

The Battle of Manila · *Laura Kalpakian*

THE ICEMAN BROUGHT ME to that day, woke me, I mean. He usually brought me two, but this day he didn't bring me nothing, just woke me where I sat on the porch having my dream when he knocked on the rail and said, "Afternoon, Mrs. Dance, I come to collect."

I lifted one eye at him, hardly able to see him at all in the glare of his white uniform and the sunlight shuddering in and out of the foxtails in the yard and the heat baking down in waves underneath the tin roof. I asked him what I owed.

"Two dollars thirty-five, same as ever, Mrs. Dance."

"You're robbing me same as ever," I say, but I got up and went in the house, that dog sniffing at my heels and got my coin purse off the piano where I always keep it between all the pictures and took it back out. "The ice melts too fast in this heat," I say. "Maybe you better bring me an extra cake. I need some for the icebox and some to cool off."

He looks strange for a minute, scratches a pimple on his chin and asks if I got his note, the one he left with the last delivery. "It was the last delivery, Mrs. Dance, the very last one. No more ice no more. No more iceboxes. Everyone in St. Elmo's got refrigerators nowadays and they don't need no ice."

"I got an icebox," I tell him.

He counts me back my change. "Well you get one of your boys to buy you a refrigerator, why don't you? Will and Archie are making good money. They can buy you a refrigerator. Why, some of them fridges have little freezers up top and you can make your own ice." He tips his hat and starts to leave me, to fight his way back up through the foxtails to where I know the fence is and after that, the sidewalk and the icewagon. I hear the squeal of the gate before I call out after him. "What day is it?"

"Tuesday, like ever, Mrs. Dance. I always come—used to come—on Tuesday."

"What Tuesday?" I holler.

"Tuesday the 17th of August," he cries back.

"But what's the year?"

Over the chug of the ice wagon, he shouts, "It's 1948, Mrs. Dance and everyone has a refrigerator and don't need no more ice."

And that's how the iceman brought me to and I knew time was passing and it was years since the Luzon campaign and the battle of Manila Bay.

I go back inside, dog at my heels and put the coin purse back up top of the piano between the picture of my son Will and Mrs. Will and their children, and my son Archie and Mrs. Archie and their children. They're twins, Will and Archie and they had joined up the Navy together and they was at Pearl Harbor when the Japs blowed it up, but they wasn't neither of them killed or even injured when it happened. But this whole house might just as well have been atop the Arizona that day because my husband Hank had the radio on and my youngest Ben was reading the funny paper and I was fixing breakfast when the news of Pearl Harbor come on. Ben drops the paper and screams. I drop the dishes and scream and peed my pants, but Hank, he did not scream. He gasps and moans out the bitterest note I ever heard, a long ragged groan and then a sharp, high one and he crumples over, falls forward out of his chair to the floor. He had a heart attack and died in Ben's arms. The only victim of Pearl Harbor to be living in California.

They give Hank a veteran's funeral, not for his being the first California victim of the second war, but for having fought in the first. Hank had joined up in May, 1917, even though he was a married man and didn't have to go. He said he hated the Hun and owed it to his country. So his country owed it to him to bury him and they did. Hank's no sooner in the grave than Ben's telling me how he hates the Japs and owes it to his country to quit school and join up. I said: Will and Archie will save the world, you stay home with me till they call you. They'll call you soon enough. You're only eighteen. I told him that and Connie told him that and between us we kept him in St. Elmo till after high school graduation, but then he joins up to be like his brothers. He joins the army to be different from them.

But Ben wasn't like his brothers. They both lived and come home and got married and had families and now, just like the ice man said, they're doing real well. Will's manager of the St. Elmo Feed and Seed and he can't string two words together without he talks about diversifying and expansion and hard goods and profit. Archie, he goes to law school. Good thing Hank was already dead because Hank hated lawyers. Hank was a union man. Hank loved the union the way some folks love God or baseball. But Archie's a lawyer and him and his family live over in the new part of town

and they even got a television set. They want me to come over and watch their television set, but I say no, I'll just stay here and watch my old dog and whatever flies come to roost and the honeysuckle when it cares to flower. Now, though, I know I'll have to call Archie and Will and say something about a refrigerator because I can't live without ice. I go in and check the icebox and the cake has got another day, maybe more, so I can wait to phone. I chip me off some ice and go back out to the porch and my dream.

It's a new dream. Not real new, but since Christmas, maybe, or some holiday like that. Before, I only dreamed of Ben little, running up these steps and falling and hurting his knee and his little arms around my neck while I carry him into the house and wash the blood and mud off him, my lips against his sweet cheek. Or little Ben in the bathwater taking the suds from his hair and putting them on his chin and saying to me, ho ho ho, like he was Santy Claus. Or little Ben all dressed up to be a pirate on Halloween and coming into the kitchen where I am making popcorn balls, coming up behind me and saying "Boo!" and scaring me out of my wits. But in this new dream, I am in the middle of the amphibious assault on Manila Bay. The fighting is going on all around me, but it don't notice me and I don't pay no mind to the shocks and shells, the blast and shriek all around while I am looking for my son. I am in my old dress like the one I got on now and my old green checked apron that's wore through here and there and I kneel in the mud beside a body I know is Ben. I pull him into my lap and turn him over slowly. The first few times I have this dream, that's all I do: just kneel and turn him over, glad to see his face is only muddy, no blood or nothing. I am glad they have not shot up his face. But lately in my dream I find fresh water from somewheres and I bathe that mud from his face and I am so happy that with the mud washed off, it is still perfect.

Maybe Ben didn't die in the mud, but that's the way I dream it, so that's how it is, even if that ain't how it was. I rock on this porch and suck on the ice and wait for the dream to come get me, even though I can hear the dog snuffling and kids' voices somewheres, kids up to no good, no doubt, and the foxtails rasping against one another and the weight of this honeysuckle vine sagging down on the porch and pretty soon I don't hear no kids or dog, nor nothing but the fighting going on all around me in Manila Bay and I scrape the mud from my son's beautiful young face, his nice tanned skin and fine mouth, his sandy colored hair and I bathe his closed

eyes with fresh water. I kiss his eyes.

After a time the sun squints under that tin roof and lights up my eyelids bright and I know it's time to quit the dream and go in and get supper for me and this old dog. I heave my bones out of the rocker and the dog follows me to the kitchen. I don't worry about losing the dream. It will come back and it don't scare me in the least because I know it means I have accepted Ben's death and God's will and I am not fighting God any longer.

Ben's death near killed me. They said I was wild with grief. They said they couldn't figure it because I had took Hank's death so well. Well, of course I did. Hank and me, we had our good times, we had our family and our laughs and our cries and a few beers after the boys were abed, our days on this porch, our nights in that old bed for near twenty-five years and always, even in the worst of the Depression, Hank always had work with the railroad and our boys never knew the cramp of hunger in the gut. Me and Hank, we had all of that, but Ben was only twenty-two. Ben had nothing unless you count that slut Connie, which I don't.

I didn't always think she was a slut. I used to like her. A pretty girl. Plump and pink and blue-eyed and mad for Ben. She set her cap for him and she went after him and if Connie Frett had been my daughter, I'd have tanned her hide before I'd let her run after a boy like that, but she got him. They was in love and they couldn't keep their eyes off one another—or their hands neither is my guess. After Ben died I kept watch on Connie Frett, hoping I'd see her sprout a big belly, but I told myself it wouldn't be Ben's baby anyway. He had been gone too long. But Connie was a good girl in her way and after Ben died, she couldn't do enough for me. She was over here all the time, like we had to be together because we was the only ones who loved Ben that much. I shared her grief, but I couldn't let her share mine. She and me, we'd come out on this porch in the evenings and sit on the steps together and I'd say, thank you for cooking supper, Connie, and for cleaning up, or thank you for sweeping the porch and dusting up the place, Connie. And then she'd put her head in my lap and weep and I'd pat her back. We'd stay that way for a long time, but I couldn't let her share my grief. That was all my very own.

After a while she quit coming over so regular and folks said Connie was coming out of it and wasn't that good and I said, yes it was. They said the war was over and the boys all home and wasn't that good and I said yes. But I got lonely after Connie quit coming and it was just me and Ben and

this old dog left here and no more Connie flinging herself into my lap, sobbing her eyes out and needing me.

Then one night, I get a knock on my door and it's Connie Frett. She looks real pretty with a gardenia in her hair and a yellow cotton dress on. She leans down and pats this old dog and then she smiles up at me and says: Hi Manila.

That's my lawful name, Manila. I was born the same time Admirable Dewey took Manila Bay, when we whipped them Spanish and showed them what real Americans was made of. My mother told me folks was mad with victory and she could hear my father telling Dr. Tipton that he was going to name me Admirable Dewey and that the doctor pointed out that no girl could go around St. Elmo being called Admirable Dewey. It was the doctor suggested Manila and everyone agreed that was just the perfect name for a baby girl.

I said: What brings you by, Connie? I took two Coca-Colas out of the icebox and we sat on the front porch step, her pink arm next to my brown one, her yellow dress next to my green checked apron and the smell of her gardenia washing over us. She told me she was getting married in a week and she didn't want me hearing it from nobody else. "I'm marrying Michael Kehoe. He fought in Europe and he's home now. He was on the football team with Ben. Maybe you remember him, Manila."

"I don't remember no one but the quarterback."

"Ben was the quarterback."

"I know."

"Ben and Mike Kehoe were very good friends, Manila. They loved cars and football. They were a lot alike."

"No one was like Ben."

"No," she says, slow, pulling the word out taut, like bread dough till it frays and tatters in the middle. "I thought I would die when Ben died. I wanted to die." Connie swallows hard. I hear it. "If I couldn't die, then I wanted to grieve for him my whole life. But I can't."

"Who says you should?" I ask, swilling my Coca-Cola.

"I'm young," she goes on. "I love Michael Kehoe, not like I loved Ben, but I love him and I'm going to marry him and be a good wife to him."

"You never deserved Ben anyway," I say, hating myself, but saying it just the same. "You were a slut."

Connie stood and handed me back the Coke bottle. She brushed off the

seat of her yellow dress and started to walk down the path to the gate which you could see in them days because the foxtails hadn't yet growed over it. She gets halfway to the gate and she calls back, sad-like, "I guess Ben is all yours now, Manila."

I don't say nothing. I stay where I am and keep hold on the dog so he don't go after her. I want to ask Connie if she had ever made love with my boy Ben. I'd like to know he had a girl's love before he died. That isn't so much to ask. But I don't say nothing. I just sit here on the step and watch her yellow dress go out of the gate when you could still see the gate because the foxtails hadn't growed over it yet.

"I can't have the new fridge delivered, Ma, until you get these foxtails cut down." That's what Archie says to me, standing on the front porch, popping sweat and I tell him he wouldn't be so hot if he didn't wear vests and wool suits in summer. He laughs. He says, "Ma, that's part of my job. Who ever heard of a lawyer in overalls?"

"A mule in a party dress is still a mule."

"Yes, well, what about these foxtails? Let me send a boy over here to cut them down. Hell, Ma, I'll do it myself if you'd let me, but I'm telling you, they won't deliver the fridge until they can get through the yard."

"Then you do it," I tell him. "Only don't wear no suit."

So Archie and Will both come over and cut down my nice foxtails and pretty soon some men come into my kitchen and push the icebox in the corner and puff and huff and bring in a refrigerator and plug it in. I tell them: all I want is some ice. They show me these little trays that you put fresh water in and put them in the freezer and wait a long time and you get ice.

Real nice ice and lots of it. Enough for my Coca-Cola and some for me to drop down my dress and a square or two for the dog so's we can come out here on the porch and rock and let my dream come back to me: the mud of Manila Bay soaking over my skirt and up my knees as I kneel with Ben in my arms and the battle shrieking around us, guns booming and men screaming and mud. Me with my fresh water bathing Ben's beautiful young face, his hair, opening the collar of his uniform and washing the mud from his neck. I pull him tighter into my arms and put my weathered cheek against his perfect one.

Then one day, sometime later, I know it must have been later because

my dream wasn't new anymore, but an old dream, I was sitting on the porch, in summer. Anyway, it was hot. I was having my dream when I hear voices and I think it's the soldiers in the battle and I think it's strange I can hear them at last, but it's not soldiers and pretty soon I know it. Other voices. Calling at me. *Manila Dance has ants in her pants . . . Manila Dance has ants* I come to and the dog is barking and snarling and I smell the smoke from the battle all around me. The dog don't leave my side, but sniffs and squeals and looks up at me and barks when I say, "Holy Frijole, they've set us afire!" The smoke was thick everywhere now, but I couldn't see no flames, just a curtain of smoke and that awful chant to cut through it *Manila Dance has ants in her*

Me and the dog run into the house. He must have run under a bed, but I go straight to the piano and snatch all Ben's pictures off, the one in his football uniform and holding his helmet, his graduation picture and the other one of him when he joined up the army, so smart looking and beautiful. Then I grab the wedding picture of me and Hank and my coin purse with all my money. I pull off my green apron and make a bag of it and throw the picture in and I see I got room for the pictures of Will and Archie when they was little, before Ben came along. I tie it all up quick and make a run for the kitchen and the back door. I can see flames in the service porch and burnt my hand on the back doorknob and I could see the wringer washing machine starting to pop and crackle with the heat, so I run back to Ben's bedroom, but the window is locked. I break it with my elbow and throw my pictures out and call for the dog and he comes bounding and we leap out, me getting a long jagged cut down my leg which I don't notice just then because I hear sirens coming from all directions, blasting and blaring through the smoke. By the time me and the dog have got to the street, the fire department has got their hoses pumping and spraying the house and drowning the yard, fighting their way in the front door through the smoke. I stay as close by the house as they'll let me. I see the blood pouring out my leg. I kneel there and hold my dog and my pictures and I think: this is how it was in my dream, the smoke and ash and soot and blood, the mud, even, of Manila Bay.

Me and the dog have to stay with Will and Mrs. Will and their three children that night and Archie comes over, growling and snarling about how the police have already caught the little bastards that done it and how Archie is going to see they get their little bastard asses locked up for good and always.

But it didn't happen that way. Me and Will and Archie sat in court and listened to the judge rap them boys' little knuckles a few times and say they was never to come near my place again. Then he turns it on the parents and gives them a lot of ragging about their children being a menace to the public safety and how their children was their responsibility and then he says Case Dismissed. Just then one of the little bastards' fathers stands up and says to the Judge, "While you're at it, Your Honor, why don't you do something about her?" (He points to me.) "I ask you, is she responsible? Is anyone who lives in a fire trap and a pig sty and never comes out, who looses her dog on little children, isn't she a menace to the public safety? That woman is crazy, Your Honor, and a threat to property! She's forcing us all out of the neighborhood! She's crazy and she ought to be locked up for good and always!"

"Stuff it where the sun don't shine!" I yell, but then Will gets hold of my arm and marches me out of the courtroom and tells me for Chrissake to shut up.

He drives me to his house, a new one with a lot of other new ones all around it and skinny little trees in front and a pool out back. We all sit by the pool and drink lemonade. (Mrs. Will don't allow no Coca-Cola in her house. She says it will rot nails and just think what it will do to your teeth and brains.) They say they want me to come and live with them. Which I say no. Then Archie and Mrs. Archie drive up and come out to the pool too. They say: Why don't we get you a nice apartment, Ma? You don't need that big house anymore, living all by yourself. The yard is just too much for you. There's lots of nice apartments in St. Elmo nowadays, new ones. You could have neighbors and live close to shopping and not have Shirley do your shopping for you.

"I never asked Mrs. Will to do nothing for me," I tell them. "She just does it and she won't never take no for an answer. I'm not moving. Hank bought that house and that's where he lived till he died and that's where I'll live till I die."

Will says: "The house is ruint now, Ma."

"It's just blacked up a little from the smoke and the service porch gone, that's all. No more washing machine. I don't wash too much anyway."

Archie says: "Ma, fifty years ago Guadalupe Street might have been a good neighborhood, even twenty or thirty years ago, but it's just not anymore. That man was right, Ma. All the nice people are moving out."

“What do I care? I don’t have no dealings with the neighbors and once the foxtails grow back, I don’t even have to see them. Why, once them foxtails grow back, I could live next door to the White House and not see President Roosevelt.”

“Roosevelt?” says Mrs. Archie with a little gag. “Roosevelt’s dead, Mom. Roosevelt’s been dead for ten years. Eisenhower’s the president now.”

“Eisenhower’s the general.”

They all look from one to the other. They tell me about how the general got to be the President. Then they go back to talking about the apartment I should live in and neighbors and shopping, but I don’t have to hear it. I crunch on my ice and it fills up my ears. I drink my lemonade, wishing I had a Coke and wondering how it could be that so much time had passed since they quit delivering the ice and wondering if my refrigerator still worked and how long it would take the foxtails to grow back and if I could bear to sit on the porch till they did.

They all shout and snuffle at me, but the next day I get Mrs. Will to drive me back to my own house. I won’t let her come in. I am glad to be rid of her. Of all of them. A week at Will’s is like a year and a half anywhere else. Maybe I been there longer than a week. My house still stinks of smoke, but the wet’s almost all dried up, everything except the couch and the chair: they are still wet and they are starting to smell. The television set don’t work either.

I tell the dog, let’s get to work. First thing is to open all the windows and get the smell of battle out. Then I undo the knot on my green apron and take my pictures out and use the apron to give the piano a nice dust up, to get the ash and cinders off. The wood is all buckled up, but I don’t play anyhow. It was always Ben like to thump the piano and grin at Connie Frett while she swooned alongside him. The pictures I left on the piano, they got wet, but not burnt and that’s all I really care about anyway.

First I put my wedding picture back up and then I put the one of Will and Archie when they was little. I look at it. I move it so it sits between the one of Will and Mrs. Will, and their family and the one of Archie and Mrs. Archie and their family. Look at that, will you? Will and Archie are getting old! I wonder why I never noticed it in the flesh. Then I say to myself: Manila, it’s because you never much look at them in the flesh. But I

think on them now, think on them hard, on what they look like now. Will's hair is all pepper and salt and he's got one more chin than God gave him. Archie's hair clings alongside his ears, but it has deserted the top of his head and Archie has a paunch. Will and Archie never was no beauties (and their children ditto and their wives the same), but I had never before noticed that they are getting old.

I reach down and pick up Ben's pictures and set them on the piano, first the football one and then high school graduation and then Ben in his uniform. I touch his beautiful young face. Ben will never grow old, Ben will never be bald or have a paunch or gray hair. Everyone else will change, but not Ben. I pick up the uniform picture and press it to me, but I have to sit down at the piano bench because I get dizzy when I think how it's been ten years since Roosevelt died, since all the boys come home. I get weak when I think how pretty soon everyone will forget all about the boys that didn't come home. No one will remember them. They won't have no children to look like them. The dead don't have no law offices with their names on shingles, don't have their pictures in the paper cutting ribbons for new stores. The boys that didn't come home don't have friends and families and boys of their own who will go to high school and court girls in yellow cotton dresses with gardenias in their hair. Ben won't have none of that. Ever. I hold Ben's picture but I won't cry because I have accepted his death and God's will. I hear a voice come into my ear, steady as the drone of a gnat. *Ben has you, Manila. You're all Ben's got, Manila. Ben and you will live in this house till you die.* I start to cry then and the dog comes over and rubs against my bandaged leg. He thinks I am crying for Ben's death, but I have accepted Ben's death. I am crying because Ben won't have no life. I am crying because I am all the life Ben has and he deserves better than me. I am crying because I know when I die, Ben will die too. He will stay forever young and beautiful and die when I do and no one will ever know he once lived. No one will remember how he filled my arms with his baby body, how he said ho ho ho in the bathwater and Boo at Halloween, that he brought in the newspaper or teased me for the cherries on my hat, that he grinned at Connie Frett while he sat on this piano bench. I slide to the floor with the dog. I cry into his dog smell and promise Ben that when I die they'll put Ben's name on the stone too. Ben don't have no stone in St. Elmo. Ben's buried in the Philippines, but he won't die till I do. Ben Dance 1923-1945, Manila Dance, 1898 to whenever she dies. Ben

and Manila, they died together, knee deep in the mud and blood and smoke and stink of battle, the last battle of Manila, the one they fought in St. Elmo, California.

The dog died first. He was old and he just went peaceful in his sleep, but I couldn't lift him so I waited until Mrs. Will come with my groceries and then I told her the dog died and she said she would call Will at the Home Center.

"The what?" I say.

"Sit down, Mom, and relax and I'll make you a cup of coffee." While she's making the coffee, she goes on about how there ain't no Feed and Seed anymore, but the St. Elmo Home Center which carries everything for the Do-It-Yourselfer. She leaves me in the kitchen with the coffee and I hear her go into the livingroom and dial the phone and tell Will how he better bring the Home Center truck for the dog, how he better do it fast because she don't know exactly when the dog died. Then she waits for a bit and adds that I might go round the bend if I see the Humane Society truck. I wonder what bend she's talking about since I never leave this house.

Mrs. Will comes back in the kitchen and pours herself a cup of coffee and sits at the table with me and starts to gab like she always does about her kids and what fine things they're doing. Like I could care. I can't even keep their names straight, or which one's got foil all over his teeth and which ones don't. I am wondering what I will do without that old dog. I never liked him and he was mangy and ugly, but we got on and he was a good watch dog. He always heard the kids nosing about the place and he'd snarl and take after them till he got too old. He was mangy, but he was useful. And in the middle of my thinking about the dog, I hear Mrs. Will say something about Connie.

"Connie? Connie Frett? Ben's girlfriend?"

"Connie Kehoe, Mom. She came into the Home Center the other day with her husband and we had a real nice chat. She's got three kids now, a boy and two little girls. Mike's going to re-light the kitchen for her, fluorescent light, the latest thing, and they've just poured a new patio too.

"Connie asked after you, Mom. She was real concerned, you living here all by yourself in this bad neighborhood. She said she read in the news-

paper about the fire. I told her how we've been trying to get you to move for years now and how stubborn you are." Mrs. Will stopped there like I am supposed to laugh or apologize or say how nice that was. I wipe my nose with my hand. "Connie says she keeps meaning to come over and see you one day, but with all those kids, she just can't—"

"I don't want to see her or no one. You tell her. You tell her she better not come around Guadalupe Street, not her, or no one else. Bad enough I have to jaw and pass the time of day with the meter reader and the mailman, though I don't get no mail no more, just stuff for occupant. I don't even get no bills anymore, come to think of it. I can't remember the last time I got a bill or anything with my real name on it. Manila Dance. I miss the ice man."

Mrs. Will pats my hand and says that was because all my bills now went to Will and Archie and they pay them and wasn't I lucky to have two such fine sons.

"I got three sons," I tell her. "Three and don't you forget it. Don't none of you forget Ben just because he's dead and you're not."

"I didn't mean it like that, Mom. I'm sure if Ben had lived—"

But I get up and go to the fridge for a Coke because I can't stand to hear it from her lips, what Ben might have done if he'd lived. He didn't live. He didn't grow old and fat like Will or fat and bald like Archie. Ben died in Manila Bay. Ben lives in Manila Dance. And then I heard Connie Frett's voice float back to me, past all the years and foxtails, *I guess Ben is all yours now, Manila*. And I thought: she knew it, even then, that little slut of a girl, she knew what would happen to Ben and I did not.

I go to the sink and wash my face and Mrs. Will says she's real sorry about the dog.

Then one day in the spring, they all come over, all the grandchildren and Will and Archie and their wives all dressed up and they bring me a cake and a puppy and told me Happy Birthday. They told me I was sixty and they got me this dog for my birthday. They said his name was Lucky.

I hated the little bastard. He peed on everything and got under my feet and was always climbing up on the bed like it was his. I kicked him off, but he always come back and pretty soon I got so's I couldn't remember the other dog that much and I sort of liked this frisky one, but I told him he wasn't getting nothing special from me and he'd have to earn his keep just like the old one done.

One morning I wake up to hear him barking like a sonofabitch. I put on my robe and open the door so he can go out and pee, but he tears up through the foxtails and then I hear an “Ooof! Ouch! Help! Call off this damn dog! Ow!”

I wait a little, maybe count to ten. Maybe twelve. Then I call the dog off. I go out to this bimbo and ask him what he’s doing in my yard. He points to the sign he has just hammered in amongst the foxtails, just about buried in foxtails and right next to the fence. It says:

PUBLIC NOTICE

These premises constitute a public hazard. They will be cleared within thirty (30) days of the date hereon in accordance with Civic Code #452-12-J, Article 5. The owners of title shall clear said property or be fined appropriate to Property Code 21569.

I say: “What the hell does that mean?”

He says: “It means you clean up this pigsty, lady, or they’re going to cart you off to the funny farm.”

I make like I am going to let go of the dog. He leaves.

Archie come over that night and he says the sign don’t mean that exactly. Archie says the City of St. Elmo was very concerned for the fire hazard my house and yard presented. I said there wouldn’t be no fire, nor no hazard as long as no bastard brats torched my place, but Archie says that’s all five years ago now and that this summer’s been especially hot and dry and that the city was afraid that if a passer-by flicked his cigarette into my foxtails, the whole neighborhood would go up in flames. He said of course I wouldn’t want that on my conscience.

I said I didn’t give a good goddamn. I didn’t know any of my neighbors and anyway, they was all a long ways from my house. “Least I got a real yard,” I told Archie, “One half acre of real yard, not like that postage stamp with a pool you call your back yard.”

Archie started to go on about the city some more, but I watch the electric light gleaming off the top of his head. He don’t have no hair there at all anymore. Is Archie just about the same age Hank was when he died? Is he? He don’t look like Hank. Hank always had hair. Maybe Archie looks

like me, but I reach up top of my head and I got hair too and then I remember that I don't know what I look like anymore so how could I know who Archie looks like? My face swims up to Archie's for a closer look, but all I can tell for certain is that Archie don't look like Ben. Ben is still twenty-two and in the mud and I start to tell Archie about my old dream, about how it was scaring me now because even though I had accepted Ben's death and God's will, I was scared, too scared to go on with my dream where I have got Ben's shirt unbuttoned, open, but I can't do nothing more. What if I get his shirt off and find him all bloody and blasted? No, God, please God, no, don't let his flesh be shredded before my eyes. What if I get my son's shirt off his shoulders and back and find he don't have no back, no shoulders, no body that's not bloodied into pulp? Oh, Archie, what if the mud turns red? I can't remember where Ben took the bullets, Archie, or how it was he died at all except for Manila Bay and I . . .

"Now, Ma, let me call the doctor, Ma. Please. Better yet, let me take you to the hospital. They can help you, Ma. Really. They can help you get along with other people. Just a little stay at the hospital, that's all you need. Just to get away from this house and stay where the doctors can help you forget the past and get on with your life."

Well what could I do but laugh out loud? I laughed so hard that dog jumped up and waved its little black tail like I was about to throw him a bone and when I was through laughing, I said, "The first person who comes here to cut them weeds gets shot. And the first doctor who comes near me, he gets shot too. My life is getting on just fine, Archie Dance, without no doctors and without no hospitals and your life is getting on too, Archie, and if you once looked in the mirror you'd see it. You're old, Archie. You're old and fat and you won't never be young and beautiful again."

Archie took his hat off the table and jammed it on his bald head. He said: "That's the way it happens to the living, Ma."

I told him to save it for the jury and leave me be.

They come to cut the foxtails and just like I promised, I holler out the window that I have a shotgun and I am about to blow them to bits. I didn't have no gun, but it sounded good.

The guy hollers back that he was leaving, but that he'd be back with a court order signed by my own son, Judge Archibald Dance.

I turned to the little dog and I said, "Just imagine Archie being a judge and never telling me." The little dog looked at me funny and that's when I thought maybe Archie had told me. I went to the piano and asked Ben what he thought of Archie being a judge and Ben give me his old boyish grin and said this was our foxtail foxhole, our fortress and wouldn't no one get in, judge or no judge. I laughed and turned Ben's picture so he could see the TV. We like the game shows and cartoons best of all. I eat my lunch with Sheriff Sam and the Cartoon Corral.

I must have fell asleep because there was something else on the TV, the picture sputtering up and down when I woke to the sound of a knock on my door. The dog woke up too. (He never was as good a watchdog as the old one.) I go to the door and there stands this blonde kid, pink and pale and kind of fat, his blue eyes big with fright. He keeps licking his lips. He says: "I'm Danny Kehoe." He looks over his shoulder. "My mother's down the walk, there, just outside the gate."

I say: "Tell it to the marines. I don't want any."

"My mother, Connie Kehoe, she wants to know if you want me to cut your grass. You talk to her."

He makes like he's going to call her, but I say, real quick, I say, "No, I don't want to see her." I stare at this boy and I can see Connie Frett all over him, but the foxtails are so nice and high that I can't see Connie down at the gate. The boy is thirteen or fourteen, maybe, fat like Connie was when she first set her cap for Ben. I say: "I don't have no grass and I like the foxtails just as they are."

He looks like he wants to run or pee his pants, but he licks his lips again and says, "My mother said I was to do for you whatever might need doing here. She says I'm to do it for you and your boy."

"For Ben?" I say, "For Ben?"

"I don't know his name."

"For Ben," I say again and this time I smile.

Twice a month that boy come. I wouldn't let him touch the foxtails, but he cleared off the tumbleweeds and picked up the trash and cleared away the last of the wreck from the fire, the wringer washer and a mattress I had throwed out too. He said he didn't think there'd be another war and I didn't have to save my tin cans no more and if I got rid of them, maybe I wouldn't have so much mice. He said, if I wanted the mice, he'd leave the cans be. I let him use Ben's little red wagon to gather them cans

all up and put them in bags and take them out to the street so the trashmen could come and get them. He said the trash people come Monday on Guadalupe Street and when he come on Saturday, he'd put my trash out. Those Saturdays he didn't come, the trash don't go out. Then one day he shows up hauling a bright trash can, so shiny it makes you blink and he says he got it at the Home Center, that Will give it to him. Connie's boy trimmed back the honeysuckle so it didn't weigh so heavy on the tin roof over the porch, then he put some props alongside the railings and said he would fix the raingutters, but then he looked at them and they were too rotted to fix. He even fixed the window in Ben's room, the one I'd put my elbow through escaping from the fire. I always just stuffed newspapers there to keep out the wind and cold and animals, but he fixed it up with glass and he said Will told him he could have whatever he needed to fix my place up. Danny said since Will was giving away, why not some new rain-gutters? I said: Why not? Then Danny said: "I'll do the raingutters, Manila, and then I'll trim the foxtails."

While Connie's boy was working I'd remember how Connie used to moon about this yard waiting for Ben to finish his chores so he could take her to the matinee and then out for a soda. When Connie's boy finished up his chores, me and him always had a Coke if it was hot, or coffee if it was cold. He liked his coffee just the way Ben did, with sugar and milk and lots of it. I started having Mrs. Will buy more sugar and milk and asked for some cookies too. Danny said Oreos were his favorite.

One afternoon while we was having coffee, Danny flips on the TV Archie got me after the fire. Danny asks me what's wrong with it. Nothing, I tell him. It works fine. Danny says I'd get a lot more channels if I'd let him put an aerial up, but I didn't know what that was. He said it was no never mind and he'd get it from Will at the Home Center. Even though the next day was Sunday, Danny come back over and he spends the whole afternoon on the roof handing me down wire and calling back and forth while we slid the wire in the window and he used some little pliers to diddle the back of the TV. Then, up he goes again, back on the roof and tells me to holler when the picture is the best. "Just imagine," I said when he come back down, "just imagine all that was going on TV all the time and I never got nothing but Channel 11 and Channel 13."

"Now you can watch the football games, Manila," Danny said, but I told him I hadn't been to a football game since Ben graduated from high

school and he said they had them on TV now and you could watch football and not leave the comfort of your own home.

After that, Danny'd come earlier and stay later and watch the football games with me. He explained the game. I didn't get it, but I pretended I did. I asked a lot of questions because it was so nice to hear a boy talk about football like Ben used to do. One day Danny asked me why I didn't get some beer so I put it on my list for Mrs. Will and she near puked when she read it. Next thing I know I got Archie in my living room ragging on me about buying beer for minors.

"There's no minors in St. Elmo," I tell him. "St. Elmo's a railroad town."

Archie's face rumples up like a baked potato. "Ma," he says, "we are all very pleased at what Danny Kehoe has been able to do for you. We are very pleased that you will let him help out around here and you ought to know that I have offered both him and Connie money and they won't take it."

"Money for what?"

"There's been a great transformation in you and in this place in the last two years, Ma."

"Years?" I say, "*two years?*"

"But if he is going to ask you to buy beer for him, I must tell him to quit coming, it's against the law and—"

"Don't you dare, Archie Dance! Don't you dare! What's it to you, Mr. Judge Dance, if I have a couple of beers? I'm not buying it for Danny. I'm buying it for me and Ben. We like a beer now and then and who are you to tell us we can't have one?"

So a six pack of beer come with the groceries, but only once a month. Mrs. Will said that was all I needed. I didn't like the beer as much as I like Coke, but it was nice to have a beer with Danny while we watched football after he done the chores. He even painted the porch and the smell come all over the house. I breathed it in. Ben painted the porch once, just before he joined up.

One afternoon I hear a knock and I go to the door and it's Danny and he's wearing a gorilla mask. Scared the living BeJesus out of me. He has a sack of candy in his hand. "It's Halloween, Manila," says Danny, lifting his mask. "And I think I'll just sit here this year and hand out the candy and keep trouble away. We don't want any trouble like last year when

those kids broke your window, do we?"

"There's no beer, Danny," I tell him. "We drunk it all up."

"Well, I'll stay here and hold down the fort and you go to Garcia's and get us a six pack."

"I couldn't."

"Sure you could, Manila. Garcia's store is just down the street three blocks. This side. You can't miss it."

"No." I start to back away, but Danny comes up to me and I see that he's taller than me. I come to the same place on Danny that I used to come to on Ben. Danny is still pink and blonde like Connie but he's not fat anymore. He's tall.

He takes my old coat off the hook and helps me into it. "What's Halloween without a few beers, Manila? Don't worry, I'll fight off the troops."

That's what I said to Garcia (or whoever it was behind the till). I said: What's Halloween without a few beers? And Garcia says *Si Si* and rolled his eyes toward heaven. He says: Very happy to help you, Manila and I say: How'd you know my name? And he says: Everyone knows you, Manila. You are the crazy lady of Guadalupe Street. Crazy Manila, our lady of Guadalupe.

I squint at Garcia and at one or two others squatting on their haunches near the counter. I say: Boo!

We had a good laugh over that and I go back with the beer. When the kids come to the door, I say: Boo! while Danny stands behind me in his gorilla mask handing out the candy and them kids don't know whether to laugh or run or blubber. We don't get no little kids. Just big ones and when Danny tells them no funny stuff this year, they look at one another and say: Funny stuff? Funny stuff? Oh, I laughed over and over and when Danny left, I told him that was the best Halloween since Ben was a pirate and I was sorry it wouldn't come around again for another year.

After that I went to Garcia's pretty often for beer and maybe twice a week besides, just to get some little thing, some animal crackers for the dog and a box of Cheez-its for me, a bar of Palmolive. Mrs. Will would ask where I got these little things when she brung my regular groceries and I told her I bought them myself. She said that was very good. She said Danny and Garcia were good for me. She said I was getting better. I told her I wasn't sick.

Still, I might have been getting better, but it certainly didn't have noth-

ing to do with Danny or Garcia. It was my dream that was making me happy. I didn't have the dream so often now, but when I did, I could peel Ben's shirt from his shoulders, from his arms, and back and not find no blood nor blasted flesh. He hadn't been shot to bits anywhere. He was still whole and perfect. I washed the mud off him and pulled him into my arms and put his head against my shoulder and held him, my cheek pressed close to his hair, and sang. And sometimes, even though the mud stayed in my dream, the battle didn't. All I could hear was myself singing, no shriek and blast, no groans of others dying, no shot and shell, just my singing to Ben. And when I'd wake, I'd go in to the piano and look at Ben and it made me happy to know that he hadn't been bloodied up and blown apart, that he was still perfect and young and nothing could ever touch him. And I was happy for me too because me and Ben, we had a good life together and he needed me and I was always here for him.

Danny asked me about him once and I showed him Ben's picture on the piano. Danny said Connie told him they'd been friends in high school. "You wouldn't recognize the place anymore, Manila."

"What place?" I asked, all ready to tell him more about Ben.

"St. Elmo High. They got a new auditorium now and a Senior Quad and a new cafeteria and they're fixing up the boys' gym with a new wing. Mom says she doesn't recognize it, except for some of the old teachers." He winks at me. "Some of them are just about as old as you can get and still draw breath."

"You think they might remember Ben?"

"Hell, Manila, they remember Moses. Anyway, you ought to come to my graduation and see the old place."

"I haven't been to a graduation since Ben's."

"Then you come to mine. I'll see you get an invite."

I went to the St. Elmo High graduation, but not because of Danny. One of Archie's boys was Valedictorian of the Class of 1965. I listened to the speeches, but I was looking for Danny amongst the 700 up there. "Seven hundred," I said to Mrs. Archie. "Just imagine St. Elmo High so big they have 700 graduates."

"There's two other high schools too, you know, Mom," she whispers.

"There is? They got 700 too?"

"Hush, Mom. Here comes Ronald. It's Ronald's turn to speak."

I tried to remember how many had graduated with me, but I couldn't

even remember my graduating at all. But Ben's, I could remember that. How many graduated with the Class of 1942? They didn't have no auditorium in those days. They had the graduation on the grass out front of the school. Hotter than hell it was. I remember the cherries on my hat clacking when I clapped for the speeches they give, lots of talk about the vile Japs who snuck up and bombed Pearl Harbor and who beat General MacArthur out of the Philippines and everyone that day was talking about the war and the great destiny these boys was going off to and how they would fight in the name of freedom and give their lives and sacred honor and I clapped like everyone else. But I didn't believe it. I didn't believe a word of it. I didn't believe it for a minute that Ben would die in the mud at Manila. Not Ben Dance. Ben's life lay all before him. *Yes, all three years of it.*

"Stop it, Mom. Stop. Archie, do something with her."

"Hand me a handkerchief. Hush, Ma. We want to hear Ronald. Hush, dammit, Ma, hush!"

"Archie, do something!"

The next thing I know we are out of the auditorium and standing by a drinking fountain and Archie wets down the handkerchief and mops my face and says he knew they shouldn't have brung me.

There was a war after Danny's graduation too. Sometimes I watched it on TV now that I get a lot of stations. Danny joined up the Army, but he told me not to worry. He said they would send him to Germany where he could drink all the beer he wanted. I told him Germany was the enemy, same as the Japs. Danny said, "Not this time, Manila. The Germans and Japs are our friends now."

"Not my friends."

"It's the gooks who are the enemy now. Gooks for enemies. Gooks for allies. Can't tell the difference anymore."

"Where are they fighting?"

"In Vietnam."

"Is that close to Manila?"

"Hell no, you don't have to worry. You're safe here in St. Elmo."

They sent Danny to Manila and he sent me a lot of post cards which I taped to the piano. He wrote on them he thought I'd like to see the city I was named for. It looked pretty and green and tropical and moist and not at all like St. Elmo which is dry and dusty and brown except for two weeks in the winter when it floods.

St. Elmo is dry and dusty and brown as leather, I wrote in my first letter in a thousand years. I didn't have no pen, just the stub of a pencil I use for my grocery list and the paper Mrs. Will leaves me to write on. I found an envelope back of my bureau and I wrote out Danny's name and his address which was just a lot of numbers mainly. Course I don't have no stamps so I put on my coat to walk to the post office, the one near my house, or what I remember near my house, but there was a parking lot and a Sav-On drug there and no one ever heard of a post office. I thought I probably turned the wrong way and I would just go back, but I turned the wrong way again, and maybe again after that, because I couldn't find my house, couldn't find nothing, only the Dairy Queen and 7-11, the Lotus Blossom and Jolly Burger and Quik Photo and cars. Lots of cars. Cars everywhere. How could St. Elmo be so big and bright and ugly and have so much noise? No more oleanders and the palms all so tall I couldn't see the tops. I hang onto my letter like it is Danny's hand, but there is no one to lead me and I am loster and loster in St. Elmo where I have lived my whole life.

A girl finds me in the dark, a Jap girl wearing a shirt that says Lotus Blossom and she wants to know what I am doing by the dumpster where it is so dark and cold. I push my face into the dark of my hands till my hands light up bright with flashing lights whirling around, red and blue and dizzy. A policeman comes up. I hear leather creak and squeal when he kneels down, before I hear his voice asking where I live. He takes hold my hand, the one with the letter, but I tell him that letter is mine and he gives me back my hand and takes my elbow to stand me up. Where do you live, he says again and again. Where do you live, old lady? I tell him I am our crazy lady of Guadalupe Street. He puts me in the car where there is a lot of squawking and squealing. He drives to the Dairy Queen and tells me to wait. He comes back with a hamburger in a little white bag and a Coke. I drink the Coke all up before we get to the police station.

Pretty soon I see Archie. All the police say: Sorry, Your Honor, we didn't know she was your mother.

Archie says: I commend you all for the care you've taken of her.

The police all seem to line up and open doors for us as bald Archie leads me out to his big black car. He says he is taking me home with him. He says he has moved and how he lives up in the hills and out of the smog. I pull my coat around me. "I don't care where you live now," I tell him. "I don't want to go home with you. I want to go home with me. Take me to

my house. And mail this letter on the way.”

“Who could you be writing to, Ma?”

“I have a friend in Manila,” I tell him. “That’s where Ben died, you know.”

“I know Ben died, Ma, but you don’t.”

I am glad to see he turns the car around, but I don’t say nothing more till we get to my house and the little dog is glad to see me. Archie walks in and turns on all the lights. Then he says: “You ever pull a stunt like that again, Ma, and I swear, I’ll have you committed. I should have had you committed years and years ago. This is a warning. You better heed me or it’s the state hospital for you. The loony bin, Ma. You understand? The funny farm.”

After that I put stamps on my shopping list for Mrs. Will. I quit going to Garcia’s. (Though one New Year’s Garcia brung me some tamales which I thanked him for, but they were too weird for me. I fed them to the dog who farted all night.) The foxtail started growing back up and I thought: I’ll just wait for Danny to get back from Manila before I cut them, but a long time must have passed because they grew up over the fence again and Will and Archie come over with their boys and they spend one whole day cutting them down and not taking no for an answer. The paint chipped off the porch Danny painted and the raingutter fell off again and when Halloween came around, I didn’t say Boo to no one. I sat in the dark, in the corner between the piano and the wall, holding my picture of Ben and hoping them kids would go away and not set fire to my house again.

I waited for the mailman to bring me some more post cards from Manila, but Danny didn’t send no more. One or two letters, scribbled so bad it looked like I might have wrote them. No pictures. In my letter I said: Please send me some more picture post cards for my piano. Then Danny wrote me a letter. He said there wasn’t no post cards where he was now, only heat and rain and mud.

“Mud?” I said to the dog. “Mud?” I held on to the porch rail and stood up slow. *Mud?* I felt my heart quicken and thud in my breast, hard thuds like dirt clods flying and spraying in my eyes and mouth. I got to my bed and the dog followed and loaded his old bones on the bed at my feet to keep them warm, but the rest of me was cold. I lay there and I wondered if I was going to die. I prayed to God I wouldn’t die, prayed not for me, but

for Ben. Ben was still too young to die and I am all that keeps him alive. Keeping him alive is my life, but it's hard on you, this living for and loving the dead, it's hard, harder because you can't love death. You have to hate the death while you love the dead and keeping them alive is hard for an old woman like me. I tried to think how old I was, but give it up and went back to praying, praying like hell that God would spare me and God would spare Danny too because I knew I didn't have enough life in me to go on living for Ben and Danny too.

The next morning I was real glad to find myself alive. The dog and me, just as we were, me still dressed, so that saved time and I got up and made us some coffee and told the dog it was going to be a hot one today. We go out on our porch, but before noon the smog comes creeping up underneath the tin roof and the honeysuckle vine and sticking its little yellow fingers in my eyes. I have to go inside and watch Sesame Street till it cools off, but it don't seem to. I take the dog back out and hose him down and hose me down too and then we drip dry on the porch till it was time for cartoons and a couple Cokes. After cartoons it's the news. I listen for word of Manila Bay, but there's nothing, so I turned off the TV and said to the dog: Suppertime. He don't even get up and pad after me. He is getting real old.

I go into the kitchen, but it's too hot to fire up the stove, even for a can of beans, so I get another coke out of the fridge and some ice and an extra ice cube for the dog. I run ice over my face and neck and then drop it in my glass, pour the Coke and I'm taking the dog's ice in to him when I hear the gate squeal. The dog starts up. We go to the screen door and watch the foxtails swish and whisper like they do when so much as a cat prowls through them, but this is no cat. I can see a body moving through them. It's too late for the mailman and then I see it's a woman's body, but it's not Mrs. Will or Mrs. Archie because the dog starts to growl. I squint into the sun, lowering itself into the foxtails, lighting them up like a thousand torches, flickering in the desert wind. And then I see it's Connie Frett. Connie Frett or someone like her.

Someone pink and puffy and fat. No yellow dress. No gardenia in the hair. The hair is gray and short and the woman is gray and short and fat, but underneath all that I know it's Connie Frett, though she don't say anything. She just comes up to the porch and we sit down together. I ask her the question, the one I wanted to ask all those years ago before her yel-

low dress disappeared up the walk. "Did you make love with him, Connie?" I ask. "Did he have that much? Did he know a girl's love?"

"Yes. He had that much. I loved him."

"I didn't mean what I said, Connie, about your not deserving him. Calling you a slut. I don't know why I said such a mean thing. I'm sorry. I apologize." I start to wonder how long ago it was, but Connie lowers her head into my lap and I know it doesn't matter, the years, the time. There isn't any years or time, there's only living and dying and laughing and grieving and you keep doing them over and over like the seasons. "You keep living and dying and laughing and grieving," I tell Connie, "but the one thing you don't do, not more than once anyway, is forget. If you once forget, then you have forgot forever and for all time."

"He's only missing in action, Manila. He might come back. Don't you think?" Connie raises up her fat, tear-stained face, the lips chewed raw with grief. "Of course."

"He might," I say. "There might be someone we don't know about, Connie, someone who finds him in the mud, lying there, face down in the mud and maybe, probably, they turn him over. They bathe his face and eyes and unbutton his shirt and wash the mud off his chest and his shoulders and they find he isn't bloody or mangled at all. Just stunned, Connie. That's all. He's just stunned and he's not dead. Someone will touch his eyes, kiss them, and he'll open his eyes and smile, Connie."

"Yes," says Connie, laying her graying head back in my lap. "He's stunned and separated from the rest of his unit, but he's not dead, is he, Manila?"

"No."

"Tell me again, Manila. Tell me how it happens."

I stroke her hair and back. My grief is not my own anymore. I hold her and tell her over and over about the battle for Manila and the mud and finding the body and how someone will lift Danny from the mud, bathe his face, and find he isn't bloody in the least, just muddy and how when the mud is washed off, he is still perfect and young and beautiful. I tell how she will pull him into her arms and hold him against her shoulder, sing maybe. I tell how he will smile, how he will know the touch even if he don't know the person. I hold Connie Frett and I tell her over and over and we stay on the porch till it's long past dark and the dry red moon rises slow in the night sky.