I also remember the details of Freddie's fight with LeRoy Beske outside the school bus.

He and Faye did everything by their plan. When LeRoy came off the lowest bus step, Freddie slugged him one. Freddie decided fast not to try for a second hit. He turned around and started thanking each girl for holding his book. Then, he told us, a semitrailer hit him in the small of his back. He felt himself caving. As he went down, another semitrailer hit him in the back of his neck.

Next he lay on the concrete sidewalk, face up. Snow was falling. The remarkable thing about it was that all of the snowflakes were angled straight at him. Some came from straight above, but also some came at him at a slant from left and right, and some from above his wet eyebrows and from below his chin. Then he noticed that in a ring all around that gigantic gray sky were the faces of little girls. They were all looking down at him. He saw the baby fat under their chins. The girls were cheeping and crying his name. Freddie could see they looked very respectful. As I listened to him, I thought: Maybe they'll grow up to be dull or dispirited like the football players, but for now, as Mercein would have said, they were enough to make your heart stop.

Bly, Carol. My Lord Bag of Rice
Canada: Milkweed Editions, 2000

After the Baptism

The Benty Family had a beautiful baptism for their baby-when a good deal might have gone wrong. It is hard to r:un any baptism these days: of all the fifty-odd Episcopalians in Saint Aidan's Church, not to mention the two Lutheran grandparents, who really believes much of what the young priest says? No one with an IQ over one hundred actually supposes that "baptism could never be more truly, truly relevant than it is right now, in our day and age." People may get a kick out of the rhetoric, but that doesn't mean they believe it. If Bill Benty, Senior, the baby's grandfather, tried any of that proclaiming style of Father Geoffrey, if he tried anything like that just once over at the plant, he'd be laughed out to the fence in two minutes.

At least Father Geoffrey was long enough out of seminary now so he'd left off pronouncing Holy Ghost Ha-oly Gha-ost. His delivery was clear and manly. When he took the baby from her godparents, he took hold of her in a no-nonsense way: her mussed, beautiful white skirts billowed over his arm

like a sail being carried to the water. But the man was vapid. A frank, charming midwestern accent can't bring dead ideas to life. He had been charming about agreeing on the 1928 baptism service, instead of the 1979. Bill's wife, Lois, loved the beautiful old phrasing. Beautiful it was, too, Bill thought now, but on the other hand, how could any realistic person ask those particular three godparents "to renounce the vain pomp and glory of the world"? Where would that crew get any glory from in the first place?

The middle-aged godparent was Bill's long-lost first cousin, Molly Wells. Thirty-odd years ago she had run away to North Carolina to marry. After almost no correspondence in all those years, Molly had shown up widowed-a thin, sad woman with white hair done in what Lois called your bottom-line, body-wave-only permanent. Neither Bill nor Lois had met her husband. Bill had mailed her dittoed, and later photocopied, Christmas letters, as he did to all his relations, giving news of Lois's work in Episcopal Community Services and whatever of interest there was to say about the chemical plant, and young Will's graduations and accomplishments-Breck School, Reed, the Harvard B School, his first marriage, his job with the arts organization before the snafu, his marriage to Cheryl. Molly and her husband had no children, and her responses to the Bentys' news were scarcely more than southern-lady thank-you notes.

Then in July of this long, very hot summer, she announced she was now widowed and would visit. Here she was, a houseguest who kept to her room, considerate enough not to dampen their family joking with her grief. Today, for the baptism, she wore a two-piece pink dress, gloves, and a straw-brimmed

hat. Since one expects a young face under a broad-brimmed hat, Bill had had a moment's quake to see Molly when she came down the staircase that morning. Molly had frankly told them she had not darkened the doorway of a church in thirty years but she would not disgrace them.

The other godparents were an oldish young couple whom Will dug up from his remaining high-school acquaintance. Bill had warned Will that you had to give these things time: when a man has been caught embezzling he must allow his friends months, even a year, to keep saying how sorry they are, but the fact is, they can't really ever look at him the same way again. For a good two or three years they will still mention to people that he was caught embezzling or whatever, but in fact they have no rancor left themselves. In about five years, they will again be affectionate friends but never as in the first place. It was only a question of having the sense not to ask them for help getting a job the first two years-and then simply to wait.

Probably Will was lucky to have found this couple, Chad and Jodi Plathe, to stand up for his baby. They were not Episcopalians. They were meditators, and if not actually organic farmers, at least organic eaters. When Will and Cheryl brought them over to Bill and Lois's for dinner earlier in the month, it had been fun to goad them. Each time Chad mentioned an interest of theirs, Bill had said, "Oh, then it follows you must be into organic eating." Or "Oh, then it follows you must be into horoscopes." "Into Sufi dancing, I bet." They were-into all the philosophies he brought up. They looked at him, puzzled, and young Will said, "Very witty, Dad-oh, witty." Once Chad said something hostile back, Bill forgave

him everything. In one sense, Bill had rather listen to a non-Christian fallen-away Bay Area Buddhist who is man enough to take offense, at least, than to this Father Geoffrey, with his everlasting love for everything and everybody.

Now Chad and Jodi stood at the front, their backs to the grandparents in the first row and all the congregation in the next rows. They wore their eternal blue jeans, with the tops of plastic sandwich bags sticking out of the back pockets. They wore 1960s-style rebozos with earth-tone embroidery and rust-colored sewn-on doves. Their shoulder-length hair was shiny and combed. At least, Bill thought comfortably, very little evil in the world was generated by vegetarians. He saved up that idea to tell Chad if the conversation draggd at dinner.

Early that morning, Bill had taken his coffee happily out into the little back-kitchen screened porch. The wind was down, and the ivy's thousands of little claws held the screens peacefully. Like all true householders, Bill liked being up while others slept. His wide lawn lay shadowed under four elms the city hadn't had to take down yet. The grass showed a pale gleam of dew and looked more beautiful than it really was. Across the avenue, where the large grounds of Benty Chemical started, Bill had ordered a landscaping outfit to put in generous groupings of fine high bushes and hu dreds of perennials. He ordered them plahted on both sides of the fence. Now that it was August, and everything had taken hold, the grounds looked lavender and gentle.

"You can't make a chemical factory look like an Englishman's estate," Lois had told him last week. "But, darling, darn near! Darn near! If only the protesters would wear battered stovepipe hats and black scarves!"

Bill told her that he had heard at a Saint Aidan's Vestry meeting that the protesting or peace-demonstrating community of the Twin Cities definitely regarded Benty Chern as a lot more beautiful place to work around than any one of Honeywell's layouts. "And they should know," Bill added with satisfaction.

At seven-thirty, the usual Sunday contingent of protesters weren't on the job yet. It was generally Sue Ann and Mary, or Sue Ann and Drew, on Sundays. Bill learned their first names automatically, as he learned the first names of new janitorial staff at Benty Chern. Now he gathered himself, got into the car, and was out at Northwest Cargo Recovery on Thirty-fourth Street in good time. He signed for the lobsters. They were moving around a little, safe, greenish black, in their plastic carrying case. "Hi, fellows and girls!" he said good-naturedly to them. He felt the luggage people smiling at him from behind their counter. Bill knew he was more spontaneous and humorous than most people they dealt with. "For my first grandchild's baptism!" he told them.

When he got home, the caterers had come. Lois was fingering along the bookcases, looking for the extra 1928 prayer books. Molly sat, cool in her silk two-piece dress. "I do believe it's threatening rain," she said in her partly southern accent. "Oh, and rain is just so much needed by our farmers." Her "our farmers" sounded false, feudal even, but Bill said, "Darn right, Molly!"

Now he relaxed in church. He flung an arm around the bench end, a little figure carved in shallow relief. Some Episcopalian in Bill's dad's generation had brought six of these carvings from Norfolk. They all cracked during their

first winter of American central heating. Bill and a couple of other vestry men glued the cracks and set vises; then they mortised in hardwood holes against the grain, to make them safe forever. Each bench end was a small monk, with robe, hood, and cinch. The medieval sculptor had made the little monks hold their glossy wooden hands up, nearly touching their noses, in prayer. The faces had no particular expression.

Bill sat more informally than other people in Saint Aidim 's. He had the peaceful slouch of those who are on the inside, the ones who know the workings behind some occasion, like cooks for a feast, or vestry men for a service, or grandfathers for a baptism. Bill had done a lot of work and thinking to make this baptism successful, so now his face was pleasant and relaxed. He was aware of the Oppedahls next to him, the baby's other grandparents, sweating out the Episcopal service that they disliked. He thought they were darn good sports. He leaned across Lois at one point and whispered to Merv Oppedahl that a strong Scotch awaited the stalwart fellow that got through all the Smells and Bells. Merv's face broke into a grin, and he made a thumbs-up with the hand that wasn't holding Doreen's hand.

All summer the wretched farmers' topsoil had been lifting and lifting, then moving into the suburbs, even into St. Paul itself. Grit stuck to people's foreheads and screens, even to the woven metal of their fences. But inside Saint Aidan's, the air was high and cool; the clerestory windows, thank heavens, were not the usual dark and royal blue and dark rose stained glass imitations of continental cathedral windows-full of symbols of lions for Saint Mark and eagles for Saint John, which a whole generation of Episcopalians didn't know

anything about, anyway. Besides, they made churches dark. Saint Aidan's had a good deal of clear glass, and enough gold-stained windows so that all the vaulting looked rather gold and light. It was an oddly watery look. In fact, the church reminded Bill of the insides of the overturned canoe of his childhood. It had been made of varnished ribs and strakes; when the boys turned it over and dove down to come up inside it, madly treading water, they felt transformed by that watery arching. It was a spooky yellow-dark. No matter that at ten their voices must still have been unchanged; they shouted all the rhetoric and "bits of poems they knew. They made everything pontifical. They made dire prophecies. They felt portentous about death, even. Not the sissy, capon death they taught you about at Cass Lake Episcopal Camp, but the death that would get you if a giant pried your fists off the thwarts and shoved you down.

Now Father Geoffrey was done with the godparents. He put his thumb into the palm oil and pressed it onto the baby's forehead. Then he cried in a full voice, "I pronounce you, Molly Oppedahl Benty, safe in our Lord Jesus Christ forever!" Tears made some people's eyes brittle. They all sang "Love divine, all loves excel-l-1-ling ..." using the Hyfrydol tune. Then it was noon, and they could leave.

Everyone tottered across the white, spiky gravel of the parking lot. They called out unnecessary friendly words from car to car: "See you at the Bentys' in five minutes, then!" and "Beautiful service, wasn't it?" "Anyone need a ride? We can certainly take two more!"

The cars full of guests drove companionably across the tacky suburb. People felt happy in different ways, but all of

them felt more blessed than the people they passed. They may have been to a sacrament that they didn't much believe in, but they at least had been to one. Ten years before, all these streets had been shadowy under the elms. Now, though spindly maple saplings stood guyed in their steel-mesh cages, the town showed itself dispirited in its lidless houses that human beings build and live in. The open garages, with here and there a man pottering about, looked more inviting than the houses. The men tinkered in the hot shadow, handling gigantic mowing and spraying equipment parked there. No one could imagine a passion happening in the houses-not even a mild midlife crisis. Not even a hobby, past an assembled kit.

Another reason everyone felt contented was that all their troubles with one another had been worked out the week before. Unbeatable, humane, wise, experienced administrator that he was, Bill explained to Lois, he had done the best possible thing to guarantee them all a great baptism Sunday by having Will and Cheryl (and little Molly) over to dinner the week before. There were always tensions about religious occasions. The tensions are all the worse when most of the _religion is gone while the custom lives on. Each detail of the custom-what's in good taste and what's the way we've always done it before-is a bloodletting issue. Now, there were two things to do about bloodletting issues, Bill told Lois.

"Yes, dear?" she said with a smile.

"If the issues can be solved to anyone's satisfaction, just solve them. But if they can't be solved at all, have the big fight about them a week ahead. Then everybody is siGk of fighting by the time you have the occasion itself."

Lois said, "Makes sense. What can't be solved, though?"

He gave her a look. "Our son and our daughter-in-law are not very happily married. They started a baby two months before they married. And you and I will always just have to hope that it was Will's idea to marry Cheryl and not Merv Oppedahl's idea at the end of a magnum. Next: Cheryl wanted the baby to be named Chereen-a combo of Cheryl, for herself, and Doreen, for her mother. Our son thinks Chereen is a disgusting idea. Next: Cheryl puts a descant onto any hymn we sing, including-if I remember correctly, and I am afraid I will never forget-onto 'Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring' and Beethoven's Ninth, whatever that one is."

"'Ode to Joy,'" Lois said.

"'Ode to Joy,'" Bill said. "Next: The Oppedahls are probably not very happy that their daughter has married someone who did two years at Sandstone Federal Prison for embezzlement. Next: You and I are not happy about Will's marrying Cheryl. She is tasteless. He is mean to her. Are you with me so far? Then next is the choice of godparents. Good grief! It is nice that Will wants to honor his first cousin once removed Molly Wells by asking her to stand godparent, but she hasn't gone to church in thirty years. And Cheryl wanted a young couple, not an old second cousin, for her baby's sponsors. It is obvious Will chose Molly because she gave them seventeen thousand dollars by way of a nest egg. Very handsome thing to do. *Very* handsome, considering Will's record."

Lois said, "Oh, dear, must you?"

"All these things are on people's minds. It's best to have it all out ahead of time. Just because a rich relation gives someone money is not a reason for having her stand godmother-

especially when the baby's mother obviously doesn't want her. Next: The Oppedahls aren't going to be comfortable with the Episcopal church service, but they'd be a sight *more* comfortable if we used the modern language of 1979-but the baby's grandmother on the other side wants 1928."

Lois said, "Oh, dear. I thought I was going to come out of this clean."

Bill laughed, "No one comes out of a family fight clean. Next: Mrs. Oppedahl is a horrible cold fish who doesn't like anybody. She doesn't even like her own daughter very well. In fact-poor Cheryl! Do you know what she told me? She told me the first time she ever felt popular, as she put it, was at Lutheran Bible camp, when all the girls discovered she could harmonize to the hymns. Suddenly it made her part of the group. When they all got back from camp, the girls talked about her as if she were someone who counted, and the boys picked up on it. She was OK in high school after that. She told me that just that one Lutheran Bible camp gave her more nourishment-her word-than she'd ever got from her parents."

"You're a wonder, dear," Lois said. "What about the other godparents?"

"The holistic birdseed-eaters? They know perfectly well that the only reason Will chose them was to override any chance of Cheryl's having some couple *she'd* choose. They know that I think their knee-jerk Gaia stuff is silly, and they will feel awkward about the service. I don't know what to do about them."

Lois said, "We will have lobsters. That's not meat! Then they won't bring their plastic bags of whatever."

"Boiled live lobster. Great idea. They will eat it or I will shove it down their throats," Bill said. "I will offend Doreen Oppedahl by offering Merv a strong drink. It'll buck him up, and she's hopeless, anyway."

"Have we thought of everything?" Lois said.

Bill turned serious a moment. "I am going to tell Will he can't speak cruelly to his wife in my house."

Lois said, "Well, poor Will! Do you remember how when we were all somewhere at someone's house, suddenly there was Cheryl telling everyone how she and Will met because they were both at the microfiche in the public library together and they both felt sick from the fiche?"

"Nothing wrong with that," Bill said. "Microfiche does make people feel like throwing up."

"But she went on and on about how nausea had brought them together!"

Bill said, "I remember. Will told her to shut up, too, right in front of everyone."

The week before the baptism, therefore, Will and Cheryl and little Molly joined Bill, Lois, and their cousin Molly Wells for dinner. They aired grievances, just as Bill had planned. Then he glanced out the window and said to his son, "Come on out and help me with the protesters, Will."

Everyone looked out. The usual Sunday protesters had been on the opposite sidewalk, near the plant fence. They looked flagged from the heat, but determined. Bill saw it was Sue Ann and Polly this time. They had their signs turned so they could be read from the Benty house. IT IS HARD TO BE PROUD OF CHEMICAL WARFARE was the message for that

Sunday. Now the two young people had moved to this side of the avenue, doing the westward reach of their loop on the publjc sidewalk but taking the eastward reach on Bill and Lois's lawn.

"Not on my grass they don't," Bill said, smiling equably at the others. "We'll be right back."

Father and son went to the lawn edge and stood side by side, waiting for the protesters to come up abreast of where they were. The women, in the house, could see their backs but couldn't hear what was said. Presently they realized nothing violent seemed likely. They made out the protesters smiling, and Bill turned slightly, apparently calling a parting shot of some civil kind to them. The protesters moved back over to the Benty Chemical side of the street, and Will and Bill came across the lawn toward the house.

Bill had used that time to speak to his son. "I can't stop you from treating your wife rudely in your own home. But in mine, Will, don't you ever swear at her again. And don't tell her to shut up. And stop saying 'For Christ's sake, Cheryl.'"

"Dad-my life is going to be some kind of hell."

"I bet it might," Bill said in a speculative tone. "It well might." Just then the sign-bearers came up to them. One said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Benty," to Bill. The other of them said in a very pleasant tone, "There must be some other way human beings can make money besides on contracts for spreading nerve diseases that cause victims five or six hours of agony," and they made to pass on.

"Off the lawn, friends," Bill said levelly. "Sidewalk's public, lawn's private."

"Agony is another word for torture," the first protester said, but they immediately crossed the street.

As Bill and Will came back to the house, Bill said in a low voice, "Go for the pleasant moments, son. Whenever you can."

All the difficult conversations took place that could take place: all the permanent grievances-Will's and Cheryl's unhappiness-were hinted at. People felt that they had expressed themselves a little. By the end of the day, they felt gritty and exhausted.

A blessed week passed, and now the baptism party was going off well. The caterers had come, with their white Styrofoam trays. They set out sauces and laid the champagne crooked into its pails of ice. They dropped the lobsters into boiling water. There was lemon mayonnaise and drawn butter, a platter of dark-meat turkey-damper, better than white meat, Lois Benty and the caterers agreed. It is true that as she made her way around the Bentys' dining-room table, loading her plate, Doreen Oppedahl whispered to her husband, "It'd never occur to me, I can tell you, to serve dark meat on a company occasion," and Merv whispered back, "No, it never *would* occur to you!" but his tone wasn't malicious. He had spotted the Scotch on the sideboard. That Bill Benty might be pompous, but at least he was as good as his word, and Merv wasn't going to be stuck with that dumb champagne, which tasted like 7-Up with aspirin. An oblong of pinewood lay piled with ham so thin it wrinkled in waves. The caterers had set parsley here and there, and sprayed mist over everything; they set one tiny chip of ice on each butter pat. "Those caterers just left that chutney preserve that Mrs. Wells broug}J.t right in its mason jar," Doreen whispered to Merv.

He smiled and whispered, "Shut up, Doreen." She whispered back, "If you get drunk at this party, I will never forgive you."

When all the relations and friends had gathered into the living room, Bill Benty tinkled a glass and asked them to drink to his grandchild. After that, people glanced about, weighing places to sit.

Then the one thing that neither host nor hostess had foreseen happened: no one sat in the little groupings Lois had arranged. Nor did people pull up chairs to what free space there was at the dining-room table. They gravitated to the messy screened porch off the kitchen. The caterers obligingly swept away all their trays and used foil. People dragged out dining-room chairs; other people camped on the old wooden chairs already out there.

The morning's breeze had held. Some of it worked through the gritty screens. People relaxed and felt cheerful. They kept passing the baby about, not letting any one relation get to hold her for too long. Father Geoffrey kept boring people by remarking that it was the most pleasant baptism he could remember. Suddenly Lois Benty pointed across at Chad's and Jodi's plates. "Don't *tell* me you two aren't eating the lobster!" she screamed. "Lobster is not meat, you know!"

Both Chad and Jodi gave the smile that experienced vegetarians keep ready for arrogant carnivores. "Well, you see," Jodi said with mock shyness, "we asked the caterers-you see, we did ask. The lobsters weren't stunned first!"

Father Geoffrey said pleasantly, "And delicious they are, too. I've never tasted better."

Jodi said, "They were dropped in alive, you see.... So it's a question oftheir agony." Then Jodi said in a hurried, louder voice, "Mrs. Benty, please don't worry about us! We always bring our own food, so we're all set." She reached into her back jeans pocket and brought out two plastic bags of couscous and sunflower seeds. "We are more than OK," she said.

Lois asked people if she could bring them another touch of this or that-the ham, at least? she said, smiling at Mrs. Oppedahl.

"Oh, no!" cried Mrs. Oppedahl. "I've eaten so much! I'd getfat!"

By now Merv had had three quick, life-restoring glasses of Scotch. For once he felt as urbane and witty as Bill Benty, even if he wasn't the boss of a chemical industry.

"Fat!" he shouted. "Afraid you'll get fat! Don't worry! I like a woman fat enough so I can find her in bed!"

He looked around with bright eyes-but there was a pause. Then Bill Benty said in a hearty tone, "Oh, *good* man, Oppedahl! *Good* man!"

Quickly, the baby's second cousin said to Jodi Plathe, "Those little bags look so interesting! Could you explain what's in them? Is that something we should all be eating?"

Bill said, "Go ahead, Jodi. Convert her. That's what I call a challenge. If you can get Molly Wells to set down that plate of lobster and eat bulgur wheat instead, you've got something there, Jodi!"

Jodi gave him a look and then said, "No, you tell *me* something, Ms. Wells. I was wondering, why were you crying at the baptism this morning? Somebody said you never went to church at all, and yet ... I was just wondering."

"Oh," Lois Benty said, getting set to dilute any argument, "I bet you mean during the chrism."

Molly Wells happened to be holding the baby at that moment. Above its dreaming face, hers looked especially tired and conscious. "My dear," she said, "that is a long story. I just know you don't want to hear it."

"Let's have the story, lady," Mr. Oppedahl said. "My wife is always so afraid that I'll tell a story-but the way I look at it is, people like a story. You can always ask 'em, do they mind a little story? And if they don't say no, the way I lo.ok at it is, it's OK to tell it. So go right ahead. Or I could tell one, if you're too shy."

"Never mind!" cried Bill. "Out with it, Molly!"

Father Geoffrey said gently, "I know I for one would surely like to hear it!"

Molly Wells said, "I have to confess I was mostly daydreaming along through the service, thinking of one thing and another. I never liked church. Unlike Bill here-Bill's my first cousin, you might not know-I was raised in the country, and my dream-my one and my *only* dream-was to get out of the country and marry a prince and live happily ever after.

"The only way I could think to escape at seventeen was to go to Bible camp. So I went-and there, by my great good luck, I met another would-be escaper, Jamie Wells. We cut all the outdoors classes and then used those same places where the classes met to sit and walk together when no one was there. We met in the canoe shed. We sat on the dock near the bin of blue and white hats, depending on how well you swam. We met in the chapel, even, during off times. Wherever we were, we were in love all the time. I recall Jamie said to me, 'There is nothing inside me that wants to go back to the old life, Molly. Is there anything inside you that wants to go back

to the old life?' There wasn't, so we ran away. Away meant to stay with his parents and sister, who were at a resort in the Blue Ridge Mountains that summer. We told them we wanted to be married, and they were kind to us. We married, and we lived in love for thirty years.

"It was so pleasant-in the little ways as well as the big ones. Jamie found a hilltop that looked over the valley and across to two mountains-Pisgah and The Rat. He told the workmen how to cut down the laurels and dogwoods and just enough of the armored pine so that you couldn't see the mill down in the valley but you had a clear view to the mountains. We spent hours, hours every day, sitting on our stone terrace. We even had Amos and George bring breakfast out there. I remember best sitting out there in March, when the woods were unleafed except for the horizontal boughs of dogwood everywhere! They looked so unlikely, so vulnerable, out there among all that mountain scrub! The ravines were full of red clay, and the sound of the hounds baying and baying, worrying some rabbit all the time. I remember how we always made a point of taking walks in late afternoon, and I would never stop feeling dazzled by the shards of mica everywhere. And Jamie did have the most wonderful way of putting things. He said mica was bits left over from the first world, back when it was made of pure crystal, when it was made of unbroken love, before God made it over again with clay and trees, ravines, and dogs. I recall when he said that kind of thing my heart used to grow and grow.

"Nothing interrupted us. Now, Jamie's sister, Harriet Jean, always wanted me to do social work for her, but she forgave me when she saw I wasn't going to do it. I expect she

understood right off from the very first that I loved her brother, and all a maiden lady really wants from a sister-in-law is that she should really love her brother.. We three got along very well. One day, on Amos and George's day off, we had a copperhead on the terrace. Harriet Jean was over there in a flash, and she shot its head right off with her twenty-gauge. She was so good about it too: I remember she told us very clearly, 'I ant you and Jamie to just turn your back now,' and she swept up its head and slung its body over the dustpan handle and carried it off somewhere. She had a good many projects with the black people, and she would have liked me to help her with those ... but after a while she said to me, 'Molly, I see that you have your hands full with that man, and I mean to stop pestering at you,' and she was as good as her word. Different occasions came and went-the Vietnam War, I certainly remember that clear as clear. It was in the paper, and when Amos and George came out with the breakfast trays and brought that paper, Jamie said, 'There is a time when a country is in a kind of death agony, the way a person could be,' and I felt a burst of love for him then, too. No one in my family could ever observe and think that clearly."

At this point, Mr. Oppedahl said in a loud but respectful voice, "I didn't just get what you said he did for a living." ·

Molly Wells said, "Oh, that. He had a private income-that whole family did. Of course, he had an office he had to keep to tend his interests with-but it was private income." She shifted the baby, and seemed to rearrange herself a little as she said that. It didn't invite further comment.

She took up her story. "Everything went along all those

years, except of course we just wept uncontrollably when George died, and Amos never was so springy serving us after that.

"Then one day we found out that Jamie had inoperable cancer of the lung."

There was a little pause after she said that. They could all hear the footsteps of people on the sidewalk, outside. The wind had cooled·a little.

"They wanted to do radiation on Jamie, because there were some lung cancer cells in his brain. Well, so we had the radiation treatment. I drove Jamie all the way to Asheville for that, twice a week. It was a very hard time for us: he was often sick. When he wasn't actually sick, he felt sick.

"They managed to kill those lung cells in his brain, and gradually, after many months, he died, but not of brain cancer.

"Well, now," the middle-aged woman said. "Three occasions all came to mind during that baptism service for this beautiful little girl this morning. First, after I had been married not two months, I noticed, the way you gradually get around to noticing everything there is about a man, that the flesh in his upper arm was a little soft, just below the shoulder bulge. I could have expected that, since Jamie just wasn't interested in sports at all and he didn't do any physical work. But still I remember thinking: That bit of softness there will get a little softer all the time, and after twenty years or so it might be very soft and loose from the muscle, the way the upper part of old men's arms are-which kills a woman's feeling just at the moment she notices it. Right away, of course, if it is someone dear to you, you forgive them for that soft upper arm there, for not being young and handsome

forever, but still the image of it goes in, and you feel your heart shrink a little. You realize the man will not live forever. Then you love him even better in the next moment, because ·now-for the first time-you pity him. At least, I felt pity.

"The second occasion was when he was sick having all that radiation. He vomited on our living-room floor. It was Sunday evening. We always let Amos go home to his own folks on Sundays, so the ::_e wasn't anyone to clean that up-but Harriet Jean was there, and she offered to. Suddenly I remember almost snarling at her-I just bayed at her like a dog. I told her to keep out of it. I would clean up my own husband's mess. Of course she was surprised. She couldn't have been more surprised than I was, though. That night in bed, I went over it carefully, and I realized that the only physical life I had left with Jamie was taking care of him, so his vomit was part of my physical life with him. Not lovely-but there it was.

"The last occasion was about a half hour after his death. The hospital people told me I had to leave the room, and I remember I refused. Finally they said I could stay another ten minutes and that was all. Now, you all may know or you may not know that they have their reasons for taking people away from dead bodies. I laid my forehead down on the edge of the bed near Jamie's hip-and then I heard a slight rustling. My mind filled with horror. I lifted my head and looked up to see a slight change in his hand. It had been lying there; now the fist-just the tiniest bit, but I wasn't mistaken-was closing a little. When a person looks back coolly from a distance on a thing like that, you know it is the muscles shrinking or contracting or whatever they do when life has left. To me,

though, it was Jamie making the very first move I had ever seen him make, in all my life with him, which I had nothing to do with. He was taking hold of something there-thin air, maybe-but taking hold of it by himself. Now I knew what death was. I stood up and left.

"This morning, in church, I was daydreaming about him again. It's a thing I do. I was not going to mention it to any of you.

"I told you about this because I was so surprised to find how my life was not simple at all: it was all tied up in the flesh, this or that about the flesh. And how is flesh ever safe? So when you took that palm oil," she finished, glancing across at Father Geoffrey, "and pronounced little Molly here safe-*saje!-in* our Lord Jesus Christ forever.... Well, I simply began to cry!"

She sat still a moment and then with her conversational smile looked across at the younger godmother. "Well, you asked the question, and now I have answered you."

In the normal course of things, such a speech would simply bring a family celebration to an absolute stop. People would sit frozen, still as crystal for a moment, and then one or another would say, in a forced, light-toned way, "My word, but it's getting late.... Dear, we really must ..."and so forth. But the Benty family were lucky. A simple thing happened: it began to rain finally, the rain people had been wanting all summer. The rain fell quite swiftly right from the first. It rattled the ivy, and then they could even hear it slamming down on the sidewalks. Footsteps across the avenue picked up and began to run.

They all noticed that odd property of rain: if it has been

very dry, the first shower drives the dust upward, so that for a second your nostrils fill with dust.

Then the rain continued so strongly it cleaned the ajr and made the whole family and their friends feel quiet and tolerant. They felt the classic old refreshm nt we always hope for in water.

An Apprentice

I cross most of St. Paul to take my violin lessons. Then I drive slowly around Georgia's half block, along Hemlock Avenue, and through the north-south alley. I locate the regulars. They are of two kinds-the four men who generally are on their feet, laughing, shouting, dealing, waiting for the Hemlock Bar to open at six; and the three men who sprawl, elbows propped, right on the four low steps leading from the sidewalk up the low slant of Georgia's lawn. These three are more languid than the crack pushers: they lie at ease and blow their smoke straight up, pursing their lips at the sky.

For my first two lessons, I gave those men the stairs: I climbed up the grass slant, keeping a good ten yards between them and me. But by the time I was learning the third position and could do "Go Down, Moses," with harmonics on the G string, I thought, If Georgia Persons doesn't give way to these guys, neither will I.

So I make myself pick a way between them up the concrete stairs. They never move an inch, but they always stop