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The Optimist's Daughter

EUDORA WELTY

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One Time, One Place

The Eye of the Story

One Writer's Beginnings

Eudora Welty

*The Optimist's
Daughter*

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One



A NURSE held the door open for them. Judge McKelva going first, then his daughter Laurel then his wife Fay, they walked into the windowless room where the doctor would make his examination. Judge McKelva was a tall, heavy man of seventy-one who customarily wore his glasses on a ribbon. Holding them in his hand now, he sat on the raised, thronelike chair above the doctor's stool, flanked by Laurel on one side and Fay on the other.

Laurel McKelva Hand was a slender, quiet-faced woman in her middle forties, her hair still dark. She wore clothes of an interesting cut and texture, although her suit was wintry for New Orleans and had a wrinkle down the skirt. Her dark blue eyes looked sleepless.

Fay, small and pale in her dress with the gold buttons, was tapping her sandaled foot.

It was a Monday morning of early March. New Orleans was out-of-town for all of them.

Dr. Courtland, on the dot, crossed the room in long steps and shook hands with Judge McKelva and Laurel. He had to be introduced to Fay, who had been married to Judge McKelva for only a year and a half. Then the doctor was on the stool, with his heels hung over the rung. He lifted his face in appreciative attention: as though it were he who had waited in New Orleans for Judge McKelva—in order to give the Judge a present, or for the Judge to bring him one.

“Nate,” Laurel’s father was saying, “the trouble may be I’m not as young as I used to be. But I’m ready to believe it’s something wrong with my eyes.”

As though he had all the time in the world, Dr. Courtland, the well-known eye specialist, folded his big country hands with the fingers that had always looked, to Laurel, as if the mere touch on the crystal of a watch would convey to their skin exactly what time it was.

“I date this little disturbance from George Washington’s Birthday,” Judge McKelva said.

Dr. Courtland nodded, as though that were a good day for it. “Tell me about the little disturbance,” he said.

“I’d come in. I’d done a little rose pruning—I’ve retired, you know. And I stood at the end of my front porch there, with an eye on the street—Fay had slipped out somewhere,” said Judge McKelva, and bent on her his benign smile that looked so much like a scowl.

“I was only uptown in the beauty parlor, letting Myrtis roll up my hair,” said Fay.

“And I saw the fig tree,” said Judge McKelva. “The fig tree! Giving off flashes from those old bird-frighteners Becky saw fit to tie on it years back!”

Both men smiled. They were of two generations but the same place. Becky was Laurel’s mother. Those little homemade reflectors, rounds of tin, did not halfway keep the birds from the figs in July.

“Nate, you remember as well as I do, that tree stands between my backyard and where your mother used to keep her cowshed. But it flashed at me when I was peering off in the direction of the Courthouse,” Judge McKelva went on. “So I was forced into the conclusion I’d started seeing behind me.”

Fay laughed—a single, high note, as derisive as a jay’s.

“Yes, that’s disturbing.” Dr. Courtland rolled forward on his stool. “Let’s just have a good look.”

“I looked. I couldn’t see anything had got in it,” said Fay. “One of those briars might have

given you a scratch, hon, but it didn't leave a thorn."

"Of course, my *memory* had slipped. Becky would say it served me right. Before blooming is the wrong time to prune a climber," Judge McKelva went on in the same confidential way. The doctor's face was very near to his. "But Becky's Climber I've found will hardly take a setback."

"Hardly," the doctor murmured. "I believe my sister still grows one now from a cutting of Miss Becky's Climber." His face, however, went very still as he leaned over to put out the lights.

"It's dark!" Fay gave a little cry. "Why did he have to go back there anyway and get mixed up in those brambles? Because I was out of the house a minute?"

"Because George Washington's Birthday is the time-honored day to prune roses back home," said the Doctor's amicable voice. "You should've asked Adele to step over and prune 'em for you."

"Oh, she offered," said Judge McKelva, and dismissed her case with the slightest move of the hand. "I think by this point I ought to be about able to get the hang of it."

Laurel had watched him prune. Holding the shears in both hands, he performed a sort of weighty saraband, with a lop for this side, then a lop for the other side, as though he were bowing to his partner, and left the bush looking like a puzzle.

"You've had further disturbances since, Judge Mac?"

"Oh, a dimness. Nothing to call my attention to it like that first disturbance."

"So why not leave it to Nature?" Fay said. "That's what I keep on telling him."

Laurel had only just now got here from the airport; she had come on a night flight from Chicago. The meeting had been unexpected, arranged over longdistance yesterday evening. Her father, in the old home in Mount Salus, Mississippi, took pleasure in telephoning instead of writing, but this had been a curiously reticent conversation on his side. At the very last he'd said, "By the way, Laurel, I've been getting a little interference with my *seeing*, lately. I just might give Nate Courtland a chance to see what he can find." He'd added, "Fay says she'll come along and do some shopping."

His admission of self-concern was as new as anything wrong with his health, and Laurel had come flying.

The excruciatingly small, brilliant eye of the instrument hung still between Judge McKelva's set face and the Doctor's hidden one.

Eventually the ceiling lights blazed on again, and Dr. Courtland stood, studying Judge McKelva, who studied him back.

"I *thought* I was bringing you a little something to keep you busy," Judge McKelva said in the cooperating voice in which, before he retired from the bench, he used to hand down a sentence.

"Your right retina's slipped, Judge Mac," Dr. Courtland said.

"All right, you can fix that," said Laurel's father.

"It needs to be repaired without any more waste of precious time."

"All right, when can you operate?"

"Just for a scratch? Why didn't those old roses go on and die?" Fay cried.

"But this eye didn't get a scratch. What happened didn't happen to the outside of his eye, it happened to the inside. The flashes, too. To the part he sees with, Mrs. McKelva." D

Courtland, turning from the Judge and Laurel, beckoned Fay to his chart hanging on the wall. Giving out perfume, she walked across to it. "Here's the outside and here's the inside of the eye," he said. He pointed out on the diagram what would have to be done.

Judge McKelva inclined his weight so as to speak to Laurel in her chair below him. "The eye wasn't fooling, was it!" he said.

"I don't see why this had to happen to *me*," said Fay.

Dr. Courtland led the Judge to the door and into the hallway. "Will you make yourself comfortable in my office, sir, and let my nurse bother you with a few more questions?"

When he returned to the examining room he sat in the patient's chair.

"Laurel," he said, "I don't want to do this operation myself." He went on quickly, "I've kept being so sorry about your mother." He turned and gave what might have been his first direct look at Fay. "My family's known his family for such a long time," he told her—sentence never said except to warn of the unsayable.

"What is the location of the tear?" Laurel asked.

"Close to central," he told her. She kept her eyes on his and he added, "No tumor."

"Before I even let you try, I think I ought to know how good he'll see," said Fay.

"Now, that depends first on where the tear comes," said Dr. Courtland. "And after that on how good a mender the surgeon is, and then on how well Judge Mac will agree to take my orders, and then on the Lord's will. This girl remembers." He nodded toward Laurel.

"An operation's not a thing you just jump into, I know that much," Fay said.

"You don't want him to wait and lose all the vision in that eye. He's got a cataract forming on his other eye," said Dr. Courtland.

Laurel said, "Father has?"

"I found it before I left Mount Salus. It's been coming along for years, taking its time. He's appraised; he thinks it'll hold off." He smiled.

"It's like Mother's. This was the way she started."

"Now, Laurel, I don't have very much imagination," protested Dr. Courtland. "So I go with caution. I was pretty close to 'em, there at home, Judge Mac and Miss Becky both. I stood over what happened to your mother."

"I was there too. You know nobody could blame you, or imagine how you could have prevented anything—"

"If we'd known then what we know now. The eye was just a part of it," he said. "Why blame your mother."

Laurel looked for a moment into the experienced face, so entirely guileless. The Mississippi country that lay behind him was all in it.

He stood up. "Of course, if you ask me to do it, I will," he said. "But I wish you wouldn't ask me."

"Father's not going to let you off," Laurel said quietly.

"Isn't my vote going to get counted at all?" Fay asked, following them out. "I vote we just forget about the whole business. Nature's the great healer."

"All right, Nate," Judge McKelva said, when they had all sat down together in Dr.

Courtland's consulting office. "How soon?"

Dr. Courtland said, "Judge Mac, I've just managed to catch Dr. Kunomoto by the coat-tail over in Houston. You know, he taught me. He's got a more radical method now, and he can fly here day after tomorrow—"

"What for?" Judge McKelva said. "Nate, I hid myself away from home and comfort and tracked down here and put myself in your hands for one simple reason: I've got confidence in you. Now show me I'm still not too old to exercise good judgment."

"All right, sir, then that's the way it'll be," Dr. Courtland said, rising. He added, "You know, sir, this operation is not, in any hands, a hundred per cent predictable?"

"Well, I'm an optimist."

"I didn't know there were any more such animals," said Dr. Courtland.

"Never think you've seen the last of anything," scoffed Judge McKelva. He answered the Doctor's smile with a laugh that was like the snarl of triumph from an old grouch, and Dr. Courtland, taking the glasses the Judge held on his knees, gently set them back onto his nose.

In his same walk, like a rather stately ploughboy's, the Doctor led them through the jammed waiting room. "I've got you in the hospital, they've reserved me the operating room and I'm fixed up, too," he said.

"He can move heaven and earth, just ask him to," said his nurse in a cross voice as she passed her in the doorway.

"Go right on over to the hospital and settle in." As the elevator doors opened, Dr. Courtland touched Laurel lightly on the shoulder. "I ordered you the ambulance downstairs, sir—it's a safer ride."

"What's he acting so polite about?" Fay asked, as they went down. "I bet when the bill comes in he won't charge so polite."

"I'm in good hands, Fay," Judge McKelva told her. "I know his whole family."

There was a sharp, cold wind blowing through Canal Street. Back home, Judge McKelva had always set the example for Mount Salus in putting aside his winter hat on Straw Hat Day, and he stood here now in his creamy panama. But though his paunch was bigger, he looked less ruddy, looked thinner in the face than on his wedding day, Laurel thought: this was the last time she had seen him. The mushroom-colored patches under his eyes belonged there hereditary like the black and overhanging McKelva eyebrows that nearly met in one across his forehead—but what was he seeing? She wondered if through that dilated but benevolent gaze of his he was really quite seeing Fay, or herself, or anybody at all. In the lime-white glare of New Orleans, waiting for the ambulance without questioning the need for it, he seemed for the first time in her memory a man admitting to a little uncertainty in his bearings.

"If Courtland's all that much, he better put in a better claim on how good this is going to turn out," said Fay. "And he's not so perfect—I saw him spank that nurse."

FAY SAT AT THE WINDOW, Laurel stood in the doorway; they were in the hospital room waiting for Judge McKelva to be brought back after surgery.

“What a way to keep his promise,” said Fay. “When he told me he’d bring me to New Orleans some day, it was to see the Carnival.” She stared out the window. “And the Carnival’s going on right now. It looks like this is as close as we’ll get to a parade.”

Laurel looked again at her watch.

“He came out fine! He stood it fine!” Dr. Courtland called out. He strode into the room still in his surgical gown. He grinned at Laurel from a face that poured sweat. “And I think with luck we’re going to keep some vision in that eye.”

The tablelike bed with Judge McKelva affixed to it was wheeled into the room, and he was carried past the two women. Both his eyes were bandaged. Sandbags were packed about his head, the linen pinned across the big motionless mound of his body close enough to bind him.

“You didn’t tell me he’d look like that,” said Fay.

“He’s fine, he’s absolutely splendid,” said Dr. Courtland. “He’s got him a beautiful eye.” He opened his mouth and laughed aloud. He was speaking with excitement, some carry-over of elation, as though he’d just come in from a party.

“Why, you can’t hardly tell even who it is under all that old pack. It’s big as a house,” said Fay, staring down at Judge McKelva.

“He’s going to surprise us all. If we can make it stick, he’s going to have a little vision he didn’t think was coming to him! That’s a *beautiful* eye.”

“But *look* at him,” said Fay. “When’s he going to come to?”

“Oh, he’s got plenty of time,” said Dr. Courtland, on his way.

Judge McKelva’s head was unpillowed, lengthening the elderly, exposed throat. Not only the great dark eyes but their heavy brows and their heavy undershadows were hidden, too, by the opaque gauze. With so much of its dark and bright both taken from it, and with his sleeping mouth as colorless as his cheeks, his face looked quenched.

This was a double room, but Judge McKelva had it, for the time being, to himself. Fay had stretched out a while ago on the second bed. The first nurse had come on duty; she sat crocheting a baby’s bootee, so automatically that she appeared to be doing it in her sleep. Laurel moved about, as if to make sure that the room was all in order, but there was nothing to do; not yet. This was like a nowhere. Even what could be seen from the high window might have been the rooftops of any city, colorless and tarpatched, with here and there small mirrors of rainwater. At first, she did not realize she could see the bridge—it stood out there dull in the distance, its function hardly evident, as if it were only another building. The river was not visible. She lowered the blind against the wide white sky that reflected it. It seemed to her that the grayed-down, anonymous room might be some reflection itself of Judge McKelva’s “disturbance,” his dislocated vision that had brought him here.

Then Judge McKelva began grinding and gnashing his teeth.

“Father?” Laurel moved near.

“That’s only the way he wakes up,” said Fay from her bed, without opening her eyes. “I get it every morning.”

Laurel stood near him, waiting.

“What’s the verdict?” her father presently asked, in a parched voice. “Eh, Polly?” He called Laurel by her childhood name. “What’s your mother have to say about me?”

“Look-a-here!” exclaimed Fay. She jumped up and pattered toward his bed in her stockinged feet. “Who’s *this*?” She pointed to the gold button over her breastbone.

The nurse, without stopping her crochet hook, spoke from the chair. “Don’t go near the eye, hon! Don’t nobody touch him or monkey with that eye of his, and don’t even touch the bed he’s on, till Dr. Courtland says touch, or somebody’ll be mighty sorry. And Dr. Courtland will skin me alive.”

“That’s right,” said Dr. Courtland, coming in; then he bent close and spoke exuberantly in the aghast face. “All through with my part, sir! Your part’s just starting! And yours will be harder than mine. You got to lie still! No moving. No turning. No tears.” He smiled. “Nothing! Just the passage of time. We’ve got to wait on your eye.”

When the doctor straightened, the nurse said, “I wish he’d waited for me to give him a splash of water before he took off again.”

“Go ahead. Wet his whistle, he’s awake,” said Dr. Courtland and moved to the door. “He’s just possuming.” His finger beckoned Laurel and Fay outside.

“Now listen, you’ve got to watch him. Starting now. Take turns. It’s not as easy as anybody thinks to lie still and nothing else. I’ll talk Mrs. Martello into doing private duty at night. Laurel, a good thing you’ve got the time. He’s going to get extra-special care, and we’re not running any risks on Judge Mac.”

Laurel, when he’d gone, went to the pay telephone in the corridor. She called her studio; she was a professional designer of fabrics in Chicago.

“No point in you staying just because the doctor said so,” said Fay when Laurel hung up. She had listened like a child.

“Why, I’m staying for my own sake,” said Laurel. She decided to put off the other necessary calls. “Father’ll need all the time both of us can give him. He’s not very well suited to being tied down.”

“O.K., that’s not a matter of life and death, is it?” said Fay in a cross voice. As they went back to the room together, Fay leaned over the bed and said, “I’m glad you can’t see yourself, hon.”

Judge McKelva gave out a shocking and ragged sound, a snore, and firmed his mouth. He asked, “What’s the time, Fay?”

“That sounds more like you,” she said, but didn’t tell him the time. “It was that old *eth* talking when he came to before,” she said to Laurel. “Why, he hadn’t even mentioned Beck till you and Courtland started him.”

The Hibiscus was a half hour’s ride away on the city’s one remaining streetcar line, but through the help of one of the floor nurses, Laurel and Fay were able to find rooms there by the week. It was a decayed mansion on a changing street; what had been built as its twin neighbor was a lesson to it now: it was far along in the course of being demolished.

Laurel hardly ever saw any of the other roomers, although the front door was never locked.

and the bathroom was always busy; at the hours when she herself came and went, the Hibiscus seemed to be in the sole charge of a cat on a chain, pacing the cracked-open floor tiles that paved the front gallery. Long in the habit of rising early, she said she would be with her father by seven. She would stay until three, when Fay would come to sit until eleven; Fay could ride the streetcar back in the safe company of the nurse, who lived nearby. And Mr. Martello said she would take on the private duty late shift for the sake of one living man that Dr. Courtland. So the pattern was set.

It meant that Laurel and Fay were hardly ever in the same place at the same time, except during the hours when they were both asleep in their rooms at the Hibiscus. These were adjoining—really half rooms; the partition between their beds was only a landlord's strip of wallboard. Where there was no intimacy, Laurel shrank from contact; she shrank from the thin board and from the vague apprehension that some night she might hear Fay cry or laugh like a stranger at something she herself would rather not know.

In the mornings, Judge McKelva ground his teeth, Laurel spoke to him, he waked up, and found out from Laurel how she was and what time her watch showed. She gave him her breakfast; while she fed him she could read him the *Picayune*. Then while he was being washed and shaved she went to her own breakfast in the basement cafeteria. The trick was not to miss the lightning visits of Dr. Courtland. On lucky days, she rode up in the elevator with him.

"It's clearing some," Dr. Courtland said. "It's not to be hurried."

By this time, only the operated eye had to be covered. A hivelike dressing stood on top of it. Judge McKelva seemed inclined to still lower the lid over his good eye. Perhaps, open, he could see the other eye's bandage. He lay as was asked of him, without moving. He never asked about his eye. He never mentioned his eye. Laurel followed his lead.

Neither did he ask about her. His old curiosity would have prompted a dozen specific questions about how she was managing to stay here, what was happening up in Chicago, what had given her her latest commission, when she would have to go. She had left in the middle of her present job—designing a theatre curtain for a repertory theatre. Her father left her questions unasked. But both knew, and for the same reason, that bad days go better without any questions at all.

He'd loved being read to, once. With good hopes, she brought in a stack of paperbacks and began on the newest of his favorite detective novelist. He listened but without much comment. She went back to one of the old ones they'd both admired, and he listened with greater quiet. Pity stabbed her. Did they *move too fast* for him now?

Part of her father's silence Laurel laid, at first, to the delicacy he had always shown for family feelings. (There had only been the three of them.) Here was his daughter, come to help him and yet wrenched into idleness; she could not help him. Fay was accurate about it; any stranger could tell him the time. Eventually, Laurel saw that her father had accepted his uselessness with her presence all along. What occupied his full mind was time itself; time passing: he was concentrating.

She was always conscious, once she knew, of the effort being made in this room, hour after hour, from his motionless bed; and she was conscious of time along with him, setting her inner chronology with his, more or less as if they needed to keep in step for a long way ahead of them. The Venetian blind was kept lowered to let in only a two-inch strip of Mar-

daylight at the window. Laurel sat so that this light fell into her lap onto her book, and Judge McKelva, holding himself motionless, listened to her read, then turn the page, as if he were silently counting, and knew each page by its number.

The day came when Judge McKelva was asked to share the room with another patient. When Laurel walked in one morning, she saw an old man, older than her father, wearing new, striped cotton pajamas and an old broadbrimmed black felt hat, rocking in the chair by the second bed. Laurel could see the peppering of red road dust on the old man's hat above his round blue eyes.

"This is too strong a light for my father, I'm afraid, sir," she said to him.

"Mr. Dalzell pulled the blind down during the night," said Mrs. Martello, speaking in the nurse's ventriloquist voice. "Didn't you pull it down?" she shrieked. Judge McKelva did not betray that he was awake, but the old man rocking appeared as oblivious as the Judge to the sound of their voices. "He's blind, and nearly deaf in the bargain," Mrs. Martello said proudly. "And he's going in surgery just as soon as they get him all fixed up for it. He's got malignancy."

"I had to pull the vine down to get the possum," Mr. Dalzell piped up, while Laurel and the nurse struggled together to string the blind back into place. Dr. Courtland came in and did it.

Mr. Dalzell proved to be a fellow Mississippian. He was from Fox Hill. Almost immediately, he convinced himself that Judge McKelva was his long-lost son Archie Lee.

"Archie Lee," he said, "I might've known if you ever did come home, you'd come home drunk."

Judge McKelva once would have smiled. Now he lay as ever, his good eye closed, or open on the ceiling, and had no words to spare.

"Don't you worry about *Mr. Dalzell*," Mrs. Martello said to Laurel as they prepared one morning to change places. "Your daddy just lets Mr. Dalzell rave. He keeps just as still, laying there just like he's supposed to. He's good as gold. *Mr. Dalzell's* nothing you got to worry about."

“NOTHING TO DO but give it more time,” said Dr. Courtland regularly. “It’s clearing. I believe we’re getting us an eye that’s going to *see* a little bit.”

But although Dr. Courtland paid his daily visits as to a man recovering, to Laurel her father seemed to be paying some unbargained-for price for his recovery. He lay there unchangeably big and heavy, full of effort yet motionless, while his face looked tired every morning, the circle under his visible eye thick as paint. He opened his mouth and swallowed what she offered him with the obedience of an old man—obedience! She felt ashamed to let him act out the part in front of her. She managed a time or two (by moving heaven and earth) to have some special dish prepared for him outside; but he might as well have been spooned on hospital grits, canned peaches, and Jello, for all that food distracted him out of his patience—out of his unnatural reticence: he had yet to say he would be all right.

One day, she had the luck to detect an old copy of *Nicholas Nickleby* on the dusty top shelf in the paperback store. That would reach his memory, she believed, and she began next morning reading it to her father.

He did not ask her to stop; neither could he help her when she lost their place. Of course she was not able to read aloud with her mother’s speed and vivacity—that was probably what he missed. In the course of an hour, he rolled his visible eye her way, though he rationed himself on the one small movement he was permitted, and lay for a long time looking at her. She was not sure he was listening to the words.

“Is that all?” his patient voice asked, when she paused.

“You got that gun loaded yet?” called Mr. Dalzell. “Archie Lee, I declare I want to see you load that gun before they start to coming.”

“That’s the boy. You go right on hunting all night in your mind,” Mrs. Martello stoutly told Mr. Dalzell. She would never in a year dare to get so possessive of Judge McKelva, Laurel reflected, or find something in his predicament that she could joke about. She had gained no clue but one to what he used to be like in Mount Salus. “He’s still keeping as good as gold,” she greeted Laurel every morning. “It’s nothing but goodness—I don’t think he *sleeps* all the steady.”

Mrs. Martello had crocheted twenty-seven pairs of bootees. Bootees were what she counted. “You’d be surprised how fast I give out of ’em...” she said. “It’s the most popular present there is.”

Judge McKelva had years ago developed a capacity for patience, ready if it were called on. But in this affliction, he seemed to Laurel to lie in a *dream* of patience. He seldom spoke now unless he was spoken to, and then, which was wholly unlike him, after a wait—as if he had to catch up. He didn’t try any more to hold her in his good eye.

He lay more and more with both eyes closed. She dropped her voice sometimes, and then sat still.

“I’m not asleep,” said her father. “Please don’t stop reading.”

“What do you think of his prospects now?” Laurel asked Dr. Courtland, following him out

into the corridor. "It's three weeks."

"Three weeks! Lord, how they fly," he said. He believed he hid the quick impatience of his mind, and moving and speaking with deliberation he did hide it—then showed it all in his smile. "He's doing all right. Lungs clear, heart strong, blood pressure not a bit worse than was before. And that eye's clearing. I think he's got some vision coming, just a little bit around the edge, you know, Laurel, but if the cataract catches up with him, I want him seen enough to find his way around the garden. A little longer. Let's play safe."

Going down on the elevator with him, another time, she asked, "Is it the drugs he has to take that make him seem such a distance away?"

He pinched a frown into his freckled forehead. "Well, no two people react in just the same way to anything." They held the elevator for him to say, "People are different, Laurel."

"Mother was different," she said.

Laurel felt reluctant to leave her father now in the afternoons. She stayed and read *Nicholas Nickleby* had seemed as endless to her as time must seem to him, and it had not been arranged between them, without words, that she was to sit there beside him and read—but silently, to herself. He too was completely silent while she read. Without being able to see her as she sat by his side, he seemed to know when she turned each page, as though he kept up, through the succession of pages, with time, checking off moment after moment; and she felt it would be heartless to close her book until she'd read him to sleep.

One day, Fay came in and caught Laurel sitting up asleep herself, in her spectacles.

"Putting your eyes out, too? I told him if he hadn't spent so many years of his life poring over dusty old books, his eyes would have more strength saved up for now," Fay told her. She sidled closer to the bed. "About ready to get up, hon?" she cried. "Listen, they're holding parades out yonder right now. Look what they threw me off the float!"

Shadows from the long green eardrops she'd come in wearing made soft little sideburns down her small, intent face as she pointed to them, scolding him. "What's the good of Carnival if we don't get to go, hon?"

It was still incredible to Laurel that her father, at nearly seventy, should have let anyone new, a beginner, walk in on his life, that he had even agreed to pardon such a thing.

"Father, where did you meet her?" Laurel had asked when, a year and a half ago, she had flown down to Mount Salus to see them married.

"Southern Bar Association." With both arms he had made an expansive gesture that she correctly read as the old Gulf Coast Hotel. Fay had had a part-time job there; she was in the typist pool. A month after the convention, he brought her home to Mount Salus, and they were married in the Courthouse.

Perhaps she was forty, and so younger than Laurel. There was little even of forty in her looks except the line of her neck and the backs of her little square, idle hands. She was bronzed and blue-veined; as a child she had very possibly gone undernourished. Her hair was still childish tow. It had the tow texture, as if, well rubbed between the fingers, those curls might have gone to powder. She had round, country-blue eyes and a little feist jaw.

When Laurel flew down from Chicago to be present at the ceremony, Fay's response to her kiss had been to say, "It wasn't any use in you bothering to come so far." She'd smiled at that though she meant her scolding to flatter. What Fay told Laurel now, nearly every afternoo

at the changeover, was almost the same thing. Her flattery and her disparagement sounded just alike.

It was strange, though, how Fay never called anyone by name. Only she had said “Becky” Laurel’s mother, who had been dead ten years by the time Fay could have first heard of her when she had married Laurel’s father.

“What on earth made Becky give you a name like that?” she’d asked Laurel, on that first occasion.

“It’s the state flower of West Virginia,” Laurel told her, smiling. “Where my mother came from.”

Fay hadn’t smiled back. She’d given her a wary look.

One later night, at the Hibiscus, Laurel tapped at Fay’s door.

“What do you want?” Fay asked as she opened it.

She thought the time had come to know Fay a little better. She sat down on one of the hard chairs in the narrow room and asked her about her family.

“My family?” said Fay. “None of ’em living. That’s why I ever left Texas and came to Mississippi. We may not have had much, out in Texas, but we were always so close. Never had any secrets from each other, like some families. Sis was just like my twin. My brothers were all so unselfish! After Papa died, we all gave up everything for Mama, of course. Now that she’s gone, I’m glad we did. Oh, I wouldn’t have run off and left anybody that needed me. Just to call myself an artist and make a lot of money.”

Laurel did not try again, and Fay never at any time knocked at her door.

Now Fay walked around Judge McKelva’s bed and cried, “Look! Look what I got to match my eardrops! How do you like ’em, hon? Don’t you want to let’s go dancing?” She stood on one foot and held a shoe in the air above his face. It was green, with a stiletto heel. Had the shoe been a written page, some brief she’d concocted on her own, he looked at it in her hand there for long enough to read it through. But he didn’t speak.

“But just let me try slipping *out* a minute in ’em, would he ever let me hear about it!” Fay said. She gave him a smile, to show her remark was meant for him to hear. He offered no reply.

Laurel stayed on, until now the supper trays began to rattle.

“Archie Lee, you gonna load that gun or you rather be caught napping?” Mr. Dalzell called out.

“Mr. Dalzell reminds me of my old grandpa,” said Fay. “I’m not sorry to have him in here. He’s company.”

The floor nurse came in to feed Mr. Dalzell, then to stick him with a needle, while Fay helped Judge McKelva with his supper—mostly by taking bite for bite. Laurel stayed on until out in the corridor the lights came on and the room went that much darker.

“Maybe you can sleep now, Father—you haven’t been asleep all day,” said Laurel.

Fay switched on the night light by the bed. Placed low, and not much more powerful than a candle flame, it touched Judge McKelva’s face without calling forth a flicker of change in his patient expression. Laurel saw now that his hair had grown long on the back of his neck, not black but white and featherlike.

“Tell me something you would like to have,” Laurel begged him.

Fay, bending down over him, placed her lighted cigarette between his lips. His chest lifted

visibly as he drew on it, and after a moment she took it away and his chest slowly fell as the smoke slowly traveled out of his mouth. She bent and gave it to him again.

“There’s something,” she said.

“Don’t let the fire go out, son!” called Mr. Dalzell.

“No sir! Everything around this camp’s being took good care of, Mr. Dalzell!” yelled the floor nurse, coming to the door. “You just crawl right in your tent and say your prayers good and go to sleep.”

Laurel stood, and said goodnight. “Dr. Courtland believes the time’s almost here to try your pinhole specs,” she dared to add. “Do you hear, Father?”

He, who had been the declared optimist, had not once expressed hope. Now it was she who was offering it to him. And it might be false hope.

There was no response in the room. Judge McKelva, like Mr. Dalzell, lay in the dark, and Fay crouched in the rocker, one cheek on the windowsill, with a peep on the crack.

Laurel went reluctantly away.

IT WAS NOT THAT NIGHT but the next that Laurel, in her room at the Hibiscus, having already undressed, suddenly dressed again. As she ran down the steps into the warm, uneasy night the roof light went on in a passing cab. She hailed and ran for it.

“You don’t know how lucky you are, sister,” said the driver. “Getting you something to ride on a night like tonight.”

The interior of the cab reeked of bourbon, and as they passed under a streetlight she saw a string of cheap green beads on the floor—a favor tossed from a parade float. The driver took back streets, squeezing around at every corner, it seemed to Laurel, who was straining forward; but when she let down the window glass for air, she heard the same mocking trumpet playing with a band from the same distance away. Then she heard more than one band, heard rival bands playing up distant streets.

Perhaps what she had felt was no more than the atmospheric oppression of a Carnival night, of crowds running wild in the streets of a strange city. And at the very beginning of the day, when she entered her father’s room, she thought something had already happened to Mr. Dalzell. He was up on a wheeled table, baldheaded as an infant, hook-nosed and silent—the doctor had taken away his teeth. It was only that something was *going* to happen. A pair of orderlies came during Judge McKelva’s breakfast to take Mr. Dalzell to the operating room. As he was wheeled out, no longer vigilant, into the corridor, his voice trailed back, “*Told* you rascals not to let the fire go out.” They had still not brought him back when Laurel left.

A strange milky radiance shone in a hospital corridor at night, like moonlight on some deserted street. The whitened floor, the whitened walls and ceiling, were set with narrow bands of black receding into the distance, along which the spaced-out doors, graduated from large to small, were all closed. Laurel had never noticed the design in the tiling before, like some clue she would need to follow to get to the right place. But of course the last door on the right of the corridor, the one standing partway open as usual, was still her father’s.

An intense, tight little voice from inside there said at that moment in high pitch, “I tell you enough is enough!”

Laurel was halted. A thousand packthreads seemed to cross and crisscross her skin, binding her there.

The voice said, even higher, “This is my birthday!”

Laurel saw Mrs. Martello go running from the nurse’s station into the room. Then Mr. Martello reappeared, struggling her way backwards. She was pulling Fay, holding her bodily. A scream shot out and ricocheted from walls and ceiling. Fay broke free from the nurse, whirled, and with high-raised knees and white face came running down the corridor. Fists drumming against her temples, she knocked against Laurel as if Laurel wasn’t there. Her high heels let off a fusillade of sounds as she passed and hurled herself into the waiting room with voice rising, like a child looking for its mother.

Mrs. Martello came panting up to Laurel, heavy on her rubber heels.

“She laid hands on him! She said if he didn’t snap out of it, she’d—” The veneer of nurse slipped from Mrs. Martello—she pushed up at Laurel the red, shocked face of a Mississippi countrywoman as her voice rose to a clear singsong. “She taken ahold of him. She w-

abusing him.” The word went echoing. “I think she was fixing to pull him out of that bed. think she thought she could! Sure, she wasn’t able to move *that* mountain!” Mrs. Martel added wildly, “*She’s* not a nurse!” She swung her starched body around and sent her voice back toward Judge McKelva’s door. “What’s the matter with that woman? Does she want to ruin your eye?”

At last her legs drove her. Laurel ran.

The door stood wide open, and inside the room’s darkness a watery constellation hung throbbing and near. She was looking straight out at the whole Mississippi River Bridge lights. She found her way, the night light was burning. Her father’s right arm was free of the cover and lay out on the bed. It was bare to the shoulder, its skin soft and gathered, like a woman’s sleeve. It showed her that he was no longer concentrating. At the sting in her eye she remembered for him that there must be no tears in his, and she reached to put her hand into his open hand and press it gently.

He made what seemed to her a response at last, yet a mysterious response. His whole pillowless head went dusky, as if he laid it under the surface of dark, pouring water and held it there.

Every light in the room blazed on. Dr. Courtland, a dark shape, shoved past her to the bed. He set his fingertips to her father’s wrist. Then his hand passed over the operated eye; with its same delicacy it opened the good eye. He bent over and stared in, without speaking. He knocked back the sheet and laid the side of his head against her father’s gowned chest; for a moment his own eyes closed.

It was her father who appeared to Laurel as the one listening. His upper lip had lifted short and soft as a child’s, showing ghostly-pale teeth which no one ever saw when he spoke or laughed. It gave him the smile of a child who is hiding in the dark while the others hunt for him, waiting to be found.

Now the doctor’s hand swung and drove for the signal button. “Get out in a hurry. Arrange collar his wife and hold her. Both of you go in the waiting room, stay there till I come.”

The nurse pushed into the room, with another nurse at her shoulder.

“Now what did *he* pull?” Mrs. Martello cried.

The other nurse whipped the curtains along the rod between the two beds, shutting out Mr. Dalzell’s neat, vacated bed and the rocking chair with the felt hat hanging on it. With her to she kicked out of her way the fallen window blind lying there on the floor.

Dr. Courtland, using both hands, drew Laurel outside the room. “Laurel, no time to lose. He closed the door on her.

But in the hall, she heard him give an answer to the nurse. “The renegade! I believe he just plain sneaked out on us.”

In the waiting room, Fay stood being patted by an old woman who was wearing bedroom slippers and holding a half-eaten banana in her free hand.

“Night after night, sitting up there with him, putting the food in his mouth, giving him a straw, letting him use up my cigarettes, keeping him from thinking!” Fay was crying on the woman’s bosom. “Then to get hauled out by an uppity nurse who doesn’t know my business from hers!”

Laurel went up to her. “Fay, it can’t be much more serious. The doctor’s closed in with

Father now.”

“Never speak to me again!” shrieked Fay without turning around. “That nurse dragged me and pushed me, and you’re the one let her do it!”

“Dr. Courtland wants us to stay here till he calls us.”

“You bet I’m staying! Just wait till he hears what I’ve got to say to him!” cried Fay.

“You pore little woman,” said the old woman easily. “Don’t they give us all a hard time.”

“I believe he’s dying,” said Laurel.

Fay spun around, darted out her head, and spat at her.

The old woman said, “Now whoa. Why don’t you-all take a seat and save your strength. Just wait and let them come tell you about it. They will.” There was an empty chair in the circle pulled up around a table, and Fay sat down among five or six grown men and women who all had the old woman’s likeness. Their coats were on the table in a heap together, and open shoeboxes and paper sacks stood about on the floor; they were a family in the middle of their supper.

Laurel began walking, past this group and the others who were sprawled or sleeping in chairs and on couches, past the television screen where a pale-blue group of Westerners silently shot it out with one another, and as far as the door into the hall, where she stood for a minute looking at the clock in the wall above the elevators, then walked her circle again.

The family Fay had sat down with never let the conversation die.

“Go on in there, Archie Lee, it’s still your turn,” the old woman said.

“I ain’t ready to go.” A great hulking man in a short coat like a red blanket, who was too gray-headed to be her child, spoke like her child and took a drink from a pint bottle of whiskey.

“They still ain’t letting us in but one at a time. It’s your turn,” the old woman said. She went on to Fay. “You from Mississippi? We’re from Mississippi. Most of us claims Fox Hill.”

“I’m *not* from Mississippi. I’m from Texas.” She let out a long cry.

“Yours been operated on? Ours been operated on,” said one of the daughters to Fay. “He’s been in intensive care ever since they got through with him. His chances are a hundred to one against.”

“Go on in yonder, scare-cat,” ordered the mother.

“They went in my husband’s eye without consulting my feelings and next they try to run me out of this hospital!” cried Fay.

“Mama, it’s Archie Lee’s turn, and I come after you. Go yourself,” said the daughter.

“I reckon you’ll have to excuse me a minute,” the old woman said to Fay. She began brushing at her bosom where Fay had cried, shaking herself to get the crumbs off her skirt. “I declare, I’m getting to where I ain’t got much left to say to Dad myself.”

“You know what his face looks like to me? A piece of paper,” said a wizened-looking daughter.

“I ain’t going to tell him that,” said the old woman.

“Tell him you ain’t got too much longer to stay,” suggested one of the sons.

“Ask him if he knows who you are,” said the wizened-looking daughter.

“Or you can just try keeping your mouth shut,” said Archie Lee.

“He’s your dad, the same as mine,” warned the old woman. “I’m going in because you skipped your turn. Now wait for me! Don’t run off and leave me.”

“He don’t know I’m living,” said Archie Lee, as the woman trudged through the doorway in Indian moccasins. He tilted up the bottle: Mr. Dalzell’s son, long lost.

Fay sobbed the louder after the old woman went.

“How you like Mississippi?” Mr. Dalzell’s family asked, almost in a chorus. “Don’t you think it’s friendly?” asked the wizened daughter.

“I guess I’m used to Texas.”

“Mississippi is the best state in the Union,” said Archie Lee and he put his feet up and stretched out full length on the couch.

“I didn’t say I didn’t have kin here. I had a grandpa living close to Bigbee, Mississippi,” Fay said.

“Now you’re talking!” the youngest girl said. “We know right where Bigbee is, could find it for you right now. Fox Hill is harder to find than Bigbee. But we don’t think it’s lonesome because by the time you get all of us together, there’s nine of us, not counting the tadpole in Ten, if Granddad gets over this. He’s got cancer.”

“Cancer’s what my dad had. And Grandpa! Grandpa loved me better than all the rest. That sweet old man, he died in my arms,” Fay said, glaring at Laurel across the room. “They die but not before they did every bit they could to help themselves, and tried all their might to get better, for our sakes. They said they knew, if they just tried hard enough—”

“I always tell mine to have faith,” said the wizened daughter.

And as if their vying and trouble-swapping were the order of the day, or the order of the night, in the waiting room, they were all as unaware of the passing of the minutes as the man on the couch, whose dangling hand now let the bottle drop and slide like an empty slipper across the floor into Laurel’s path. She walked on, giving them the wide berth of her desolation.

“Wish they’d give Dad something to drink. Wash his mouth out,” said the old mother coming back—Laurel nearly met her in the door.

“Remember Mamie’s boy?” Another family had come in, grouping themselves around the Coke machine. The man who was working it called out, “He shot himself or somebody shot him, one. He begged for water. The hospital wouldn’t give him none. Honey, he died wanting water.”

“I remember Joe Boy Bush from Bruintown,” a man retorted, turning around from the television screen. “He was laying there going without water and *he* reached himself over and bit that tube in two and drunk that glucose. And drunk ever’ drop that was in it. And that fool, in two weeks he was up out of that bed and they send him home.”

“Two weeks! Guess how long they’ve held us here!” cried Fay.

“If they don’t give your dad no water by next time round, tell you what, we’ll go in there all together and pour it down him,” promised the old mother. “If he’s going to die, I don’t want him to die wanting water.”

“That’s talking, Mama.”

“Ain’t that true, Archie Lee?”

But Archie Lee lay on the couch with his mouth open.

“There’s a fair sight. I’m glad his dad can’t walk in on us and see him,” said the old woman. “No, if Dad’s going to die I ain’t going to let him die wanting water!” she insisted, and the others began raggedly laughing.

“We’ll pour it down him!” cried the mother. “He ain’t going to stand a chance against us.” The family laughed louder, as if there could be no helping it. Some of the other families joined in. It seemed to Laurel that in another moment the whole waiting room would dissolve itself in waiting-room laughter.

Dr. Courtland stood in the doorway, the weight of his watch in his hand.

When Laurel and Fay reached him, he drew them into the elevator hall. The door to Judge McKelva’s room stood closed.

“I couldn’t save him.” He laid a hand on the sleeve of each woman, standing between them. He bent his head, but that did not hide the aggrievement, indignation, that was in his voice. “He’s gone, and his eye was healing.”

“Are you trying to tell me you let my husband die?” Fay cried.

“He collapsed.” Fatigue had pouched the doctor’s face, his cheeks hung gray. He kept his hands touch on their arms.

“You picked my birthday to do it on!” Fay screamed out, just as Mrs. Martello came out of the room. She closed the door behind her. She was carrying a hamper. She pretended not to see them as she drummed past on her heels.

Laurel felt the Doctor’s hand shift to grip her arm; she had been about to go straight to the door, unattended. He began walking the two women toward the elevators. Laurel became aware that he was in evening clothes.

At the elevator he got in with them, still standing between them. “Maybe we asked too much of him,” he said grudgingly. “And yet he didn’t have to hold out much longer.” He looked protestingly at the lighted floors flashing by. “I’d been waiting to know how well that eye would see!”

Fay said, “I knew better than let you go in that eye to start with. That eye was just as bright and cocky as yours is right now. He just took a scratch from an old rose briar! He would have got over that, it would all be forgotten now! Nature would have tended to it. But you thought you knew better!” Without taking her eyes from him, she began crying.

Dr. Courtland looked at her briefly, as if he had seen many like Fay. As they were leaving the elevator among all the other passengers, he looked with the ghost of a smile into Laurel’s face. In a moment he said, “He helped me through medical school, kept me going when Daddy died. A sacrifice in those days. The Depression hit and he helped me get my start.”

“Some things don’t bear going into,” Laurel said,

“No,” he said. “No.” He took off his glasses and put them away, as if he and she had just signed their names to these words. He said then, “Laurel, there’s nobody from *home* with you. Would you care to put up with us for the rest of the night? Betty would be so glad. Trouble is, there’s goings-on, and of course more to follow. Dell—our oldest girl’s eighteen—”

Laurel shook her head.

“I’ve got my driver waiting outside, though,” Dr. Courtland went on. “As soon as you-a finish at the office, I’ll send you where you’re going, with something for you both to make you sleep.”

“All I hope is *you* lay awake tonight and remember how little you were good for!” cried Fay.

He took them on, through the necessary office gates, and when they came outside the

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