading traces
The Middle-Aged

ROBERT A. DAVIES

We wear our wrinkles,
expressions to pass through the world—
voices calling us to old dreams,
what we will be.

To pass through the world to what
we no longer ask.

Innocence we smile at
in children and others—
we are the tough birds who survived—
blood runs down the bankers' walls
and we are not appalled—
in silent woods the trillium
has lost its silver tongue.

Who we are has happened.

Cores

WENDY BARKER

When you pull the grape
away from its twig stem
sometimes the small navel tears
and inside you can see
more green
like the skin,
color of young cats' eyes,
soft jelly,
no bones, not even white seeds.

My child will eat only
seedless grapes.
These days I relish
spitting out seeds,
biting down to the red
furrows of a peach pit,
wondering if our brains
are as wrinkled,
as hard, as dark.
Home Improvements

JAMES KNUDSEN

LEE MARKHAM IS DOODLING on an orange personalized scratch pad in her husband Noon’s study. She is grinning as she daydreams about the evening two weeks ago when she went to a neighbor’s back yard party and wound up among floating candles in the swimming pool, kissing some man named Metcalf. Noon had gone home to check on their son, Timmy, and in the meantime, well, she had lost her head.

Lee has seen Metcalf every other day since then and has just begun to refer to this situation in her mind as an “affair.” Metcalf is an architect, a bachelor, and slightly younger than her. This is all she knows except that he must be an acquaintance of her neighbors.

Since Metcalf is her first lover, Lee wants to handle the situation perfectly: Noon must never know. She decides to compose a list of all-purpose excuses and stories to tell Noon so that he will not get suspicious. When she cannot think of any, she calls Metcalf.

“Smile before you brush your teeth in the morning,” he tells her, “and you’ll laugh all day.”

Lee decides that Metcalf must be smoking funny stuff, and hangs up. She will tell Noon that Metcalf is planning some home improvements for her.

“You married too young,” says Metcalf, lighting Lee’s cigarette. “Your child is nine, yet he intimidates you.”

“I just don’t think it’s fair,” Lee takes a small puff, “to ask my son to sit in the car while I tryst with my lover.”

“Would he like a Coke? I have skyscraper models with tiny cars and people he could fool with. Bring him in.”

“Never!” Lee coughs. “I couldn’t do that.”


Later, she begs Metcalf to tell Timmy that he always talks business with clients in the bedroom with the door closed. Metcalf laughs. “He already knows.”
The interior walls of the new house are "vanilla," a concoction Lee invented at the paint store by personally adding a pinch of ochre to off-white. Sometimes Timmy reels through the house wearing yellow plastic ski-goggles claiming that the walls make him snow-blind. He does it when guests are present and everyone giggles, even if they’ve seen him do it before.

Lee was indecisive when selecting furniture for the living room. The decorator’s plan for apple green satin and orange corduroy didn’t seem right ("That combination makes my eyes hurt!") so she ended up with chrome and glass end tables, a black wicker day bed, and a colonial print Barcalounger. She thinks that a baby grand piano or a Persian rug could save the room.

Lee drives her lover home in the station wagon. He sits in the back seat with Timmy and a basket of dirty clothes for the dry cleaners. "Well," says Lee, as her lover steps from the car, "I'll be seeing you Thursday then?"

"If possible," says Metcalf. "Timmy, I need my sunglasses."

Timmy rolls down the window and takes off the glasses. "Here, Metcalf," he says.

When Metcalf has disappeared into his condominium, Lee turns around and stares at Timmy expectantly. "Does Metcalf think I’m cool?" She grips his shoulders. "What do you think?"

"I wish he’d give me his sunglasses. Ones like those cost ten-fifteen bucks at least!"

"But does he like me?" Lee turns around silently and starts the car. At dinner, she interrupts Timmy every time he starts telling Noon about what he’s been up to.

Timmy’s room is hostile territory. Three small turtles, each identified with a different shade of nail polish, live in an old broiler pan with a half inch of water and a flat rock island. The turtles’ names are Lee, Noon, and Timmy.

She is frightened by the sharp-edged poptop chains that criss-cross Timmy’s ceiling and faintly sickened by the photographs of Galapagos lizards tacked to the walls. Consequently, her visits to the room are rare and remarkable to Timmy. "Hey, Mom, what’s up?"

Lee sets the vacuum at the foot of his bed. She hesitates for a moment, concentration on Timmy’s face. "I thought you might like to clean up in here."

"Oh, no." Timmy is looking at her through the large end of a telescope. He sets it down and leaps from the bed. "That’s all right, really. Are we going to Metcalf’s today, I hope?"
Lee is surprised to hear his name. She steps back and feeling something strange in her hair, takes a swat at it. A poptop chain splits and one section falls to the floor. "Now you've done it, Mom," says Timmy as he balls his fist and steps toward her.

Metcalf, Lee, and Timmy are lounging by the condominium swimming pool. "Watch me, watch me!" shouts Timmy, dashing from his deck chair. "I'm gonna do a cannonball!"

Lee puts her hand up as a visor, pushing back her sweaty bangs. "O.K."

Metcalf is lying on his stomach with his eyes closed. "O.K., Sport."

Timmy scampers over to the high dive and climbs the ladder carefully. When he reaches the edge of the board, he looks expectantly at his mother. She isn't looking—she has turned over and is lying on her stomach. Metcalf is whispering to her. "Mom!" Timmy screams. "Metcalf!" As he hits the water, he is giving them the finger.

In the kitchen, Lee is somewhat lost. She forgets to use the cooking spoons and ladles that dangle from a wrought iron carousel above the stove. The spines of her foreign cuisine paperbacks have not been cracked because the recipes never list the cooking time for her microwave oven and their authors act as if the blender is yet to be invented.

Each of Lee's appliances is a different color—poppy, harvest gold, copper, and avocado. Noon tells her that the kitchen "looks like it's a playroom."

Before Metcalf, Lee occasionally dreamed of a dim motel room, cheap bourbon, and kissing a man who was not her husband: they ate room service in bed by cigarette light, then kicked their dishes onto the floor.

Being with Metcalf isn't like that. He doesn't think affairs are sordid. He thinks the whole family should be involved. When she closes the shades in his bedroom, he opens them. "Natural light is erotic," he says. Lee has begun to wonder whether loving Metcalf is any fun at all.

The main staircase of Lee's house is lighted by a large white sphere that Timmy pops from time to time with his BB gun. Timmy finds the light so irresistible that he cheerfully forfeits his allowance to cover the damages. Lee is getting so tired of replacing the fixture that she is considering stiffer penalties for Timmy or...
installing a crystal chandelier.

Noon suggests that Timmy is expressing healthy aggression. “Children don’t know what to do with their anger sometimes.”


Lee likes Noon well enough. He’s not like other husbands she knows. He doesn’t putter in the garage on Sundays or eat fat sandwiches at midnight. He is trim and dresses with moderate style. He knows a good wine when he sees one and can pick up a dance step just by watching.

Everyone thinks he’s perfect, Lee muses as she looks at Metcalf. My folks, our friends. He probably knows about Metcalf and thinks it’s grand. “Swell, honey, good idea, honey.” That’s him all over.

Timmy and Metcalf are wrestling on the living room floor of the condominium. Timmy was sullen earlier. He knocked over an architectural display that Metcalf had worked on for days. He punctured a small village of geodesic domes with a pencil. Sensing that something was really wrong between them, Metcalf promised to take Timmy on a camping trip. Just the two of them. “Will we have gas lanterns?” Timmy asked doubtfully.

“Yes, yes,” said Metcalf. “I’ve got all the gear you can imagine.” They begin fighting playfully to see who’d have to carry all that gear.

“Half-nelson, half-nelson!” shouts Metcalf, slapping his free hand on the floor. “Victory for the champ!”

In his elation, Metcalf lets go, laughing. Timmy stands up and begins to kick him. There are tears in his eyes and he is screaming, “Bastid, sona bitch!” He throws the front door open and is gone.

“Let him cool off,” says Metcalf, but Lee starts running.

Lee had nothing to do with decorating Noon’s den. Noon panell ed it in pecky cypress and installed handtooled leather curtains. He has his Dixieland music in there, his history books, and fifteen years worth of gift pipes. He has quit smoking, but still likes to chew on one thoughtfully from time to time.

There is an intercom system in the house and sometimes Noon calls Lee from his den. “I’m feeling swell, honey. How are you?” Lee pretends she doesn’t hear.

When Lee arrives at the house, she moves reluctantly toward Noon’s den. She can hear Timmy telling him all about Metcalf. “At first,” Timmy says, “I thought Metcalf was my friend, but then I knew
he was Mom’s.”
Lee strains to hear Noon’s response through the door. She thinks she hears him say, “How inconsiderate.”

Lee wakes up two hours later to the sound of Noon’s voice coming over the intercom. “Unlock the door, babe, we can discuss this like adults.”
“ Noon?” Lee sits up and looks around the bedroom. “I’m sorry.”
“I know, babe. Don’t worry. I’ve been thinking it over and the ways I’ve failed are probably multitudinous.”
“No!”
“Listen, we’ve nipped this problem before it got serious.” Noon’s voice sounds so comforting that Lee suspects she is dreaming. “Timmy doesn’t really know what was going on. He’s only jealous of your ‘friendship’ with Metcalf . . . so there’s no real damage.”
“Oh, Noon, you think so?”
“ I’m going to try so hard to understand that I will. It’s as simple as that. Let me in please.” Lee gets up and unlocks the door. “Good,” says the intercom.

Noon and Lee are sitting in the sunny dome car of a westbound Canadian train. Lee still clutches the bouquet of comic books that Timmy had thrust at her as she was leaving. “This trip,” Noon asks. “Was it necessary?”
“I’m serious about wanting to start over.”
“And so am I.” Lee and Noon clink their martinis together.
“Noon, do you suppose Timmy’s all right?”
“No doubt! He’s having a swell time on the campout!”
“But he hated Metcalf so much . . .”
“Listen, we’ll be back in a couple of weeks.” Noon sips his drink. “And children forget so easily. I know the minute Metcalf suggested it that his camping with Timmy would help settle the matter. He’s not a bad fellow. No doubt they’re having a swell time.”
Lee nods, feeling slightly envious. She begins to read one of Timmy’s comics and is soon lost in the story.
Small Business

JEANNE SCHINTO

WHEN GRETA GOT TO THE CHURCH she couldn’t find a place to park. She drove around the block three times slowly in her new black car. It had a long hood, and it cornered like a hearse. She might better have driven the pastry-shop truck, with its shelves for carrying cake, but it was battered up and Greta was concerned to make a nice appearance at the curbside.

She piloted the car around the block again. All these people just for church? Then she remembered the faster. Mary said people flocked to see him camped out in the courtyard, those both for and against him. Everyone was curious.

What he wanted of the church was more money for the shelter children. He wanted people to live without frills. But was that possible? Did he want people to always to keep a small pocket in their minds for remembering sorrow? Greta was intrigued that the man was so dead certain. What was she certain of? When you hear a sound like the one a giant bar of soap makes when it’s dropped from a height into water, then you know the ice is cracking and you’d better skate as fast as you can to the bank of the canal. She’d learned that in Friesland, at the age of ten. What was she certain of now?

It felt slightly risky to Greta to be driving somewhere by herself. She rarely went anywhere alone in America. She feared not only crime, but something else she could not name in either of the languages she knew. It appeared in her mind like the shadow of something, a tracing unsure and unlucky. She could never be sure she would make the right move if a quick one was called for. In the shop, at home, she moved fast as the cinched-waist girl she was once, but outside, without Federic to guide her, she might make a fatal mistake. Still, she had ventured out today alone because it wouldn’t be fair to make Federic come along on this, his one day off. He liked to spend it falling in and out of naps, or in a scalding hot bath. His squarish buttocks and the backs of his legs were bright red when he finally stepped out. He did need his rest. It was summer, and summer brought the weddings, and every single week Federic made a mountain range of wedding cakes. So Greta went along with this wedding cake to the Catholic church, for she hoped that doing good meant also being free
from harm.

It was Mary’s idea, and it had surprised Greta, for Mary, at the shop, talked rarely except of female troubles. Somebody’s daughter’s miscarriage. Infertility. How she loved to talk of human suffering! The greater your suffering, the more attention was paid you. She seemed envious of the troubles of her friends. On Sundays, though, she and her many daughters counted money at the church. Mary said they sat at a long table piled high with the church collection. She said their fingers smelled salty at the end of the day. Then she helped prepare the Sunday dinner for the shelter children. And Mary said the children would kill to have the wedding cake for dessert.

Greta was glad to play a part in Mary’s good deeds. Cake, the best food in the world! No one had to be coaxed into eating it. It wasn’t bread or soup. Holidays and all occasions were celebrated with cakes. She was sorry that the marriage that the cake had been meant for had been cancelled. Still, something good was coming of it, right on the heels of the sorrow. Wasn’t it nice to make and sell things people love so well?

SHE DECIDED to double-park at the entrance to the church courtyard. She slung her pocketbook around her neck and wrestled the cake out of the car. It towered, regal, a dead-white queen recently unceremoniated: Federic had removed its love-bird top-piece — he could use it on another wedding cake, and, as he had argued with Greta, the children wouldn’t notice it was missing. Greta was forced to agree. She walked reverently with the cake, like someone carrying a statue in a religious procession.

At the stone archway that led into the courtyard, she expected to find Mary waiting to tell her where she should go with the cake. She searched for her among the groups of people eddying around the courtyard in confusion. More people poured out of the church’s many doors, staring at Greta looking around from behind her cake. Some laughed and whispered. No one offered help. Greta forgivingly, proudly thought: they must see I’m strong. Still no sign of Mary. She let herself be swept along by the crowd.

Inside, she did not see the faster, but his rumpled sleeping bag lay in a heap on the cracked cement. Green glass bottles stood all around it — dozens and dozens of them glinting. Gingerly Greta put the cake down on a wooden bench nearby.

People came to stand by her, to gape at her and the cake. She wanted them to know she knew nothing, had nothing to do with the faster. Was neither for nor against him. Had other business with the church. Her own good works.

“Where iss he?” she asked a hatted woman cheerily, with her accent well-pronounced. A foreign accent to an American was a sure
sign of befuddlement.

The woman looked at Greta closely; then, when something was decided, spoke to her in a loud voice, more appropriate for addressing a small crowd: “He stands in the front row at every Mass, swaying like a drunk!”

“Someone should knock him flat as he stands there,” said a man who had overheard.

“His ‘friends’ wouldn’t permit it,” said the woman. “They believe in his ‘cause.’ ‘The children.’”

The man yawned elaborately. “He makes me tired. Let him get his fingernails dirty. Working good and hard.”

“And that girl with him?” said the woman.

“What girl? I haven’t seen a girl.”

“There! You will now. Here they come.” The woman nudged Greta.

The faster came staggering out of the church, like a hatless scarecrow come alive. Scuffling in his laceless shoes, eyes rolling, dressed in dusty black, he carved the air with pointy elbows recklessly, his chin jutting.

A tall, tattered child loped along behind him. Her stringy hair was nearly white. She wore a baggy brown dress coarse as burlap and dirty sneakers without socks.

Greta watched the two as she might have watched performers. They seemed part of a show, actors in the theatre. The crowd seemed part of it, too, especially the faster’s supporters.

Adults flapped their arms and squawked like so many birds helpless before one fallen from the nest. Children wheeled around him, calling him, doing anything to get his attention, then not knowing what to do with it once it was had. Stricken-faced mothers coaxed their children into embracing him. Others conspicuously, piously, placed more green bottles around the periphery of his camp.

Greta detected the euphoria all of a sudden. With a groan the faster collapsed face down on his sleeping bag, but Greta saw his euphoric grin as he turned himself over. His face was shrunken to the bones, a fox’s, triangular — but the skin, though blueish, sickly, had a strangely glowing pallor. The faster made everyone in the courtyard look healthier, more alive. His was an unlikely image to animate so much life. Only the girl seemed to shine, without smiling, with the same ghostly light. She had taken up a position at the head of his camp; she made a ragged sentry, immobile, shining with the light often seen in the handicapped — such as accident survivors — or others who think they have finally discovered a better-than-average reason to be content, or even happy, just to be alive.

“I hope you die!” shouted someone from a group standing apart from the faster, arms folded. Others in the group carried the chant for-
ward louder and more sprightly. This produced in the courtyard an air of the stadium — the two sides of the matter, ying, Greta in the middle with her cake. Where was Mary? Greta felt squeezed, listening to more of the talk around her.

"He's shivering, but he wants ice cubes."
"Cold preserves."
"Soon, very soon, it will be over."
"What about the girl?"
"She looks deathly, just stepped out of the grave."
"Or about to step in."
"If she dies, he'll be to blame."
"Not Father Dudley."

Was the child fasting, too? Greta grew alarmed. A young body feeding on itself? It was wrong. Children should eat. Where were her parents? Was she a shelter child? How could the shelter allow it? Greta scanned the crowd for Mary, who would know the answers to her questions.

IT WAS THEN SHE SAW up on a screened veranda a plump, pasty-faced young woman beckoning vigorously. The woman made continuous broad circles with short, fleshy arms, and when Greta realized it was she the woman called, she hoisted her cake and started to weave her way through the churning throng.

Greta saw that the woman wore a little black veil far off her head. Nuns took care of the children in the shelter. Was that a good arrangement? Like too-virtuous big sisters, Greta thought. Unpopular, with nothing else to do, no children of their own, just pretending. The nun whose face was so buoyant, so full, grew fuller as Greta approached her.

"You're looking for Mary," the nun called down cheerily.
"Yes!" Greta said.
"Come up!"
Greta struggled up the wooden steps with her cake. The nun held open the door.
Sister Celeste introduced herself and slapped her chubby hands together, exclaiming over the cake. Greta set it down on a wobbly card table.

"Mary will be over from the rectory soon," the nun said. "And so will Father Dudley. He wants to thank you personally. I hope you aren't in a hurry. We've been having a little extra excitement here these past few weeks." She nodded her doughy face down toward the roiling courtyard below them. "In some ways, it's very entertaining, actually." She giggled. "No, I shouldn't say that. Inspiring, I guess is what I mean."

Greta nodded politely, but inside she was uncertain, and they sat
down in metal folding chairs set closely together. Sister Celeste seemed perfectly comfortable with the arrangement. She took every opportunity to pat Greta on the hand.

"At the novitiate, they warned us against 'saint complexes.'" she smiled. "This isn't the first fast supposedly to the death, you know. Though it's the first one in our city. Father Dudley has done some research on the fellow."

"He iss not sincere?" Greta asked.

"Oh, I'm sure he's sincere, overly so, but human, like us all. Not the Lord God, after all, much to his eternal regret. I envy him. Oh, yes, I do! His will! His presence in the courtyard I'll admit has disturbed me. It's getting a little tiring, though. I wish either that he'd give in or that Father Dudley would. Since it's not likely that Father Dudley will..."

"Hiss friends..." Greta said. She wanted to ask about the girl, but something prevented her.

"The supporters are quite sincere in their good intentions, also," Sister said. "Father Dudley thinks this kind of drama is actually beneficial to a parish. Attendance is up — and so of course is the Sunday collection. All kinds of good things are happening as a result of that. Father Dudley was enjoying the fast thoroughly. Up to a point..."

In the courtyard below, the noise grew louder. Greta and the nun stood to see better what was going on. They saw that the faster's friends were moving him into the shade of the pavilion. Two men helped him walk. The white-haired girl carried the sleeping bag and smoothed it on the ground. The pavilion was looked down on by a statue of the Virgin Mother.

They could see the faster better now. His face drunkenly elated; the pavilion was just a few feet away from the veranda. And the crowd had spread out to give the glittery-eyed young man some air. They had tucked several blankets over, under, and around him. He shivered violently.

The white-haired girl had closed her eyes. Her lids looked thin as moth's wings, and she appeared to be praying. She held one of the green glass water bottles with both hands.

"What unlucky families to have to send their children away to your shelter!" Greta said.

"If you're strapped, if the law requires it, what can you do?" Sister asked. "What is there? Short of miracles or gambling. We consider this shelter a kind of miracle. Evidently the faster wants something better for the children than what we can provide. He wants the parishioners to take the children into their homes. That's very unrealistic."

"They are all goot children, aren't they?"

"Not all," Sister said. "Some have some rather unpretty habits — both the kind we think can be changed in time and others we
don’t believe anyone but Our Lord can change — if Him.” She laughed, then covered her mouth.

“Maybe they aren’t bissy enough,” Greta suggested. “Bring them to the shop. Maybe they will learn a little something? Dipping cooky hearts? We’ll put them to work. That’s how my husband started in Friesland at the age of four!

“Afterwards they can come to our house. We haff a nice new modern house now. And a swimming pool. Good for children! And our children are grown and gone. Can all the children swim?”

“Not all, I don’t believe.”

“Oh, they should learn!” Greta said. “Every one! It’s one of those things everyone should know. Like what to do when someone is choking!”

Sister Celeste heartily agreed.

Mary was crossing the yard with a smallish, slender man.

“Oh, here’s Mary and Father Dudley,” Sister said.

FATHER DUDLEY STOPPED in the middle of the crowd. Mary went to the pavilion and spoke to the white-haired girl, who began to argue with her. She took the girl by the arm, and together they continued on their way to the veranda. Father Dudley strode to the pavilion in a small man’s stretched steps. He looked athletic and smart in black pants and a white polo shirt. He was handsome in a clipped, too-neat way — overly healthy, overly scrubbed, like certain over-cautious children.

Greta thought that the overweight Mary approaching looked unusually vibrant in a well-cut raspberry dress. In the pastry shop, for work, she wore a white uniform that had grown too tight for her and a hairnet over flattened hair dyed the color of an onion. Today, her hair looked nearly healthy, and fuller. Behind the counter at the shop she moved like a penned sheep, soundlessly bumping into things, as if walking half-asleep, but her swivelling eyes missed nothing. Today, she walked with a lilt in her step. Many of the faster’s foes waved to her and she waved back with a pageant queen’s air, her other hand never letting go of the white-haired girl’s struggling arm.

They clacked up the wooden steps. Mary flung open the screen door.

“He should start a diet camp for fatties,” she said, pointing a thumb back over her shoulder. “Then he’d get all the money he wants. Those camps make a fortune. Where is his mother? That’s what I want to know. He’s going to ruin his health like that.”

The girl would look at nothing but the floor. She was pale, paler than her hair, but her hair was not really white. It was blonde, a blueish-blonde, the color of the moon. Eyes, down, she scratched the many insect bites on her spindly legs. When she finally did look up, she eyed the cake in the corner:
Sister Celeste started to say something complimentary about Greta, but Mary wasted no time. She pushed the girl over towards the cake, the girl’s arm still pinched between her fingers. “Okay, cake tester.”

“Cake tester?” Sister asked.

“Father Dudley wants her to try a piece right now.”

“Oh!” Sister laughed nervously, sounding oddly pleased.

“He wants her to have a piece right away,” Mary repeated, more firmly, then winked at Greta.

Greta quickly glanced away. She wanted the white-haired girl to like her. Children should eat. Children needed food. It was a good idea Father Dudley had to tempt her with the cake, but something wasn’t setting right with Greta. Her cake was a thing of beauty for happy, careless times, not duty, not medicine.

Mary produced a knife, from where Greta did not see. Then, out in the courtyard, Father Dudley began giving a speech, and everyone — Sister, Mary, Greta, and the girl — all moved back to the veranda’s edge to listen.

Father Dudley spoke of the faster kindly, as if he were a friend; and, then, it was clear, they had been friends of a sort, once; before the fast, they had enjoyed several friendly conversations together about the world and its problems and how to solve them.

Greta watched the girl watch the faster and began to think of herself at that age, or a little older. When she was fourteen, when she went to work at Federic’s uncle’s shop. Federic was the tall, long-fingered boy then, and Greta, the straight-shouldered, yellow-haired girl, who never sat still but folded boxes, boxes, in any spare moments, until her knuckles bled. One day, Federic took her knuckles into his mouth, to lick the flecks of blood away, before he even knew what he was doing.

That was thirty years ago. How much had happened since then? They had moved here and made cake after cake. Some years, they had worked so hard that nights they merely napped, muscles twitching. And their children, a boy and a girl, were distant in more ways than one. Federic had wanted them to be like him, and Greta had seen this was wrong, but hadn’t stopped him. If they weren’t like him, what then? Imagination hadn’t carried her. She was equally to blame. Greta could hardly bring herself to pronounce the names of the states where her children were living.

FATHER DUDLEY’S long speech was coming to an end. His voice was winding his words down to a close. The crowd, still hushed, was growing restless, and the faster, propped on teetering elbows to listen, his teeth still showing speckled and broken, had his chin to his chest, as the priest said: “Now I know some of you have taken his side.” His eyes swept the crowd. “But your fate, John Bidden,” he turned to the faster, “is in your hands and in the hands of those who
surround and encourage you.”

As Father Dudley stalked away with small steps, the crowd began to boil again. On the veranda the girl was first to speak. Greta had expected the voice of a fly, and the sound she heard was not far from that, but strong, getting strength from somewhere:

“He’s doing it all for me, you know!”

“Not only you — ,” Mary said.

“Yes, just me. He said even if I were the only one in the shelter, he’d still do the same thing he’s doing.”

“You’ve got a lot to learn about men, honey.”

“He told me what to do in event of his death!” the girl shrieked.

“Nobody’s going to die around here, and if he wants you kids to eat so well so badly, then you eat a piece of this cake. Father Dudley want you to tell him what the cake tastes like. He told me he wants you to sit down and write him an essay and tell him what you ate.”

“That’s my department,” Sister said, looking hurt. “English composition.”

“That’s right,” Mary said. “He wants you to supervise.”

“Oh!” Sister said, pleased; this time, it was she who produced the knife from nowhere. Mary must have given it to her for safe-keeping, preoccupied as Mary was in getting the grappling girl back in front of the tall, mute cake.

Then Father Dudley sailed through the veranda screen door.

“Father, you should listen to him!” the girl cried hoarsely. “You know what he says? He says even if you finally figure out what you think is the right thing to do, doing it is a whole ‘nother matter. The church knows what to do, and yet they don’t do it! He does! He does! He knows he makes you jealous!”

Father Dudley’s boyish face was serene: “Did you know he has a wife and four daughters in Buffalo, New York? One of them is about your age. I’ve also learned that he’s being sought by the Arlington County police. He skipped out on a work-release program. Our parish house was the first place he came. He was serving time in the jail on a charge of bigamy.”

“Eating his cake and having it, too?” Sister Celeste beamed with delight.

“The cake is beautiful, Mrs. Jensen!” Father Dudley said, avoiding the girl’s fallen face.

Greta hated herself for smiling.

When Father turned to say to the girl, “And you’re going to eat your cake, too” Greta whispered to Sister Celeste: “I think you should try to get her to eat a little something else. A little cream of chicken soup? A little rye bread?”

The nun merely fingered the knife.

“A cracker? Something less ceremonious than cake,” Greta said.
"I think your chances will be better."
But Father Dudley had another idea.
"Well, I'm going to eat a piece," he sighed.
"You need it, Father!" Sister said, handing him the knife. "You look as if you've been fasting yourself!"
"On the contrary!" Father said. "But you know, you can't fatten a thoroughbred. That's what my father always said. He was a hundred and thirty in his wedding suit, a hundred and thirty in his grave."
"I'm going to have a piece, too," Mary said suddenly. "Diet day tomorrow. Monday!"
"And me, too!" Sister said, somewhat guiltily, pulling her weight above her belt.
Greta thought: nuns and children living together. Unlikely housemates — the one side of the dining room taking life in teaspoonfuls, the other shovelling. She longed to whisk the girl away, to feed her at her kitchen table.
Father Dudley cut into the cake — three large, triangular pieces from the bottom layer.
"This will probably be the only time I'll cut a wedding cake. Haha," he said as he worked.
He handed one piece to Sister, one to Mary.
"Mrs. Jensen?"
But Greta was watching the girl, waiting for a crack in the ice. She will never eat in front of them, Greta thought, and she won't eat that cake.
"Mrs. Jensen?" Father said again. "Or is it 'Jansen'?"
Greta looked at Father's slackening face, and Mary and Sister eating.
They are not villains, Greta thought kindly. They are very nice.
As if to concur, Mary said through cake: "If we're so bad, what about the real bad people? We don't go around killing people, stinking knives through ribs!"
"Mrs. Jensen?" Father said again, holding out to her the cake.
The girl was looking sideways at Greta. Greta kept her hands by her sides. In the back of her mind she saw a child's blackboard slate. The numbers wouldn't add up right. Still, Greta kept her hands quiet, as she did behind the counter of the shop when she waited for unpleasant customers to make up their minds. She was very calm then, as she began to be now. Because she knew that even if she made a low comment underneath her breath, they couldn't hit her. They couldn't reach her to hit. With their hands full of cake, these three couldn't, either.
Contributors

Since her last appearance here, WENDY BARKER has relocated in Texas, where she teaches at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Her life there is now "becoming a little more rhythmic again." ROBERT A. DAVIES is co-editor of Mr. Cogito Press, and the author of Timber and Timber First Addition. He teaches at Pacific University in Oregon. JAMES KNUDSEN teaches English at the University of New Orleans. His stories have appeared in Intro, Kansas Quarterly, and Wisconsin Review. Avon recently published his novel for young adults, Just Friends. MARTIN ROBBINS is teaching a course in "writing about science" at the Harvard Extension. He has written the libretto for a children's opera, The Silence Bottle (about technology gone out of control), which will be performed with puppets at the Museum of Natural History in New York this March. JEANNE SCHINTO's first published story (in The Ontario Review) received a "distinguished" mention in Best American Short Stories, 1980, and she's been going strong ever since: her fourth got a UNICO National Foundation literary prize. She's also a journalist, with work published in places like The Washington Post, Smithsonian, and Ms. Since his story "Tracy" was published here in Surmner, 1981, DAVID SCHUMAN has "moved from the desert to the rain forest (Eugene, Oregon)" and "from one side of the podium to the other" (he is now a second-year law student instead of a professor and assistant dean). He continues "to harbor ambitions to write fiction, although of late my most creative piece of work was an appellate brief in defense of a farmer who had inadvertently trespassed onto his neighbor's blackberry patch." GEORGE STALEY is an English instructor at Sinte Gleska College on the Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. He has written journal articles on furniture-making, television, and education.

Editor: John Christopher Kleis
Poetry Editor: Richard Lautz
Business Manager: Karen T. Shrom
Editorial Assistance: John J. Keenan