

IT GOT TO where Edna wouldn't answer when the phone rang. "I just don't answer," she said. "I know." She meant, "I know that's going pretty far, and I don't care. I've been driven to it." And she also meant, "I know who's calling." She said she could tell by the sound of the ring that it was her sister Alma, next door, so near that the shadows of the two roofs made one shadow through most of the day. Her older—or, as she was careful to say, her elder—sister, Alma, who had once peered over the railing of a child's crib and the baby (a relative of hers) had screamed. Alma calling up again to tell Edna some new story about Laurie, and to insist that Edna should get the police right away. And bring an ambulance and a doctor for Laurie, who was bleeding all over the place. Edna said, "But I just don't hear." And she nodded quickly as though she had got the better of that one, but from her restlessness and the way she could not let go of the subject it was obvious that she had done nothing of the kind. When the phone rang, she said, she stood right where she was, or she sat still in the chair—the blue-painted wicker one out on the front sun porch, or the carved one with the brownish purple velvet cushion, in next to the radio in the dining room—until the phone stopped calling her. "She can just ring and ring," Edna said, "until I could—". She blew a little laugh down her nose. "I can tell she's saying, 'I *know* you're in there, and I can keep right on ringing until you answer me.' But I won't. She finally gets tired. And I'm right here all the time. She knows that. She watches when I go out or come in. I don't know what else she does in there, everything piled up the way she's got it. Food lying all around the kitchen. You know she won't answer her own door most of the time. People go up the steps and they ring and ring. And then they knock. And she's in there, alright. They can hear her moving around. And she may be hard of hearing, but she knows they're there. They even see her pull back the edge of the curtain, like that, and look out, and she'll say, 'What do you *want*?' and then close the curtain and never open the door. Maybe then they go around and try the side door. And she'll call out, 'If you don't stop that right now I'll get the police.' And they hear her rattle the chain on the other side of the door." Edna drooped, worn out by the whole situation. It had been a long time since she had knocked on Alma's door.

They were both old enough for people to wonder about their ages and make guesses as to how long they might last—one of the unconfessed habits. Neither of them had had bodies for a long time except in terms of the medicine cabinets in their bathrooms and the sizes of their clothes, or at least of their oxfords, but their footsteps were still heavy. Pieces of china tinkled faintly in the dressers when they walked through their houses. Neither of them heard clearly. Some days worse than others. Edna called Alma “Dutch” as a familiar reference: all the rest of the brothers and sisters called her that among themselves, but to outsiders they pretended that they didn’t, really. The name conveyed a judgment of Alma, a distance from her, a washing of the hands, and a certain awe. They explained that “Dutch” meant “stingy”—or at least they had come to believe that it meant stingy, back when they had all been children, miles up the river, across from the big rock under the trees on the far shore, with the name of the village painted on it in white, for boats, which passed up and down in those days, and stopped down at the landing. But “Dutch” had just meant “strange” to start with, referring to the Dutch who were Germans, in fact, and were supposed to say things that everyone agreed were always funny, such as “Go the hill up.” But maybe the reason the family had arrived at calling Alma “strange” when what they meant was “stingy” was that they were stingy too, and knew it, and wanted to point a finger at Alma, to say that she was stingier than they were: *she* was Stingy. And she was. And “strange” came to mean “stingy” so that they could say so all the time. Edna said that Alma frequently did not answer her telephone, either. Edna could sit in the kitchen and hear the telephone ringing over at Alma’s, and tell that nobody was coming to answer it, when she knew that Alma was right there and could hear it if she wanted to. She said she knew that people wondered about Alma.

Edna was the one who had always done what was needed, and then Alma had said “we.” They called their mother “Grandma” to children, and “Mumma” to each other and everyone else, unless they had occasion to use her full name, which they did as though it were a title. When Edna and her husband had been living in New Kensington, Mumma had lived with them for so long that it seemed she had always been there, and that all of their lives had been arranged that way from the beginning. They had all come to feel that the world was like that, with Mumma living at Eddie’s and Port’s, in the front bedroom upstairs, the biggest room in the house, facing out over the railroad tracks and the

cement viaduct that crossed above them, under which the trains roared, the white smoke pouring up until the smokestack reached the sooty patch on the side of the bridge, and then getting cut off for an instant before shooting straight up again twice as fast on the other side—something which Mumma had seen, hour after hour, every day for she didn't know how long, and had not paid it any mind, if she had noticed it at all. So many years she had seen the river going by, outside the back door, and then the trains racing past, darkening the house with their storm shadows, and then for so long she had not seen the water any more, but more trains than ever, and the viaduct with cars on it. She could still see them when at last she was sick there for so long that it came to seem that that was a lifetime too, in her rocking chair by the one window, bent over with her head on a board tied to the wooden arms so that she could look out at the room or at the sky tipped clear over sideways. Some days Alma would come down the alley in back, and stop by after breakfast on her way to the store, and would stand in the kitchen or sit down for a minute and ask, "Well, how is Mumma today?" And after their mother died at ninety-six, Alma would say, to the few people she stopped to talk to on the street, "Well, *we* was always good to our Mumma, anyway."

People had always been afraid of Alma. Even when she and Edna were children with all their brothers and their one younger sister, up the tracks along the river, Alma, with her red hair and freckles, had been the terror of the neighborhood. She boasted that she could lick any boy her age in the place, and she was right: she would stand on the front porch and dare them to try to get to the top before she knocked them down and sent them home crying, with bloody faces. Mumma put a stop to that, or at least she tried to, but even Mumma, who kept a tight rein knotted on all of them, and whom nobody talked back to, said that she couldn't think where Alma had got it from—certainly not from Mumma's own side of the family. She had been heard to mumble that Alma was a cross they had to bear, and she repeated that they must all pray. But it did not appear to be the Lord's will for Alma's disposition to sweeten as she got her growth, and later on when the family moved downriver into town Mumma had wondered out loud whether Alma would ever get married and be taken off their hands. She did, though, in the next phase of their lives, when they had moved again, farther downriver, to a bigger town: New Kensington. There Alma was introduced to Ralph at a church occasion, and in His good time God joined

them in holy matrimony. Ralph was thin and round-shouldered, with a long, sharp, aquiline nose thin as a drum-head, and he talked through it, just as Alma talked through hers. When she said, "Ralph," it sounded like a cat on a back fence, and when he said, "Alma," it sounded like another, but much quieter, as though he hoped she would not hear him.

He had what all of them—Mumma, Edna, and the rest of the family—agreed was a good job, down at the big Alcoa aluminum plant. They said he was the foreman in charge of all the painting of the buildings. When the family spoke of his position it seemed that Ralph must be the vice president, except that he kept getting moved up. He never betrayed the slightest hankering for a change, but kept the same job all his working life because you couldn't do no better than that, and he would describe the pension growing and waiting for him when he retired.

Ralph's wide-brimmed greenish tan hat which, like the rest of his clothes, always looked as though he had just worn it home from the haberdasher's, was virtually as necessary to him as the large, gold-rimmed, pink-tinted glasses that had clasped his nose bone until they were part of his face and his voice. His hat was a detachable and variable part of his head. It was the way he turned and nodded and talked. If you had seen his hat alone on a hatrack, you could have told it was Ralph's. He wore his hat when he sat out on the porch swing of his house, and often he wore it indoors, and when he took it off the ghost of it remained on his head, which appeared to be naked and not at home, the thin hair missing the warm hat-band and the dark close cover, and you could see that being out from under the hat was a momentary condition, an interlude of suspended credulity.

He and Alma bought a big tan-painted frame house on the hill a few blocks above Mumma's, with a long flight of wooden steps and a pipe railing up the bank out front, and they got a rat terrier like Mumma's and Edna's, which they named Sally. When Sally died they got another Sally. Alma became pregnant, but the baby, a girl, died. Or, as the family put it, she lost it, and could have no more children, which some said was a mercy. The details remained a mystery. But for the rest of her life the loss was cited in efforts to explain why Alma was the way she was. The tan house looked out over downtown New Kensington, to the bluffs across the river, but she kept the windows locked, the blinds down to the sills, the curtains drawn shut, the inside doors locked and bolted and the outer glass doors locked and latched. She would have done that wherever they might have lived.

Ralph's salary grew steadily with the years, and in time they moved down from the old wooden house to a new red brick one with a wide paved front porch and deep awnings, only a street up from Mumma's—the alley ran between the two streets—but in a section that was said to be more residential. And he and Alma acquired a new Studebaker the color of Ralph's hat, and kept it locked in the brick garage that opened onto the alley in back. The car was of Ralph's choosing. By then he confided, in a low voice, sitting on one of the glazed chintz cushions rife with unregarded orange flowers, on the new tin glider out among the echoes of the porch, that he let Alma have her way about everything else, but he reserved his freedom with respect to two things: the choice of his clothes and of the car. It was a used statement, spoken with no one in mind. His clothes: the hat, the suit without a wrinkle, the polished thin expensive shoes, and the fine-knit socks with thin clocks up the sides. Most of the outer garments appeared to be shades of his hat. Partly because he was bone-thin and stooped, he seemed huddled in them. Even in his shirt and suspenders. Even in his undershirt. In his suit as in his gabardine topcoat, when he stood up it seemed that he could be hung on a hanger and put away without getting out of them. And although they looked new the clothes resembled him. And so did the Studebaker, with its narrow vertical radiator grille. You could see why he had chosen each of the garments, and the car. He kept the Studebaker under a sheet in the immaculate hushed garage, where the sunbeams came in through the clean windows and moved across the blank floor, warming the smells of Simoniz and oil and gray velvet car upholstery. He took off the sheet and backed the car out only on special occasions. As he grew older he changed the model once or twice, at long intervals, and he drove less and less. Eventually, when the neighbors acquired televisions, he and Alma bought one too, and Alma sat on the edge of her easy chair watching the wrestlers through her cataracts, smacking her lips and slapping her knee under the long faded dress, calling out "Kill him! Kill him!" while Ralph sat back in the shade of his hat and said nothing.

Edna had married too, back at the same time as Alma. Her husband was a tall, bony, gentle, shambling figure with dark skin and black wiry hair which he kept cropped short like a brush. He was from just up the river at Mahoning, but he had been blessed with the exotic name of Alonzo, though everyone called him Port, short for Porter, his family name. Port knew everybody he saw, and he got along with everybody.

He had a high, hoarse, laughing voice. He never learned to drive. He walked everywhere as though he were coming home. He swung along the bright, windy railroad tracks the same way he did on the sidewalk, with his head tipped a little to one side. Edna was somewhat sideways and lop-sided too. Her walk, her shoulders, her mouth. It was one of the things they had in common, and it grew more pronounced with the years. They bought a small house, yellow brick halfway up, and white clapboard above that, with a sun porch in front, and a stained glass window facing the next house. It was on Stanton Avenue, a narrow street with houses along only one side and the steep drop to the Pennsylvania Railroad tracks on the other. When Port got home their rat terrier named Patty would yap on the cellar stairs and her nails would pelt like a storm of rice until he let her out. Then he would settle out on the sun porch, by the white-painted wicker table where the Zenith, in the form of an old veneer model of a country church, stood on the big doily that Mumma had crocheted, and he would bend his ear to the Gothic grille to follow the distant ball game through the static. If it was a warm day he would sit there in his undershirt even though Edna would come to the slightly raised window behind the radio, or to the door of the porch, and say, "Port, now you put your shirt on before somebody sees you." He paid no attention, except to look, for a moment, like someone who is getting away with something. When Edna was out of sight in the back of the house he might take out his false teeth too, and lay them down carefully on the doily, but if she came out and caught him at that he would wad them back into their place again, raising his eyebrows and looking up at the canary cage.

Whereas Ralph's clothes were a careful fit, Port's were apt to look too long and loose for him, tall though he was—like hand-me-downs. Sometimes Edna or he picked up shirts and underwear for him at sales, several at a time, if they were going at two or three for something. If his size wasn't to be found in the sale, they got him the size larger. That would be better than having things too small. And since they weren't needed right away, Edna wrapped them in newspaper and put them on a shelf for later on.

Nobody talked much about Port's job, as though there was not much to be said about it. It was a job, that was all. He worked down at the post office, which they always referred to as the new post office. He unloaded and sorted mail bags. That was what he did. There was no promise that he would stay there forever if a real opportunity presented itself some

day, but the job was handy, and it was the government, so it was as steady as anything could be. They did not forget the depression. And there were supposed to be employee benefits. He and Edna never had a child. He taught the rat terrier to jump through the hoop of his arms.

Mumma got the house next door to them, just like theirs except that the porch was open, not glassed, and the front was shaded by a toby tree, so that the rooms were darker and cooler. And quieter, though Mumma too had her rat terrier in the cellar, and an old canary named Dicky, who sang, it was said, when she talked to him, if he was feeling well. Usually he was not feeling well, and had not been feeling well for some time, because he was moulting. Mumma's black ormolu clock with its gold lions and Roman numerals chimed in front of the mirror on the mantelpiece, and the house filled with silence and the past. When a train roared by as the clock was striking, the silence after it had gone was deep and long, and people who had been talking stood and stared. Mumma had a white china poodle with a black head and orange glass eyes, that was very old and was hers like her shadow or her name. Then one year Alma or somebody out shopping found some new china dogs, small but nice, and inexpensive, at the five and ten, and that year at Christmas everybody got them as presents. Alma had a police dog with a chip out of one front foot. Edna had a ginger-colored bulldog, very life-like. Mumma had a fox terrier, but it looked new and unsettled near the poodle, even though it had its own doily to stand on. Mumma took many of her meals with Port and Edna, and even when she ate alone Edna usually took something over to her. They all treated the two buildings like rooms of the same house, so it seemed natural, when Mumma could no longer get around easily, for her to move over from her own place to theirs, once and for all.

Despite his long limbs and his easy gait there had always been a lurking frailty about Port, though it was not a thing that anyone noticed until afterwards. Lifting mail bags involved the danger of hernia, and occasionally in the evenings he complained of the ache in his back, but such things were treated as the wear and tear inevitably incurred in earning one's bread. Then one day Port fell backwards off the top of a mail truck and was carried home with a serious injury to his back, and he was left lying flat for months, in pain that was severe most of the time, and never absent. He and Edna began their experience of the extent and the limitations of the employee benefits accruing from his job with the government. The doctors spoke calmly and knowledgeably,

but they made no promises, and nothing they prescribed had much lasting effect. They agreed that the damage would take a long time to heal, and that Port's back might never recover completely, or be free of pain. At last Port was permitted to get up and ease himself around the house. Edna had to help him dress. And after more months he was allowed, as much for morale as for physical reasons, to go back to work—doing things that required no lifting, of course. But even that was too much. The severe pain returned, and Port had to keep taking days and weeks off, lying flat, a prey to depression. Eventually it became impossible for him to walk down to the post office at all, even with the stiff and groping step that had become his, and he lay at home, helpless, growing weaker, his resistance to disease of any kind ebbing away, until finally, still in middle age, he died.

Then Mumma died, and Alma's and Edna's younger brother, Bill, the one who had been to college and became a preacher, moved back from Philadelphia with his wife, and became the pastor of a small church up at Elderton, in the country. Their children had grown up and left home, but even so the tiny, dilapidated frame house by the highway which the congregation had been using as a manse was not what the new pastor and his wife felt was adequate. It was neither what they were used to nor what they had in mind. The manse was sold, and the minister, whose endowment policies were maturing by then, bought forty acres a few miles outside the village, with a view of the surrounding ridges on all sides. He sold the woods off one whole slope for timber, and built a stone house on the hilltop. He brought Edna up for visits from time to time. Usually it was just for the afternoon, and she walked around idly with her black purse clamped tightly beneath her arm, and looked at the distance, sat in a chair and said "Mm-hmm" to herself, over and over, had some early supper, usually cold cuts, at the table by the picture window, and Bill drove her back to New Kensington afterwards. A few times when Bill was away and his wife was up there alone, Edna came and stayed until he got back. And once or twice when Bill and his wife went on a trip together, Edna was glad enough to come up and live there alone while they were gone, feeding the dog and the cats, watering the petunias when she remembered to. The nearest neighbor was a mile away, and Edna of course could not drive, but friends from the church stopped off to see her when they were passing, and took her into the village to do her shopping. She double-locked every door behind her so obsessively that she locked herself out once and was saved only by the

chance visit of a neighbor who had a spare key. By that time she had sold the house in New Kensington where Port and Mumma had died, and was living in two rooms in a converted attic in the house of a high-school art teacher. While she was staying up on the hilltop in the stone house she made some inquiries of the people she got to know, and after Bill and his wife came back she announced her intention of buying a house in Elderton and moving there. It was not what the pastor's wife would have suggested, and she wondered whether Edna would be happy, but she said it was not really her business, and dropped the subject.

Edna bought a small house on the only street, you might say, in the village. Elderton is one of many local settlements that once were cross-roads. The houses lined the four roads for some distance from the intersection, and then there were no more, and that was that. Some of the buildings dated back to the early years of the nineteenth century, and even before that, and the walls of some of them were made of logs inside the clapboard which had been put on much later—recently enough so that there were photographs of houses before the refurbishment (showing second-story porches) and during (showing men with billowing moustaches, and derby hats, posing with hammers) and afterwards (the facades gleaming with fresh paint, and bedight with new gingerbread trim above the banisters). But most of the extant houses had been built around the time of the Civil War: square, solid, brick or frame, on foundations of great dark, dressed stones. Big trees lined the streets, with flagstoned walks under them stencilled by fallen leaves. In the thirties and forties, as cars multiplied and their speed increased and came to be regarded as a necessity, the state diverted one of the routes through Elderton and made a by-pass alongside the village: a concrete highway that sliced across the gently curving main street at either end. The new artery paralleled the old shaded avenue, exposing the backs of the houses along one side of it, disclosing their outbuildings and odds and ends running down into the hollow. Where there had been a view of fields and woods, and of line after line of hills, there was a highway, and the light above a concrete slab.

The old gray house that Edna bought was at one end of the main street just before it rejoined the bone-yellow by-pass. Down across from the stop sign where the street ended stood the house that once had been the church manse. And going the other way, up the street past a few front yards, was her brother's church. Edna stuffed her veteran veneer furniture from New Kensington into one more wooden structure. She piled

up the clothes waiting to be mended, and some of the old bedding, in a leaning stack next to the table radio, and the magazines and newspapers under the painted wicker tables and on the chapped cushion covers of the porch glider, arranged some cans on the kitchen shelves, and there she was: in that village not far from the one where she had been born, but in this one now she knew nobody at all, not a soul, except for her brother and his wife, some miles out of town, on the hill. Having no friends, she made none. And though she had no car she did not much like to be driven anywhere, either, unless she knew the people very well who offered to drive her. She made a few inquiries to find out who to go to in the village to have her hair done, and she made appointments for that, and walked there. Having her hair done was very important to her. It was a proof that she knew what was right, a kind of church-going. Her hair was thin and had turned gray when she was young. She wore it short, curled flat to her head, with a hair net over it. When it had just been rinsed and set the scalp showed through, pink, although her face and neck were more nearly the color of her hair. Apart from having her hair done regularly she was interested in certain religious tracts that came in the mail, and revealed by means of scripture quotations the imminence of the end of the world and of the Day of Judgment. And in very little besides. She had never cared much about food, one way or another. She just fixed something when the time came. She was seldom out on the sun porch in front of the house, because people could look in. Her downstairs rooms were small and dark. What did she do there? Her brother and his wife took her out to their house to supper once or twice a week. Her brother dropped in to see her on his way home from meetings at the church. She seemed alright. Her new life scarcely differed from the old one.

Edna was one thing, as Bill's wife would say. But then one Sunday when Ralph and Alma came up on a visit they got an idea that it would be nice to move up there too, and live in the country. Ralph had retired from his years at the aluminum plant, and had his pension at last. There happened to be a realtor's sign on the small vacant lot next to Edna's house, on the side nearer the church, and Ralph and Edna called the number on the sign, and went to the office and bought the piece without wasting any time, and started plans for building. Edna shook her head and declared repeatedly that she didn't know what to say. As for Bill's wife, she said that when she heard the news she thought she would have a fit. The house became what they called a reality almost as quickly as

the decision itself. A cement building covered with yellow aluminum siding. It presented a picture window to the street, next to the striped aluminum awning over the brick front steps. The indication that Ralph and Alma had moved in was the curtain drawn tight across the pane. Ralph cut the grass out front, in his hat. Except for food shopping, a block or two away, and going to church, they never went anywhere, and they never spoke much to anybody.

Everything at Edna's looked old and dark and frayed, like the seats of a run-down movie house. Some of Alma's things looked the same way, but some looked almost new, like merchandise at a five and ten during a sale, or the displays in a second-hand store, in a pink light. Alma's cataracts thickened, but still she sat in front of the television and slapped her knee. Then Ralph began to get pains in the head. A tumor was found, and operated on, but the pains grew worse, and gave him no peace. Alma seemed unable to do anything for him or to grasp the situation except as one more proof of the malevolence of things, from which she had suffered all her life. Gradually Ralph became incapable of taking care of himself, and when he became helpless Alma could not be counted on to get him a glass of water when he called for one, though he went on calling. She vacillated between ignoring the situation, and a resentful panic when the fact was forced upon her. After years of bullying, she became as invalid in her way as he was in his, and wandered around the rooms as though she did not know them. Edna came over and took care of Ralph; she washed him, and helped him down the hall, and cooked for both of them. It went on that way for some time, until he died.

And that left Edna and Alma, alone, next door to each other, after all those years. Edna went on keeping an eye on Alma to make sure she ate. If she didn't go over for a few days, she would notice that Alma seemed to have eaten almost nothing, to judge by the look of the kitchen, except package bread, and potatoes boiled days before. Dutch had never been much of a cook. Ralph used to stand at the stove, under his hat, and fry himself a couple of eggs, half the time, when he got hungry. Edna took things she had cooked over to Alma's, but after a day or two she would find that Dutch had not eaten them at all. The dishes were left on the kitchen floor. When Edna mentioned it, Alma said, "I believe you're trying to poison me." And after that, if Edna took something over to her, Dutch threw it out. Their brother Bill would take Dutch up to the house on the hill, for the afternoon, and she would stand in

the middle of the kitchen or the living room with her black patent leather purse clamped under her arm, looking around at nothing in particular for a long time. Once she filled the watering can at the kitchen sink, and took it out and watered the cat sleeping on the wood pile. When she sat down she would perch on the edge of the rocker, smiling like a cat herself, and rock back and forth, paying attention to nobody, and saying through her nose, "Mm-hmm, mm-hmm." Just as Edna did, but Alma filled the syllables with a nasal vehemence and determination that were hard to interrupt. Bill's wife tried cooking for Dutch, too, but Dutch had always nursed a suspicion of her, and when the dishes were brought to her door she said, "I know you just want to poison me," and would not let them into the house. Her mouth had been puckered for years, as though it closed with a drawstring, and it grew more and more withered. The hair that had once been a dark red remained dark but lost its color. It looked as though she never washed it. Her round face sagged, and her freckles faded into the surrounding pallor.

Occasionally she might surprise a visitor with a mood in which she came out with what sounded like confidences. Nobody, she said, knew about the pump that she had had installed, far below the surface, out under the sidewalk. She might have been referring to the oil pump that had been put in for the furnace, but she called it a water pump. She said it was connected to the cellar by a tunnel that was a secret passageway, and you wouldn't find it unless she told you where to look. The pump, she insisted, was hers, and it was worth more than she was going to tell. It was nobody's business. But it was worth thousands, and nobody need think they were going to get it from her, unless she pleased. Even if she sold the house, maybe, some day, she might not say anything about the pump. She'd just hang onto that, and leave it to anybody she wanted to, when the time came. There were people who would steal it, she said, if they knew it was there. And the thought gave her comfort.

Then, as another instance of the malice and indifference that surrounded her, she might mention Laurie, and as often as not she would do so in terms at once so vague and so matter-of-fact that the person she was talking to might suppose that Dutch was referring to some child who lived nearby, or to one whom she remembered out of her past. And might go on supposing that for some time, partly because her talk wandered so, and she referred as a matter of course to events and people unknown to her hearers. But the details she described would grow more

lurid as she went on, and it would become clear that what Dutch was describing was not remote, and not over. She would let it be known that Laurie lived upstairs. Dutch's house had only one floor.

Even before Ralph had taken sick she had talked about Laurie, but with less urgency, and so disjointedly that the references merged with the rest of her strangenesses, and for a while no one gave them much heed. Ralph, as his friends put it, humored her, and by that time perhaps he scarcely took in what she said to him, and if he heard something odd in her talk he forgot it at once. Or he may have managed to go on thinking, as others came to do, that Dutch was rambling on about the baby girl to whom she had given birth decades before, and who had died. But from the way Dutch talked, it became apparent that in her mind Laurie was a little girl of about ten. While Ralph was dying Alma talked of how Laurie bled. She wanted people who had come to see Ralph to pay attention to Laurie.

And after Ralph died the references to Laurie grew more persistent and more violent. The blood came through the ceiling. She could hear Laurie upstairs, calling and crying and running. Laurie was mauled by a big dog right in back of the house, and Dutch said she had run out and saved the child's life, and picked her up and brought her in, and Edna should call the police. A man attacked Laurie with a hatchet, out on the back walk, and struck her between the legs, and Laurie lay there bleeding all over the walk. Edna should do something right away. Get an ambulance and the police. Edna said, "Where is the little girl now?"

Alma snapped, "I *told* you."

Edna could look out and survey the whole of Dutch's back walk without having to draw the white curtains, and she saw no sign of blood or of a little girl. "I don't see her," she said.

"I had to bring her in here," Dutch answered. "I put her to bed upstairs. Bid, you do as I say, right now."

"Bid" was what their Mumma had called Edna when she was a child. Short for "Biddy Chick"—and the name had stayed in the family. Dutch used the syllable like a projectile. But Bid talked back, and told Dutch to call the police herself if she wanted them. After that, when Edna did her wash and hung out the sheets on the back line she would no more than have got back into the house and shut the kitchen door behind her before Dutch's side door opened and Dutch stomped out and across the walk to spit on the sheets.

And from then on Alma fought with just about everybody. When

someone called her on the telephone, if she was in a relatively civil frame of mind she would open the conversation by asking, "What do you want?" Then, without waiting for an answer or finding out who was calling, she might launch into a savage castigation of all those who were bothering her, spying on her, lying about her, stealing or plotting to steal from her, and a detailed statement of what she planned to do about them, and to them. In another mood she would simply pick up the receiver and say, "Now you stop this or I'll call the police," and hang up. She even accused her brother Bill, the preacher, of having stolen the broken wrist watch and the worn topcoat of Ralph's that she had given him herself after Ralph died. Many of Ralph's clothes she had kept, and just put away.

The closets of Dutch's house, and of Bid's, were wadded to the ceilings with things salted in moth balls and wrapped up in brown paper. Woolens and fur pieces and winter clothes. Winter bedding, much of it home made. Quilts. New shirts and underwear bought in sales, by twos and threes. Wedding dresses. Overcoats for both sexes. Clothing that had belonged to their grandparents and to forebears no longer remembered. Carpets. Curtains. Towels and sheets from white sales in a previous generation, never unwrapped. Tablecloths never unfolded. Apparel from someone's childhood. Clothes for Alma's baby who died. Everything swaddled first in newspaper and string, with brown paper and new string outside that, half the time with nothing written on the bundle to identify the contents. Both Bid and Dutch went periodically to one of the closets in their houses, dragged a chair up to its door, to climb up on, and took out all the bundles, undid them to remind themselves of what was inside, and then put in a few fresh moth balls and packed everything back up again and crammed the bundles onto the shelves as before. Month by month, year by year, they did that, remembering less and less often to write on the brown paper what was inside, so that if they took it into their heads that they wanted something they had put away, they had to rely on remembering exactly where they had seen it last, or wait until it turned up again, or suspect that they had been robbed. The whole routine represented a large part of what they called their housework. It demanded a great deal of time and energy, but it reassured them.

Edna got tired of living where she was, as much because of having Dutch living next door, telephoning and spitting on the sheets, as anything else. And finally she sold her house and moved her things once

more, back into the same two-room apartment in New Kensington, in the house of her friend the high-school art teacher. She had to find a new hairdresser, and several of her few friends had died. She worried about thieves and about falling on the stairs, the curbs, the icy sidewalks, the front steps—but Dutch receded from her thoughts.

And Dutch stayed on, alone in the yellow house, for another year or so, and then she too moved back into town, to a small apartment on the second floor of a two-story brick building that stood by itself, under big trees, on a side street. Even before she moved, one of her few remaining regular visitors, a niece, a married woman in her middle years, with grown children, and problems of her own, who lived on the other side of the river, had taken to bringing in groceries for her, and the original kindness developed into a steady round of shopping for Dutch, as Dutch herself grew less able to get out, and less to be trusted if she did manage to step outside the front door. After Dutch moved, the same niece continued to shop for her, as a matter of course.

Dutch's brother, the preacher, still dropped by to visit her every week or so, but once she had moved, her niece was almost the only person who saw her frequently and regularly. The niece became the main source of information about her aunt, to whom she referred, respectfully, as Aunt Alma, as she had done ever since childhood.

"Don't you pay more than twenty-five cents for a loaf of bread," Alma would tell her niece almost every week. Prices had risen steeply since the shopping days Alma had in mind, and at least half the time the niece had paid for the groceries herself, but Alma insisted that anything above a quarter for a loaf of bread was a proof that the store was cheating her.

"You take that right back," she would say to her niece, when she had managed to read the price through her thick cloudy lenses. And her niece would have to go back out with the bag of groceries Alma had refused, and take off the labels and keep the things in her own refrigerator for a day or so, and then mix them in with some more shopping and drive back to Alma's with them all over again. She had to call up first, before she went to see her aunt, to say that she had some groceries, and ask whether it would be alright to bring them by. Sometimes, when she asked, Alma would say, "What day of the week is it there?"

"It's Tuesday, Aunt Alma."

"Well, it's my Sunday, and Sunday's not for shopping, and you can't come today."

If her niece telephoned an hour or so later, Alma might have forgotten, and it would be possible to deliver the groceries after all.

By the time Alma asked about Sundays she had moved into town to the apartment, where many of the boxes remained packed for the rest of her life, although Alma's brother and her niece came and helped to move her in and to put a bit of order into the place. Alma did not want them getting into her things too much. Getting nosy. Just keep their hands to themselves. An electric wall clock lay face up on a wooden kitchen chair, and that turned out to be its place—never plugged in. Her television took up one corner, and on top of it stood a shrubbery of old framed photographs of relatives at all ages. She moved the pictures back and forth, brought some out to the front and deliberately eclipsed others behind them, according to the shifts of her favor and the latest turn of the story she made up about what each of those people in the frames was doing just then. She was concerned about how long it had been since each of them had been to church. She confused the names on some of the pictures. Got them mixed up. Some of those people were dead, but she was not interested in that. Some of them, she said, were rude to her. Some lied to her. Some were cute.

Once Alma fell down and could not get up, and she lay there for hours, for more than a day, before her niece found her and began to say that something else would have to be done. Once Alma broke her arm in the bathroom and had to have a cast, a particularly large and cumbersome one. She wore it for a long time because she was old and slow to mend. While she had it on she became still more dependent on her niece, who bore up under the charge because she felt she had to; she was sorry for her aunt, and nobody else came forward to take care of her. And she knew that anything could happen. She came and did the housecleaning but was not allowed to touch many of the things in the apartment, and when she had spent two hours cleaning the bathroom she was afraid to use the toilet, herself.

After Alma broke her arm she had trouble with her hair. It never got washed. It was all nested up on top of her head, with pencils stuck through the nest to hold it together. It got matted. Alma complained that it hurt. Her niece offered to wash it. She found that the hair was caked solid, glued with something that seemed to be a melted crayon. When her niece tried to untangle it Alma whined and snapped that she was being hurt. "Don't you harm my hair," she said. And, "Don't you cut my hair," when she saw the scissors. But her niece managed to

persuade Alma that she would be more comfortable if her hair were trimmed, and in the end had to cut the whole mat away, and then wash the rest as well as she could.

After Alma had moved into the apartment it seemed that Laurie no longer lived in her house, but was somewhere in the neighborhood. Alma worried about Laurie at a distance. At Christmas time she mailed a card to Little Laurie, sending it to her own address. She took to making up small parcels for Laurie, wrapped in old paper and ribbon, and leaving them on the stairs of her apartment. She asked whether her niece had seen Laurie, but her niece had the sense never to lie. Alma began to fuss about what might happen to Laurie: accidents in the street, rape, neglect, cold, hunger. One day she confronted her niece with an old paper bag filled with some of the parcels from the stairs, to be given to Laurie.

"I don't know where she is, Aunt Alma. I don't know how to find her."

Alma told her to go along to the corner and wait there by the post office until Laurie came by on her way home from school. There was no post office at the corner. Alma seemed to imagine that she was still living out in the country town.

"I won't recognize her."

"Yes you *will*," Alma said, and pushed the bag at her niece, and her niece toward the door.

And her niece went down the steps with the bag, and walked along the street to the corner, in case her aunt was watching from behind the curtains. She stood at the corner for a few minutes. She even caught herself looking along the next block and realized that she was wondering whether there was a post office there that she had never noticed. She laughed at herself, and stood holding the bag up like a baby, smelling the autumn, the damp leaves on the paving stones under the trees. She wondered how she would manage to get power of attorney from Alma, so that she would be able to cope with paying her aunt's bills. She hoped nobody would come by and recognize her and ask what she was doing, standing there on that street corner, on a back street, no shops nearby, just people's houses. And holding an old, torn, crumpled paper bag. It would make her feel uncomfortable if she had to explain that she was waiting for a little girl who did not exist, in order to give her the bag. She jogged it up and down gently, and then she turned and walked slowly back, and quietly opened the door of her car and got in, and sat

there, wondering what to do. She knew this would happen again. And when she went back up with the bag, Alma would say she had gone to the wrong place, or had not really waited, and was lying. Or she would say that Laurie must be sick, or must have had an accident. And it would go on from there. In a few days the bag would be pushed into her hands again, and she would be ordered out to wait for Laurie. She wondered what was in the bag. With her upbringing she felt ashamed at being curious. But she thought she had better look, for there was no telling what Alma might have put in the bag. She opened the top and peered in. She could smell moth balls. The first parcel she undid had a small Bible in it. The next one contained old greeting cards: birthdays, Christmases, get-well cards that had been sent to Ralph when he was dying. There was a box full of ribbons tied in bows. An envelope with one dollar in it. A scarf, and a sweater out of one of the brown paper bundles of winter clothes.

## NOTES

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