

The Keepers · *Erin Jolly*

“YOU VIR-GILL!” YELLS Papa from the downstairs bedroom, “Get up fum-air and build a far in-ee heater so’s we can get up early. Prince is coming home on leave from the Army and he’s got a new Chevy and we all going to town this evening. Come on now, shake a leg.”

In the loft Virgil mutters under his breath at the rude awakening. “Oh, Papa,” he calls down, “it’s been raining all night and the wood’s wet. It’s still early, Papa!”

“You Vir-gill,” Papa shouts back, “you know what to do when-ee wood’s wet. Get down-ere and whittle you some kindlin’ fum-ee stairs—it won’t hurt this fine manshing none, I reckon!”

Virgil leans over and shuffles one shoe on the floor and lies back on his pillow. Papa yells again as he shuffles both shoes and gains a little more time. But when Papa yells like he is ready to climb those rickety stairs, Virgil groans in resignation, and pushing back the covers on his side of the bed, he throws them onto Fleety, who is eight. Fleety always sleeps curled into a warm snail, his knees sticking into Virgil’s back. Virgil gives him a little knock on the skull just for fun, then gets to his feet stretching. Fleety was named for a beautiful sign that Mama once saw in Memphis—the Van Vleet Mansfield Drug Company. It is a high-toned name and Mama says there is a little town in Mississippi called Van Vleet also; no doubt the drug company was named for it. But in spite of her protests the name has been shortened to Fleety and there’s nothing she can do about it. Same thing about her oldest child; his name is really Princeling and Mama refuses to call him anything else. The more she reads the crankier she gets, complains Papa; because she reads everything she can get her hands on—the Cardui Almanac and Sizzen-Roebuck catalogue when there’s nothing else. And now she has started calling him Charles when everybody knows he is just plain Charley Pankey. Makes him feel like a fool. Even changed her name from Elsie to Elise; doesn’t want him to call her Elsie any more. “You just shift the letters about a little,” she says.

Papa swears that one of the worst things about share cropping is when they move from one plantation to another and Elsie makes him tote out box-loads of old magazines she has saved through the years; wives of the plantation owners keep her supplied with their picture books of fine

houses and shiny furniture and recipes and stories about how Love is. Everybody knows you can go crazy from too much reading. At one place where they cropped, a woman that Elsie traded magazines with went totally off her rocker and became frenzy-minded. That's why Papa wrote to Prince to get leave for a few days because his mama is sick; sure looks like they're going to have to put her away. Resilver is going on seventeen—a name Mama saw in an advertisement in one of the dad-blamed magazines and she said it was pretty enough to use for the new baby—and she can keep house and do the cooking until Mama gets well.

On this cold Saturday in February Virgil puts on clean faded blue jeans and a plaid cotton shirt. There is a partition in the loft and beyond it Resilver is dressing and she will come down to help Mama get breakfast. Mama and Papa are still in the bedroom that adjoins the little sitting-room where the heater and the tee-vee are. Virgil gets the fire going and presently Mama will come through on her way to the kitchen that was put in order the night before—skillets and pans hanging behind the big Home Comfort range. Elsie cannot make Papa stop telling Virgil to whittle kindling from the stairs or pull off strips of the heavy blue building paper that looked so fine with its bright tin rounds holding it down when they moved in three years before. She has stopped plaguing him about it because anybody knows you can't change men. Papa says the landlord takes advantage of him anyway and will fix the house up for a new tenant when they leave, so what's all the fuss about?

Virgil builds a fire in the kitchen range too, and from a zinc bucket takes water with a gourd dipper and fills the teakettle for Mama; he pours a little water into the gray enameled washpan, splashing it on his face delicately, and his finger tips touch the bar of soap lying in an old sardine tin with its top cut out. All the while, snatches of a new tune are running in his head but he has not found all the words yet.

When Virgil is grown-up he is going to be a song-writer and play his guitar and sing on tee-vee. He doesn't have too long to wait—he is almost fifteen and big for his age and he just might run away from home in a year or two and start making big money. He is always writing songs in his spare time, most of them without rhyme or meaning; but good enough, he thinks, for him to get in with a bunch like Brodie Lawhorn and his Mad-Bucket Brigade. He goes into the sitting-room and gets his guitar and plucks a few chords . . . he is so worried about Mama these days that he longs to make up a song just for her. He hums,

*Be thankful for Mother-r-r—
She'll go with you to the end,*

but what next? Frowning, he stares at the window where the rain is coming down in sheets . . . then his face brightens:

*Be thankful for Mother-r-r,
She'll go with you to the end—
Every time you pass her winder
Her heart is full of splinters.*

Mama passes through the room on her way into the kitchen, and she smiles at him. She is very frail, weighing only ninety-five pounds. She wears a clean, crisp house-dress with a starched, ruffled apron over it, tied in a big bow behind. Both are made from the printed sacks that the chicken-feed comes in and she always chooses the sack patterns with the greatest care. As she enters the kitchen Resilver is coming down the stairs to help; she is a pretty girl with red, wavy hair like Mama's, cut shoulder-length. This morning she is wearing blue jeans and a white shirt open at the neck. Papa will lie in bed until he smells the coffee perking.

Now Vleet comes down slowly, dressed exactly like Virgil in jeans and shirt; he is warm and lovable, without the bony lankiness of Virgil. He has not outgrown the baby-of-the-family stage; he allows Mama and Resilver to put their arms about his shoulders and sometimes he even lets them kiss him. But not often. Vleet doesn't like Papa and this is why:

Mrs. Hargrave, on whose plantation they are living now, once gave him a darling, black dog about half-grown, a combination of cocker spaniel and Labrador retriever. "This dog has got good blood," she said when she met Vleet one afternoon while she was taking her walk. "Would you like to have him, Vleet? We have too many dogs already."

"Yes, Ma'am!" said Vleet enthusiastically. He went home with Mrs. Hargrave to get a piece of rope to tie to the dog's collar although it was plain from the way he panted and wriggled that he would have followed Vleet without a leash. They ran together all the way home; Mama was busy but she came out and said the dog was pretty, sure enough; and she gave him a piece of cornbread for his supper. Then Papa came home and would not even look at the dog's glossy, wavy coat.

"We got two coon-hounds awready, and three bird dogs. We don't need nair-other dog!"

"But the others are not pretty," said Mama reasonably.

"What can we name him, Mama?" asked Vleet, looking sidewise at Papa stalking into the house.

"I'll find something," Mama said confidently, and that night she got out a stack of magazines and began reading. "I know!" she said suddenly. "We'll name him Orange!"

"Nobody but Elsie would name a black dog Orange," said Papa in disgust, eyeing the magazine between her hands.

"That was the name of a ruling family back in the seventeenth century," said Mama. "They ruled in the Netherlands and I knew I had read about them somewhere. Here's the little piece and the very name we need. This dog you got, Vleet, is purebred—or almost."

"Here Orange, here Orange," Vleet called for two days so the dog would become used to his name. And always he was scampering about Vleet's ankles, red tongue hanging from the curly black head, or else he was rolling over and over in delirium. But a few days later, Orange was missing. Vleet walked along the roads and across the fields calling, calling, and he even went to Mrs. Hargrave's back yard and peered through the fence, but Orange was nowhere to be seen. A week later, as he was walking beside the St. Francis River calling "Here, Orange, herre, herre!" he happened to look down and there in a clear still place was Orange with a big stone tied to his collar. He ran home screaming and Mama said, "Yes, honey, I know. I hoped you wouldn't find her. Didn't you know she was a she-dog?"

"Mrs. Hargrave called her *him* and anyway, he didn't have to do that! I could of give her away, anybody would have been proud to have that dog!"

"Mrs. Hargrave must not have known. She wouldn't have deceived you deliberately. We were all too busy the day you brought her home and nobody thought to turn her over and look. Naturally, I never thought he'd do *that*! He didn't let on and I found out by accident. At least he could have takened her farther down the river."

The only way Mama knew to comfort him was by getting down her cooking pans. "I'll make you a big gingerbread man with raisin buttons, Van Vleet, darlin'. Try to be quiet, now." But he couldn't control his sobs all at once, and he went to the front yard where an old automobile tire hung from the big oak tree. He swung slowly, pushing one foot against the hard gray earth, planning to run away from home as soon as he was old enough to know where to go.

Vleet has not liked Papa since and he doesn't want to be called Fleety any more. He does not play on the banks of the St. Francis the way he once did. Mama is kind to Papa because she understands him as nobody else ever will. He had a hard way to go when he was young. There were eight kids and he was the oldest and his papa used to beat him with a razor strop. So he ran away from home and did odd jobs and then got his big chance, working as a tractor driver on the Wylie plantation east of Wynridge. Mama was working as a waitress in a café; she had to drop out of school when her mother died. She wouldn't stay home with her papa who had marrying on his mind right away. And so when Papa came into the café on Saturday nights she fixed things extra nice for him; it was almost more than she could bear to see that lonesome look in his beautiful brown eyes.

Of course he's bossy and he's got a mean streak in him a mile wide, but Mama knows how he got that way. His paw died and of all the eight kids nair-one will live with their maw because she is so ornery too; never kept house right, never cooked good, never acted like any *body*. Papa talks about her like she was a saint from heaven; Mama pays him no mind.

Once Resilver said, "I don't know why you put up with him. We could move into Wynridge or Memphis and I could get a job babysitting after school and you could do sewing. We'd all do better without him."

Mama was furious. "Keep your voice down, Resilver! What about *him*? Could he get along without *us*? He's got no real family but us and we've got to stick by him. I know he never says so but I think deep down in his heart, that sometimes he's proud of us."

But today Resilver is setting the table for breakfast; Mama knows that something is up but she just can't pin it down. It seems that Resilver and Virgil are sorry for her somehow; nobody wants their kids to feel sorry for them!

When breakfast is ready Papa comes in and washes his face, snorting and blowing and wetting his black hair and combing it smooth. He is not a tall man but Mama is so little that he looks big alongside of her. When they go to town on Saturdays he wears stiffly-starched khaki pants and a khaki shirt and he has shaved himself and to look at him you'd think he was as good as anybody. He will stand on a street corner in Wynridge talking to other men while Mama waits at a little distance so as not to lose him and at the same time not giving him cause to say later that she was trying to listen in on man-talk. When he is ready to

move on down the street he will not say a word to Mama, but she will fall into step right at his heels. Today they are going to town because Princeling is coming; perhaps he will tell Mama what it is that Papa has got on his mind. The other children are being so close-mouthed that she'll be dogged if she will ask them.

They eat the hot breakfast. Mama has baked a huge pan of crisp biscuits and she has pear preserves from last fall's canning and eggs exactly the way each person likes them: Papa's turned over and hard, Virgil's turned lightly, Resilver's straight up; Vleet always says, "Just how you fix yours, Mama," and so she scrambles theirs. "Any way that's the least trouble," says Princeling when he is at home. It gives her a good feeling to be able to remember her family's likes and dislikes even in such simple ways.

"Be glad when Princeling gets here," says Mama tenderly. "So much meanness in the world, there's a lot of temptations for a handsome boy like him. I don't want him old and sin-sick afore his time."

"Don't nag him when he comes," growls Papa. "Boys is got to sow their wild oats. If I was young again I'd have a bigger crop."

Mama knows this is just brag, so she pays no heed. But she is troubled because Princeling is coming today; it's not time for his Army leave. He is always so thoughtful of Mama; he tells her what he wants to do for her when times get better. He wants her to have a nice house with rugs on all the floors and gas heat and Venetian blinds. He wants Mama to take life a little easier. But she knows that it's not everybody that can have such things here below and so we must be thankful for our blessings.

But secretly she has come to hate this house on the Hargrave plantation and she feels like a hypocrite sometimes when she has the urge to hack and scar at it herself; she never lets on to her family because she doesn't want to encourage such sinful thoughts. What she really wants is a house in the hill country because she cannot keep this one as clean as she wants; each time it rains and even when the folks clean their shoes on the mat she made out of the tops of soft-drink bottles nailed upside down on two boards, some of it still sticks to their shoes when they come in. Gumbo is gray mud that won't come off unless you grab a wet rag immediately and start scrubbing—and what it does to the kids' shoes! In dry weather the mud becomes hard like cement; during a drought cracks come in it so deep that the chaps can lose a marble or something and can run their arms clean down in them and not touch a thing.

Nobody can fight gumbo all the time but Mama tries to keep from fussing; Papa is doing the best he can—he's a good tractor driver, they don't come any smarter. But in the back of her mind there is always the picture of a nice clean house for her family, with linoleum rugs on the floors and starched ruffled curtains at the windows. It will be a light sunny house and she will have a new cook-stove and everything will be kept sparkling—and the first chap to come in with mud on his feet will rue the day. Sometimes she shows them pictures in the magazines, how families ought to live, or interrupts the tee-vee programs to comment. She wants them to live like that.

Well, along the middle of the morning Princeling drives up the graveled road in his bright new red car, and blows a long blast on the horn. Everybody hurries out to the porch; the rain has stopped and it will be a good day in town. Princeling emerges and hastens up the walk that is made of two wide planks; he runs up the steps and picks up Mama, fragile, protesting, lifting her in the air and laughing at her.

"And how is my mama? My pretty mama?" He keeps an arm about her as they enter the house and then he tosses his cap onto a table, grabs Virgil's arm to see if there is more muscle than when he was home last, and smacks Resilver on her behind. He runs his hand through Fleety's curly brown hair and exchanges contemplative looks with the half-grown, black pup lying behind the stove.

"Another dog, huh?" he asks.

"Elsie lets Fleety keep him in the house," says Pa grimly.

"He's a boy dog," Fleety explains swiftly. "Mama found him for me over to Perkins' house. They had four."

Princeling goes into the kitchen and pours a cup of coffee from the pot that Mama keeps ready on the back of the stove. Then they all seat themselves about the heater. "How you doing in school, Virgil?" asks his big brother.

There is a heavy silence. Nobody wants to tell on Virgil. "Well, what's wrong, Buddy? Don't you let them golden opportunities pass you by, Boy!"

"I let 'im quit," says Papa defiantly. "The teacher had it in fer'im."

"I begged and begged," Mama says sadly. "Resilver is in the tenth grade already and she plans to go on. I want these children educated."

"He'll be fifteen soon and he's a good tractor driver awready," says Papa. "During school terms I slaved and slaved and let him go when he coulda been helpin' out. He passed to the eighth and that's farther

than I got. I went through the sixth and we had graduation. We sung *Arkansas*. Pitch in, kids!”

*Arkansas, Arkansas, 'tis a name dear,
'Tis the place I call home, sweet home—
Arkansas, Arkansas, I salute thee,
From thy shelter no more I'll roam!*

Everybody is out of breath when they finish and then Virgil strikes some rippling chords and sings *Be Thankful for Mother*. “I composed it,” he says modestly.

“Thank you, Virgil,” says Mama. “That was real sweet.”

“He’s talented, that’s a fact,” says Princeling.

“He gets it from me,” says Papa. “I was always musical. There was some songs when I was growin’ up, better’n anything you hear today. Listen:

*Mairzy doats and dozey doats and liddle lamzy divey,
A kiddley divey doo, wooden you?*

Papa glances about at them; all are smiling. “There was another one:

*Hut sut Rawlson on the rillerah and a brawla, brawla soe-it,
Hut sut Rawlson on the rillerah and a brawla soe-it. . . .*

I knowed ’em all. You don’t hear anything that catchy these days. We had black cats we named Hut and Sut.”

“Still and all,” says Princeling thoughtfully, “I wisht Virgil would stay in school.”

“I’ll keep up my music,” Virgil assures him. “I aim to get on tee-vee.”

“He’ll live to be sorry,” says Mama from the doorway. “He’ll never be able to do nothing without education.”

“You-all heard her!” says Princeling. “Mama reads a lot, and she knows best.”

“Yeah,” says Papa meaningfully, cutting an eye at Princeling.

“You-all be good to Mama,” Princeling says but she hears him and there is something pacifying in his voice, the way you speak to a decrepit old woman of fifty. Under everything they are saying, she hears

a note of unrest; they cannot hide it from her, however loudly they laugh.

"I'm gonna put lipstick on Mama one-a these days and dress her up like Miz Hargrave!" Princeling calls toward the kitchen and awaits Mama's laugh but there is only silence. She does not even turn her head.

"She's made me two new outfits!" says Resilver suddenly. "A jumper and another with a jacket. She ordered the material out of the new Sears. I'll show you!" She runs upstairs and returns with the clothes that Mama has copied from the colored fashions in the catalogue, turning and pressing the seams beautifully. "I'll wear the jumper to town today and I'll save the suit until spring. It takes a smart person to sew the way Mama does—using old patterns and changing them!"

"Well, she's smart at sewing, that's for sure," says Princeling, fingering the material. Papa mutters something but nobody asks him to repeat it.

"I don't see why you-all want to brag on Elsie all the time," he says. "Sure, she sews. Takened me three year to pay for that fancy machine she's got. Sewing's no big deal. My mother kept house for eight kids and chopped cotton and sewed besides."

"Her buttonholes look like pig's eyes," calls Mama from the kitchen. She heard that, all right.

Papa's face gets red. He jumps out of his chair and begins to walk the floor and everybody gets quiet.

"Wait'll you hear what Elsie is got on her mind!" he shouts, and in the kitchen Mama becomes stock-still. "Then see how smart your mama is!"

Princeling looks at Papa and then at Mama's straight little back in the kitchen, turned away from them. Resilver and Virgil stare at a few coals that have rolled onto the apron of the heater and Vleet, lying on the floor on his stomach, keeps his gaze on a comic book.

"What's wrong, Mama?" asks Princeling, but there is only silence.

"I'll tell you what's wrong!" yells Papa. "I wanted to keep it from you kids as long as I could, but Mama ain't herself no more. She thinks too much. You got any idea what she wants me to buy for her?" He pauses for a moment and then bursts out, "Elsie wants a star sapphire!"

Oh, Mama is furious. He shows what he thinks of her, all right, still calling her Elsie when she's told him again and again, how tacky that sounds. He could at least say, "Elise wants a star sapphire!"

Princeling is genuinely astonished. He goes into the kitchen and puts

an arm about Mama's rigid shoulders. She is staring out the back window at the sagging, wire fence that Papa has promised to straighten up before the garden is planted; she looks at the clothesline on its unsteady poles that are always falling with a full load of washing, at the dirty, wet, Barred Rock chickens pecking about the doorstep. She won't turn her head even for Princeling.

"Mama! People of our station don't own star sapphires! You got any idea what them things cost? Papa can't buy you one in a hundred years!"

Papa is standing in the doorway. "What can you expect of somebody that was born on Friday the thirteenth?" he says glumly. "All them old magazines she saves that we have to haul around, and pestering Miz Hargrave for hers soon as she's finished. No pride. She's a lot worse since we got the tee-vee. I thought it might quieten her down some, but it's ruint her sure enough. She wants everthing them women have. I never seen a star sapphire in my whole life, never knowed there was such a thing until she showed me a pitcher. It's just a little old blue set on a ring. She broached the subject last year but I never told nobody, thought it might be the change working on her. We ain't never had no mental illness in my family. Why, I can't make enough money the rest of my life to buy her one and if I did, what would the chaps do for shoes? That's why I needed you here for a few days, Prince. You'll have to help me decide what to do about Elsie. You know that's crazy talk and maybe we oughta put her away."

Resilver bursts into tears and runs up the stairs; Virgil feels so funny that he steps out on the porch and starts whistling and Fleety and his dog follow him and they stand looking at the new, red Chevy parked in front of the house. So that's it, thinks Mama, pulling away from Princeling. "Just what is so bad about wanting to live like fine folks?"

"Well," says Princeling tenderly, "let's don't talk about it now. We'll just go to town after a while and have fun." He pats Mama's unyielding shoulder and then returns to the adjoining room. "You satisfied to stay here another year, Papa?"

"Not what you could call satisfied, Son. But I promised Mr. Hargrave to stay on if he'll give work to Virgil too. That boy is going to make a fine, husky field hand and then we can move."

Virgil enters just in time. "Be glad when we can!"

Fleety and his dog sit on the floor beside the stove and there is a little foreign voice from the kitchen. "Tired this house!"

"You gonna let me'n Fleety bust out the windows of this house when

we move, Papa? We was little fellers when we left the last place and we busted out thirteen.”

“And it’ll be a stain on your conscience the last day you live!” says Mama angrily, from the kitchen doorway. “Next time it’ll be over my dead body.”

“Plenty of time to think about that,” says Papa. “Next time we’ll take out the light bulbs because we bought ’em. I just might unscrew the pump handle and take some of the farm tools because we might need ’em some day. Finders keepers, you know, Son. If we leave anything valuable behind crooks will steal ’em soon’s the house is empty.”

“I’m not sure you’re right about that, Papa,” says Princeling, running his fingers through his thick black hair. “That’s not the principles Mama has taught us and whatever you say about Mama, we got to remember she’s always honest.”

“Right to leave things here for folks what hasn’t worked for ’em? Speaking of principles, Elsie, remember the first place we cropped and when we moved you made me dig up a root of that yaller climbin’ rose that’s at the end of the front porch, what we been haulin’ from place to place ever sinct? Wasn’t that stealin’, Elsie?”

“Only decent stealin’ you ever done,” says Mama, turning back to her pots and pans.

By two o’clock they are finished eating but Mama won’t dress until she has washed up everything; Resilver dries, and then sweeps the kitchen. Mama rubs some lotion on her hands (the kind that tee-vee says will keep them kissin’ soft) and goes into the bedroom. When she comes out she is wearing a green, wool dress that she made, and a smart black coat that her sister Belle sent from Michigan; they are doing good up there and the weather is so much colder that this heavy coat will last her for winters to come. She has tucked a green, silk scarf into the collar and with her black bag and gloves is ready to go. The boys have on their jackets and Resilver is stylishly dressed in her new, navy-blue jumper with a tailored, white blouse underneath; she is wearing her trim camel’s-hair coat.

“Van Vleet,” says Mama determinedly, because Princeling is there and she wants him to remember that all her children have strong names even though they are seldom used except by herself—“put Homer into his box so we can leave.”

Homer has been watching their preparations for departure and he shrinks at the familiar tone of Mama’s dismissal and tries to make

himself as inconspicuous as possible. "Homer?" says Princeling. "Funny name for a dog."

Vleet has picked him up and, with the half-grown dog dangling from his arms, pauses on his way to the back porch. "Mama said that when she was in the eighth grade at school, the teacher read to them about a poet who lived in Greece a long time ago, and that was his name."

Presently they are in the new car. Virgil is in the back seat first, rolling his window up and down; Mama and Resilver sit with him. Papa and Princeling are in the front seat and Vleet is with them because he is little. The interior of the car is like perfume.

In Wynridge, Princeling parks the car on a side street and they walk rapidly to the movie house. He will buy tickets for them all. It ought to be a fine show, thinks Mama, staring at the blinking rolling lights over the marquee and the gaudy posters, but it can't match *Gone With the Wind*. She has seen that one three times, once in Belden City and twice in Wynridge and she'll see it again if it ever comes close. She is crazy about Clark Gable and the way he says to Scarlett at the end, "My dear, I don't give a damn." She thinks she is somewhat like Scarlett, the way she puts off worrisome thoughts until the morrow.

Just outside the darkened theatre they stand with others who are waiting for the newsreel to come on; that way they won't have to see the picture's ending first. Presently they know it's about over; there are long pauses and slow sad music and faint voices . . . then the roar of the lion on the screen and the blast of the drums and marching feet and they rush inside.

Resilver catches sight of one of her girl friends and they squeal at each other, throwing out their arms; they go in and sit a few rows from the front while Virgil and Vleet, carrying sacks of popcorn, run down the aisle to sit on the first row. Princeling sits between Mama and Papa. After a while the movie is over and they all stagger out spellbound; street lights are on, gleaming hazily through the fog.

The stores will be open until ten o'clock because it is Saturday night, so they have time for some shopping. The children have been told to come to the Annie and Baby Sister Café in exactly one hour and they will have supper. Papa stops to talk to some men on the street.

"What you want me to buy for you, Mama?" asks Princeling.

"Oh, honey, I don't know. I broke another glass today so let's just step in here and look."

They enter the big variety store under a gaudy sign saying *If We Ain't*

Got It, You Don't Need It; people are jostling one another, the clerks are tired and irritable and the owner strides up one aisle and down another pleading, "Take yo' time, folks, you'll get waited on . . . just be honest, please, and take yo' time!"

So Mama and Princeling take their time, wandering among throw rugs, shiny tin pans and stacks of dishes . . . at last they emerge with a tall, flowered pitcher and eight, iced-tea glasses to match, a new mop and two pairs of hose for Mama.

"Thank you, Son," she says lovingly, "thank you so much!"

"Easy come, easy go, Mama," he answers. "You can't take it with you—they's no pockets in a shroud!"

"No, honey, there's not," says Mama, pleased that he remembers her teachings.

In the crowded café Papa and Resilver and Virgil and Vleet have found seats and are saving places for them, waiting impatiently. A jukebox is playing "Plant some flowers on my grave, dear," and Mama feels like crying. They order catfish and french-fries and coleslaw and hush puppies and iced tea; they have almost finished when they see Mr. Emerson come in the door and stand looking about the café as if he is seeking somebody. He is the farm manager for Mr. Fontaine, who has one of the biggest plantations in the state.

"Charley Pankey!" he calls out and they all jump in amazement; even Fleety stops eating.

"Can I speak to you a minute?" Papa almost chokes and as everybody in the café pauses to watch, he goes to meet Mr. Emerson, who gives him a hearty handshake. Pushing back his chair, Princeling bows to Mama, and asks, "Will you excuse me?" and follows Papa and Mr. Emerson outside.

Mama knows it is late to be hiring farm labor for the coming year and anyway Papa has made a trade with Mr. Hargrave, so it couldn't be that. So is Papa in some kind of trouble? He's got a terrible temper and a big mouth, but in that case Mr. Emerson wouldn't be shaking hands, would he? So she tries to finish eating but she can't; she is worried about Papa. After a while Papa and Princeling enter, smiling and motioning for the family to come on; at the front counter Papa is paying for their supper! He has a foxy look; Mama is dying to know what has happened, but she won't ask. They leave the café and at a street light on the corner Papa motions for them to stop. They press against the wall of a store building so other people can pass, laden with packages, talking and laughing. Princeling says, "Listen, you-all, Papa's got good news."

They stare at Papa. Resilver flushes with excitement, Mama stands a little closer to Princeling while Virgil and Fleety push their way into the center of the group. Papa enjoys tantalizing them but presently he speaks.

"We gonna move," he says casually, as if it were of no importance.

Mama's heart begins to pound. "Move? Why, Charles, how can we? You got a trade with Mr. Hargrave!"

"I've got fifty bucks in my pocket and fifty more when we move across the county line to the Fontaine place. Mr. Emerson says they got to have more tractor drivers over there and Virgil can work too. Mr. Fontaine gives him power to hire and fire."

"Wheeee!" says Virgil and begins dancing, bucking in and out, shuffling his feet and pushing out his hands like they do on tee-vee. Vleet is shinnying up a lamppost.

"You Fleety!" yells Papa. "Come down fum-air!"

"It's like this, Mama," says Princeling with an arm about her shoulders, "a new house will make you feel better; it'll take your mind off of—other things. Mr. Fontaine is sold on Papa and Virgil and he's gonna put you in a brand-new house that's painted and got lights and gas heat! Think of it, Mama, all that and rent-free!"

Mama glances at Resilver and then turns her eyes away. Resilver has never been able to have her nice, school friends visit her in the old house. "It's just not right," she says, choosing her words carefully, but cringing at the look in Papa's face. "How many rooms is it?"

"Five rooms and a bathroom," says Papa tenderly. "Good shed for a car when we get one. Chicken house. Big garden spot. Two great big-bearin', paper-shell puhcahn trees. We gonna move along about midnight tomorra night. Think you can get packed, Elsie?"

"I don't know," says Mama desperately. "We never sneaked away from any place before, and sure not in the night. Besides, you give your word to Mr. Hargrave and it's only trash goes back on their word."

"How come you takin' up for the Hargraves?" says Papa wrathfully. "They ain't so daggoned honest themselves. Remember Mrs. Hargrave and that dog? She knowed what she was a-doin', takin' advantage of a pore little iggerant kid."

Fleety squirms and Mama draws him to her. "Come here, Van Vleet," she says. "I never saw any boy your age as smart as you are. You'll show 'em all some day." Papa pretends not to hear.

Princeling laughs loudly to cover the tension; Resilver and Virgil are

standing before a lighted window, looking at pretty new furniture, and Vleet is between Mama and Princeling. "She don't mean to throw cold water on your prospects, Papa," he says soothingly. "Mama's always thinking about the right and wrong of everything; you're probably right saying she reads too much. A man's got to better a situation for his family, Mama, a settin' hen cain't fatten, you know. I want you to have a house that don't leak, with rugs and all. Papa, you see that Mama has rugs for that new house!"

Papa gives an angry grunt and walks away toward the street where the car is parked. They all follow silently, Mama feeling so weak and low-down that she can hardly walk. What's it all for, she wonders—the reading and learning and hoping that her family will live right? As they near the car, Princeling points to a trailer across the street on a vacant lot. "Looka there, you-all! See the folks crowding around! Why, we can get our pitchers made for two bits apiece! Now I make a motion we go over there and get our pitchers made to celebrate the good luck in our family!"

"I'll wait in the car," says Papa in a surly voice, walking away from them. Virgil and Vleet run toward the trailer and Resilver tries to slow her steps and walk like a lady. Princeling and Mama drop behind and he holds her arm gently as if she was his best girl friend.

"You see, Mama," he says in a low voice, bending down, "Papa's doing all this for you. He's getting older and it may be the last chanc't he'll have to get you and the kids a nice house. It hurts a man's pride for his family to live in an old, beat-up house like the one you got now. He'll never be able to buy you a star sapphire, but this is something he's able to do."

Mama stops in her tracks and stares at him with scornful eyes. "Who do you think you're lying to, Princeling Pankey? He's not doing it for me and the children—he's doing it for a measly hundred dollars and a new house to live in and because he hasn't got the spunk to say no to a man like Mr. Emerson who is only a flunkey for Mr. Fontaine who probably doesn't even know our name. And when word of this gets around, that he went back on his word and we moved in the night, who'll ever trust us again? And answer me this: do you suppose that in my wildest dreams I'd ever want Papa to sweat and worry to buy me a star sapphire?"

Princeling is truly bewildered. "But, Mama, he says you've been nagging him for months to get you one."

"I've read about them and I've seen a picture now and then. You look down on a square or even a circle of blue with a star buried deep, so you think you've got a little window to heaven right on your hand. I just wanted him to look at the things I see, to ponder about them and to love me enough to want to buy me one of those rings. I never would have let him do it, however much he could have saved."

"Now, Mama, you've lived with Papa long enough to know he don't reason like that. You mean well, I know—but you've always read too much. I'll talk to Papa about it and he'll be glad to know you're not really sick."

He draws her to the edge of the crowd that is milling about, and taking her small, ringless hands between his own, he turns them over and says, "Mama, I don't know how to say this but I been seeing your hands without rings all my life because you told us that Papa was too poor to buy you a wedding ring when you married him; and I venture to say that the whole family will agree with me that all the cooking and washing and ironing and sewing that you have done for us is worth more than the way those tee-vee ladies live with all their rings and things."

Mama cannot reply to such words so she is silent. Then Princeling drops her hands as Virgil and Vleet run up to show the photographs made in a machine behind the green curtain in the front of the trailer; and looking on the forced smiles, Mama and Princeling agree that each is a perfect likeness.

They walk to the trailer where Resilver is standing before a small mirror that hangs on the side, putting on lipstick and running a comb through her thick, red hair . . . then she vanishes. Presently she emerges and they admire her photograph with the wide smile showing her teeth. "They used to tell you to say *Cheese*, Mama, but now you say *Sex*, and you get a bigger smile!"

"I do declare," says Mama indignantly. "How vulgar!"

Princeling laughs. "Here, honey," he says to Resilver, "loan me your lipstick. Let's fix up Mama real pretty. I got to show the fellers at the base a pitcher of my best girl." He takes Mama's face in his big hands and draws a crimson mouth. "Resilver, comb her hair nice . . . now you look glamorous, Mama!" As she protests in embarrassment, he guides her to the steps of the trailer and, turning to the others, he says, "See? Nobody can hold a candle to our Mama! Come on now, Mama, give us a great big smile!"

He assists her up the trailer steps as ceremoniously as though she is a big movie star and then he bows, returning to stand with the others. Just before she turns to go inside, Mama pauses to look at them gravely; they are watching her closely with their photographic smiles, wondering if she will smile back and make them feel good. Her gaze rests on each face in turn and then, who is that! Why, there is Charles, come to stand with his family! She knows that he was lonely in the car while the rest of them were enjoying the bright lights, so he has slipped back to be with them although he is not really with them at all; she sees those sad brown eyes fixed on her face with the same lost look they had the first time she saw him. . . . Just before the green curtain shuts her away from them and with all the strength she can muster, Elise straightens her shoulders and, although her face feels strangely stiff, the painted lips form the smile they are waiting for.