

Mary Summers

FOUR LADIES

I wouldn't still be thinking about an encounter I had on a Saturday in August in Texas if I'd ever seen any one of the ladies again. But heaven knows I never have—though heaven knows I wish I would, because I'm tired of thinking that it's Margaret's bentwood body I see shuffling and sighing along the street in front of my house, and Prudence sitting on the bench at the bus-stop like a heap of abandoned baggage, and Vivian who's masked in every silent shape and shifting shadow.

On that August Texas Saturday I'd wakened to find that my electricity had gone out and left me for the day. So it was bright morning outside and my apartment was filled with wretched, hot twilight, and also with all the somber stillness of Sunday, so I couldn't really stay. But I'd only just arrived to Texas—hadn't even yet started my new job—so I had nothing to look to but my own slim, tender body; no money, no friends, and nowhere really to go.

But anyway in the dim I put on my coolest blue sundress and my favorite brown sandals, and it was as hot and close as if a thousand invisible others had wakened with me and were crouching, crowded, breathing and whispering in my dull rooms. I left, and outside I walked myself through the white light, still and hushed like a terrible, silent mob, and under the bright-dark shadows of the arms of the trees, and past the houses filled with staring strangers.

I decided I would visit a grove of trees that I particularly liked. These trees had nice limbs. On the day of my arrival I'd come upon them, and I saw how their branches tapped and touched and mixed like fingers, and how their shadows locked and crossed and fell and moved so that the black street seemed to wear a patterned skin like a diamondback snake. And I thought that I had found something beautiful in Texas, and it made me think that I might bear it. But on this hot Saturday there was no breeze at all, and the trees stood stock still and stared straight ahead like sentrymen bearing up under the heat, like they didn't even know me.

I'd met a fellow who lived nearby, an Englishman by the name of Benjamin Grant. Benjamin reminded me of my oldest brother, Timothy, who'd been as sweet and calm and comforting as cream, and so I liked him. I decided I would visit him. But Benjamin was tired that day—very tired, he said. He let

me in purely out of British politeness, then stretched out on his sofa perfectly still as a lizard on a rock and stared at the walls and windows until my halting conversation lulled him to sleep.

So I let myself out very quietly, and presently I found myself walking along in this little paved parking area outside of some apartments made of a green-white limestone. I was thinking that the world was a very hot, bright, lonely place, and I wished for my mother and dad, and the shady garden and blue mountains in Virginia. I was thinking this very hard, and wishing it very badly, and my eyes were seeing red bleedinghearts and white foxgloves and pale, soft lambs' ears, and my feet were cool in the grass.

And then suddenly I snapped to attention because a lady pulled right up next to me in a maroon Buick, right there in front of all the stones, and she asked me if I knew where apartment 121 was, and I told her I did. Because I might not have had any money or any friends, but I do have a mind for detail. So I told the lady to park her Buick because 121 was around the corner in its own little nook, and we would have to walk.

So she parked and she got out of the car very slowly, one leg at a time, and she hoisted her right leg out with her two arms, as though she were a cripple. When she finally rose she clutched the car door like a crutch, and I could see that she was terribly old. She was skinny in the bony, milky way peculiar to old people, and her hands were spotted with shadowy age, and her fingers were gnarled as roots.

She closed the car door and shuffled along, bent as the bowl of a spoon, and holding onto the Buick with her awful hands like it was a ballet bar. And she opened the trunk and it was crammed with lovely things, as though she planned to attend a number of weddings and showers and church dinners. There was a watermelon fruit-boat filled with fruit, a coffeecake from the bakery, several crocheted blankets, mostly in browns and yellows, two sets of floral sheets, four periwinkle towels with white piping, a stained glass window ornament in the shape of a hummingbird, and a little bag of crystallized ginger candy. She started to gather the things, preparing to take them in to her friend Prudence in 121 whom, she said, was dreadfully ill. So I told her Oh No You're Not, and For Heaven's Sake Let Me Do It, and Especially the Fruit Basket. And when she told me Thank You Sweetheart and that her name was Margaret I saw that her lips were all worn out, and that they quivered and were spotted with black age. So I helped her to 121 with my hand under her elbow, skin soft and loose as old leaves, and then I brought in

all of the blankets and sheets and towels, and the candy and coffeecake, and finally the heavy fruit basket.

And then I stood sweating in front of the ladies—Prudence, in a wheelchair, whose skin was the color of ice, and whose hair was as sparse as an infant's, and Margaret, leaning on the back of Prudence's chair, and another, tiny woman called Vivian who was mostly deaf and mostly blind. "We have been visited by an angel!" they said. And they turned to each other like judges in conference, as though I could not hear them, nodding and remarking and agreeing that an angel was indeed among them. Then they fell into a dusty silence, and finally Prudence looked up and asked me if I wouldn't join them for a cup of tea.

So I fixed us all a pot of hot tea, and gave each of the ladies a cup and each one told me Thank You Angel, when I handed it to them. Prudence had some of the ginger candies and she closed her eyes and smiled and I thought she was drifting to sleep but she said she was only thinking of her husband, and Vivian and Margaret sighed, and they too began to think of their husbands. And the three sat with shut eyes and whispered to the men in a scant, silvery way, and the room was silent except for the hushed rustling of the old lips and throats, like the quietest breeze through the tenderest leaves of the smallest trees, and the room was filled with ghosts.

Then, there in the cold coal of the quiet I became filled with a windy feeling, as though I was peering into a room that had been vacant for many years. And now it was filled only with the slow chant of the sounds of sleep, and the silent noise of dreams, and this was no comfort. It was a peculiar, hollow sensation, and so I rose to leave. But when I did my feet crackled on the floor, as though I had stepped on a carpet of shells and gravel and dried leaves. And Prudence turned toward me—not in a startled way at all, but slow and deliberate and wide-eyed like an owl.

"Angel," came her voice from the corner, sharp as candlelight, "Angel, don't go." And in ringing echo came the sounds of Vivian and Margaret: "Angel, Angel . . . stay with us a little longer!"

And Vivian alone: "Angel, why would you leave? Stay and share with us! Stay and sup with us! Come, Angel, help me with the supper." And she rose, painful and rusty, and beckoned me to the kitchen with her slim hands, and I followed.

We warmed soup, first, and then Vivian made creamed chicken in a deep black skillet, I remember, and also candied carrots and steamed spinach, and

we warmed soft dinner rolls. And all the while her hands trembled so that she could not grasp the dials on the gas stove, and could not lift the heavy pots, and could hardly open the oven door. And then, hunched as she was, she would look up at me with her eyes rolled nearly into her head and tell me Angel, Please Help, and her voice was the soft whish of a broom.

We set the table with the fruit-boat for a centerpiece, and the ladies thought it was very beautiful, and that the soft chicken was very delicious. I had hardly taken one bite before Margaret began to speak of her husband, and her words moved forward slowly, stalking. She told me that he'd perished, in a fire in a hotel in Egypt. And as she spoke her words seemed to grasp my mind and dance with it, and my head became hot with the vision of the fire like teeming red witches, the flames their wild arms, the heat their horrid breath. And I saw her husband wrinkle and disappear in a snake of smoke, and his shadow was lost in a bank of black shadow.

I looked down at my plate, white porcelain with a silver circle, and by now my food had grown cold and soft and I could not eat it. The ladies, however, continued to eat with great relish, gnawing and sucking at the chicken and its rich white sauce. Now Prudence began to recall her husband's passing, too, and she peered around and said it happened right before her very eyes, right after a grand party at the shore. And the strung lights in the black sky were like cats' eyes, and the air was thin and soft as silk, and the moon's gray gaze was upon us. And afterwards Prudence and her husband strolled together on the veranda, and all the half-empty glasses and plates and the crumpled napkins were the scattered remains of the evening, the artifacts of the hours past. And then I saw the man falter and fall, and his glass and ice shattered into sharp shards. And then his breath fled and joined the rest of the night, settling beneath the trees and bushes.

Then there was silence.

The ladies looked at me, and then at my plate of untouched food—one to the other and back, as though they were comparing. "Angel!" they chided. "Why haven't you been eating?" I looked down at the plate with its silver circle, and suddenly the greens were soft, hairy moss, and the carrots gelid fingers, and the creamy chicken putrid vomit. My head spun and my heart raced and weakly I told them Thanks, No . . . No Thanks No Thanks No Thanks! At first they were only irritated but soon they became strangely desperate, leaning towards me with their six dull eyes, pleading with me to

Please Share, Please Share, Take, Eat. Finally it became clear to them that I would not, and there came a brief respite from the racket of their clamoring throats, and Margaret's one voice rose and told me archly that one could not expect to keep one's body and one's soul together, if one refused to eat.

Now I was filled with guilt; I was appalled at my own lack of manners. So I rose to clear the dishes, and said that I would fix us all a pot of coffee, and slice the coffeecake for dessert. And as I hunted and searched for cups and dishes and a sharp knife in the strange kitchen the ladies sat and watched as though I were a mouse in a cage; I could hear them commenting to one another at my quick movements and nimble hands.

Then we sat huddled at the little kitchen table, and I told myself that no matter where I might be I must not forget my manners; I must take what the ladies offered. But when I lifted my coffee cup to my lips and saw the steam rising and curling, it was the missing souls of the dead men, and the cake was soft rot, and again my head reeled and my hands trembled, and I could not eat or drink.

It occurred to me then that the little house was very warm, and in a wintry way, as though it was bitter cold outside. Perhaps this warmth was what made my heart beat so . . . for I'll swear that frost was creeping up the windows like white spiders, and that the light that reached through the window was bony blue, as though it had been reflected from snow, and that a white wind was throwing itself against the front door, and I could hear it thumping.

Now Vivian was explaining why it was she hadn't even wept when she'd heard of her husband's death—they never found his body, after all—but I could hardly hear her; she seemed far away, and my ears were filled with the hurling and banging of the wind. Surely the ladies noticed that my face had become shiny with sweat, and my breath quick, and my nimble hands unsure . . . but if they did they chose to ignore it, and continued to speak while I grew ever more nervous . . . the space of my mind was dimming, and my stomach seemed to be filled with a flock of great birds, trapped and flapping their great wings. And the warm room with all of its curling and the voices and the old eyes all pressed tightly upon me so that I could scarcely breathe, much less speak. I rose from the table, looked down at the ladies, and without a word, left.

Some days passed and my hours became filled with work and words and various tasks and sleep. But I could not forget the ladies. I called my mother

and told her what had happened, and she scolded me. "It is important not to forget the elderly!" she told me. "Think of their lonesome lives!" And I supposed she was right, and was ashamed, and told myself that my strange behavior on the day of the encounter demonstrated not only ill breeding, but also my own childishness.

So the following Wednesday evening, ten days later, I softened sweet butter and when I had finished my silent supper I mixed the ladies a sugar shortbread, rolling and cutting the fragrant dough just as I had seen my mother do so many times before. I baked it and put it on a plate, still warm, and made my way to the ladies with my rich offering.

When I arrived I saw no lights in the window. I rapped and knocked and rang the doorbell, but—what do you think?—nobody answered. A man appeared at the side of the building. I suppose he came from around the corner, but he appeared with a lot of rustle, as though he'd risen from the shrubs. And I suppose he was a handyman or a yardman, because he was filthy—so dirty he appeared sooty—and his face was lined and scarred with years. But he seemed feeble and carried no tools.

"Where are the ladies?" I asked him.

He laughed shortly, with only one quick breath. "Ooh," he said roundly, and his voice rang as though he spoke from within a cave. "Gone."

"Well," I said, "how long?"

The man cocked his withered head and looked at me as though I'd asked a very nosy question. "Little while," he said at last.

"Well *how long*?" I demanded. "A week? A month? Years?"

"Can't say," he said quietly, looking down and shifting his feet in the dirt. "Don't recall . . . I've lost track of the time myself, I'm afraid." He laughed. "Guess it depends on what you call a long time or a little while!"

We stood and looked at each other in the creeping dim, ten paces apart, perhaps, our faces blank and unfriendly as two clocks. Finally I walked toward him. "Why don't you take this?" I told him, handing him the shortbread. "I can't deliver it to the ladies . . . and I surely won't eat it myself."

The man reached out and took the plate. "I appreciate that," he said, and he turned and started to walk away, slowly, with stiff, halting steps. "After all," he said, looking straight ahead as though he were not talking to me at all, but to someone else in front of him, "one cannot expect to keep one's body and one's soul together . . . if one refuses to eat."