

A Small, Good Thing

SATURDAY afternoon she drove to the little bakery in the shopping center. After looking through a loose-leaf binder with photographs of cakes taped onto the pages, she ordered chocolate, his favorite. The cake she chose was decorated with a spaceship and launching pad under a sprinkling of white stars at one end of the cake, and a planet made of red frosting at the other end. His name, SCOTTY, would be in raised green letters beneath the planet. The baker, who was an older man with a thick neck, listened without saying anything when she told him Scotty would be eight years old next Monday. The baker wore a white apron that looked like a smock. Straps cut under his arms, went around in back and then back in front again where they were secured under his big waist. He wiped his hands on the front of the apron as he listened to her. He kept his eyes down on the photographs and let her talk. He let her take her time. He'd just come to work and he'd be there all night, baking, and he was in no real hurry.

She decided on the space cake, and then gave the baker her name, Ann Weiss, and her telephone number. The cake would be ready on Monday morning, just out of the oven, in plenty of time for Scotty's party that afternoon. The baker was not jolly. There were no pleasantries between them, just the minimum exchange of words, the necessary information. He made her feel uncomfortable, and she didn't like that. While he was bent over the counter with the pencil in his hand, she studied his coarse features and wondered if he'd ever done anything else with his life besides be a baker. She was a mother and thirty-three years old, and it seemed to her that everyone, especially someone the baker's age—a man old enough to be her father—must have children who'd gone through this special time of cakes and birthday parties. There must be that between them, she thought. But he was abrupt with her, not rude, just abrupt. She gave up trying to make friends with him. She looked into the back of the bakery and could see a long, heavy wooden table with aluminum pie pans stacked at one end, and beside

the table a metal container filled with empty racks. There was an enormous oven. A radio was playing country-western music.

The baker finished printing the information on the special-order card and closed up the binder. He looked at her and said, "Monday morning." She thanked him and drove home.

On Monday afternoon, Scotty was walking home from school with a friend. They were passing a bag of potato chips back and forth and Scotty was trying to find out what his friend was giving him for his birthday that afternoon. Without looking, he stepped off the curb at an intersection and was immediately knocked down by a car. He fell on his side with his head in the gutter and his legs out in the road. His eyes were closed, but his legs began to move back and forth as if he were trying to climb over something. His friend dropped the potato chips and started to cry. The car had gone a hundred feet or so and stopped in the middle of the road. A man in the driver's seat looked back over his shoulder. He waited until the boy got unsteadily to his feet. The boy wobbled a little. He looked dazed, but okay. The driver put the car into gear and drove away.

Scotty didn't cry, but he didn't have anything to say about anything, either. He wouldn't answer when his friend asked him what it felt like to be hit by a car. He walked straight to his front door, where his friend left him and ran home. But after Scotty went inside and was telling his mother about it, she sitting beside him on the sofa, holding his hands in her lap and saying, "Scotty, honey, are you sure you feel all right, baby?" and thinking she would call the doctor anyway, he suddenly lay back on the sofa, closed his eyes, and went limp. When she couldn't wake him up, she hurried to the telephone and called her husband at work. Howard told her to remain calm, remain calm, and then he called an ambulance for Scotty and left for the hospital himself.

Of course, the birthday party was canceled. The boy was in the hospital with a mild concussion and suffering from shock. There'd been vomiting, and his lungs had taken in fluid which needed pumping out that afternoon. Now he simply seemed to be in a very deep sleep—but no coma, Dr. Francis had emphasized; no coma, when he saw the alarm in the parents' eyes.

At eleven o'clock that Monday night when the boy seemed to be resting comfortably enough after the many X-rays and the lab work, and it was now just a matter of his waking up and coming around, Howard left the hospital. He and Ann had been at the hospital with Scotty since that afternoon, and he was going home for a short while to bathe and to change clothes. "I'll be back in an hour," he said. She nodded. "It's fine," she said. "I'll be right here." He kissed her on the forehead, and they touched hands. She sat in a chair beside the bed, looking at Scotty. She kept waiting for him to wake up and be all right. Then she could begin to relax.

Howard drove home from the hospital. He took the wet, dark streets faster than he should have, then caught himself and slowed down. Until now, his life had gone smoothly and to his satisfaction—college, marriage, another year of college for the advanced degree in business, a junior partnership in an investment firm. Fatherhood. He was happy and, so far, lucky—he knew that. His parents were still living, his brothers and his sister were established, his friends from college had gone out to take their places in the world. So far he had kept away from any real harm, from those forces he knew existed and that could cripple or bring down a man, if the luck went bad, if things suddenly turned. He pulled into the driveway and parked. His left leg had begun to tremble. He sat in the car for a minute and tried to deal with the present situation in a rational manner. Scotty had been hit by a car and was in the hospital, but he was going to be all right. He closed his eyes and ran his hand over his face. In a minute, he got out of the car and went up to the front door. The dog, Slug, was barking inside the house. The telephone kept ringing while he unlocked the door and fumbled for the light switch. He shouldn't have left the hospital, he shouldn't have, he cursed himself. He picked up the receiver and said, "I just walked in the door! Hello!"

"There's a cake here that wasn't picked up," said the man's voice on the other end of the line.

"What? What are you saying?" Howard asked.

"A cake," the voice said. "A sixteen-dollar cake."

Howard held the receiver against his ear, trying to understand. "I don't know anything about a cake," he said. "Jesus, what are you talking about?"

"Don't give me that," the voice said.

Howard hung up the telephone. He went into the kitchen and poured himself some whiskey. He called the hospital, but Scotty's condition remained the same; he was still sleeping and nothing had changed there. While water poured into the tub, he lathered his face and shaved. He had stretched out in the tub and closed his eyes when the telephone began ringing again. He hauled himself out, grabbed a towel, and hurried through the house, saying, "Stupid, stupid," for having left the hospital. But when he picked up the receiver and shouted, "Hello!" there was no sound at the other end of the line. Then the caller hung up.

He arrived back at the hospital a little after midnight. Ann still sat in the chair beside the bed. She looked up at Howard and then she looked back at Scotty. The boy's eyes stayed closed, his head was still wrapped in the bandages. His breathing was quiet and regular. From an apparatus over the bed hung a bottle of glucose with a tube distending from the bottle to the boy's right arm.

"How is he?" Howard said. "What's all this?" waving at the glucose and the tube.

"Dr. Francis's orders," she said. "He needs nourishment. Dr. Francis said he needs to keep up his strength. Why doesn't he wake up, Howard?" she said. "I don't understand, if he's all right."

Howard put his hand at the back of her head and ran his fingers through the hair. "He's going to be all right, honey. He'll wake up in a little while. Dr. Francis knows what's what."

In a little while he said, "Maybe you should go home and get a little rest for yourself. I'll stay here. Just don't put up with this creep who keeps calling. Hang up right away."

"Who's calling?" she asked.

"I don't know who, just somebody with nothing better to do than call up people. You go ahead now."

She shook her head. "No," she said, "I'm fine."

"Really," he said. "Go home for a while, if you want, and then come back and spell me in the morning. It'll be all right. What did Dr. Francis say? He said Scotty's going to be all right. We don't have to worry. He's just sleeping now, that's all."

A nurse pushed the door open. She nodded at them as she

went to the bedside. She took the left arm out from under the covers and put her fingers on the wrist, found the pulse, and then consulted her watch. In a little while she put the arm back under the covers and moved to the foot of the bed, where she wrote something on a clipboard attached to the bed.

"How is he?" Ann said. Howard's hand was a weight on her shoulder. She was aware of pressure in his fingers.

"He's stable," the nurse said. Then she said, "Doctor will be in again shortly. Doctor's back in the hospital. He's making rounds right now."

"I was saying maybe she'd want to go home and get a little rest," Howard said. "After the doctor comes," he added.

"She could do that," the nurse said. "I think you should both feel free to do that, if you wish." The nurse was a big Scandinavian woman with blond hair, and heavy breasts that filled the front of her uniform. There was a trace of an accent in her speech.

"We'll see what the doctor says," Ann said. "I want to talk to him. I don't think he should keep sleeping like this. I don't think that's a good sign." She brought her hand up to her eyes and leaned her head forward a little. Howard's grip tightened on her shoulder, and then his hand moved to her neck where his fingers began to knead the muscles there.

"Dr. Francis will be here in a few minutes," the nurse said. Then she left the room.

Howard gazed at his son for a time, the small chest quietly rising and then falling under the covers. For the first time since the terrible minutes after Ann's telephone call at the office, he felt a genuine fear starting in his limbs. He began shaking his head, trying to keep it away. Scotty was fine, except instead of sleeping at home in his own bed, he was in a hospital bed with bandages around his head and a tube in his arm. But it was what he needed right now, this help.

Dr. Francis came in and shook hands with Howard, though they'd just seen each other a few hours before. Ann got up from the chair. "Doctor?"

"Ann," he said and nodded. "Let's just first see how he's doing," the doctor said. He moved to the side of the bed and took the boy's pulse. He peeled back one eyelid and then the other. Howard and Ann stood beside the doctor and watched.

Ann made a little noise as Scotty's eyelid rolled back and disclosed a white, pupilless space. Then the doctor turned back the covers and listened to the boy's heart and lungs with his stethoscope. He pressed his fingers here and there on the abdomen. When he was finished he went to the end of the bed and studied the chart. He noted the time on his watch, scribbled something on the chart, and then looked at Howard and Ann, who were waiting.

"Doctor, how is he?" Howard said. "What's the matter with him exactly?"

"Why doesn't he wake up?" Ann said.

The doctor was a handsome, big-shouldered man with a tan face. He wore a three-piece blue suit, a striped tie, and ivory cuff links. His gray hair was combed, and he looked as if he could have just come from a concert. "He's all right," the doctor said. "Nothing to shout about, he could be better, I think. But he's all right. Still, I wish he'd wake up. He should wake up pretty soon." The doctor looked at the boy again. "We'll know some more in a couple of hours, after the results of a few more tests are in. But he's all right, believe me, except for that hairline fracture of the skull. He does have that."

"Oh, no," Ann said.

"And a bit of a concussion, as I said before. Of course, you know he's in shock," the doctor said. "Sometimes you see this in shock cases."

"But he's out of any real danger?" Howard said. "You said before he's not in a coma. You wouldn't call this a coma then, would you, Doctor?" Howard waited and looked at the doctor.

"No, I don't want to call it a coma," the doctor said and glanced over at the boy once more. "He's just in a very deep sleep. It's a restorative, a measure the body is taking on its own. He's out of any real danger, I'd say that for certain, yes. But we'll know more when he wakes up and the other tests are in. Don't worry," the doctor said.

"It's a coma," Ann said. "Of sorts."

"It's not a coma yet, not exactly," the doctor said. "I wouldn't want to call it coma. Not yet, anyway. He's suffered shock. In shock cases this kind of reaction is common enough; it's a temporary reaction to bodily trauma. Coma—well, coma is a deep, prolonged unconsciousness that could go on for days, or

weeks even. Scotty's not in that area, not as far as we can tell, anyway. I'm just certain his condition will show improvement by morning. I'm betting that it will, anyway. We'll know more when he wakes up, which shouldn't be long now. Of course, you may do as you like, stay here or go home for a while, but by all means feel free to leave for a while if you want. This is not easy, I know." The doctor gazed at the boy again, watching him, and then he turned to Ann and said, "You try not to worry, little mother. Believe me, we're doing all that can be done. It's just a question of a little more time now." He nodded at her, shook hands with Howard again, and left the room.

Ann put her hand on Scotty's forehead and kept it there for a while. "At least he doesn't have a fever," she said. Then she said, "My God, he feels so cold, though. Howard? Is he supposed to feel like this? Feel his head."

Howard put his hand on the boy's forehead. His own breathing slowed. "I think he's supposed to feel this way right now," he said. "He's in shock, remember? That's what the doctor said. The doctor was just in here. He would have said something if Scotty wasn't okay."

Ann stood there awhile longer, working her lip with her teeth. Then she moved over to her chair and sat down.

Howard sat in the chair beside her. They looked at each other. He wanted to say something else and reassure her, but he was afraid to. He took her hand and put it in his lap, and this made him feel better, her hand being there. He picked up her hand and squeezed it, then just held it. They sat like that for a while, watching the boy and not talking. From time to time he squeezed her hand. Finally, she took her hand away and rubbed her temples.

"I've been praying," she said.

He nodded.

She said, "I almost thought I'd forgotten how, but it came back to me. All I had to do was close my eyes and say, Please, God, help us—help Scotty; and then the rest was easy. The words were right there. Maybe if you prayed too," she said to him.

"I've already prayed," he said. "I prayed this afternoon—yesterday afternoon, after you called, while I was driving to the hospital. I've been praying," he said.

"That's good," she said. Almost for the first time, she felt they were together in it, this trouble. Then she realized it had only been happening to her and to Scotty. She hadn't let Howard into it, though he was there and needed all along. She could see he was tired. The way his head looked heavy and angled into his chest. She felt a good tenderness toward him. She felt glad to be his wife.

The same nurse came in later and took the boy's pulse again and checked the flow from the bottle hanging above the bed.

In an hour another doctor came in. He said his name was Parsons, from radiology. He had a bushy moustache. He was wearing loafers and a white smock over a western shirt and a pair of jeans.

"We're going to take him downstairs for more pictures," he told them. "We need to do some more pictures, and we want to do a scan."

"What's that?" Ann said. "A scan?" She stood between this new doctor and the bed. "I thought you'd already taken all your X-rays."

"I'm afraid we need some more," he said. "Nothing to be alarmed about. We just need some more pictures, and we want to do a brain scan on him."

"My God," Ann said.

"It's perfectly normal procedure in cases like this," the new doctor said. "We just need to find out for sure why he isn't back awake yet. It's normal medical procedure, and nothing to be alarmed about. We'll be taking him down in a few minutes," the doctor said.

In a little while two orderlies came into the room with a gurney. They were black-haired, dark-complexioned men in white uniforms, and they said a few words to each other in a foreign tongue as they unhooked the boy from the tube and moved him from his bed to the gurney. Then they wheeled him from the room. Howard and Ann got on the same elevator. Ann stood beside the gurney and gazed at the boy, who was lying so still. She closed her eyes as the elevator began its descent. The orderlies stood at either end of the gurney without saying anything, though once one of the men made a comment to the other in their own language, and the other man nodded slowly in response.

Later that morning, just as the sun was beginning to lighten the windows in the waiting room outside the X-ray department, they brought the boy out and moved him back up to his room. Howard and Ann rode up on the elevator with him once more, and once more they took up their places beside the bed.

They waited all day, but still the boy did not wake up. Occasionally one of them would leave the room to go downstairs to the cafeteria to drink coffee or fruit juice and then, as if suddenly remembering and feeling guilty, jump up from the table and hurry back to the room. Dr. Francis came again that afternoon and examined the boy once more and then left after telling them he was coming along and could wake up any minute now. Nurses, different nurses than the night before, came in from time to time. Then a young woman from the lab knocked and came into the room. She wore white slacks and a white blouse and carried a little tray of things which she put on the stand beside the bed. Without a word to them, she took blood from the boy's arm. Howard closed his eyes as the woman found the right place on the boy's arm and pushed the needle in.

"I don't understand this," Ann said to the woman.

"Doctor's orders," the young woman said. "I do what I'm told to do. They say draw that one, I draw. What's wrong with him, anyway?" she said. "He's a sweetie."

"He was hit by a car," Howard said. "A hit-and-run."

The young woman shook her head and looked again at the boy. Then she took her tray and left the room.

"Why won't he wake up?" Ann said. "Howard? I want some answers from these people."

Howard didn't say anything. He sat down again in the chair and crossed one leg over the other. He rubbed his face. He looked at his son and then he settled back in the chair, closed his eyes, and went to sleep.

Ann walked to the window and looked out at the big parking lot. It was night, and cars were driving into and out of the parking lot with their lights on. She stood at the window with her hands gripping the sill and knew in her heart that they were into something now, something hard. She was afraid, and her teeth began to chatter until she tightened her jaws. She

saw a big car stop in front of the hospital and someone, a woman in a long coat, got into the car. For a minute she wished she were that woman and somebody, anybody, was driving her away from here to somewhere else, a place where she would find Scotty waiting for her when she stepped out of the car, ready to say *Mom* and let her gather him in her arms.

In a little while Howard woke up. He looked at the boy again, and then he got up from the chair, stretched, and went over to stand beside her at the window. They both stared out into the parking lot and didn't talk. They seemed to feel each other's insides now, as though the worry had made them transparent in a perfectly natural way.

The door opened and Dr. Francis came in. He was wearing a different suit and tie this time, but his hair was the same and he looked as if he had just shaved. He went straight to the bed and examined the boy once more. "He ought to have come around by now. There's just no good reason for this," he said. "But I can tell you we're all convinced he's out of any danger, we'll just feel much better when he wakes up. There's no reason, absolutely none, why he shouldn't come around and soon now. Oh, he'll have himself a dilly of a headache when he does, you can count on that. But all of his signs are fine. They're as normal as can be."

"Is it a coma, then?" Ann asked.

The doctor rubbed his smooth cheek. "We'll call it that for the time being, until he wakes up. But you must be worn out. This is hard to wait out. Feel free to go out for a bite," he said. "It would do you good. I'll put a nurse in here while you're gone, if you'll feel better about going. Go and have yourselves something to eat."

"I couldn't eat," Ann said. "I'm not hungry."

"Do what you need to do, of course," the doctor said. "Anyway, I wanted to tell you that all the signs are good, the tests are positive, nothing at all negative, and just as soon as he wakes up he'll be over the hill."

"Thank you, Doctor," Howard said. He shook hands with the doctor again, and the doctor patted his shoulder and went out.

"I suppose one of us should go home and check on things," Howard said. "Slug needs to be fed, one thing."

"Call one of the neighbors," Ann said. "Call the Morgans. Anyone will feed a dog if you ask them to."

"All right," Howard said. After a while he said, "Honey, why don't you do it? Why don't you go home and check on things, and then come back? It'll do you good. I'll be right here with him. Seriously," he said. "We need to keep up our strength on this. We may want to be here for a while even after he wakes up."

"Why don't you go?" she said. "Feed Slug. Feed yourself."

"I already went," he said. "I was gone for exactly an hour and fifteen minutes. You go home for an hour or so and freshen up, and then come back. I'll stay here."

She tried to think about it, but she was too tired. She closed her eyes and tried to think about it again. After a time she said, "Maybe I will go home for a few minutes. Maybe if I'm not just sitting right here watching him every second he'll wake up and be all right. You know? Maybe he'll wake up if I'm not here. I'll go home and take a bath and put on clean clothes. I'll feed Slug. Then I'll come back."

"I'll be right here," he said. "You go on home, honey, and then come back. I'll be right here keeping an eye on things." His eyes were bloodshot and small, as if he had been drinking for a long time, and his clothes were rumpled. His beard had come out again. She touched his face, and then took her hand back. She understood he wanted to be by himself for a while, to not have to talk or share his worry for a time. She picked up her purse from the nightstand, and he helped her into her coat.

"I won't be gone long," she said.

"Just sit and rest for a little while when you get home," he said. "Eat something. After you get out of the bath, just sit for a while and rest. It'll do you a world of good, you'll see. Then come back down here," he said. "Let's try not to worry ourselves sick. You heard what Dr. Francis said."

She stood in her coat for a minute trying to recall the doctor's exact words, looking for any nuances, any hint of something behind his words other than what he was saying. She tried to remember if his expression had changed any when he bent over to examine Scotty. She remembered the way his fea-

tures had composed themselves as he rolled back the boy's eyelids and then listened to his breathing.

She went to the door and turned and looked back. She looked at the boy, and then she looked at the father. Howard nodded. She stepped out of the room and pulled the door closed behind her.

She went past the nurses' station and down to the end of the corridor, looking for the elevator. At the end of the corridor she turned to her right where she found a little waiting room with a Negro family sitting in wicker chairs. There was a middle-aged man in a khaki shirt and pants, a baseball cap pushed back on his head. A large woman wearing a house dress and slippers was slumped in one of the chairs. A teenaged girl in jeans, hair done in dozens of little braids, lay stretched out in one of the chairs smoking a cigarette, legs crossed at the ankles. The family swung their eyes to her as she entered the room. The little table was littered with hamburger wrappers and Styrofoam cups.

"Nelson," the large woman said as she roused herself. "Is about Nelson?" Her eyes widened. "Tell me now, lady," the woman said. "Is about Nelson?" She was trying to rise from her chair, but the man had closed his hand over her arm.

"Here, here," he said. "Evelyn."

"I'm sorry," Ann said. "I'm looking for the elevator. My son is in the hospital, and now I can't find the elevator."

"Elevator is down that way, turn left," the man said and aimed a finger down another corridor.

The girl drew on her cigarette and stared at Ann. Her eyes were narrowed to slits, and her broad lips parted slowly as she let the smoke escape. The Negro woman let her head fall down on her shoulder and looked away from Ann, no longer interested.

"My son was hit by a car," Ann said to the man. She seemed to need to explain herself. "He has a concussion and a little skull fracture, but he's going to be all right. He's in shock now, but it might be some kind of coma, too. That's what really worries us, the coma part. I'm going out for a little while, but my husband is with him. Maybe he'll wake up while I'm gone."

"That's too bad," the man said and shifted in the chair. He

shook his head. He looked down at the table, and then he looked back at Ann. She was still standing there. He said, "Our Nelson, he's on the operating table. Somebody cut him. Tried to kill him. There was a fight where he was at. At this party. They say he was just standing and watching. Not bothering nobody. But that don't mean nothing these days. Now he's on the operating table. We're just hoping and praying, that's all we can do now." He gazed at her steadily and then tugged the bill of his cap.

Ann looked at the girl again, who was still watching her, and at the older woman, who kept her head down on her shoulder but whose eyes were now closed. Ann saw the lips moving silently, making words. She had an urge to ask what those words were. She wanted to talk more with these people who were in the same kind of waiting she was in. She was afraid, and they were afraid. They had that in common. She would have liked to have said something else about the accident, told them more about Scotty, that it had happened on the day of his birthday, Monday, that he was still unconscious. Yet she didn't know how to begin and so only stood there looking at them without saying anything more.

She went down the corridor the man had indicated and found the elevator. She stood for a minute in front of the closed doors, still wondering if she was doing the right thing. Then she put out her finger and touched the button.

She pulled into the driveway and cut the engine. Slug ran around from behind the house. In his excitement he began to bark at the car, then ran in circles on the grass. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the wheel for a minute. She listened to the ticking sounds the engine made as it began to cool. Then she got out of the car. She picked up the little dog, Scotty's dog, and went to the front door, which was unlocked. She turned on lights and put on a kettle of water for tea. She opened some dog food and fed Slug on the back porch. He ate in hungry little smacks, between running back and forth to see that she was going to stay. As she sat down on the sofa with her tea, the telephone rang.

"Yes!" she said as she answered. "Hello!"

"Mrs. Weiss," a man's voice said. It was five o'clock in the morning, and she thought she could hear machinery or equipment of some kind in the background.

"Yes, yes, what is it?" she said carefully into the receiver. "This is Mrs. Weiss. This is she. What is it, please?" She listened to whatever it was in the background. "Is it Scotty, for Christ's sake?"

"Scotty," the man's voice said. "It's about Scotty, yes. It has to do with Scotty, that problem. Have you forgotten about Scotty?" the man said. Then he hung up.

She dialed the hospital's number and asked for the third floor. She demanded information about her son from the nurse who answered the telephone. Then she asked to speak to her husband. It was, she said, an emergency.

She waited, turning the telephone cord in her fingers. She closed her eyes and felt sick at her stomach. She would have to make herself eat. Slug came in from the back porch and lay down near her feet. He wagged his tail. She pulled his ear while he licked her fingers. Howard was on the line.

"Somebody just called here," she said. She twisted the telephone cord and it kinked back into itself. "He said, he said it was about Scotty," she cried.

"Scotty's fine," Howard was telling her. "I mean he's still sleeping. There's been no change. The nurse has been in twice since you've been gone. They're in here every thirty minutes or so. A nurse or a doctor, one. He's all right, Ann."

"Somebody called, he said it was about Scotty," she said.

"Honey, you rest for a little while, you need the rest. Then come back down here. It must be that same caller I had. Just forget it. Come back down here after you've rested. Then we'll have breakfast or something."

"Breakfast," she said. "I couldn't eat anything."

"You know what I mean," he said. "Juice, a muffin, something, I don't know. I don't know anything, Ann. Jesus, I'm not hungry either. Ann, it's hard to talk now. I'm standing here at the desk. Dr. Francis is coming again at eight o'clock this morning. He's going to have something to tell us then, something more definite. That's what one of the nurses said. She didn't know any more than that. Ann? Honey, maybe we'll

know something more then, at eight o'clock. Come back here before eight. Meanwhile, I'm right here and Scotty's all right. He's still the same," he added.

"I was drinking a cup of tea," she said, "when the telephone rang. They said it was about Scotty. There was a noise in the background. Was there a noise in the background on that call you had, Howard?"

"I honestly don't remember," he said. "It must have been a drunk or somebody calling, though God knows I don't understand. Maybe the driver of the car, maybe he's a psychopath and found out about Scotty somehow. But I'm here with him. Just rest a little like you were going to do. Take a bath and come back here by seven or so, and we'll talk to the doctor together when he gets here. It's going to be all right, honey. I'm here, and there are doctors and nurses around. They say his condition is stable."

"I'm scared to death," she said.

She ran water, undressed, and got into the tub. She washed and dried quickly, not taking the time to wash her hair. She put on clean underwear, wool slacks, and a sweater. She went into the living room where Slug looked up at her and let his tail thump once against the floor. It was just starting to get light outside when she went out to the car. Driving back to the hospital on the damp, deserted streets, she thought back to the rainy Sunday afternoon nearly two years ago when Scotty had been lost and they'd been afraid he'd drowned.

The sky had darkened that afternoon and rain had begun to fall, and still he hadn't come home. They'd called all his friends, who were at home and safe. She and Howard had gone to look for him at his board-and-rock fort at the far end of the field near the highway, but he wasn't there. Then Howard had run in one direction beside the highway and she had run the other way until she came to what had once been a little stream of water, a drainage ditch, but its banks were filled now with a dark torrent. One of his friends had been with him there when the rain started. They had been making boats out of pieces of scrap wood, and empty beer cans that had been tossed from passing cars. They had been lining up the beer cans on the pieces of wood and sending them out into the stream. The stream ended on this side of the highway at a cul-

vert where the water boiled and could take anything under and into the pipe. The friend had left Scotty there on the bank when the first drops of rain had begun to fall. Scotty had said he was going to stay and build a bigger boat. She had stood on the bank and gazed into the water as it poured into the mouth of the culvert and disappeared under the highway. It was plain to her what must have happened—that he had fallen in, that he must even now be lodged somewhere inside the culvert. The thought was monstrous, so unfair and overwhelming that she couldn't hold it in her mind. But she felt it was true, that he was in there, in the culvert, and knew too it was something that would have to be borne and lived with from here on, a life without Scotty in it. But how to act in the face of this, the fact of the loss, was more than she could comprehend. The horror of the men and equipment working at the mouth of the culvert through the night, that was what she did not know if she could endure, that waiting while the men worked under powerful lights. She would have to somehow get past that to the limitless sweep of emptiness she knew stretched beyond. She was ashamed to know it, but she thought she could live with that. Later, much later, maybe then she would be able to come to terms with that emptiness, after the presence of Scotty had gone out of their lives—then perhaps, she would learn to handle that loss, and the awful absence—she would have to, that's all—but now she did not know how she could get through the waiting part to that other part.

She dropped to her knees. She stared into the current and said that if He would let them have Scotty back, if he could have somehow miraculously—she said it out loud, "miraculously"—escaped the water and the culvert, she knew he hadn't, but if he had, if He could only let them have Scotty back, somehow *not* let him be wedged in the culvert, she promised then that she and Howard would change their lives, change everything, go back to the small town where they had come from, away from this suburban place that could ruthlessly snatch away your only child. She had still been on her knees when she heard Howard calling her name, calling her name from across the field, through the rain. She had raised her eyes and seen them coming toward her, the two of them, Howard and Scotty.

"He was hiding," Howard said, laughing and crying at

once. "I was so glad to see him I couldn't begin to punish him. He'd made a shelter. He'd fixed himself up a place under the overpass, in those bushes. He'd made like a nest for himself," he said. The two of them were still coming toward her as she got to her feet. She doubled her fists. "'Forts leak,' the little nut said. He was dry as a bone when I found him, damn his hide," Howard said, the tears breaking. Then Ann was on Scotty, slapping him on the head and face with a wild fury. "You little devil, you devil you," she shouted as she slapped him. "Ann, stop it," Howard said, grabbing for her arms. "He's all right, that's the main thing. He's all right." She'd picked the boy up while he was still crying and she'd held him. She'd held him. Their clothes soaked, shoes squishing with water, the three of them had begun the walk home. She carried the boy for a while, his arms around her neck, his chest heaving against her breasts. Howard walked beside them saying, "Jesus, what a scare. God almighty, what a fright." She knew Howard had been scared and was now relieved, but he hadn't glimpsed what she had, he couldn't know. The quickness of how she had gone into the death and beyond it had made her suspect herself, that she hadn't loved enough. If she had, she would not have thought the worst so quickly. She shook her head back and forth at this craziness. She grew tired and had to stop and put Scotty down. They walked the rest of the way together, Scotty in the middle, holding hands, the three of them walking home.

But they hadn't moved away and they'd never talked about that afternoon again. From time to time she'd thought about her promise, the prayers she'd offered up, and for a while she'd felt vaguely uneasy, but they had continued to live as they had been living—a comfortably busy life, not a bad or a dishonest life, a life, in fact, with many satisfactions and small pleasures. Nothing more was ever said about that afternoon, and in time she had stopped thinking about it. Now here they were still in the same city and it was two years later, and Scotty was again in peril, an awful peril, and she began to see this circumstance, this accident and the not waking up as punishment. For hadn't she given her word that they'd move away from this city and go back to where they could live a simpler and quieter life, forget the jump in salary and the house which was still so new they

hadn't put up the fence or planted grass yet? She imagined them all sitting around each evening in some big living room, in some other town, and listening to Howard read to them.

She drove into the parking lot of the hospital and found a space close to the front door. She felt no inclination to pray now. She felt like a liar caught out, guilty and false, as if she were somehow responsible for what had now happened. She felt she was in some obscure way responsible. She let her thoughts move to the Negro family, and she remembered the name "Nelson" and the table that was covered with hamburger papers, and the teenaged girl staring at her as she drew on her cigarette. "Don't have children," she told the girl's image as she entered the front door of the hospital. "For God's sake, don't."

She took the elevator up to the third floor with two nurses who were just going on duty. It was Wednesday morning, a few minutes before seven. There was a page for a Dr. Madison as the elevator doors slid open on the third floor. She got off behind the nurses, who turned in the other direction and continued the conversation she had interrupted when she'd gotten onto the elevator. She walked down the corridor to the little side room where the Negro family had been waiting. They were gone now, but the chairs were scattered in such a way that it looked as if people had just jumped from them the minute before. She thought the chairs might still be warm. The tabletop was cluttered with the same cups and papers, the ashtray filled with cigarette butts.

She stopped at the nurses' station just down the corridor from the waiting room. A nurse was standing behind the counter, brushing her hair and yawning.

"There was a Negro man in surgery last night," Ann said. "Nelson something was his name. His family was in the waiting room. I'd like to inquire about his condition."

A nurse who was sitting at a desk behind the counter looked up from a chart in front of her. The telephone buzzed and she picked up the receiver, but she kept her eyes on Ann.

"He passed away," said the nurse at the counter. "Are you a friend of the family or what?"

"I met the family last night," Ann said. "My own son is in

the hospital. I guess he's in shock. We don't know for sure what's wrong. I just wondered about Mr. Nelson, that's all. Thank you." She went on down the corridor. Elevator doors the same color as the walls slid open and a gaunt, bald man in white pants and white canvas shoes pulled a heavy cart off the elevator. She hadn't noticed these doors last night. The man wheeled the cart out into the corridor and stopped in front of the room nearest the elevator and consulted a clipboard. Then he reached down and slid a tray out of the cart, rapped lightly on the door, and entered the room. She could smell the unpleasant odors of warm food as she passed the cart. She hurried past the other station without looking at any of the nurses and pushed open the door to Scotty's room.

Howard was standing at the window with his hands together behind his back. He turned around as she came in.

"How is he?" she said. She went over to the bed. She dropped her purse on the floor beside the nightstand. She seemed to have been gone a long time. She touched the covers around Scotty's neck. "Howard?"

"Dr. Francis was here a little while ago," Howard said. She looked at him closely and thought his shoulders were bunched a little.

"I thought he wasn't coming until eight o'clock this morning," she said quickly.

"There was another doctor with him. A neurologist."

"A neurologist," she said.

Howard nodded. His shoulders were bunching, she could see that. "What'd they say, Howard? For Christ's sake, what'd they say? What is it?"

"They said, well, they're going to take him down and run more tests on him, Ann. They think they're going to operate, honey. Honey, they are going to operate. They can't figure out why he won't wake up. It's more than just shock or concussion, they know that much now. It's in his skull, the fracture, it has something, something to do with that, they think. So they're going to operate. I tried to call you, but I guess you'd already left the house."

"Oh, God," she said. "Oh, please, Howard, please," she said, taking his arms.

"Look!" Howard said then. "Scotty! Look, Ann!" He turned her toward the bed.

The boy had opened his eyes, then closed them. He opened them again now. The eyes stared straight ahead for a minute, then moved slowly in his head until they rested on Howard and Ann, then traveled away again.

"Scotty," his mother said, moving to the bed.

"Hey, Scott," his father said. "Hey, Son."

They leaned over the bed. Howard took Scotty's left hand in his hands and began to pat and squeeze the hand. Ann bent over the boy and kissed his forehead again and again. She put her hands on either side of his face. "Scotty, honey, it's Mommy and Daddy," she said. "Scotty?"

The boy looked at them again, though without any sign of recognition or comprehension. Then his eyes scrunched closed, his mouth opened, and he howled until he had no more air in his lungs. His face seemed to relax and soften then. His lips parted as his last breath was puffed through his throat and exhaled gently through the clenched teeth.

The doctors called it a hidden occlusion and said it was a one-in-a-million circumstance. Maybe if it could have been detected somehow and surgery undertaken immediately, it could have saved him, but more than likely not. In any case, what would they have been looking for? Nothing had shown up in the tests or in the X-rays. Dr. Francis was shaken. "I can't tell you how badly I feel. I'm so very sorry, I can't tell you," he said as he led them into the doctors' lounge. There was a doctor sitting in a chair with his legs hooked over the back of another chair, watching an early morning TV show. He was wearing a green delivery room outfit, loose green pants and green blouse, and a green cap that covered his hair. He looked at Howard and Ann and then looked at Dr. Francis. He got to his feet and turned off the set and went out of the room. Dr. Francis guided Ann to the sofa, sat down beside her and began to talk in a low, consoling voice. At one point he leaned over and embraced her. She could feel his chest rising and falling evenly against her shoulder. She kept her eyes open and let him hold her. Howard went into the bathroom but left the door

open. After a violent fit of weeping, he ran water and washed his face. Then he came out and sat down at a little table that held a telephone. He looked at the telephone as though deciding what to do first. He made some calls. After a time, Dr. Francis used the telephone.

"Is there anything else I can do for the moment?" he asked them.

Howard shook his head. Ann stared at Dr. Francis as if unable to comprehend his words.

The doctor walked them to the hospital's front door. People were entering and leaving the hospital. It was eleven o'clock in the morning. Ann was aware of how slowly, almost reluctantly she moved her feet. It seemed to her that Dr. Francis was making them leave, when she somehow felt they should stay, when it would be more the right thing to do, to stay. She gazed out into the parking lot and then looked back at the front of the hospital from the sidewalk. She began shaking her head. "No, no," she said. "This isn't happening. I can't leave him here, no." She heard herself and thought how unfair it was that the only words that came out were the sorts of words on the TV shows where people were stunned by violent or sudden deaths. She wanted her words to be her own. "No," she said, and for some reason the memory of the Negro woman's head lolling on her shoulder came to her. "No," she said again.

"I'll be talking to you later in the day," the doctor was saying to Howard. "There are still some things that have to be done, things that have to be cleared up to our satisfaction. Some things that need explaining."

"An autopsy," Howard said.

Dr. Francis nodded.

"I understand," Howard said. "Oh, Jesus. No, I don't understand, Doctor. I can't, I can't. I just can't."

Dr. Francis put his arm around Howard's shoulders. "I'm sorry. God, how I'm sorry." Then he let go and held out his hand. Howard looked at the hand, and then he took it. Dr. Francis put his arms around Ann once more. He seemed full of some goodness she didn't understand. She let her head rest on his shoulder, but her eyes were open. She kept looking at the hospital. As they drove out of the parking lot, she looked back at the hospital once more.

At home, she sat on the sofa with her hands in her coat pockets. Howard closed the door to Scotty's room. He got the coffeemaker going and then he found an empty box. He had thought to pick up some of Scotty's things. But instead he sat down beside her on the sofa, pushed the box to one side, and leaned forward, arms between his knees. He began to weep. She pulled his head over into her lap and patted his shoulder. "He's gone," she said. She kept patting his shoulder. Over his sobs she could hear the coffeemaker hissing, out in the kitchen. "There, there," she said tenderly. "Howard, he's gone. He's gone and now we'll have to get used to that. To being alone."

In a little while Howard got up and began moving aimlessly around the room with the box, not putting anything into it, but collecting some things on the floor at one end of the sofa. She continued to sit with her hands in her pockets. Howard put the box down and brought coffee into the living room. Later, Ann made calls to relatives. After each call had been placed and the party had answered, Ann would blurt out a few words and cry for a minute. Then she would quietly explain, in a measured voice, what had happened and tell them about arrangements. Howard took the box out to the garage where he saw Scotty's bicycle. He dropped the box and sat down on the pavement beside the bicycle. He took hold of the bicycle awkwardly, so that it leaned against his chest. He held it, the rubber pedal sticking into his chest and turning the wheel across his trouser leg a little way.

Ann hung up the telephone after talking to her sister. She was looking up another number, when the telephone rang. She picked it up on the first ring.

"Hello," she said, and again she heard something in the background, a humming noise. "Hello! Hello!" she said. "For God's sake," she said. "Who is this? What is it you want? Say something."

"Your Scotty, I got him ready for you," the man's voice said. "Did you forget him?"

"You evil bastard!" she shouted into the receiver. "How can you do this, you evil son of a bitch?"

"Scotty," the man said. "Have you forgotten about Scotty?" Then the man hung up on her.

Howard heard the shouting and came in to find her with her

head on her arms over the table, weeping. He picked up the receiver and listened to the dial tone.

Much later, just before midnight, after they had dealt with many things, the telephone rang again.

"You answer it," she said. "Howard, it's him, I know." They were sitting at the kitchen table with coffee in front of them. Howard had a small glass of whiskey beside his cup. He answered on the third ring.

"Hello," he said. "Who is this? Hello! Hello!" The line went dead. "He hung up," Howard said. "Whoever it was."

"It was him," she said. "That bastard. I'd like to kill him," she said. "I'd like to shoot him and watch him kick," she said.

"Ann, my God," he said.

"Could you hear anything?" she said. "In the background? A noise, machinery, something humming?"

"Nothing, really. Nothing like that," he said. "There wasn't much time. I think there was some radio music. Yes, there was a radio going, that's all I could tell. I don't know what in God's name is going on," he said.

She shook her head. "If I could, could get, my hands, on him." It came to her then. She knew who it was. Scotty, the cake, the telephone number. She pushed the chair away from the table and got up. "Drive me down to the shopping center," she said. "Howard."

"What are you saying?"

"The shopping center. I know who it is who's calling now. I know who it is. It's the baker, the son-of-a-bitching baker, Howard. I had him bake a cake for Scotty's birthday. That's who's calling, that's who has the number and keeps calling us. To harass us about that cake. The baker, that bastard."

They drove out to the shopping center. The sky was clear and stars were out. It was cold, and they ran the heater in the car. They parked in front of the bakery. All of the shops and stores were closed, but there were still cars at the far end of the lot in front of the twin cinemas. The bakery windows were dark, but when they looked through the glass they could see a light in the back room and, now and then, a big man in an apron moving in and out of the white, even light. Through the glass she could see the display cases and some little tables with

chairs. She tried the door. She rapped on the glass. But if the baker heard them he gave no sign. He didn't look in their direction.

They drove around behind the bakery and parked. They got out of the car. There was a lighted window too high up for them to see inside. A sign near the back door said, "The Pantry Bakery, Special Orders." She could hear faintly a radio playing inside and something—an oven door?—creaking as it was pulled down. She knocked on the door and waited. Then she knocked again, louder. The radio was turned down and there was a scraping sound now, the distinct sound of something, a drawer, being pulled open and then closed.

The door was unlocked and opened. The baker stood in the light and peered out at them. "I'm closed for business," he said. "What do you want at this hour? It's midnight. Are you drunk or something?"

She stepped into the light that fell through the open door, and he blinked his heavy eyelids as he recognized her. "It's you," he said.

"It's me," she said. "Scotty's mother. This is Scotty's father. We'd like to come in."

The baker said, "I'm busy now. I have work to do."

She had stepped inside the doorway anyway. Howard came in behind her. The baker had moved back. "It smells like a bakery in here. Doesn't it smell like a bakery in here, Howard?"

"What do you want?" the baker said. "Maybe you want your cake? That's it, you decided you wanted your cake. You did order a cake, didn't you?"

"You're pretty smart for a baker," she said. "Howard, this is the man who's been calling us. This is the baker man." She clenched her fists. She stared at him fiercely. There was a deep burning inside her, an anger that made her feel larger than herself, larger than either of these men.

"Just a minute here," the baker said. "You want to pick up your three-day-old cake? That it? I don't want to argue with you, lady. There it sits over there, getting stale. I'll give it to you for half of what I quoted you. No, you want it? You can have it. It's no good to me, no good to anyone now. It cost me time and money to make that cake. If you want it, okay, if you

don't, that's okay too. Just forget it and go. I have to get back to work." He looked at them and rolled his tongue behind his teeth.

"More cakes," she said. She knew she was in control of it, of what was increasing her. She was calm.

"Lady, I work sixteen hours a day in this place to earn a living," the baker said. He wiped his hands on his apron. "I work night and day in here, trying to make ends meet." A look crossed Ann's face that made the baker move back and say, "No trouble, now." He reached to the counter and picked up a rolling pin with his right hand and began to tap-tap it against the palm of his other hand. "You want the cake or not? I have to get back to work. Bakers work at night," he said again. His eyes were small, mean looking, she thought, nearly lost in the bristly flesh around his cheeks. His neck around the collar of his T-shirt was thick with fat.

"We know bakers work at night," Ann said. "They make phone calls at night too. You bastard," she said.

The baker continued to tap the rolling pin against his hand. He glanced at Howard. "Careful, careful," he said to them.

"My boy's dead," she said with a cold, even finality. "He was hit by a car Monday afternoon. We've been waiting with him until he died. But, of course, you couldn't be expected to know that, could you? Bakers can't know everything. Can they, Mr. Baker? But he's dead. Dead, you bastard." Just as suddenly as it had welled in her the anger dwindled, gave way to something else, a dizzy feeling of nausea. She leaned against the wooden table that was sprinkled with flour, put her hands over her face and began to cry, her shoulders rocking back and forth. "It isn't fair," she said. "It isn't, isn't fair."

Howard put his hand at the small of her back and looked at the baker. "Shame on you," Howard said to him. "Shame."

The baker put the rolling pin back on the counter. He undid his apron and threw it on the counter. He stood a minute looking at them with a dull, pained look. Then he pulled a chair out from under a card table that held papers and receipts, an adding machine, and a telephone directory. "Please sit down," he said. "Let me get you a chair," he said to Howard. "Sit down now, please." The baker went into the front of the

shop and returned with two little wrought-iron chairs. "Please sit down, you people."

Ann wiped her eyes and looked at the baker. "I wanted to kill you," she said. "I wanted you dead."

The baker had cleared a space for them at the table. He shoved the adding machine to one side, along with the stacks of notepaper and receipts. He pushed the telephone directory onto the floor, where it landed with a thud. Howard and Ann sat down and pulled their chairs up to the table. The baker sat down too.

"I don't blame you," the baker said, putting his elbows on the table and shaking his head slowly. "First. Let me say how sorry I am. God alone knows how sorry. Listen to me. I'm just a baker. I don't claim to be anything else. Maybe once, maybe years ago I was a different kind of human being, I've forgotten, I don't know for sure. But I'm not any longer, if I ever was. Now I'm just a baker. That don't excuse my offense, I know. But I'm deeply sorry. I'm sorry for your son, and I'm sorry for my part in this. Sweet, sweet Jesus," the baker said. He spread his hands out on the table and turned them over to reveal his palms. "I don't have any children myself, so I can only imagine what you must be feeling. All I can say to you now is that I'm sorry. Forgive me, if you can," the baker said. "I'm not an evil man, I don't think. Not evil, like you said on the phone. You must understand that what it comes down to is I don't know how to act anymore, it would seem. Please," the man said, "let me ask you if you can find it in your hearts to forgive me?"

It was warm in the bakery and Howard stood up from the table and took off his coat. He helped Ann from her coat. The baker looked at them for a minute and then nodded and got up from the table. He went to the oven and turned off some switches. He found cups and poured them coffee from an electric coffeemaker. He put a carton of cream on the table, and a bowl of sugar.

"You probably need to eat something," the baker said. "I hope you'll eat some of my hot rolls. You have to eat and keep going. Eating is a small, good thing in a time like this," he said.

He served them warm cinnamon rolls just out of the oven, the icing still runny. He put butter on the table and knives to spread the butter. Then the baker sat down at the table with them. He waited. He waited until they each took a roll from the platter and began to eat. "It's good to eat something," he said, watching them. "There's more. Eat up. Eat all you want. There's all the rolls in the world in here."

They ate rolls and drank coffee. Ann was suddenly hungry and the rolls were warm and sweet. She ate three of them, which pleased the baker. Then he began to talk. They listened carefully. Although they were tired and in anguish, they listened to what the baker had to say. They nodded when the baker began to speak of loneliness, and the sense of doubt and limitation that had come to him in his middle years. He told them what it was like to be childless all these years. To repeat the days with the ovens endlessly full and endlessly empty. The party food, the celebrations he'd worked over. Icing knuckle-deep. The wedding couples stuck to each other's arms, hundreds of them, no, thousands by now. Birthdays. Just the candles from all those cakes if you thought you could see them all burning at once. He had a necessary trade. He was a baker. He was glad not to be a florist. It was better to be feeding people. Not giving them something that sat around for a while until it was thrown out. This was a better smell than flowers.

"Here, smell this," the baker said, breaking open a dark loaf. "It's a heavy bread, but rich." They smelled it, then he had them taste it. It had the taste of molasses and coarse grains. They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread. It was like daylight under the fluorescent trays of light. They talked on into the early morning, the high pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving.

Tell the Women We're Going

BILL JAMISON had always been close with Jerry Roberts. The two grew up in the south area, near the old fairgrounds, went through grade school and junior high together, and then on to Eisenhower where they took as many of the same classes and teachers as they could manage, wore each other's shirts and sweaters and pegged pants, and dated or ganged the same girl—whichever came up as a matter of course.

Summers they took jobs together—swamping peaches, picking cherries, stringing hops, anything they could do that paid a little money to see them through to fall, something where they didn't have to worry about a boss breathing down their necks every five minutes. Jerry didn't like to be told what to do. Bill didn't mind; he liked it that Jerry was the sort of take-charge guy he was. The summer just before their senior year, they chipped in and bought a red '54 Plymouth for \$325. Jerry would keep it a week at a time, then Bill. They were used to sharing things, and it worked out fine for a while.

But Jerry got married before the end of the first semester, kept the car, and dropped out of school to go to work steady at Robby's Market. That was the only time there was a strain in their relationship. Bill liked Carol Henderson—he'd known her a couple of years, almost as long as Jerry had—but after Jerry and she got married, things were just never the same between the two friends. He was over there a lot, especially at first—it made him feel older, having married friends—for lunch or dinner, or else late evenings to listen to Elvis Presley, and Bill Haley and the Comets, and there were a couple of Fats Domino records he liked, but it always embarrassed him when Carol and Jerry started kissing and near making out in front of him. Sometimes he'd have to excuse himself and take a walk to Dezorn's service station to get some Coke because there was only the one bed in the apartment, a hideaway that let down right in the middle of the living room. Other times Jerry and Carol would simply head off in a clumsy leg-hugging walk to the bathroom, and Bill would move to the kitchen and