

Miracle Feet · Cathy Coats

FOR THIRTY YEARS, Mrs. R. E. Haskiss had lived with her husband, Mr. R. E. Haskiss, in a two bedroom house, in what was once considered to be a nicer neighborhood. Now, most of its inhabitants were black and all its houses were in need of paint. These were facts that did not bother Mrs. Haskiss in the least, since she did not associate with her neighbors and had no interest in home decor. She had few interests: new recipes, daytime television and gospel music. She had iron gray hair, chopped off at the chin, with bangs that hung to her eyebrows. She wore printed housedresses and men's pajamas. She had one friend, Mrs. Rose Rayner, a widow who lived across town and whom she called every afternoon, after Mr. Haskiss had returned from his lunch to his job at the stove foundry.

Mrs. Haskiss had been married for thirty-eight years and had one child, a daughter, Jeanetta, who was twenty-six. Mrs. Haskiss was fifty-eight years old and would be fifty-nine in July, and every once in a while it crossed her mind that her life was empty. From the knowledge she gathered watching soap operas, she realized it was a problem common to women in the modern world, and for a time, she entertained the idea of getting a job. But then, she didn't really know how to do anything, and she was old. She wasn't interested in working when she could avoid it, and the only thing she thought she'd like to do was sing in a gospel group. She couldn't carry a tune either.

One day, she was putting away boxes of Christmas ornaments in the top of the closet, when she fell off the kitchen chair. Sitting in the debris of paper mache wise men and cardboard candy canes that Jeanetta had made one year, long ago, in school, she decided to call Mrs. Rayner and tell her what had happened.

Mrs. Rayner became quite hysterical. "What if it's a broken hip!" she cried. "My sister died of a broken hip!"

Mrs. Haskiss, who knew her friend's sister had died with pneumonia, told Mrs. Rayner to calm down. "Nothing's broken," she said. "I had to stand up to dial your number and if anything was broken, I would've known about it."

"It's just what happened to Helen," said Mrs. Rayner. "It had paralyzed her nerves." The widow insisted on calling an ambulance. "X-rays won't kill you," she said.

So Mrs. Haskiss hung up the phone, cleared the decorations to one side, and sat down on the floor to wait for the ambulance. The idea was beginning to appeal to her for this was something out of the ordinary. She tried looking sick so the ambulance men would not be disappointed, and then practiced a facial contortion in the aluminum frame of the refrigerator. She

wondered if her husband would leave work to come to the emergency room when Mrs. Rayner called him.

She had been in the hospital all afternoon, in a semi-private room, the other bed unoccupied, when her husband called at six o'clock that evening. He was well on his way to being drunk, as he usually was by six o'clock, and he wanted to know where she was, why his dinner wasn't cooked.

She wasn't surprised that he hadn't believed Mrs. Rayner, who had told him it was a broken hip, nor was she surprised that he was drunk. She thought he was probably too drunk to care whether her hip was broken or not. She thought she had the fortitude of an iron wall for trying to reason with the man.

"My doctor has advised me," she said.

"Oh," said Mr. Haskiss. "He's advised you. La-de-da."

She held the phone away from her ear and thought about hanging up. It was just like him to be this way. The only peace she had was when he was gone to work. It was a good thing her doctor had told her to spend the night in the hospital, otherwise she'd be on her feet cooking dinner, then cleaning it up. "My doctor told me to stay in the hospital until he checks this bruise I've got."

"Oh, Lord," he said. "You got a bruise? All you got is a bruise and you're sitting on your can in the hospital?"

She felt her thigh. "Bruises can cause cancer and blood clots," she said. "I can come home and cook your dinner and die with a blood clot." He said nothing. She knew she should've expected this. Why she kept thinking he would be any different, she didn't know. "Is Jeanetta home from work?"

Jeanetta was their daughter. She had gone to Peoria and worked as a go-go dancer when go-go dancers were in demand, and when they weren't, she married a Mexican who was in fear of being deported. He had left her in the Holiday Inn in Kankakee (across from the Armour meat packing plant) the day after the wedding. She had returned home and was going to Beauty School. She practiced on the women who couldn't afford a regular beautician.

"Yeah, Jeanetta's home," said Mr. Haskiss. "She's getting dressed to go to one of those singings."

She waited for him to make a comment about the gospel groups that she and Jeanetta went to see at fairgrounds and churches; they never missed one. She wondered if Jeanetta was going to see Brother Simon and the Jubilee Twins. She had heard them on television and they weren't very good, so she didn't feel bad about missing it.

"How long you going to be up there?" he asked.

The doctor had told her she would be there overnight, but she hoped it would be longer and decided not to tell him anything. "Can't say. They put a heat pack on my leg and that helps some."

“Well, Jeanetta won’t even put her dainty foot in this kitchen. What do you suggest I do?”

She sighed, allowing a shallow stream of air to escape through her pursed lips, and crossed the bruised leg over the other one. She was getting sore from sitting on the bed all day. “Now look,” she said, “I’m in this hospital where my doctor told me to stay put and that’s what I’m going to do, so don’t go giving Jeanetta a hard time, expecting her to clean up your old dirty messes, because she’s not stuck with you and it’d serve you right if she just moves out while I’m gone.”

Actually, she wouldn’t mind if she could stay in the hospital long enough for Jeanetta to get tired of his demands and move out. Jeanetta was only at the beauty school four hours in the afternoons, and she was at home the rest of the time, making messes.

“I’m not doing a thing to Jeanetta,” he protested. “She’s gonna come up there and see you and she wants to know if you want anything.”

She thought about what she needed. If she didn’t go home tomorrow, she would need some pajamas. The gown they had given her was open clear down the back and she had caught a glimpse of her old bare bottom in the full length wall mirror, when she crossed from the bathroom to the bed. “Tell her to bring me a pair of pajamas and the slippers Rose crocheted for me,” she said.

“I’ll see you when you get home then,” he said.

She didn’t want to think about it. In the hospital, the nurses waited on her and the LPNs who checked her blood pressure every hour knew all the floor gossip. Even though she didn’t know any of the people involved, it was interesting to listen to. She already felt sorry for a Mrs. Dodie, a woman who had cut one of her wrists; then, wearing nothing but her underpants, had run screaming into the emergency room, and all because her doctor boyfriend had jilted her.

A man holding a television stood in the doorway, and she motioned him into the room. “Hmm hu,” she said, and hung up the phone. The first thing she had done when they checked her in at the desk downstairs was to order a television. Tomorrow was Sunday, and in the morning her favorite gospel shows were on.

While the man was installing the television on a metal stand anchored close to the ceiling, and Mrs. Haskiss was dialing Rose Rayner’s telephone number, two LPNs wheeled in a stretcher holding a young girl. A man and a woman crowded in behind the nurses and the room around the empty bed was congested with people. The LPNs lifted the girl off the stretcher, onto the bed, then pulled the curtain that separated her from Mrs. Haskiss.

Mrs. Haskiss looked at the piece of white cloth hung between the two beds, irritated at the nurses for having pulled it between her and what was going on in the other half of the room. She hung up the phone before Rose

answered. She could hear mumbling and someone was crying. On “General Hospital,” Diane was in a semi-private room, and was fighting for her life; she had a disease, and she had lost the will to live. Maybe this girl was very sick. Mrs. Haskiss pulled the curtain back again. The girl looked groggy, like she had come from surgery. Mrs. Haskiss made an effort to look friendly. (Her husband always said she looked sour.) “What happened here?” she asked.

The woman, wearing yellow slacks and a knit sweater, gave her a nod of acknowledgement. “Accident,” she said, and wiping her eyes, sat down in a chair by the bed.

Mrs. Haskiss could tell the woman had been crying. She could bet her last penny nobody would cry about her accident. The girl looked like she was about fifteen, with very short blonde hair and skinny arms. “You her folks?” she asked, adjusting the heat pack.

“Yes,” the woman said. “I’m Mrs. Dietz, this is my husband.” The man, still standing at the foot of the bed, nodded.

Mrs. Haskiss looked at Mr. Dietz, but he stared at her and she turned back to the woman. “Car wreck, huh?”

“No,” said Mrs. Dietz, “nothing like that. She took the wrong kind of pills.”

Mrs. Haskiss heard the girl stir on the bed, and looked over at her. Her eyes were open wide, too wide. She looked like a crazy person in a movie, behind asylum bars. “Has she got an allergy?” she asked, nodding toward the girl.

“No,” the woman said, and stroked her daughter’s head.

The girl moved again. She raised her hand as if to push her mother away, but let it fall back to the bed with a dull thud. “Go way,” she said, barely parting her lips.

Mrs. Haskiss felt bad for the woman; she could imagine Jeanetta treating her that way. “I thought maybe she took some penicillin,” she said. “That stuff’s real bad if you’re allergic to it.” She shook her head.

The man sat down on the edge of the girl’s bed, his face turned to the door. The woman rubbed her forehead and no one spoke. Mrs. Haskiss had hoped that if she got a roommate, it would be someone like Rose or one of the LPNs. It seemed very strange that a fifteen year old girl would take the wrong kind of pills accidentally. This girl might be crazy.

“Did that tube hurt you?” the man asked, leaning forward, his hands on either side of his daughter’s legs, covered by the sheet.

The girl groaned and rolled her head on the pillow toward Mrs. Haskiss. “What time is it?” she asked. “Is it night?”

Mrs. Haskiss looked quickly at her wristwatch. “It’s six-thirty,” she said. She wondered if the girl was a drug addict. Jeanetta’s Mexican husband had used drugs.

“Daddy,” the girl said, and the man touched her knees.

Mrs. Haskiss sat watching them for a minute, then leaned back against her pillows. No one spoke or moved. The woman kept one hand around the girl's arm. "You think you can hand me the controls to that set?" she asked the woman, and motioned toward the television. "I told them to send this up before I knew anybody was going to be in here with me, but as long as you're going to be here," and she looked at the girl, "we can split the cost. It's only two dollars a day—that's together."

The man turned around and looked at her as if he were straining to see something in bad weather.

"John," the woman said, calling her husband's name softly. He pulled his lips in tightly and handed Mrs. Haskiss the electric channel changer, then sat back down on the bed. "I told you we should have insisted on a private room," he said, looking at his wife.

Mrs. Haskiss clicked on the television. She thought he was the rudest person she knew.

The girl lifted her head from the pillow, then fell back on the bed. "I don't care what she watches," she said.

Mrs. Haskiss tested the volume control. She had done nothing to them, and here he was, as rude as anybody she had ever met. He was wearing a three piece suit and probably sold real estate or something and thought he was important. She pulled the sheet, still folded at the front of her bed, up around her bare legs. "I'll keep the set down low," she said. "I don't watch anything tonight except a couple of country western singing shows. Tomorrow morning's my favorite. They have the gospel groups then. Six-thirty too early for you, hon?" she asked the girl.

The girl turned her head to her mother and said she was sorry. Mrs. Haskiss turned another channel. The whole family was rude. Well, the woman seemed nice enough, but that girl, she could tell that one was just like her father.

"I took the pills," said the girl, then swallowed, "because I couldn't think what else to do."

"Couldn't think what else to do?" cried the woman.

"Shhh," the man said. "Your throat hurts because of the tube. The tube rubbed against the back of your throat."

The woman began to cry and Mrs. Haskiss kept the volume down low on the television. This girl had eaten a bunch of pills and now, her parents were here, sitting by her bed and holding her hand. If she took a bottle of pills, no one would come sit by her bed. They'd wait a couple of days, then commit her somewhere.

"It's all right," said the girl.

"It's not all right," sobbed the woman. The man moved to the middle of the bed, touched his wife's shoulders and hushed her again.

Mrs. Haskiss changed channels. How could it be all right? She had never even thought about doing what the girl had done and how could that girl

have anywhere near the kind of problems she had. She would call Rose after Jeanetta came. At least somebody was going to come see her. It would've been nice to be in the hospital and have lots of company, but she didn't think that was going to happen. Her big mistake had been getting married to R. E. Haskiss. Not that she didn't think marriage was wonderful, but only if you were married to a wonderful person.

Mrs. Dietz took her daughter's hand.

"What will happen?" asked the girl.

"Nothing," said the woman. "We'll go home."

Mrs. Haskiss flicked another channel, then several more. She found a faith healer on cable station. "This man heals mostly colored people," she said. "I guess that's who goes to his meetings. I liked Katherine Kuhlman when she was on because she had doctors and lawyers and college teachers, and you knew it was the real stuff." She pointed at the screen where a black man was being shaken by the faith healer. "They probably went down to East St. Louis and paid a bunch of people to come on and act like this."

"But nothing will happen?" asked the girl, then sighed and closed her mouth.

"Not that I don't like colored people," said Mrs. Haskiss. "We had racial understanding week at our church and this colored choir came and my husband wouldn't go for nothing, but I went."

Mrs. Dietz was talking to her daughter in a quiet strained voice. "You have to promise us . . . You have to promise us . . ." and her voice became uneven, shifting in jerks to loudness. She was crying now, and Mrs. Haskiss turned up the television, ignoring the man when he looked up. The phone rang and she picked it up. "Hmm hu," she said into the receiver.

It was Mrs. Rayner on the phone. She was calling for a progress report. Mrs. Haskiss thought the widow had sounded disappointed when she was told no bones were broken, and kept calling in hopes the situation had changed and a leg had to be amputated.

"Rose, right now the only thing I'm doing is laying here in bed with a heat pack on my leg," she said, pulling the neck of the hospital gown away from her throat. "If they would've sent me home this afternoon, that old man would've expected me to stand at that stove and cook his dinner."

She untied the strings at the back of the gown—the neck was choking her—then saw the man watching her. She wanted to stare back or say something rude, but he looked very official in his suit and necktie, and she was afraid he might know someone in the hospital who would tell her she had to leave.

She told Rose that Jeanetta was coming to see her that evening. She would have liked to tell Rose about the girl who took the pills, and the man and woman, but nobody on their side of the room was saying a thing, and they would hear her for sure. "There's not a bit of difference between the way he treats me and the way my father treated my mother. Thirty years

ago, I would've said you were crazy if you'd told me I'd make that mistake." Mrs. Haskiss heard her voice getting too loud and checked her speech. The voice on the television screamed, "Praise God!" "Turn your television on channel thirty," she told Mrs. Rayner, who was talking about her sister Helen. "They got this faith healer on and he's shouting to beat the band. Ha!"

Mr. Dietz turned around and looked at the television, then turned to his daughter. "You've got your contact lenses out of your eyes?" he asked.

The girl nodded. "It's really all right," she said. "What's she watching?"

"A TV preacher," the man said. "Is it going to bother you?"

The girl shook her head.

Mrs. Haskiss anchored the phone against her shoulder with her chin and looked sideways at the girl. Why she kept saying it was all right, she didn't know. Something had to be wrong with her. She was too young to be jilted by a doctor boyfriend.

The woman stood up and pulled at the creases in her slacks. "I have to leave for a while," she said, bending over and kissing the girl. "Your brothers will need some supper."

"Tell them I'm all right," said the girl.

The woman turned to her husband. "I'll be back in about an hour," she said. He nodded and patted her hip.

Mrs. Haskiss sighed, watching the woman leave; she had hoped the man would leave first. Something tragic must have happened to the girl.

She hung up the telephone. The man on the television was casting out a demon. (The demon was what made the man on the television drink.) She wasn't impressed. She thought her husband was responsible for his own drinking, although she knew he liked to blame her.

The healer combed his hair back like Jeanetta's Mexican husband did. Jeanetta had shown her a picture they had taken in a penny arcade, before they were married. The healer's skin was white though, pale and puffy like a dough ball, and dented with tiny black eyes.

She didn't like the preachers nearly as much as the singers. The preachers went on too long talking about things she didn't understand. She guessed there were lots of people who knew what they were saying, but she wasn't one of them. She would a lot rather have listened to a tenor sing about the nail scarred hands of Jesus, the long walk to Calvary, the crown of thorns, and the cross heavy on his back, than listen to a preacher talk about David and Goliath.

A lot of it was the same, what the preacher said and what the singer sang about; she would admit that, but still, the singing touched her in a way that nothing else did, not Jeanetta or R. E. or anything. She had never cried when she thought about her life being empty. She only cried when she found gospel music. The world could say what it wanted to about Elvis Presley, but when he sang "How Great Thou Art" her heart was stirred.

When Del Rogers and the Soldiers of Zion appeared at the fairgrounds last week, along with Elvis Presley's limousine, she had gone.

The girl's doctor came in. He was a thin man with a delicate face and dark hair, that reminded Mrs. Haskiss of dry coal, the kind of black that never shone. Not greasy like the Mexican's or the healer's hair.

"I think I can send you home tomorrow," the doctor said, tucking the sheet around the girl's feet.

"Don't touch my feet," she said. "I don't want anybody to touch my feet."

Mrs. Haskiss flicked through the channels. The girl's doctor was saying something about a cough reflex, but it would be too obvious she was listening if she turned the set down. She watched out of the corner of her eye, as the girl reached up to touch the bent head of the doctor. The doctor took the girl's hand and kissed it.

No one was going to kiss her hand. They would probably do their best to send her home tomorrow, but she would complain tonight and then they would keep her here. She needed to get away from Jeanetta and R. E. and that house.

Mr. Dietz and the doctor walked to the door, an arm's length between them. They stood in the hall and talked for a few minutes. Mrs. Haskiss could see the girl's father rocking on the balls of his feet, his legs apart and his hands in his pants pockets.

The girl raised her hand off the bed. "My brother hurt his leg playing football," she said. "He broke it in five different places." She spread her fingers and made a kissing noise with her tongue.

"Mine's not broke," said Mrs. Haskiss, "but I could get a blood clot. You go to school?"

The girl nodded.

"Guess you don't watch TV in the day, huh?"

The girl shook her head. "No."

"They took off my favorite soap operas, but I still watch 'General Hospital' and the game shows," said Mrs. Haskiss. "You ever see 'General Hospital'?"

"No," said the girl.

"There was a lady on 'General Hospital' that took some pills because she was pregnant. Her sister was married to the baby's father."

"I don't have a sister," said the girl.

"I got a daughter," said Mrs. Haskiss, who saw Jeanetta walking down the hall, holding a paper sack in her hands, "and she never left home when she was a kid and I'm having that same problem with her now." She called to her daughter and waved her into the room.

Jeanetta had her mother's face. She had breasts and hips and legs like a pin-up girl, and wore cheap, bright clothing. Her appearance didn't bother Mrs. Haskiss, who only minded the fact that her daughter was very lazy

and still lived at home when she should have left as soon as she was out of high school.

“Well, Mama,” Jeanetta said, putting the sack down, “they got you settled, I can see.” She smoothed her hair in the lavatory mirror, then swung a chair to the middle of the room, between the two beds. She sat with her back to the girl.

“Who are you going to go see?” Mrs. Haskiss asked.

“New group,” said Jeanetta. “They’re supposed to be pretty good. They’re younger than a lot of them. Some of those guys you like are getting too far over the hill.” She sat down and pulled the sack over to her feet. “Brought your stuff,” she said.

“That ought to suit you fine,” said Mrs. Haskiss, “being so young. Not everybody I like is over the hill.” She hoped her daughter would get married and move away. When Jeanetta was home, there was just one more person to clean up after. “When did you get that new hair?” she asked, pointing to a hairpiece that sat four inches on top of her daughter’s skull.

“Long time ago, up north. You can’t buy anything like it around here. It’s real soft,” she said, fingering the hair.

Mrs. Haskiss didn’t say anything. She doubted she had bought it long ago; in fact, she suspected Jeanetta had bought it earlier in the day with the money that was supposed to pay the utilities, her share of the rent.

Jeanetta leaned forward and pulled at the straps of her brassiere. “Did you talk to Daddy about what I would do and what I wouldn’t do around the house? I’m not married,” she stopped and looked at the girl, then back to her mother. “What’s wrong with her?” she mouthed silently.

Mrs. Haskiss motioned for her to come closer and whispered, “The nurse said she took a whole bottle of pills, nearly killed herself. They had to pump her stomach.”

“On purpose?” Jeanetta whispered.

“That’s what they told me,” Mrs. Haskiss said out loud.

Jeanetta opened her eyes wide. Then they both watched the man walk back into the room and sit by his daughter, who was staring absently at the television. “Do you want your mother to bring your lenses?” he asked.

Mrs. Haskiss was sorry he had come back so quickly. She wanted to tell Jeanetta how rude he had been.

“No,” said the girl. “I think they’re watching Hee-Haw.”

The man smiled.

“I think that’s what it is,” said the girl.

“I can turn it for her a little,” Jeanetta said, standing up and reaching for the metal TV stand.

Mrs. Haskiss looked at her daughter’s skirt tail hiked up to just under the cheeks of her buttocks. “She’s going to have to get married,” Mrs. Haskiss said under her breath, then saw the girl’s eyes looking at her. She tried to remember the man’s name, but it escaped her mind. “Mister, huh?”

“Dietz,” the man said, nodding at Jeanetta.

“Mister Dietz, this is my daughter Jeanetta. She brought me a few things I need,” she said, pointing to the sack. She didn’t know why she was explaining anything to him. She could have company whenever she wanted.

“Hello,” said Jeanetta, smiling broadly and patting the hairpiece. She pulled out a hairpin and turned to the girl. “Can you see that TV now?”

“Don’t want to watch it,” said the girl.

Jeanetta turned to Mr. Dietz. “It’s no fun when you’re that age,” she said, “being in the hospital.”

“Well, now I can’t see it too good,” said Mrs. Haskiss, ignoring a dirty look from her daughter. Jeanetta acted like she would hop into bed with anything that looked like a man.

“Go ahead and turn it back,” said Mr. Dietz. “She’s not going to watch anything now.”

Jeanetta swung the television back and Mrs. Haskiss studied her daughter’s clothing. She was wearing a white rib knit shirt and a black skirt that swirled around her hips like a square dancer’s outfit. Then she had a fat red belt at the waist and white boots that were shiny like plastic.

“Those bras that you wear,” said Mrs. Haskiss, “are unhealthy. Those wires push you around all over the place.”

Jeanetta sighed loudly and asked the man what he did for a living.

“Insurance,” said Mr. Dietz, and nodded his head.

“Insurance,” the girl repeated.

“I swear, it’ll probably give you cancer,” said Mrs. Haskiss shaking her head. “It makes you look cheap.”

“Life insurance,” said the girl. “Not car or casualty.”

“Well, if that don’t beat all,” said Jeanetta. “My, my. Here I am coming up to see you, taking my time, and you insult me the entire time I sit here.” She turned to Mr. Dietz. “The ingratitude of some people amazes me.”

Mrs. Haskiss groaned. She didn’t care that Jeanetta looked cheap except that she’d never find anybody halfway decent if she looked the way she did now.

If Jeanetta got married, then she’d have one less person hanging around her all the time, and the house would be empty during the day, at least until R. E. retired. Tonight, she would act like she was nearly dying from pain, then the doctor would keep her here until he found out what it was.

“You can’t get cancer from bras,” said the girl, looking at Mrs. Haskiss. “I’ve never even heard of that.”

“To hear her tell it,” said Jeanetta, “she got it falling on the kitchen floor.”

Mrs. Haskiss rubbed her bruised leg. “Cancer is a strange thing,” she said, “and they’re not sure how you get it, but it is a known fact I could get it from this bruise.” She rubbed her leg faster, then stopped. “Anyway, Jeanetta, it looks cheap.”

Jeanetta didn't talk to her mother after that. No one said anything, and Mrs. Haskiss changed the television station twice. At seven-thirty, Mrs. Dietz came back in the room. The woman kissed her husband, then her daughter.

Jeanetta turned her back on the Dietzes. "I don't know why they don't let you come home," she said to her mother. "Nothing's pulled or broken."

At eight o'clock, visiting hours were over. Jeanetta left fifteen minutes before the nurse made her rounds, but the man and woman stayed as long as they were allowed. The man put a blanket around the girl's feet. "They want to keep you here tonight to rest."

"It's too hot," said the girl.

Mrs. Dietz laid the blanket at the end of the bed, then kissed her daughter good night.

"I'll be here if she needs anything," said Mrs. Haskiss. She thought they'd probably be back before breakfast was served.

"We'll see you first thing in the morning," Mrs. Dietz said.

They left, the nurse at their heels, and Mrs. Haskiss looked over at the girl. "You want to watch anything?" she asked, offering the girl the channel changer.

"No," said the girl, "anything you want."

Mrs. Haskiss turned to a channel with wrestling. "Now, right there's what my husband's doing, he's sitting home, glued to the tube, watching wrestling, just waiting for the midgets and ladies. The midgets I don't mind because it gives them something to do, otherwise they'd probably be on welfare or something. But I don't like to see them women fight. There's something ugly about it."

"It makes me nervous," said the girl.

"I watched this movie," said Mrs. Haskiss, "about this movie star who tried to eat pills about three different times. They always found her. She was married to three different men, but they were all no good."

The girl smiled and lifted her hands to her face and rubbed her eyes. "I've never been married," she said. "I was tired."

Mrs. Haskiss didn't know what to make of this, so she dismissed it. "That healer on the TV, he cast out a demon from that alcoholic man," she said. "Do you believe in miracles? Driving a demon out's a miracle." She didn't really believe it, but it was a way of introducing the subject of her husband, her favorite subject.

The girl seemed to think about it for a minute, spreading her fingers across the sheet over her stomach like a web. "Yes," she finally said. "In miracles."

This surprised Mrs. Haskiss who had expected a rapid fire "no." She harbored serious doubts about this girl's mind. "You go to church?" she asked.

"No," said the girl, closing her eyes.

Mrs. Haskiss wondered if she was going to go to sleep in the middle of their conversation. "What kind of miracles do you believe in?"

The girl was silent, and Mrs. Haskiss changed channels on the television. It was like trying to talk to a hole in the ground.

"Oh," the girl said finally, "a miracle's a miracle."

Mrs. Haskiss turned the volume down completely. "Depends on what you think a demon is and what it does to people. Some people make their own trouble." Her husband for example, who she knew wasn't possessed by anything but his own meanness. "My husband," she said, "is a drunk."

The girl opened her eyes. "My father sells miracle insurance. Your husband could work miracles."

"What kind of belief is that?" asked Mrs. Haskiss. She thought the girl was making fun of her just like R. E. made fun of her for going to the gospel shows. Her husband was a drunk, he was no miracle worker, and neither was this girl's rude father, who couldn't even be civil to a sick woman.

Mrs. Haskiss turned off the television and found the hand buzzer that signalled the nurse's station at her bedside. She would call the nurse in and say she was in terrible pain. She would moan a few times first, and was just opening her mouth to do so when the girl opened her eyes and pulled the white hospital sheet up around her neck, exposing her small feet.

"They're Jesus feet," she said. "They're miracle feet. I was going to stay in my bedroom until I was asleep, but when my feet saw those pills, they said 'no' and made me get up and try to go in the living room, where I fell all right, right on the floor, with my mother yelling."

Mrs. Haskiss looked at the girl's feet. There were small blue veins that started in her ankles and ran past the top of her high arches.

"What if I was a child without feet? I'd be dead now," said the girl. "It's a miracle."

"If you wouldn't 've taken those pills in the first place," said Mrs. Haskiss, "there wouldn't be any need for a miracle. You can't get a miracle by doing a sin."

"There's a reason why I was born with feet and there's a reason for everything," said the girl, "so how can it be a sin?"

Mrs. Haskiss was excited. She had her now. "If there's a reason for everything," she said, "then how can anything be a miracle?"

The girl closed her eyes. "I was tired," she said, "but I'm all right."

Mrs. Haskiss was aggravated. "You can't be just tired," she said. "You can't be just that."

The girl didn't say anything.

Mrs. Haskiss placed the nurse's call buzzer on the phone table between the two beds. The girl was crazy and she hadn't got to say a word about R. E. who was driving her to an early grave as sure as she was living now.

The nurse who had brought in the dinner trays had told her she would be

going home in the morning, and the idea of returning to that house made her feel like a heavy weight had been placed inside her stomach. She had swallowed a huge piece of stone. She had put up with it for so long that she couldn't think why things should be any different now. If R. E. and Jeanetta were both gone, she didn't know if she would feel any different, if things would improve. She hit her pillow and wiped her eyes with the loose neck of her gown. She couldn't remember the last time she cried about being who she was.

Mrs. Haskiss hadn't thought she would be tired after spending the afternoon in bed, but she fell asleep and slept until the nurses made their morning rounds. Her plan had been to complain through the night about her pain, but it was too late now. She was deciding what she wanted for breakfast when the girl's parents came in.

The man helped the girl to her feet and the woman wrapped a yellow robe around her. "You can have a bath when we get home," the woman said. The girl began to cry, softly at first, then louder. "What will happen?" she asked. "What will happen?"

Mrs. Haskiss didn't know what she was crying about. She was going home with people who brought her clean clothes and promised her a bath and touched her skin. The girl's doctor came in and said goodbye, and told the man and woman that he wanted to talk to them sometime during the week. The woman nodded and helped the nurse settle the girl in the hospital wheelchair.

The woman looked around the room as if she had forgotten something. "Goodbye," she said to Mrs. Haskiss.

"Goodbye." She thought she would call Rose today and tell her about the girl. "Can you imagine killing yourself because you're tired?" she'd say. "I'd say take a nap." She smiled at her joke.

Her doctor didn't come in the room, but sent word through the floor nurse that Mrs. Haskiss was to be released that morning after breakfast.

She fell back on her pillows. "I can't even stand up on this leg!" she told the nurse. "I don't care what the man says, my leg is killing me." She refused to eat her breakfast or move from the bed. Her doctor was summoned from the physical therapy wing and told of his patient's behavior.

He listened to her description about a shooting pain, "like hot knives" running up and down her leg when she stood on it. Last night she had got up to use the toilet and the pain liked to have killed her. If she went home now, she'd be up on that leg, and have to do the laundry, the cooking, and the housework, and probably drag her husband to bed, because she didn't mind saying that he was one hopeless drunk.

The doctor seemed to sympathize with her and Mrs. Haskiss was hopeful.

“You did take a nasty fall,” he said, sitting down in the same chair Jeanetta had sat in the night before.

She sighed with relief. She wouldn’t have to go yet, and somehow, by the time she was ready to leave, things would be different.

“But,” he said, clearing his throat, “we can’t find anything in the X-rays, and the bruise is just a nasty bruise. Nothing is pulled or broken. The bruise might take a while to heal, because as you grow older—”

“My leg’s killing me,” she said, interrupting him, almost weeping. “I can’t go home like this.”

“Any other time,” began the doctor in a quiet voice, “I would let you stay another day for your peace of mind, to assure you nothing is wrong, but the hospital is already full and we’ll need the bed.”

“There’s an empty bed in this very room,” she cried. She didn’t want to go home. She didn’t want to go back and think that nothing would ever change for her; she was so tired of that. She would be just like she was now, get older and die.

“If you go home,” said the doctor, “and follow your normal routine, or just as much of it as you feel like, you’ll be much better. Feeling fine in no time, I’m sure.”

She watched him stand up and walk out the door. A body could be racked with pain and he wouldn’t care.

A nurse’s aide brought in a hospital wheelchair and asked her if she needed any help getting into it. “Don’t you know,” said Mrs. Haskiss, rubbing her eye with her closed fist, “I’m supposed to be all right. A miracle cure,” she said. She got to her feet, then grimaced and groaned as she put her weight on her bruised leg. “Ahhh!” she cried, and fell back into the wheelchair.

“Have you called your family yet?” asked the nurse’s aide. “Is somebody here to take you home?”

“I get to make a phone call? That doctor seems to think I can just walk home,” Mrs. Haskiss said.

“You can call home,” said the nurse’s aide. “I can wait.”

Mrs. Haskiss thought of who she would call. Jeanetta didn’t have a car and she’d tell her to take a cab, like she was made of money. R. E. would be over at Tater’s as soon as he got up—hung over or not—and they’d probably have a card game going already.

“I don’t want to call anybody,” said Mrs. Haskiss, sniffing as she pushed the wheelchair back from the phone table. “The doctor says I can walk, I can walk.”

The aide pushed her down the corridor, past the open rooms and larger wards. Mrs. Haskiss saw the floor nurse wink at the nurse’s aide. “I saw that!” she said, holding onto the wobbly arms of the wheelchair. Oh Lord, she was being forced out. Pushed out, her butt in a wheelchair. They went

through the ground floor, past the ladies' auxiliary gift shop, out the exit doors, to the parking lot.

"Is somebody coming?" the aide asked. "I can call you a cab."

"No," she said. "Just give me my stuff and I'll make it." She stood up and groaned, then straightened her legs and cautiously let go of the arms on the wheelchair, letting her body weight settle on her lower back. She groaned again. It still wasn't too late, the doctor could have his doubts and be staring out a window from the third floor.

"I could call you a cab," said the nurse's aide pulling the wheelchair away.

Mrs. Haskiss took a step and said no. She picked up the paper bag that Jeanetta had brought her and limped out to the parking lot between a row of cars, then resumed her normal gait when she reached the sidewalk. She would have to walk five blocks, the first block past a row of houses that set on the side of a steep hill.

These had been nice houses once, but now they looked like her own home. Not that she cared. She didn't care where she lived, anywhere but home, and she smiled, thinking that it would be a good song, "Anywhere But Home." Some star could sing it, then she could move to Nashville and be rich. But nothing like that was going to happen for her.

The sun was high and shone on the big front window of the Illinois Power building. It was hazed through a fine mist of clouds and the humid air surrounded her head like many pairs of arms. She was going home. Back to R. E. and Jeanetta and Rose on the telephone. After she got dinner, Jeanetta would paint her toenails or watch TV or read a magazine, and R. E. would drink. None of it would come close to her though. She would go in their bedroom and listen to gospel music on the record player. She would cry when she heard the tenor sing about the nails piercing the skin of Jesus.

She thought about it now and she didn't feel like crying. She had never thought about doing what the girl had done, but as she walked past the General Radiator plant, and started up the hill to cross the railroad tracks, she thought about it. A month ago, she had read in the paper where a colored lady had stood on the tracks, stock still, the train whistle blowing at her to move, until the engine hit her. Killed her instantly the paper said, and the next day the town kids had gone and spent the day looking for red spots on the rails.

There was a reason for everything. The girl in the hospital had said it was all right. But what if *her* feet didn't tell her to move, and what if *she* died? If she died now, what reason was there for ever being here? If she went home, things would be the same. Oh, Lord. Maybe she was crazy.

At the top of the hill she stood on one of the railroad ties. She bent her head to her shoulder; she smelled like the hospital. Somewhere down the track she heard a train whistle blow. She felt it coming before she saw it, the

lines vibrated beneath her, and the excitement that started in her chest moved through the rest of her body.

She stepped off the tie, past the second rail, and walked down the hill where she sat on the high curb of someone's lawn. Her life was a mess, but if she died, she would just be dead, and it wasn't much relief.

She put her sack on the sidewalk and opened her mouth where a large wet bubble rested on her lips. Maybe she couldn't just settle for being dead, but she could go back to the tracks, put her feet across the rails, and let the train wheels chop them off. Then she'd go back to the hospital for a while, and when she got out, Jeanetta and R. E. would have to wait on her. But she might bleed to death or the train would drag her under the engine.

If there was a reason for her living with R. E. for so long, she didn't know what it was. If there was a reason for her limping around in the hospital parking lot, half hoping she'd get cancer, she wished she knew what it was. And as for the train, she didn't think she'd trust her feet to move her.

She was tired—the sun made her feel sick—and when she got home, she was going to stretch out on the couch. She reached over, picked up the sack, and rummaged through it. She found the green crocheted slippers Rose had made for her, and took off her brown loafers. “Nothing but the best for miracle feet,” she said, and snorted. She pulled on the slippers, stepped off the sidewalk, and walked home in the gravel.