

An Untold Episode of The Donna Reed Show



Merthiolate Memoirs

Donna breathed a lengthy sigh. The February weekend from Hades (not hell, heck, Donna would never even think that word) was very nearly over! It had been an episode that had really tapped her resourcefulness more than any she could remember.

The previous Thursday afternoon she'd been feeling kind of low, even depressed, and, well that just wouldn't do for former Iowan Donna Stone, so she drove downtown to her husband Alex's office. Alex was one of Hilldale's finest physicians, and he'd given her a large vial of a new, experimental, mood modifying drug that he had just been sent to test out by the federal government. It didn't have the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval yet, but the government guaranteed its safety for all adults. You put several drops of it in your coffee, or any beverage, at least three times a day, and it was supposed to eliminate your troubles, or at the very least make you forget about them. "Some sort of acidulous compound," Alex had said, knowledgeably, "and recently invented." He magnanimously promised not to charge Donna's household allowance for the drug, and sent her home to rest for the remainder of the afternoon.

Safe or not, it seemed to have dramatic side effects for Donna. She wasn't sure if she liked it, and was considering going back to old, reliable Bayer, which would help the headaches and blues go away if anything would. Maybe she'd keep trying the new, miracle drug a few more days, just in deference to Alex's expertise, but life had become rather strange since she first started on it.

She had waited to take the initial dose of the stuff until Friday morning at four-thirty with her first Maxwell House of the day; it had seemed innocuous and tasteless enough. She'd downed it and gone about her business—sweeping, baking cookies, dusting, and accomplishing everything she normally would on an early Friday at 5 AM, the last daybreak before the busy week-end with the family. She was done with the inaugural round of chores before six-fifteen, got breakfast started and the bag lunches ready for the kids, and had nearly been able to forget the earlier, unfortunate run-in with the living dirt.

While she had been vacuuming, she had literally been attacked and bitten on the left ankle by two dust bunnies that lurched out at her from their hideout and nest under the living room couch. They surprised her and grabbed her foot before she'd even seen them coming. Though the wounds were insignificant, she washed them thoroughly with soap and water and put tincture of merthiolate on them.

This attack had seemed odd at the time, but Donna didn't think much else of it after the vermin were sucked up, or was it down, or probably both up and down, into the vacuum bag of her trusty Electrolux. They went spiraling through the intake tube, squealing more loudly than most dust bunnies do when they get their deserved comeuppance. The whole four minutes and seven seconds they continued screaming, she amused herself picturing them disintegrating so nicely into luckless household compost; reluctantly they were integrated into the whirl of benign debris deep in her Sing-Sing of a sweeper.

Donna was quite sure they were quite dead, and would never attack anyone in her house again, despite the fact she could still hear their ghosts screaming now, even though it was Monday morning. Or was it Tuesday? Or were those the screams of the neighbors, the Turnbells, across the street, whose house she'd just set on fire? She wasn't sure. It didn't matter.

After the Friday morning domestic chores waned, she sat down to rest and picked up the old photo album she'd uncovered in the attic the preceding week while cleaning it out for the first time in two months, which was three weeks longer than it had been since she'd previously cleaned the attic in early October, which had then been the most recent occasion she had cleaned it since mid-August, when the kids were away at Camp This and Camp That and the dust bunnies had been really thick up there.

But back in August they'd been quiet, passive, summer dust bunnies, probably suffering from heat exhaustion on a broiling summer day, or else they were slowed by the worry it might rain, preventing their evil scurrying around with the inevitable Hilldale summer breezes. Rain would certainly have made it too humid for their pitiful existence, and would probably have turned them into easily removable clumps of zombie mud!

Someday she'd get shag wall-to-wall for the attic, which would repel or at least slow down and trap those dirty rabbits, but new carpeting way up the stairs was presently not in the Stones' budget, even though the TV network had lately been paying the family handsome bonuses for the weekly episodes. The Stones' lives' ratings across America were up six Nielsen points already in this glorious 1964 year, and it was rumored their show was one of new President Johnson's favorites!

The TV show certainly provided the family with a convenient sum of extra cash to supplement Alex's very successful medical practice. There'd be no problem paying for Mary's—or Jeff's—future educational needs, though Donna often worried that Jeff would never even grow up to go to college if he didn't quit getting into so much boy trouble. Just last Monday Donna called her friend Harriet Nelson and lamented, "Wait till you see Thursday's episode with Jeff sporting a black eye he brought home from school. The whole family was embarrassed the entire time we were taping! It was so un-Stonelike. The makeup gurus over at ABC couldn't even hide it! Poor Mary almost forgot her lines, she was so dismayed by her brother's appearance!" Compatriot ex-Iowan Harriet consoled Donna by saying it had to be easier having at least one daughter rather than the two sons and their misadventures she and Ozzie had to cope with week after week! Donna agreed her friend was probably right, then read Harriet her new Jell-O recipe. Harriet needed to go shopping before the grocery store closed, so the phone call ended.

The photo album from the attic tightly Donna's grasp was an anthology of her early childhood back in Iowa. Donna couldn't remember there being so many dust bunnies back home, but her mother had probably dispatched them before the family woke up every morning, just as she did to hide them from the kids and Alex today. As Donna opened the album to reveal its pictorial treasures, she noticed the arteries in her hands seemed to be an unusually vivid color of blue. She figured this was probably just an illusion caused by the weird winter angle of early morning Hilldale sunlight filtering in through the drapes on the

picture window. Glancing at the dining room table by that window, Donna noticed it seemed more angular and a deeper hue of stained red mahogany than usual, too. She looked carefully at her hand several more times, surely hoping she wasn't getting some general infection from those dust bunny bites on her foot! She contemplated asking Alex, after he got up of course, if she should go downtown to the office later in the day and have him give her a shot or a prescription for some antibiotics, just in case, but then she decided just to watch her hand carefully throughout the day for any further symptoms or complications.

Ah, the photo album contained a picture of her weathered mother! What wrinkles women suffered back then! Donna noticed her mother was definitely smirking at her from the safety of the photograph, and she found this temporarily disconcerting, but just until she spied a newborn dust bunny, peeking out at her from underneath the television set on the other side of the living room. "I wonder if June Cleaver has all these household battles?" she thought to herself, thinking about her fellow housewife friend she frequently called over in Mayfield. June was also an ABC mom, so she and Donna visited often, but



The Cleavers
*Wally and Beaver in the back; June
and Ward in the front*

Kathy Williams, Danny's wife, an old friend who was also a TV wife and mother, was someone Donna would never dare call to ask about dust bunnies or her two growing children, Rusty and Linda. She could only clandestinely visit with Kathy these days because the Williams family existed on another, competing network, and the Stones' executive producer strongly discouraged the family from openly having any Brand X friends.

The photo of Donna's smirking mother suddenly became animated and began to speak to her. "Donna, don't the bees seem nice today?"

Donna was caught by surprise, for she couldn't remember ever having seen a talking picture before, and the eeriness was compounded by the fact her mother had been dead and completely silent for nearly twenty years. Mother had perished, crushed to death beneath a raging mob of angry sports fans, an innocent victim of the Clear Lake/What Cheer riots following the final game of the girls' state basketball tournament in Des Moines back in 1945. There was plenty of seething controversy, even in 1964, as to which of those two schools actually won the finals that concluding year of the World War. The irony for Donna's family was that her mother, an ardent Denison fan, was essentially a disinterested spectator at the finale, not particularly rooting for either of the Sharkette or Dodgerette squads involved in the infamous cliffhanger.

Donna retrieved her composure. "Mother! You're only a photograph! How can you be talking to me like that?"

"The bees, Donna."

Donna felt slighted and all but irritated, because her mother had just ignored her question and continued on her own train of thought. Donna hated having any of her questions left unanswered, but she would never display her annoyance. Such a reaction was against her personal code of ethics, except in rare or unusual circumstances. Usually she would exhibit a bit of annoyance whenever her son, Jeff, was acting like a prepubescent young barbarian. She might also act it out on camera whenever maternal irritation was called for in the weekly network script, which sporadically would need the dramatic effect such exasperation added to the plot. It was often very hard being an actress and a housewife while still trying to keep faith with one's own private principles.

But it was a wonderful life, anyway. And if it was a wonderful life, Donna wondered, why had she been feeling so depressed lately? Maybe her mother could help her with that.

Donna peered down at the picture. "Mother! What bees? How can you be talking to me when you're only a photograph?" Donna tried a flabbergasted tone on her mother this time, hoping for an answer to her query. Neither feeling nor exhibiting astonishment was against Donna's personal code, and her mother knew that, darn it.

A taunting retort came back this time. "Mother! Mother!" mocked the old lady. No, wait. Time out! It wasn't Mother mocking Donna, but rather teenage daughter Mary Stone, who'd awakened, got herself out of bed, put on her pink slippers with white pompoms on the tops, slipped into her rose robe, come downstairs unannounced and perched her schoolgirl self in the kitchen.

Donna had washed Mary's nice new robe just last Tuesday with Fab, and boy was she was glad they'd put real Borax inside the powder! The housecoat could have survived without the Borax, but if Fab hadn't been new and improved, she most likely would have lost the uglier battle in the same load with the terminal grass stains Jeff had attracted to the knees of his new trousers.

Now Donna's daughter, porting her unsoiled robe, was calling out to her mother from the female sanctum of the kitchen, the only room in the entire Stone household that strongly radiated the contrasting, nurturing aromas of newly born chocolate chip cookies and Comet cleanser.

Donna was glad Mary headed into the kitchen first thing most mornings. It was good training for her future career as a homemaker and mother. Someday soon they would have to have a discussion about the facts of a housewife's life, including what to do about vermin like dust bunnies, but it would have to be later. Donna would have to prepare herself better for that somewhat embarrassing conference. Today Mary sounded distressed. "Mother, I have something to talk to you about. Can you please come in here?" she asked.

Perhaps Mary was having trouble learning her lines for the TV show again, although Donna couldn't remember Jeff getting into any school yard brawls the past week. His eye had cleared up enough since the previous evening's broadcast which had been taped much earlier in the week. Mary shouldn't have to continue to suffer the amplified dismay of teenage embarrassment about Jeff's eye. Not now. Generally Mary was on an even keel, and very mature for her age. What could she want, anyway?

“I’ll be there in a minute,” Donna called out, pausing a second to look at the state of health of her hands before adding, “There’s plenty of milk in the refrigerator for your cereal, dear.” Donna had already put the children’s Wheaties in their bowls, but wouldn’t have considered putting milk on the cereal or cooking the rest of breakfast before the children and Alex got up. Soggy grains and cold eggs were definite Donna no-nos.

“Are you having trouble with your lines for the show?” Donna asked, not really relishing an early morning acting lesson, but ready for it if it became necessary. Donna would do whatever was necessary to keep the family proper and their Nielsen ratings high! Besides, Mary’s role was quite small this upcoming week, so there couldn’t be too much of a problem.

Most weeks Donna made sure Mary’s and Jeff’s parts remained small. That’s why the children were listed third and fourth in the credits behind Donna and Alex, who obviously had more important roles in the running of day-to-day family life. One wouldn’t want one’s children to think they were more important than their parents. It could disrupt all the family’s values!

“It’s not my lines, Mother,” echoed Mary’s voice through the downstairs of the house.

Donna turned her attention back to the photo album. “Good-bye, Mother,” she said to the picture of her wrinkled mother, “I have to go right now.” Donna started to close the book, but wasn’t able to finish before her mother repeated, “Nice bees, nice bees, nice bees!” three times, which added up to nine more occasions she’d mentioned the mystery insects. Donna finally succeeded in shutting out her mother, a highly symbolic action at that particular moment when her very own daughter was calling for her assistance. Then she set the priceless old photos down carefully on the end table by the couch, and started for the kitchen. At the foot of the stairs, however, Jeff came bobbling down from his room and nearly ran right into his unwary mother.

Crises Mar the Stones' Grains and Cholesterol

“Jeff, you’ve got to learn not to run down the stairs like a bat from...!” Donna nearly slipped and said that bad word she could never even think, but she stopped when she heard the two dead dust bunnies from the morning screaming at her from their grave in the hall closet where the vacuum was now neatly put away. She relaxed. Everything in the house was in order, and Donna uncharacteristically wondered how Jeff might scream if she vacuumed him up, or if he would even fit in the vacuum bag, which, though large, was probably too small for his growing, hardening body. Her Electrolux was a canister style sweeper, suitably strong enough to immaculately maintain the two floors, the attic, and even the basement and two car garage of the Stone household, but she doubted if it could cope with a son the size of Jeff.



The Stone Family Gets Further Exposure

A well-stocked refrigerator is an important part of any happy homemaker's life.

“Mother, it’s not milk I want, either!” said Mary. “I just need to talk to you.” Donna followed Jeff into the kitchen, and Mary consigned an instantaneous glare of displeasure toward her brother, who was either too busy or too immune to notice. He’d quickly hit the icebox, nabbed the milk Mary had rejected from the refrigerator, and promptly managed to spill it all over his cereal and onto the kitchen table. Donna wiped up the deviant puddle. She remembered when Mary had been a baby how she’d always demanded her milk, although back then most bovine milk had been heavily contaminated with the miracle chemical DDT, now considered a somewhat dubious compound. In the earlier days of the

forties and fifties, DDT had promised the realm better living through its chemistry as its spray slaughtered off hordes of insect enemies going for the country's harvests, flocks of innocent birds going for the country's insects, and schools of the country's fish only trying to make an honest living in the country's watery jungles. By 1964, traces of the chemical lay dormant in all living, American tissue—from Kleenex up the food chain to inedible human flesh.

Donna remained optimistic, despite the ban on the chemical, and thought to herself, "There will always be more food than the American Republic knows how to ingest, even if Mary doesn't want to drink her milk, and even if we don't have the miracle protection of DDT. They'll find something else to replace it, anyway. Some sort of substitute must be right around the corner." Donna was from Iowa and had an optimistic state of mind.

Crunch. Crunch, slurp. Crunch, crunch-crunch. Apparently starving to death after eleven nighttime hours without food, Jeff was downing his Wheaties like a bat from the wrong side of The Underground River. Mary had become silent and evidently didn't want to talk to her mother anymore. She, too, had sat down at the table, moping a tad, and had begun testing several spoonfuls of her milk-free, dry Wheaties.

Then Alex breezed in, just as Donna was cracking open some eggs and dropping their sticky protein into the frying pan on the gas stove. He came over and gave her a peck on the cheek. Donna smiled. She always smiled when Alex pecked her on the cheek and frowned whenever he forgot the ritual. But even when he might neglect her, it would be only a temporary oversight, and he would make it a special point to return to peck her cheek and make her smile again. This was so reassuring and necessary. Otherwise Donna's frown might turn into annoyance, which, in good faith, she couldn't show, and she'd have to hide her feelings. And today Donna was already hiding her depression. The eggs began to sizzle and they turned a bright, gay white where their perimeters swam in the blistering pond of grease in the well-seasoned pan.

Momentarily elevated to new, morning heights, her nagging depression temporarily forgotten, Donna swirled in a world of pecked-on-the-cheek bliss as the last egg of the first batch plummeted into the lubricated skillet. It splattered and its edges bubbled up slightly in dismay as it struck the fiery bacon drippings. The disoriented egg looked up at Donna just as Alex, patriarch and cheek-pecker, found his chair and sat down at the table. It was at that moment Donna discerned that this particular egg had definitely begun to turn into a little chicken before it was collected and sold, for it had already formed a distinct eyeball and a tiny beak. The beak was expanding, growing larger and larger every second since its initial exposure to the clean Hilldale air. Soon the embryonic chicken beak began to talk to Donna, philosophizing about politics, growing up in a shell, and how it felt to be prematurely born on a Friday morning. She laughed to herself; this stupid egg didn't realize, just yet, it was on popping hot grease, sure to do it in!

"Jeff, I want you to come home directly after school tonight," said Alex, his eyes larger and sterner than when he was in high gear for Donna cheek-pecking.

A nicely brown round of four slices of Wonder toast popped up just south of the frying pan. Donna went to the refrigerator and pulled out the family bread spread, the taste of which usually fooled even Mother Nature into thinking it was a milk product, which it wasn't. But Madame Nature, who hated being duped, was unable to make a guest appearance in the kitchen to show Her displeasure. Her visa had expired. She had been exiled from the town of Hilldale, and pushed out into the countryside near the city. There was no chance She'd come complaining to the Stones! Donna passed the toast out to the family and set the cold and very hard oleomargarine down on the table, leaving the family on their own to individually attempt the spreading of chilled pats of tasty vegetable oil coagulants over the crispy slices of until recently very white bread.

"No ifs, ands, or buts!" continued Alex, poking a small hole through his nutritionally raped Wonder toast with his table knife and the uncooperative margarine.

Suddenly aware of its surroundings, the little chicken in the frying pan screamed, "Oh no!" Then it looked up at Donna in dismay and begged, "Don't cook me, don't eat me, please! I don't want to die!" Donna observed it had assumed a definite, strong, chicken accent, probably Rhode Island Red, since it had become so excited.

"Ah gosh," moaned Jeff, brandishing unbearable anguish in his eyes, "I never get to have any fun. I wanted to go over to Mike's house after school." Mike was the lone child of the neighbors Turnbull who lived across the street. Donna felt Jeff spent entirely too much time over there.

"Jeff, I remember when I was your age, and what it feels like to be that age, always full of energy and the like, but you come home immediately tonight or else!" said Alex, mixing his mid life crisis of nostalgia with a definite, fatherly, threatening tone. "It's time you learned to act responsibly." Alex wanted only the best for his children, and he hoped Jeff wouldn't have to fight yet another, final world war just to protect his own particular American Dream.

The chicken (or was it the egg?) was frying fast, and Donna presently heard it screaming more than clucking, crowing, philosophizing, or complaining. "Good," she thought. "It will never be an old maid hen now!" Hen chickens couldn't hope to grow up and marry doctor roosters, and besides, that whole race of edible fowls wasn't monogamous. Donna had learned that back on the farm in Iowa. Conceivably it might have been a baby rooster cooking in her pan, but that thought didn't cross her mind, nor the fact a baby rooster wouldn't have the option to grow up and marry a housewife hen.

Donna suddenly realized serving these eggs with chicken eyes and little beaks in them could start an unnecessary controversy at the breakfast table, so she came up with a sly alternative to her earlier plans. "I think I'll scramble the eggs today," she said, hoping the rest of the family would opt to listen to her rather than the last, melancholy gasps of the baby chicken. sounds better than sunny side up for a grayish, February, Friday morning!"

The entire family got excited. Scrambled was a hit. Donna grabbed her best whisk.

Of course Donna's real motive wasn't to make breakfast a memorable treat, but to hide the confounded embryo in a homogenized mass so the children wouldn't have to think about any dead baby chickens they were eating. Scrambling the eggs was the perfect solution for burying the gruesome evidence. She'd make sure Jeff got the first eggs out of the pan. He rarely noticed the subtleties of his food, anyway, and he'd most likely even eat the kitchen sink if she put sugar on it and set it on his plate. Donna began frantically attacking yolk and white because it would soon be too late to turn the eggs into a believable muddle. She smiled and got her first A+ of the day for her homemaking skills, a gold star for so quickly sizing up a potentially hazardous situation and coming up with the perfect solution—one that would happily maintain the family structure with peaceful social harmony throughout the morning meal.

"You've been getting home too late too many nights this week," Alex complained to Jeff, "and you're never going to learn your six lines for this week's show." Alex knew that even a small number of lines could tax his son, so he would have to be strict. In real life Alex could be much more the disciplinarian than he usually had to be on the TV series with its sanitized scripts and happy endings.

"Ah, gosh, OK," grieved Jeff, defeated as usual by the household's male authority figure. "That shouldn't take too long, anyway, because I already know the first three..."

"Mother, I'll just have to talk to you later," interrupted Mary, "I'd rather it would be in private, when everybody and especially this thug of a black eyed brother of mine isn't creepy crawling around. Oh, no offense, Father," she added rather coyly, as teenage daughters always talked to their fathers in 1964. She obviously didn't want Alex privy to the conversation either, but she certainly didn't consider Father a creepy crawler thug.

"What's up? More boyfriend troubles, sis?" queried Jeff, revitalized by the chance to ridicule Mary as he teased her with sensitive boyfriend subject matter.

Mary started to fume. "Shut up, wormhead!" she spouted. "Go crawl in your creepy crawler hole and eat dirt!"

In deference to the wormhead, Jeff had reached that in between age when his hormones had begun to seep, but he was still emotionally too clumsy to cope with the ongoing changes. As a result he ended up anxious, frustrated, and would often spout out a lot of sarcastic comments or jokes about older kids' boyfriends or girlfriends. He still didn't understand the new, proper role his seeping hormones were sculpting for him, and his emotional maturity was running a distant second to his racehorse of a pituitary gland.

Donna hoped to herself that someday Jeff would be as mature as Mary, the Communist threat to American family life would vanish, her children's sibling rivalries would wane and they would get along perfectly well, grow up to be beautiful and handsome, and go to college. Then as they entered middle age, every Sunday afternoon the both of them would definitely bring their own lovely, happy families over to visit Donna and Alex who would be old, senile grandparents, tucked away in the nursing home for former doctors and their wives in Westview. Donna whisked harder at her eggs.

The dying, fetal chick had now completely dispersed into tiny grit deep in the morass of albumen and bright, yellow, hardening, protein in the skillet, for Donna had succeeded in clandestinely folding its unappetizing secret into the other, normal, infertile eggs. Convinced the beak and little chicken eye were obscured, she stopped the churning, took a sip of coffee medicated with her mood elevator, and sighed. Just knowing the drug she was drinking was good government medicine was highly reassuring. A slight spasm, a virulent, infant hiccup, jumped up into her mouth, but she felt it coming and covered her face with her hand just in time so the world wouldn't know. Then she dished out the eggs on a plate and set them on the table before her only son. Her respiration returned to normal. Apparently she wasn't coming down with a bout of embarrassing hiccups, and she was glad.

Jeff dosed his eggs with a sea of ketchup and dug in, occasionally returning to his other bowl for a nostalgic foray into his nearly finished, now soggy Wheaties.

Perfectly browned, enriched but impoverished, Wonder toast popped up west of Alex's plate. Donna retrieved it, and this time she began to butter the quartet of slices herself with the inexpensive family spread. The Stones couldn't hear the latest loud roar of disapproval thundering over the outskirts of Hilldale, where Mother Nature, still held at bay, was protesting both the sticks of counterfeit butter and Her own confinement. Mrs. Nature had not yet figured out how to enter the city safely to collect Her dues, but She was working on it. She wasn't sure if She could traverse the labyrinth of numerous, impaling, protective white picket fences lining Hilldale's back yards, and She worried about Her own survival skills fighting the herbicides on the lawns, the pesticides on the flowers, and the other world of modern chemical warfare that lay in wait to be spread, sprayed, foamed, or otherwise cast on Her if She made it onto anyone's private property.

Donna turned to Mary and finally answered her. "Yes dear, we must talk sometime soon." Though Donna was always there for her children, there just wasn't time to chat with her daughter right then. She had to get breakfast over with, get pecked on the cheek by Alex as he went off to the office, get the kids off to school, relax, and go talk to her mother about the dust bunnies back in Iowa, which were still curiously on her mind. Were dust bunnies the real cause—and solution—to her inexplicable blues?

Jeff spooned down the last morsels of his now atrophied cereal into his waiting face, and continued his assault on the eggs. "No bacon today, Mom?" he asked.

"No dear, I didn't make it to the grocery store yesterday afternoon. I had to go to your father's office to..." Donna nearly slipped and let it be known she was a bit depressed, and needed a drug. "Well, I had to take care of some personal business." Jeff didn't even notice his mother's near blunder. That was good, because parents should never, never, unless there is absolutely no alternative, discuss any of life's unpleasantness with their children. Alex gave Donna a knowing, approving look. Donna gracefully smiled. Alex was so intuitive for a man.

"Watch for my sea monkeys today, Mom. OK?" Jeff changed the subject so often Donna often found him impossible to follow, and this was especially true while twenty other things were going on in the household, the situation every weekday morning at 7:27

AM not only for the Stones, but in all the other 84.6 % of the homes in Hilldale with two children and two cars. "I ordered them a couple of weeks ago and expect them in the mail any day now. I really hope they get here today."

"Sea monkeys!?" exclaimed Donna, who had no idea that apes lived in the ocean. She was glad to be able to experience astonishment, but she wasn't sure if it was a sincere emotion or if she was just practicing her acting role for this upcoming week's TV episode. After the second commercial break, right as she was talking to Nurse Henry at Hilldale General Hospital, she was going to have to appear dumbfounded when Jane Aire from the Hospital Auxiliary came over and gave her a new and improved pickle recipe, one superior to Donna's own Grandmother's. "What are sea monkeys, anyway?"

Jeff continued, "They come as little brown eggs, Mom. You put these eggs and some salt in water, they hatch out in a couple of days, and then you watch them do antics." Jeff downed another bite of chicken eggs, then choked for a second and coughed, maybe because his esophagus was slightly scratched or irritated by dead, ground up chicken beak. Invisible, but sensed by the throat, the chicken's pulverized mass remained a crushed, minute rock pile of nasty surprise not usually found in Donna's normally smooth egg dishes.

"Perhaps you need some more ketchup, Jeff," suggested Donna. "Regardless, remember to cover you mouth with your hand whenever you choke or cough, dear." How often Donna had to remind her children to cover their mouths and conceal the unusual situations that frequently would arise there! Mouths were such double edged orifices! They were linked to too many assorted organs below the head; one never knew what unexpected company might come visiting one's mouth. Mary had learned her lessons completely and sometimes even slept with her hand covering her mouth; she was so mature! But Jeff would occasionally forget his training, and Donna always had to remain vigilant whenever she was in her son's presence.

Donna gave some sticky undercooked eggs to Alex, for he preferred his sloppy, even when they were scrambled. Although they certainly carried some residual traces of DDT, circa. 1959, fortunately they didn't bear any shrouded chicken parts to surprise him. No doubt he would have noticed, and Donna's household skills could have been called into question by the male light of her life.

Halfheartedly Donna rebuffed her son. "Dear, you know we can only have whatever pets the network will allow. Otherwise we'll lose our strict video continuity from week to week. They may not approve of your sea monkeys." Through the years, the family had learned to accept ABC's rules.

Donna carefully cracked open some more eggs, these for Mary and herself. She began to stir them up, but suddenly the thought of real, land monkeys struggling in the sea made her giggle to herself and she had to cover her mouth quickly. She could see and hear the monkeys screaming, louder than any dust bunny, as they gurgled and drowned in that very salty water. Their tails would probably bob up and sink back down slowly three times before the little monkeys made their final exit and disappeared into the briny main where

lots of monkey parts with lots of monkey fur on them would be torn to ribbons and swept up by lots of sharks, the living canister vacuum sweepers of the ocean! Donna cracked the final egg of the morning and stirred it pronto into the rest of its kinfolk, all of which were drowning in the new, latest, half cup of anxious bacon grease sweltering in the bottom of her well seasoned, cast iron cookware.

Alex piped up, “Jeff, you definitely can’t hatch out those sea monkeys if you don’t learn your lines tonight.”

Four final slightly blackened slices of Wonder toast ascended into what must have seemed to them to be a bread heaven, popping up 13« seconds later than usual from the overworked, torrid inferno in the base of the Stones’ General Electric toaster.

“Alex is so forceful with the children, perhaps that’s why I married him,” thought Donna, as she took a long gulp of coffee, smiled, gave Mary her eggs, grabbed the latest toast, and put her own, barren scramble down on the table. Finally, breakfast with the family!

“I’ll watch for your sea monkeys and if they arrive we’ll discuss them tonight,” Donna said, looking directly at Jeff, who, she noticed, had spawned a very large, snow capped, but otherwise crimson pimple directly in the middle of his chin since the previous evening’s baked potatoes and roast beef supper.



Forceful Alex with the Children

“Great,” beamed Jeff, a bountiful mouthful of ketchup, egg, toast, and margarine covering most of his front teeth as he talked. “You know, I could keep them hidden in a jar in my room, and none of the cameras or the network would ever notice...” Jeff nearly choked again.

“Please don’t talk with your mouth full, dear,” requested Donna. “And please pass the salt.” Donna loved salt.

“We’ll discuss sea monkeys tonight when you come home immediately after school to learn your lines, Jeff,” reiterated Alex.

“Mother, I really need to speak with you, soon!” pleaded Mary.

“Yes, dear. We’ll talk,” Donna said, distracted from her visual pursuit scanning Jeff’s prepubescent face and the physical abor of swallowing her first dainty nibble of super salted scrambled eggs so she could confer her full attention to Mary. She took a bite of the wonderful, burnt toast and again glanced over at Jeff’s infected chin. Her fascination with his adolescent blemish was quickly replaced by an overwhelming sense of maternal guilt intermixed with horror!

Now, trying to break its way out from the inside of the pimple on his chin was the desperate beak of that obstinate little chicken she'd finished scrambling for him a few minutes ago! It was rhythmically pecking, chirping, resting, and pecking again at his skin just as if it were trying to break free from its own DDT contaminated shell. A small stain of whatever it was that was inside pimples started to drain out of the pustule and drip down Jeff's chin, and Donna worried if a complete baby chicken were soon going to follow, would that make Jeff a mother, and how she would ever explain all this to the family! It was just too hard to watch!

She had to turn her fearful gaze away, so she looked down to her scrubbed and newly waxed floor. The situation below the table was not very reassuring, either! There, brazenly skittering across the linoleum, in plain sight, making a snickering sound as it scooted across the otherwise spic-and-spanned and dirt free floor, obviously unafraid of man, beast, or Donna, hopped a stray dust bunny, heading straight for Mary's feet and slippers! What next?

The rest of the family was blissfully ignorant of these dramas being played out at their expense above and below the kitchen table. Mary evidently was preoccupied with her own selfish worries, and men and boys would never notice things like dust bunnies or chickens hatching out of pimples until it was just too late! The entire burden of dealing with these crises landed squarely on Donna's shoulders. Shaken and weak, she took a sip of coffee, and didn't smile, couldn't smile. She didn't know what to do!

"Time to do the front door thing," said Alex, interrupting the calamities in the nick of time. Then he added, apologetically, "Oh, Donna, by the way, I'm going to have to work tomorrow morning for a couple of hours. Gotta catch up on some neglected patients and paperwork down at the office." Donna frowned to herself. Alex seemed to be working so much more of late. It seemed like he was laboring longer hours on more days of the week ever since he'd hired that new blond secretary, Miss Johnson. Donna didn't really care for Alex's latest administrative assistant, but she fought the malignant sentiment because not liking anyone in Hilldale was against her personal code of ethics.

Donna would persevere this latest indignity. "That's nice, dear," she said, rising above any mistrust or unhappy, petty jealousies she might want to feel. Actually she was only slightly perturbed at the thought of tomorrow morning without Alex, and greatly relieved he had come to the rescue right now and it was finally time to do the front door thing. Why think about Saturday yet? Friday had started out so badly! Get this family out of the kitchen, get them out of the house, then worry!

Jeff gobbled a final frantic bite of gritty egg, got up from the table, and accelerated out of the kitchen and up the stairs; Mary and Alex stood up and moved to their appointed places on either side of the kitchen table. Donna took a final sip of her coffee, grabbed the bag lunches she'd made for the kids, and went out by the stairway to stand next to the front door. The countdown began.

It was time for the front door thing. Donna opened the front door, on cue, just as...

Jeff came speeding down the front stairs, grabbed his lunch from her, and was gone. Mary entered more dignified and maturely than Jeff, hugged Donna, grabbed her bag lunch, and scurried out the door. She'd had no time to put on her usual school clothes and was still wearing her bathrobe and slippers, which had trapped and apparently killed that renegade dust bunny from the kitchen floor. Finally Alex whizzed in, patients and appointments on his mind. He impatiently mumbled good-bye, and then stormed out, slamming the door behind him as he left.

Donna turned her head to the right, just a touch, and couldn't hide a tinge of disappointment on her face.

But just then, just at the last instant, just before her slight dismay was about to turn into ugly annoyance, the door flew back open and in poured a regretful Alex. He pecked her on the cheek, rocketed back out, slammed the door a second time, and the family had, as usual, all escaped the house alive.

Donna smiled. The living room faded to black and Donna passed out and fell on the floor, messing up at least five strands of her carefully starched hairdo.



The Anderson Family

The Andersons in Springfield were always supporters of the Stone family, even though they were on another network. "Kitten" Anderson is in front; the back row are Bud, Jim, Margaret, and Betty (aka "Princess").

Donna Regroups Despite Mary's Truancy

When her eyelids reopened, God was staring down at Donna from the ceiling, and He was so bright it nearly burned Donna's eyes. Also kneeling over her left side was the mortal teenager Mary, who, from the inclined perspective, was only a shadow or at best a dark silhouette without visible detail due to The Luminous, Overhanging God. If Mary could have been brought into focus, Donna would have realized her daughter seemed to be quizzically surveying her mother's exposed plight in a mature and dignified manner, as would have been expected.

Donna composed herself and sat up. God dimmed and drifted up through the ceiling into the second floor bathroom above the spot where He'd been hovering, His flow fading out much as a television show would before the cut to a refreshing, Dentyne chewing gum commercial. Trying to pretend nothing was amiss, Donna looked at Mary, accidentally bit her tongue, then asked her daughter, "Dear, why haven't you gone off to school?"

"I forgot to change into my clothes. Then I missed the bus. I didn't feel too good this morning anyway, Mother, and I wanted to talk to you, but I came back in the house and you'd passed out! Are you OK?" Donna was not OK. Mary was on the verge of cutting class, and Donna was very glad God had left for the bathroom to take care of other holy business. She sure didn't want Him to know about her daughter's educational transgression!

"Yes, I seem to have fainted or something!" Donna felt too weak to stand up. "Let me get my bearings. Don't worry. I think this is a manageable situation, dear." Glancing at her surroundings, she noticed that Mary had apparently been looking at the photo album with her grandmother, Donna's mother, in it, for it lay open on the floor next to her. Not knowing the duration of her unconsciousness, Donna worried Mary and her mother, her mother and God, or maybe all three of them together had been gossiping about her in her absence.

Donna pointed to the album and said, "I see you found those old pictures I carried down from the attic, dear. That was certainly a different time period back then, wasn't it?" Mary didn't respond. Donna paused a second before continuing, "Maybe I should take you to school when you get dressed and we could have this talk tomorrow." Donna looked more carefully and saw the album had positively been opened to the page with the picture of her mother on it, and her mother was definitely now, more than ever, now more than she did when Donna was eight years old, smirking at her and this distressing predicament. This very nearly made Donna annoyed.

She turned her head away from the photo and forgot about her mother in an instant. Suddenly she felt dizzy and sick to her stomach. It was no wonder! The walls and the floor near the front room door and over in the living room had lost all their normal shape and stability and were dramatically undulating in a manner she'd never seen before. If the room were to continue this indiscriminate pulsing and weaving, it would make the weekly furniture rearranging next Wednesday a real problem! The shape and size of the room were

changing so much second by second, it would be nearly impossible to position anything in one place and hope it would stay put or be usable. This just wouldn't work! A doctor's wife needed an appropriate, stable, interior design for all the dinner entertaining she might be called upon to do. What to do?

Mary got up, heaved herself with unsuspecting ease through the melting house into the center of the living room, and sat down on the brown, high-backed easy chair facing the TV. In the morning it was OK for Mary to sit in that particular chair, but at night its use was forbidden for son, daughter, or wife. After office hours, Alex had decreed that only he could use the chair, and no one dared ever complain about his oddball furniture tyranny, for almost all Hilldale breadwinners were allowed a few, hard earned quirks when they came home from work.

"Mother, are you all right?" asked Mary, studying her fingernails to be sure none of Monday's nail polish had worn off yet. "Your hair is messed up!" Mary sounded concerned, but it was a mature kind of concern. She also sounded distant and preoccupied; something was definitely bothering her, and Donna was a bit afraid Mary might be going to ask her how to deal with dust bunnies before she was mentally prepared for the inevitable lecture and discussion between all modern 1964 mothers and their teenage daughters.

Donna quickly slid her very blue right hand over her hair to replace any errant strands. This seemed to restore her sense of balance and strength somewhat, and she said, "Yes, I'm fine, I'll be fine, just let me get up and go sit down on the couch." Donna clutched the photo album, stood up, teetered to the left, wobbled to the right, then somehow glided into the living room despite the roller coaster of a floor under her feet. Finally she made it to the couch. Having remained upright through the trial, the room at last began to regain some of its former stability. What a relief! Her queasiness began a slow ebb to low tide.

After standing still for a twelve second eternity, Donna managed to decide where she would sit down on the couch, and she intelligently chose the left side, which seemed to be a cleaner and safer bet than it would be if she opted to venture over and sit on the right cushion, which, after all, was directly above the dust bunnies' clutch. How many new hatchlings there might be under there, and what their plans of attack were, she could only guess. The middle cushion looked rather seductive and comfy, but it was just too near the right cushion to consider it safe to sit on, so the left one it was. "Dear, could you bring me some coffee from the kitchen?" she asked Mary as she plopped down, relieved that she'd been able to make such a momentous decision before nightfall.

"Certainly, Mother," said her dauntless daughter, happy all nail polish was intact. Mary stood up and dispatched herself to the task at hand.

As Mary left the room, Donna's mother, Mary's grandmother, Donna's future, happy grandchildren's great grandmother, looking up at her disheveled daughter from the safety of her afterlife in the photo album gripped in Donna's hand, renewed her chorus of riddles and mysterious chants. "Aren't the birds and the bees nice today, Donna dear?"

“Mother, don’t talk dirty!” Donna exclaimed, shocked to hear her mother mention anything remotely connected with birds and bees together in the same breath. “I’ve got enough problems here already!”

“But the bees are really nicer than the birds!”

“Do you want half and half in your coffee, Mother?” Mary yelled from the kitchen, where Donna had not yet had a chance to wash the dirty breakfast dishes. Unfortunately, clumps of leftover drying, scrambled egg resting on the everyday china were already merging solidly with the plates in a profane marriage of ceramics and food, a wedding doomed to receive Donna’s later, forced annulment. Neither she, The Floating God in His upstairs throne, nor her lemon fresh Joy would ever consent to bless such an unclean union.

“No, dear, just black please, but there’s a brown jar of some clear medicine in the cupboard by the Nestlé’s Quik. Could you just put a couple of drops of the solution from that vial into the coffee, please?” Earlier Donna had hidden her medicine behind the can of chocolate, but Mary was almost old enough to learn about drugs. Donna hesitated a second, then continued, “It’s something your father gave me yesterday to try out, because I was feeling a little low.”

“Sure, Mother.” Mary didn’t seem shocked. She would do anything Donna asked, and didn’t find her mother’s pronouncements about being in the dumps and not wanting half and half to be particularly weird, since she, too, was feeling low. So low she wasn’t in the mood for her milk. She got the jar and counted out ten drops of the medicine into the coffee, then dumped in an extra shot, just for good measure. It might make their discussion a little easier on her mother.

Donna’s mother, not interested in coffee talk, continued percolating Donna with her own brew. “Beware, little swallow, of the birds and the bees, and the birds will try to eat the beetles and the bees and the beetles will rise up and the birds will fly away and be changed and it will even change your life!” Donna gave her mother an irritated look and then gulped hard. She had begun to think the old woman was really drifting out into left field, and she hated such complex, run-on verbal charades. She was forming an appropriate response, but right then Mary returned to the living room with coffee, and Donna had to close the picture book quickly so her mother wouldn’t start talking to Mary about the birds, bees, beetles, or any other esoteric or animalistic subjects.

“Mother, can’t we talk now? I’d prefer we talk today.” Mary was beginning to sound like a broken record, or at least one with a terrible scratch in its grooves, and she was cutting class, and all of this was on the verge of annoying Donna. Mary persisted, “I’ve been preparing myself all morning, and I just can’t wait until tomorrow.”

“Yes dear, of course. Let’s talk and get it over with since you feel so strongly about it.”

Donna meant to start listening to her daughter, but suddenly, distracted again, she noticed she hadn’t adequately dusted and polished the end table by the right side of the couch. The embarrassing table scum was obviously waiting there as more potential fast

food for those evil dirt rodents that she knew were still at work breeding underneath the right side of the sofa. Donna sighed and took a sip of her coffee. The java seemed terribly dry to her, almost like cement powder rather than liquid refreshment. It went down hard, and she could feel the sip she'd drunk drifting down toward her stomach, where each little drop seemed to be absorbing all the body fluids it could find there before hardening into an expanding, snaking disaster of a sidewalk in her digestive tract. She turned to Mary and said, "But first, could you try this coffee, just a little swallow, mind you? See if you think it tastes OK."

Mary was nearly old enough to drink coffee, and she had actually had tried it once or twice. She got up, grabbed the cup, took a swig and shrugged her shoulders. "Tastes like coffee to me."

"OK, it must be me, then," Donna said, her body from her naval to her toes having already hardened into concrete, an unnatural stone that felt like it might soon crumble into dust if her muscle spasms and horrible cramps didn't quit their violent attack on it. Realizing if her lower body did turn to powder or drop off, forever after she would remain a crippled being with only a trunk, two arms, and a head. A terrible thought! How would she ever would manage to use the Electrolux if that were to happen!

Mary sat back down on Alex's chair, and would wait no longer for Donna to get in a powwow mood. "Mother, your coffee's fine. Now listen to me, please. Do you remember late last summer when I went to Church Camp?"

"Yes, certainly, dear. How could I forget that?" Mary always went to Church Camp when Jeff went to Scout Camp, it was always August, Hilldale's weather was always very hot, Alex always ate undercooked eggs for breakfast, and Donna could do a great August cleaning while the children were gone, including up in the dreaded attic. "Didn't you tell me the other children at Church Camp called you 'Shelly' last year, dear?" Donna asked, smiling at the cute thought. She'd always been fond of the name Shelly.

"Yes, yes. That was my nickname because I spent most mornings at the ocean on His Glory Beach picking up seashells for the afternoon craft classes." Mary shifted back to her subject matter, determined not to let her mother sidetrack her again. "Remember, I told you about that boy I met there?"

Donna noticed that Mary's eyebrow kept twitching while she spoke, and the right side of her mouth had dropped half an inch or so relative to the left side. Also her right eyeball had begun a slight migration to the east side of her face.

"Wasn't his name Jonathan Angelo, or something?" Donna asked with lukewarm interest. She was feeling very much bone dry and having trouble concentrating on Church Camp or even on Mary's blemish-free face. She took a sip of coffee.

Abruptly Donna realized the solution to all her problems would be to turn herself into a lightning bolt of static electricity. Then she could eternally roam around the Stone household, seeking out and killing all the dust bunnies that dared venture out on the floors. She'd give them a quick, strong zap that would deny them even half a chance to scream

for mercy before they were disintegrated into a benign collection of sooty atomic particles, traces of bunny leftovers never again capable of coalescing into creatures that would hop around and pillage the otherwise clean house.

“Yes, Mother. His name was Johnny.” Mary’s mouth stretched open from the center out towards both sides of her face as she uttered the boy’s first name. A shiny filling in one of her back molars caught an incoming beam of Hilldale sunlight, bouncing it back towards Donna’s throat in a short pulse of death ray laser light. Donna’s head involuntarily jerked a few centimeters to the right.

“Have you talked to him lately? Has he called you?” Donna asked, hoping she wasn’t burned too badly.

Mary flushed and began to cry, but ever so delicately and in a very mature manner. “No, mother.”

Donna suddenly wanted to burst out laughing, but it would be inappropriate, so she temporarily covered her mouth with her hand, hiding the hint of a smirk spreading across her face. All morning she’d been worried Mary wanted to discuss embarrassing dust bunnies, but this conversation was only destined to be a mother/daughter tête-à-tête about stupid boy troubles! Donna donned a serious tone to hide her relief from Mary. “What seems to be the problem, dear? Other fellows ask you out on dates. I hear you talking to them when they call.”

“But I’ve just been sitting and waiting...”

“For this Jonathan Angelo?”

“Angel, Mother. Johnny Angel. Oh, Mother, why beat around the bush? I’m pregnant.” Mary, Church Camp “S helly,” had just dropped Johnny Angel’s little Frankenstein’s Monster into Donna’s very dry lap.

The house fell silent, and even the dust bunnies kept still so they could see what was going to happen next. Dust bunnies are a curious lot.

An unexpected explosion of thunder roared into Stoneland from the suburban fields outside Hilldale. Donna smiled. Then Donna frowned. She had never heard her daughter use that “p” word before, except twice when she’d been ten years old and kept a bowl of ten pet guppies that quickly expired after Jeff stirred half a can of Néstles Quik into the tank. Donna immediately decided to be a modern, 1964 Mother and avoid her instinctual panic. At the very least she would hide the sentiment.

“Oh, Mary, don’t be silly. You’re too young to be. To have. To carry....” Donna noticed the pupils of Mary’s eyes were beginning to widen, and now more teardrops, molded into glistening, watery prisms emanating little rainbows of expectant doom, were streaming down Mary’s face.

“No!” said Donna, feeling genuine disbelief and astonishment, not even having to consider her reaction to any newfangled pickle recipes.

As a muddied bright avalanche of color swamped Mary's cheeks and dripped off her chin onto the carpeting, Donna knew Mary wasn't being silly. Mary wasn't too young. Young Mary was already on the stork's future visiting list. Indignation, not usually listed in the address book of Donna's personal code of ethics, sliced through her like a chisel.

"I must call that boy's Mother! This second!" Donna genuinely liked talking on the telephone. She generally didn't sit and wait for calls like Mary did, but she didn't even know Mrs. Angel, which might make the call a little awkward. "What's the number, Mary...?"

"No, Mother. You won't do that, or I'll kill myself." This threat, though dramatic, posed little occasion for worry, for teenagers were always contemplating suicide from 1956 to 1964, and they rarely acted on it except to sing out their blues in the popular music of the day. But the childish pronouncement shocked Donna, who rarely listened to the top forty or AM radio at all. Donna preferred TV.

"Mary, don't you talk that way. Kill yourself, my Lord. It's so, so, non-mature!" Donna surveyed her daughter from head to toe. As her eyes reached the unclean pompom on Mary's left foot, she got the urge to grab the dead dust bunny from breakfast off her slipper, throw it on the floor, and grind and stomp its carcass thirty-five times into the living room carpeting, but it just didn't seem appropriate considering the circumstances.

Besides, the dust bunny might be playing possum and not really be dead at all. It could be a dust bunny trick, hiding on the slipper pretending to be dead and stuck; the dust bunny might actually be alive and building up a latent, lethal, electrical charge like an electric eel or something. It could be drawing increasing strength with every step Mary and her slippers took across the living room rug, and just be entrenched there on her decorative pompom, waiting to shock the both of them if Donna tried to pull it off and send it down to....

Mary's wet lashes flicked more water and color off her eyes and down onto the previously clean and dry, virgin and neutral, beige carpeting.

"I concentrate and concentrate on him, and he doesn't even know that I exist anymore, Mother!"

Threateningly Donna said, "Your father will kill that boy if he gets his hands or sutures on him!" Donna breathed heavily three times, earning a needed oxygen fix, and then she smiled. Alex was so forceful and protective of the family; he would take care of this.

"Then together, Johnny Angel and I, well, we'll see how lovely Heaven will be." Mary began to sob uncontrollably. Set upon the stage of her vivid, runaway imagination, inspired by a fictional article she'd read in Seventeen Magazine the previous week, were distinctly clearer visions of Church Camp Johnny and his Mary Shelly, in Act III of their lives' play, after a final, touching, crushing embrace, enacting out a beautiful duet of holy hara-kiri. They would either drink poisoned coffee, use knives, or even guns....

Mary's imaginative dissolution was interrupted by a slight, uncovered burp. She abruptly felt awful and strange, and morning sick below her ribs. Her lifelong conditioning

took hold. Instinctively, she knew she needed a handful of pink, DDT contaminated Kleenex, but there were none within reach. So she covered her mouth tightly with her hand, just in case the worst case scenario, dried Wheaties and scrambled eggs from breakfast, tried to spill forth.

“More likely than Heaven it would be H...” Donna was about to say a word she’d heard before in church, a word she’d never before thought of uttering, but this momentous occasion was interrupted and postponed for a later day because at that very second the front doorbell rang. It sang out with a piercing, high G sharp accompanied by a chorus of resonating semitones. “Oh, heck,” Donna said, “just what we need! Company!”

Jeff's Package Arrives

The strains of the doorbell music had rushed into the room from the chimes above the door. Along with the usual sound rolled an unusual vision of graphical, spiraling, colored lines and three dimensional geometric shapes, chaperoning the ringing on its journey through the living room. The wild and vivid shapes drifted through the treble clef near the TV, entered Donna's forehead, pierced her skull and brain, and finally emerged harmlessly out the back of her head near her brain stem.

None of this disrupted Donna's restored hairdo in the least, but it did distract and momentarily transform her, since she'd never noticed the coloration or form of classical doorbell music before. "Wait a second, Mary," she said. "Let me see who that is at the door. I'll be right back." She got up, went over and pulled the door open just a little, and saw Hilldale Mailman Dick Dobbs standing outside the entryway with a package in his hand and a definite civil servant smirk on his face.

"Package for your son Jeff, Mrs. Stone," he said. Donna politely tried to keep the door only slightly ajar so the mailman couldn't spy into her soiled castle, hoping to prevent any subsequent gossip about Mary skipping school and staying at home crying. It was probably a futile wish, for there was no doubt Dick could overhear her daughter's fertile sobs soaring off the nearby easy chair. Suddenly Donna had a terrible thought! God, what if the network found out about Mary's problem? They might cancel the series! She looked up to the ceiling below God's upstairs bathroom, but He was floating nowhere around when you needed Him to give you an answer or some help.

Fortunately, Mary's hyperventilating and crying seemed to be abating. Perhaps she was returning to an even keel.

Donna borrowed Mr. Dobb's pen to sign the postal receipt for Jeff's new property. "Oh, these must be Jeff's new pets or something," she said, trying to sound cheerful. "He's expecting a parcel, I know. Nice weather today, Mr. Dobbs. Yes, this must be what he's expecting." The mailman handed her the package. She handed him back his ball-point Bic. "Pretty soon it will be time for baseball season again, won't it? I think there's some kind of monkeys in this box." Mr. Dobbs gave her a curious, amused look. "Thank you very much." Slamming the door on the postman before he could respond to any of her chatter, she ran back to the living room disaster center, but Alex's easy chair had been vacated and Mary was nowhere to be seen. Donna put Jeff's pets down on the floor by Alex's chair and decided it was time to panic.

Sinful Mary Tries to Fly the Coop

Donna was frantic. “Mary, where are you? We must go see your father. He can take care of things like this!” Donna knew Alex had helped put himself through medical school taking care of things like this. For a price. Usually a couple hundred bucks. But things like this ordinarily didn’t happen to nice, upstanding families like the Stones!

“Mary, where are you?” Donna reiterated, louder.

Mary, legally and technically a minor in spite of her emotional maturity and dignified demeanor, should not have drunk any of the safe-for-adults government drug in Donna’s Maxwell House coffee. Her cellular structure was not yet developed or dignified enough for its aftereffects, and, compounded by her strained confession, she had suddenly felt her own rush of teenage panic as the acidulous compound took hold on her young body.

When the ceiling in the living room commenced drooling blobs of horrid, white plaster down onto the white pompoms and dead dust bunny decorating the tops of her bright pink slippers, she’d run into Alex’s den to escape, thrown open the window, chirped twice, and jumped out, trying to fly over to the neighbors’ large elm tree. There she spied a limb where she’d always planned to perch and collect her thoughts.

The den was fortunately on the ground floor, and all she’d managed to accomplish was a fall onto one of Donna’s prize rosebushes wintering below the window. She scratched herself quite badly on its thorns, virtually demolishing the unlucky rosebush in the process. To escape the painful flower bed, she temporarily changed herself into a garter snake, slithered out onto the undulating lawn, became unhappy Mary again and continued to cry.

Her feathers were plucked; she’d lost her wings. Having eaten the Jonathan apple of Church Camp’s tree of knowledge, her lifelong honeymoon with innocence was finished, her escape to death remained only a dream, and she’d never be able to soar over to the neighbors’ trees again. She certainly didn’t feel like singing a top 40 song about her woes just then.

Back in the living room Donna’s personal code of ethics were put on indefinite hold. “That boy’s not an angel, Mary, if he did this shitty thing to you!” she screamed, hoping her runaway daughter was still near enough to hear her punctuated commentary.

The stress Donna felt was raising her blood pressure into the danger zone, and she could sense that her heart was emigrating out of her chest and into her throat. It finally settled, pounding too loudly, too fast, and too hard, in the center of her brain. Alarmed by its unlikely and unwanted new neighbor, her brain blared out a body-wide red alert.

Adding insult to Donna’s physical incapacity of the moment, a ratty, mangy dust bunny scampered across her left foot. Surprised as much as she was when it found itself no longer on the carpeting, the dust bunny squealed and peered up to discover the worst enemy of the flock, glaring downward, wickedly, unable to attack. Not wanting to test its luck any further, the dust bunny scooted off for its couch-nest.

Donna needed to sit down again, so she turned on the TV and slumped into Alex's easy chair. The living room started to spin counterclockwise in rhythm to the beating in her head, and suddenly, adding to her confusion and pain, seventeen or more church bells and doorbells commenced clamoring from previously undiscovered locations in the room. The popular game show, "Password," faded in on the screen as the television set, wolfing juice from a river of modern, nuclear-generated pure and safe Hilldale electricity, succeeded in warming up its tubes.

Mailman Dick Dobbs, heading next door to deliver three pieces of mail, two of which were past due bills and the third a useless Montgomery Ward's advertisement, noticed the pickle Mary was in, raced back over to the Stones' yard, and got her back on her feet. Righted, Mary continued her cry in a more mature manner, despite the horrific fact that the lone, grey-lined cumulous cloud drifting directly over the mailman and her, dripping streaks of white cloud fog down out of the sky onto the tops of her pink slippers, was at that very instant harboring the smirking evil likeness of Satan.

"The Password is 'Narcotic,'" whispered the reassuring, professional, masculine voice on the TV show, which Donna could hardly hear because of the ringing of those dad-burned bells. At least the revolving room was slowing down and her heart was thumping, rather than hammering away.

Donna opened the plastic sleeve carrying the bill of lading on Jeff's package, and, because she needed to find something better to concentrate on, she opened a letter that was also enclosed. It was a business letter, which was reassuring. Business letters generally reinforced Donna's trust in the professional ethics and continuity of Western civilization. Perhaps her world would return to normal, if she could concentrate on reading a business letter. This business letter! She was sure Jeff wouldn't mind, though it was remitted and addressed to him.

Guest contestant and Password whiz Betty White gave the first clue to non-guest contestant and housewife, Amelia Cransberry. "Drug!" she said.

But Amelia didn't get it. "Dope," she replied.

Mailman Dick had succeeded in taking the first steps with a very disoriented Mary back toward the Stones' front door.

Donna, having already forgotten what the Password was, completely engrossed herself in the missive in her hand, hoping to take her mind off runaway Mary, the unwanted grandchild in her tummy, and the deranged clamoring of dinging and donging everywhere in her midst.

February 5, 1964
Acme Pets
New and Unusual Pets Department

Dear Mr. Jeffrey Stone:

Due to a lack of sea monkeys in our main warehouse, we are enclosing—in lieu of your original order—this special shipment of Africanized honey bees, freshly imported from our laboratories in Brazil. We trust you will find this substitution to be of a satisfactory nature. Full instructions on the bees' care and release are enclosed. We guarantee their antics to be every bit as entertaining as those of our currently out-of-stock sea monkeys.

Sincerely,
Mr. Broderick Rohm
Acting Director

Donna wondered if these were the nice bees her mother had been pestering her about all morning.

Mary wondered if she could make it one more step without throwing up.

Dignified Kitty Carlisle peered intently at her commoner Password contestant, Lyle Thompson, and wondered if they could earn nine important Password points. She bestowed upon him the best gift the gentry might offer the a low and mundane player, a potentially winning clue, raising her voice in appropriate Password syntax as she slowly and disapprovingly said, “Heroin...”

Donna grabbed the photo album. She would ask her mother about the package the mailman had brought. This might be really important.

“Pharmaceutical?” guessed Lyle, completely unsure of himself and the response. Mr. Thompson obviously didn't realize heroin was an illegal narcotic, whereas middle class sleeping pills, Password sponsor Anacin, and special government test drugs were legal pharmaceuticals.

Before Donna could open the photo album to ask her mother about the bees, Mailman Dick opened the front door without ringing the doorbell, thank the Lord, for Donna didn't need another one of those things going off, and he escorted Mary back into the living room. All the rest of the bells in their cloistered hideouts instantly fell silent, hiding their dissonant chorale from the living room intruders, and furnishing Donna with comforting, eardrum relief. Refreshingly civilized and businesslike, the postman, a Hilldale High graduate in 1937, quietly looked at Donna and said, “Seems the little girl had a nasty fall.”

Rosebush cuts were rife on assorted Mary locations. Negro bees were now sitting in a sealed box in the living room. And Betty White tried her hand at ‘Narcotic’ with the clue, “Policeman...”

“She's pretty upset, Mrs. Stone,” continued Mr. Dobbs.

Donna could see that.

“Opiate,” guessed Amelia Cransberry, who’d actually grown a bed of California poppies in her own front yard back in the summer of 1959. She was convinced she had the correct Password. But she was wrong.

“Mary, why, whatever happened to you? You were here when I went to the door to get the mail. Then you were gone when I came back!” Donna feigned astonishment, motherly concern, and affected a dishonest pretense that nothing unusual had preceded her daughter’s disappearance from the living room. Hoping this would fool the mailman, this outsider to the Stone tribe, she prayed Mary wouldn’t start blabbing about that Angelo fellow till later when the letter carrier was long gone. “I thought maybe you’d left for school,” Donna said, having regained her self control.

“No, Mother. I jumped from the window in Daddy’s den,” she scratched up lass confessed. “I was trying to fly across the street, but instead I landed on your rosebushes!” Donna was shocked by this proclamation, because she knew Mary had used the word Father rather than Daddy ever since she had been ten years old. Her regression to the use of the old, less mature word, Daddy, was not a good sign, and Donna felt terribly uncomfortable upon hearing this omen.

“Mary, that was an unusual thing for you to do on a Friday,” said Donna, still sitting down, pretending to be more intrigued by Password than her daughter’s extraordinary behavior or the advancing collapse of her domicile. “Why would you want to do something like that?”

“The ceiling was dripping down on my feet and I needed to get away. Then I turned into a snake to escape the thorny flowers, but it was still terrible. The Devil was sitting up in the clouds, laughing at me!” complained Mary.

“Oh, I see,” Donna said, scratching her cheek, pretending its itch was the most important consideration of her life at that instant.

Maybe it would have been better after all if Mary had mentioned the Angelo guy instead of sharing these deeply disturbing secrets with her in front of the town letter carrier.

“There now, there now,” said Mailman Dick, shifting gears and trying to console the weeping teenager with safe and simple words rather than the previous reassuring touch he’d tried. He was suddenly fearful additional physical contact could lead to his catching whatever disorder it was that Mary was suffering. Dick Dobbs knew he had no desire to become a snake!

Mary was becoming less mature and less dignified every instant, and Donna didn’t like what she sensed. Poisons worse than DDT were polluting the air, and she’d be darned if she’d allow Mary to lose any more control in front of a non-family member. That would be unforgivably un-Stonelike. Turning to Mailman Dick she said, “Could you please leave us alone right now? I really appreciate you bringing Mary back in the house after her accident, but I need to deal with this, uh, little family problem we have here. I’ll make sure Dr. Stone donates a generous cash gift this next Christmas to the Happy Valley Home for

Aged Postmen over in Westview, Mr. Dobbs.” Donna smiled. Donna had found that charity was always disarming.

“**Neurotic,**” said Kitty Carlisle, whose turn it was again after the initial Anacin commercial of the half hour. She ingeniously chose a word that began with the letter ‘n’ and rhymed with ‘Narcotic,’ both strategic ploys with proven track records in Password.

“Sure thing, Mrs. Stone.” Mailman Dick was a real gentleman, and neither rain, sleet, earthquake, a hangover, rosebush, nor pit bull would prevent him from getting people’s mail to their doors! He was not well trained, or comfortable, however, rescuing head sick damsels from psychological distress.

“**Crazy,**” guessed Lyle, wrong again. Evidently Lyle had not been a properly screened Password contestant, and Kitty Carlisle very nearly felt annoyed, for she almost never had to put up with such stupidity when she was a regular panelist on “To Tell the Truth.”

The minute the door closed behind Mr. Dobbs, subdued Donna shifted from park into drive, turned to the bleeding, weeping Mary and said, “Let’s get some clothes on you, dear. We’re going to your father’s office right away.”

“No, you’re not going to tell Daddy!” cried Mary.

“Your **father,**” said Donna, emphasizing the more formal word, “needs to look at those rosebush scrapes, dear. We really wouldn’t want you to get any added infections, now, would we?” Donna’s eyes looked to the floor in embarrassment. “Also he can take care of that other subject we were discussing.” Donna was afraid Mary was going to look worse on the upcoming week’s episode than Jeff and his shiner had the previous week. Then what would President Johnson, June Cleaver, Harriet Nelson, and the other millions of their fans think?

Mary had no idea just how her mother was planning to have Daddy take care of that other subject, her Church Camp infection, but dutifully she went, or rather was pulled, up to her room by Donna. She put on the plaid skirt and sand colored blouse she’d planned on wearing to school that day. Maybe Daddy would give her a shot or an antibiotic...?

Donna got a brown washcloth and rinsed off most of the red blood from the rosebush wounds on Mary’s face, arms, and legs, dosing the cuts immediately with the deeper, painful, sadistic punishment of tincture of merthiolate. The two began the long descent down the Stones’ stairway toward the ground floor. Donna planned it all out in her mind that they would quietly go to the garage, quietly get in the second family car, a 1961 Chevy, and quietly make their way toward Dr. Stone’s office, being careful not to exceed the Hilldale speed limits or attract any unwanted attention along the way. Then Alex would forcefully take care of everything!

Pestilence

“The next password is ‘Anarchy,’” whispered the reassuring voice on the television set in his hushed, secretive tone.

In Mary and Donna’s downstairs’ absence, a bevy of dust bunnies, sporting beige carpet colored war paint, had assembled and were growling, hungrily, right at the bottom of the steps. Daughter squealed and mother gasped as they descended the staircase and nearly landed right in the horde of salivating creatures—ravenous beasts anxiously awaiting any unwary, warm, human feet that might be falling in their midst. “Holy Everly Cattle-feeders!” screamed Donna. She pulled Mary back up the stairs several steps and yelled, “Stay right here. If those things start climbing up after you, retreat back upstairs!”

Donna was in a ferocious mood; she’d had enough for a Friday! She zipped up the steps, snatched a broom from the closet at the end of the hallway, and returned with her wood and straw Sherman tank, ready if need be to defend Mary and herself to the awful finish. Flying back down the stairs even faster than spry Jeff, she let out a deafening screech, pounced into the middle of the flock on the floor, and immediately commenced whacking every dust bunny in sight.

“Lawlessness,” said Amelia Cransberry, smiling at her new Password partner, Kitty Carlisle.

The surprised cavalry on the carpet, fast losing their numeric advantage and with it their courage, started fleeing strategically left and right for cover. Swirls of dismembered dust bunny parts from the unlucky or slow ones were swept up into whirlpools of living room air in a frantic tangle of ugly bunny mayhem and death as Donna pursued them with the frenzy only an angry, threatened mother hen might know as she defended her nest from unwanted egg gatherers. She persisted in banging at anything she saw moving, everywhere in the room. Donna’s adrenaline level hadn’t been so high in years.

“Chaos,” guessed Kitty, a good response worthy of an author’s wife, but incorrect nonetheless.

Broom straws tore loose and were swept off in every conceivable direction, adding even more fuel to the melee. The totally enraged, the very annoyed Donna vowed to put an end to these objectionable creatures in her house once and for all. Disaster after disaster struck down bunny after bunny.

Allen Ludden beamed his best game host smile straight into the studio camera. Then he turned his head to the left, directing both the studio and home audiences’ attention over toward Lyle and guest contestant (Allen’s wife), Betty White, for their stab at the Password. A second studio camera soon focused directly on the unwavering, intense eye contact between the two contestants. Their brows’ feet deepened and their eyes glistened. Unsettled facial tension drew maps of perspiration in the territory between their brows and chins. Finally Lyle chose a tactic and approached the Password ‘Anarchy’ from a political angle, hoping Betty would be of like, patriotic mind. “Communism!” he yowled.

The skirmish was nearing an end, for Donna had succeeded in getting most of the rabid pack back under the couch. There the surviving dust bunnies of the colony were holding a new, holy war council, licking their wounds, breeding fast to avoid extermination, and recouping for a later strike.

Unsatisfied that any of the creatures might live to glorify this battle in a tale to their descendants, Donna refused to concede her victory. Blinded with bunny hate, she continued banging away, shaking the floor and at times the whole living room. Forty seconds into the battle, just as one of the slower stragglers headed for the underbelly of the couch, she threw the broom at its vulnerable hindquarters and unfortunately missed the retreating pest by a good three feet. Unfortunately, three feet away from the dust bunny sat the newly delivered package of Jeff's pet bees. The bundle, a proud survivor of the rigorous U.S. postal system, instantly burst open on two sides, releasing, not as per the Acme instruction booklet sent with them, and therefore voiding the limited warranty, a swarm of one thousand, four hundred and ninety-two Africanized honey bees into the middle of the Stones' living room.

"Anarchy!" guessed Betty, correctly, despite the dubious clue from life insurance salesman and John Bircher, Lyle.

Free at last, the aggressive bees were glad for their release, but very angry at having been juggled across the equator by parcel post. Worker bee, soldier bee, queen bee, and even the lazy drones were not at all pleased to find they weren't still back in their nicely designed, recently remodeled, honey laden mother hive in Brazil. Wasting no time at demonstrating their displeasure, they indiscriminately set upon the household dust bunnies, Donna, Mary, and even the television set in front of the couch. The four brave or stupid dust bunnies that weren't already under the couch scrambled under any piece of available furniture for sanctuary. Twelve of the bees attacking the TV merged with the picture tube and emerged from the camera lenses on the other end, directly in the Password studio, creating a really undignified scene as host Allen, losing his perpetual smile, Betty, Kitty, and the other contestants, the studio crew, and the audience scurried for safety.

Donna rushed for the door, pulled Mary off the stairs, and the two sprinted outside, hoping they could outrun and elude the dense, swarming pestilence.

Password went straight-away off the air, with no explanation given to the confused audience sitting by their TVs at home. The show was rescued by the second scheduled Anacin commercial of the half hour, and when the lightning bolts and pounding hammers finally abated their attack from within the unfortunate headache victim's exposed forehead, the network switched its programming over to "The Guiding Light" seventeen minutes and eight seconds earlier than would have been expected on a Friday.

The entire swarm of bees, attracted by fear, human movement, and Northern Hemisphere fresh air, pursued Donna and Mary through the front door, which, in her haste, Donna forgot (or was unable) to close. Apparently about a dozen and a half of them

made it clean into the awaiting Chevy with the two, judging by the later count of bee stings.

Wasting no time, Donna revved the engine, laid rubber backing out of the driveway, and took off in a beeline for Alex's downtown Hilldale office, where she hoped to find forceful respite from Jeff's new pets, bunnies, Mary's untimely, but mature, pregnancy, and this rather overall unhappy Friday mid morning. The swarm followed the car in speedy pursuit, locked onto the mesmerizing pheromones of lead emissions it was spewing forth from the tailpipe. Unleaded gasoline was still some years away in 1964.

Donna and Mary Visit Alex at the Office

The oppressive journey to Alex's office required eight minutes, fourteen seconds, and thirteen bee stings—seven for Mary and six for Donna. As indignant, Negro bees, loose in the car enjoying their first ever American joyride remained the preeminent crisis throughout the trip, Mary didn't once contemplate suicide, her five nights of sin at Church Camp, or even her smarting rosebush lacerations, and Donna didn't worry at all about being annoyed when she saw blond Miss Johnson holding court with any male patients or Alex in the waiting room of the doctor's office.

The purple swelling surrounding one of the stings near Donna's left eye was pretty bad, though manageable, as she towed Mary into the office. Fair haired Miss Stella Johnson, three months into her new career and therefore still on probation, looked up from her momentary accounting enigma, saw the two, let out a slight, feminine gasp, and buzzed Alex right away. "Miss Johnson, go to lunch early today," demanded Donna, intentionally forgetting to add a proper and polite please.

There was no disagreement from the one person secretarial pool, for she was glad to avoid Mrs. Stone and abandon the impasse of the moment that was more than confusing her, indicting her community college training, and staring up at her from her littered desk. She'd spent the last half hour struggling to figure out onto whose account she should post this mysterious counter check made out for \$18.50 "for services rendered." It had arrived in the morning mail and she'd thrown away the envelope before she realized the check didn't have a patient's account number on it or an attached invoice. It was just too puzzling. She was just about to inspect the signature on the payment for the patient's name, hoping that might be a significant clue, but was happy to go eat instead.

Slipping her feet into her heels from their enclave under her desk, Miss Johnson grabbed her jacket (which, Donna noted, was tacky and definitely cut in last year's now passé style), stood up, and took four fast steps to get out the office door. She was headed straight for the reassuring shopper's Mecca lining the downtown Hilldale streets and a favorite Tastee Freeze burger barn lunch hangout four blocks to the north of her job site.

Freed from the pall of the pretentious secretary, Donna pulled aside a bemused Alex, professionally attired with his stethoscope necklace resting on his sterile white doctors' robe, and quickly, yet tactfully, explained the devastating family crisis they were facing. After she managed to calm him down, which required seven pecks on the cheek and some diplomatic, maternal, heart wrenching tugs, both parents conveyed the shaken, ashamed Mary, catatonic except for her soft crying which had begun again, into the altar of Alex's working office and up onto his paper lined examination table.

Donna returned to the waiting room to linger, to wait, and she took a quick glance out the window. To her amazement, Hilldale was under siege! She saw scores of office workers and shoppers on the usually peaceful streets downtown, dashing to and fro in a frightful predicament. They were genuinely running for their lives as waves of emancipated Negro bees zoomed fro and to in their midst, out on the town for their own early Friday lunch.

Donna smiled, for running the fastest of all down the street was none other than Miss Johnson. And there, enveloping the peroxide bombshell's futile attempt at escape, was a particularly large swarm of angry pet insects born in the Acme labs near Rio. They were eddying around her ersatz blond locks and honest darker roots, which, ironically enough, were swirled and perched high upon her head in a popular style of the day known as a beehive. Donna smiled.... No, it was shocking. Five days before Lincoln's birthday, Donna smirked!

Neither Miss Johnson nor her hairdo would escape the onslaught and return to Alex's office, but Donna had no way of knowing that just then as she watched her demented rival riveting through the street. Miss Johnson's screams seemed even louder than Loretta MacKenzie's over by the local Woolworth's. Poor thing.

The show was so entertaining Donna wished she had a box of popcorn to munch as she watched. Then she remembered that over 90% of the world's popcorn was grown in Iowa, a coincidence, for she, too, was over 90% a homegrown Hawkeye! She salivated and reminisced how the popped kernels always made tasty eating at the movies, at home on Sunday nights, or on special occasions like this, times when worries about things like dust bunnies, DDT, chicken beaks pecking out of pimples, and even unexpected grandchildren waned to the insignificant. Popcorn could really bring life into proper perspective.

Donna always looked forward to the bottom of the box where there were yummy jawbreakers of unpopped, old maid kernels. Mmm. Donna knew she was fortunate to be able to enjoy and savor the festive, salted and buttered grains, for popcorn was a safe crop, one that had never killed any member of her immediate family. That was certainly more than could be said for some of its immediate, nitrogen-sucking cousins.

But Donna's popcorn perspective and glee were fleeting, as had been all her moods so far that Friday. Her thoughts of balls and wads and boxes and handfuls of salty and greasy popcorn were painfully exploded when audible Mary moans began streaming from Alex's private office.

"Ooh!" cried the stung-up, knocked around Church Camp sinner.

Praying for a new plague of distractions, Donna softly ran her right index finger over the top of the secretary's desk. She didn't find much dust there, but there were abundant crumbs and pieces of some sort of Miss Johnson mid morning snack. Donna pushed them off the edge of the desk, and they rode a sunbeam down onto the tile floor. Detective Mrs. Stone noticed none of them had any r-r-ridges, although they were suspiciously crisp to the touch and slightly off white. Obviously Miss Johnson couldn't eat just one of whatever it was she'd been crunching while accomplishing so little productive work and pretending to be so important just sitting there with her royal behind plopped down on her pathetic little office throne.

One of the scraps had stuck on Donna's clammy index finger. She put it up to her nose and gently sniffed. The crumb smelled strongly of seductive Mormon salt from the mines of Utah. Another clue.

“EEE!” yelled Mary, suffering from nervous tension and tummy pains despite the numbed purgatory of a modern anesthetic injected regionally rather than locally.

Donna thought to herself, “When it rains, it pours.” She hoped the building’s janitor would be coming in soon, so those suspicious food crumbs she’d pushed to the floor wouldn’t feed any dust bunnies. You didn’t want to see or get bitten by any dust bunnies in a doctor’s office, after all.

“Ooh, Aah....AAAH!” wailed Mary.

Donna hoped Mary didn’t feel she was being punished for her extracurricular activities at Church Camp. She remembered how she’d felt when she’d been punished once in fourth grade, and how the paddle had really hurt.

“Eee!”

It was still poignant and painful, even though it had been ages ago. Donna had been caught running on top of the children’s desks during recess, and she could still see and smell her teacher, Pearl Hodgkins, poised over her, ready to whack her as if she were a simple lower class dust bunny instead of one of her prized fourth graders.

There was Pearl with Donna over her knee. Pearl licked her lower lip, a repetitive habit she had developed because she hated the feeling of dry skin below her mouth. The paddle looked down at Donna’s little butt.

“Ooh!”

It had been controversial sentence, but Donna had no avenues for appeal. That paddle had really hurt.

“EEEE!”

Soon the spanking was over and Mrs. Hodgkins was back by her blackboard, staring down at the young minions in her charge.

Old Hodgkins had been a dour old wench, and none too bright. She knew enough Arithmetic, Language, and nearly enough Geography to pass herself off as a fourth grade teacher. She sure didn’t shower often enough, however.

“Ooh!” screamed Mary, who hurt, and was feeling punished.

Pearl often stood in silence at the blackboard, intimidating her class, daring any of them to contradict any fact she taught them, whether or not it was true or false. Fourth graders had no multiple choice options if they were in Pearl’s section of fourth grade. And if they did dare to contradict her, following her loud, verbal retribution, out came the paddle.

“Eee!”

Most every day Pearl held timed, math exercises at the blackboard. Four children would rush from their seats and try to be the fastest at solving long division or multiplication problems. Donna, nimble with her numbers was frequently called upon to cipher.

Pearl liked her student success stories. “Six times eight is forty-eight, nine divided by three is three, Church Camp August plus nine is May minus February is three! Yikes! Why haven’t I noticed this already?”

“Ooh, ahh ahh!”

“Do you like school?” Pearl would ask her class twice a week. Everyone liked school, whether they liked it or not. No one knew what would happen if they didn’t like school. But Pearl knew.

Donna’s stomach began to turn inside out and spin like a top. It dropped halfway down to her colon, apparently heading for a two week, all expense paid vacation in her hips. Goose flesh rolled over her neck and arms. She was afraid her liver might soon become envious of her traveling gut and collapse down into her right leg. That would be inconvenient.

Some of Alex’s instruments fell to the floor. “Ting! Tang!” they went, losing their precious sterility as they landed in a gulf of assorted, colonizing bacteria, some of which didn’t really care for their uneventful life downtown.

“How many of you like me?” Pearl asked, twice a day. Every hand always went up. Everybody liked Pearl, even if they hated her.

Donna paced through the office like a lioness readying for the hunt. Over to the window, back to the desk. Over to the window, back to the desk. Her stomach rumbled and gurgled. Where were the goddamned wildebeests when you needed a good meal?

Then she spied it!

There was some physician strength Alka Seltzer on top of the medicine cupboard behind the office desk. Maybe that would save her irritated digestive tract during Mary’s delicate procedure.

A general wallowing sound followed by a loud bing and a bang rang out from the Doctor’s office.

Pearl Hodgkins was banging away with six metal rulers on the back of Horace Bjornsen’s bleeding neck. She was punishing him for getting the lowest score in the state on the year’s standardized universal test of fundamental skills. Pearl really wished he’d been assigned to Miss Hoop’s section of fourth grade instead of hers. She didn’t care what disasters happened over there.

“Plop, plop, fizz fuzz,” asserted the antacid tablets as they dropped in and drifted down to the bottom of a quickly tapped glass of bottled doctor’s office water. The declaration they made was exactly as advertised on TV, except the final ‘fuzz’ this extra strength variety sang was of a seltzer dialect that did set the tablets apart from the second ‘fizz’ made by the over-the-counter drugstore variety.

“Oooh, eee! Ooh aah aah!” cried Mary over and over, and over again.

Donna anxiously waited for the last remnants of the tablets to turn into bubbles, then gulped the gurgling concoction down as quickly as Jeff would chuck a stein of his favorite, carbonated, lemon-lime Fizzies on a 95° summer day.

“Ooh, eee!”

Would this never end? Donna walked back over to Miss Johnson’s desk and picked up a book of nursery rhymes buried in the tangle of paper clutter. It was Stella’s favorite reading when she took her two, legally mandated, fifteen minute breaks each day. Donna opened the book.

Page four of the rhymes caught her attention:

“HUMPTY DUMPTY”

Humpty Dumpty was pulled off a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall,
and men,
Drenched with egg albumen,
Turned Humpty’s egg
With its flailing legs
Into scrambled beaks
And Dumpty eyes
Despite Humpty cries.
For breakfast, then,
Their stomachs to tend,
This egg they did send
To their colons below.
Trying hard to pretend
Tweren’t friendly Humpty at all
Just an Egg that did fall there.
Shame.

“That was not a very nice poem,” Donna thought to herself. She turned to page seven.

“QUITE CONTRARY!”

Mary, Mary,
quite contrary,
How does your garden grow?

Donna threw the book into the trash can so hard that four emptied bags of potato chips defied the reassuring laws of Hilldale’s gravity. They bounced up inside the can and hovered two seconds over discarded envelopes and papers, forming a mushroom cloud of crinkled wax paper that finally subsided back down onto the book of poetry.

“Ooh, eee!”

Already the bewitching Alkabrew was boiling up and fighting the terrible acid indigestion in Donna’s stomach. Each physician strength bubble was bursting into therapeutic, r-e-l-i-e-f, and the infernal, burning pit quickly began to convalesce. In twelve seconds, Donna’s stomach began to right itself. She felt its muscles rotating back into their proper place and regaining their original function. Donna sighed. What a relief it was! Her liver

was now safe in its cavity, too. A small but noisy belch, signifying final victory, passed over Donna's parched lips, but it was snagged by the bear trap of polite protection afforded by her blanketing right hand. The nosy world that longed to hear the embarrassment of a dainty, Donna burp would still have to wait.

Donna could hear Alex now. He was angry and yelling. His oral outrage blazoned into the waiting room, and Donna worried what the other professionals at work on a Friday in the upscale building would think, for the screaming was so loud it obviously could be heard throughout the structure.

Pearl Hodgkins used to scream at her kids, too, sticking her leathery face about four inches from the covering pupil. "Are you contradicting me?" she would howl, threatened that anyone eight years old might already know more than she did. The rage always made her gamy perfume take on a worse odor than usual, and usually she drooled enough she wouldn't have to lick her lips till a couple of minutes later.

"Mary, you're grounded for six years and five months!" Alex screamed, ending his tirade. Donna knew the worst had to be over and the delicate procedure must have ended. Counting the years out on her fingers, she realized Mary would be well over 21 by the next time she was let out of her room. It sounded like a stiff sentence.

"Yes, Father," replied a very meek and beaten Mary. Donna smiled. Alex could be so forceful, yet fair, with the children when circumstances warranted it. She moved back over to the window to see if there was yet a likewise happy ending for the mob scene down on Main Street.

Except for two apparent fatalities, bee prey she couldn't recognize, folks not stirring a bone, who seemed from a distance a deathly color of purple as they lay face down over in front of Jackson's Hardware Store, Main Street of Hilldale seemed deserted and lifeless now. Everyone had apparently either gone shopping inside the stores or else returned home. No remaining vestiges of Negro bees were left in sight.

Donna wondered if the insects would ever make it back to the Stones' house so Jeff could experience the responsibility of pet ownership. If not, that would be OK. Maybe their escape to freedom was for the best. Perhaps she should just talk to ABC about the family getting a dog. A collie would be nice. Collies made good TV pets. If brushed and combed every day, they probably didn't shed too much. Maybe a collie could be trained to kill dust bunnies.

The doctor's office faded to black, brightened to a pastel lavender, then dimmed to a rather traditional dark television grey. Finally an orange glow drifted into the room from an air vent in the ceiling, and soon the aura was filling the entire office with its colorful ethers. Donna looked down at the floor and the mysterious crumbs from Miss Johnson's mid morning snack stood up on whichever ends they individually chose to call their feet. They began to pair off and waltz on the floor around the desk, just as Alex and the maturely staggering apparition of daughter Mary emerged from the examination room.

Rejuvenated, struggling to regain dignity, Donna's eldest now slowly limped into the outer office, engulfed by a halo of strong, white light rivaling even the brightness of God. Its virginal aura surrounded Mary, and, to celebrate, a choir of chiming Gregorian doorbells deserted their thirteenth century repertoire and began to perform the Hilldale High school song. "Over Hill, Over Dale, We will win cuz we can't fail, See those Cossacks, Go rollin', Up field..." The entire portrait of sound and sight was a happy celebration of a daughter's elevation to regained purity.

Donna blushed and smiled, for she realized Mary had discarded her plaid and sand school clothing for a dress. And it wasn't just any dress! Mary was clad in an elegant vision of lace and flowing satin. The literal world might have thought this to be merely the starched cotton gown of a doctor's patient, for the blinded world was unable to appreciate what was obvious to a mother. Unmistakably her daughter was standing before her in the embodiment of her future, white, wedding dress! Mary tottered over to Donna for a quick, bonding hug. Donna smiled. Her daughter had at last been fetched from the clutches of smirking devils and returned to the safety of her mother's arms!

Everything was well in Hilldale, or at least in Dr. Alex Stone's office. "Fight for Hill, Fight for Dale, Show 'em Hilldale's never frail, Make our Cossacks, Next victory, Congealed..." Donna often wondered who had written those lyrics. They were so stupid, just like football and girls' basketball. Regardless, she felt tremendously relieved. The crisis was over.

Donna was sure the day wouldn't end before Mary would again take a glass of milk and flourish. Life would return to normal. Mary's rosebush cuts and Church Camp wounds would heal without scars, and someday, in the not too distant future, if Donna could convince Alex not to incarcerate their daughter in her room for the remainder of her teenage life, there would be a big, church wedding. It would be a social event of the decade for Hilldale and the rest of the county, and that evil, awful Angelo fellow from Church Camp wouldn't even get an invitation!

Mary went back into Alex's examination room, removed her patient's robe, put on her school clothes, and returned to the waiting room, while Alex wrote out a memo bill to Donna for services rendered. Donna's household allowance would be charged \$83.33 per month until July to repay her husband for Mary's office call. Alex was so considerate, he agreed not to assign any finance charges on these extended payment terms, though he worried it might set a bad precedent if any of Donna's friends found out.

Not even a bird could be heard outdoors, when Donna and restored Mary walked quietly through the door, heads held high, out into the sunny Friday. Main Street remained eerily empty except for the carcasses of two housewives still over by the hardware store. Donna wondered if the unhappy memorial would have to remain on the street until next Tuesday's scheduled street cleaning! She hoped not. Such a sight might disrupt Alex's business if the ladies began to decompose and no one wanted to come downtown.

The one happy result of the bee attack was that Miss Johnson was still nowhere in sight. For Donna looked around for her. Twice. Actually Stella Johnson was no longer

close to Alex's office. She was already well en route to new shores back east. After a few minutes of random attacks, the Negro bees had focused their attention on her and succeeded in chasing the secretary clear out of town. Her special hair spray reminded them of the scent of some equatorial flower they relished. They savored its nectar for its narcotic properties, though some of the bees back home really overindulged in the flower's spirits and it had been known to become so addictive it could ruin their lives.

Donna Has an Adult Conversation with Mary

Early epilogue: For the importation of the unregistered bugs, Acme Pets would be sued by our protective federal government in 1965. Soon after, the company declared bankruptcy and closed the doors of their U.S. office, adequate punishment for having brought the dangerous pests to the peace loving North American continent. Acme South America did continue shipping pets to Western Europe and Australia until 1971, however.

Not everyone in riot strewn Hilldale that Friday was unhappy about the bees' arrival in town. After the bee attack ebbed and the victims regained their wits, a windfall of suffering befell Dr. Alex Stone. It was a profitable windfall lasting well into the afternoon, as streams of sting and stung victims poured into his office for \$8.00 a pop treatment of their feverish aches and swelling pains. And more than three dozen of the casualties he treated would have to be charged extra upon their follow-up appointments for further treatment, prodding, and observation. A handful were traumatized enough they had to be referred to outside sources for newfangled, long-term, psychological counseling after the event. Until 1967, Alex would receive a handsome monthly commission from his assorted head-doctor comrades in town as they strove to make sense out of the event for the unlucky, confused victims.

Donna's latest agenda of the day was to drop Mary off at school, do some grocery shopping, go home, and relax. Donna needed to spend some quality time with herself, alone, the rest of the afternoon.

Arriving in the parking lot, Donna opened the door to the Chevy, and a final, trapped, overheated dawdler bee whizzed out of the car. It encircled Donna's head three times before it gave up and flew away annoyed, for she'd nearly downed it swinging her hands in disarray in the air near her head.

Mary, who, after her delicate procedure had finally ended, had been so sociable in her wedding dress, had flip-flopped to sullen upon donning her school clothes and going outdoors. As the car drove mother and daughter away, neither spoke or knew what to say. The veil covering unspoken thoughts began to worry Donna. Silence grew increasingly unbearable with each passing Hilldale block until it finally became just too dreadful and tense. Donna turned to the car's AM radio for some relief. As it warmed up, out of the tinny tiny speaker on the dashboard gushed the mournful strains of the hour's KHIL Golden Oldie from the 50's. "Teen angel, teen angel,..." Donna's hand fumbled for the knob, finally she got a grasp on it, and immediately shut the music off.

The car was still several blocks from Hilldale High, where Mary would get back into her appropriate routine before the school day ended. Donna was determined her daughter would not be an afternoon truant, now that any required, delicate procedures had successfully ended!

Trying to lighten her daughter's burden, Donna finally broke the ice in the front seat. She stammered, unintentionally bit her lip, swallowed to discourage anything unwanted from coming up, and finally blurted out, "Don't whimper, Mary."

"I didn't say anything, Mother." Mary hadn't whimpered. More silence.

"I thought I heard you whimper, just a little. There's no need to be morose, now."

Still more silence.

"It's so bright outside today, isn't it?" Donna asked cheerfully.

Nothing. Mary was being uncooperative. Donna didn't smile.

Donna took a deep breath. This would have to be a heavy, not casual, discussion. It was that time. The Chevy was stopped at the currently red stoplight suspended above the intersection of Elm and Grant Streets. The well-tuned General Motors engine provided little vibration or respite from the Friday ice. So Donna chose her words carefully, sighed, took her foot off the brake, and began. "You know what those creatures were in the living room when we were trying to leave the house, don't you?" She really hadn't planned or wanted this discussion for about a year, and frankly didn't feel inclined to have it right then.

"You mean the bees?" Mary asked, naively.

"No, not the bees," Donna laughed. "The ugly ones! The flock of dust bunnies all over the living room floor!"

"Oh, is that what those things were?" Mary didn't seem very interested in dust bunnies or in conversation at that moment, for she didn't feel very good. Despite this, she did have one mystery that still lay heavily in her worries. "Mother, did you notice anything strange about the ceiling in the living room today?" she asked in a muffled tone.

Donna was immediately annoyed by the unexpected response. "Don't change the subject, dear!" She collected herself, and said, "Mary, those creatures, those dust bunnies, are the bane of the tidy homemaker. You'll have to learn to keep them under control and off your floors some day when you manage your own household."

"It doesn't seem you are doing a very good job of controlling them, Mother," Mary pouted. She felt weak, not particularly mature, and strangely like she had four or more dust bunnies eating away inside her tummy. "Those things were everywhere! I'd never seen anything like it in our house before." Mary paused a moment, then wistfully asked The \$64,000 Question, "Where do dust bunnies come from, Mother?"

Donna wanted, nay, needed some more of her coffee. She was definitely feeling threatened, slightly embarrassed, and unabashedly annoyed. On the defensive, she retorted, "I don't know what's going on right now or where they're all coming from. I've controlled them the best way I've known how for well over sixteen years, Mary! It just seems to be a particularly fertile breeding season [Mary started sobbing softly again] for those bunnies this winter, that's all." Donna continued, more restrained, "Mary, just listen to me, now. One thing I do know is when you grow up and get married, you're going to

have to do battle with legions of dust bunnies for the rest of your natural life, or at least until you're old enough to go away joyfully into a nursing home where the sympathetic housekeepers will be responsible for eliminating the things. I won't always be there with a broom or a vacuum to protect you from them."

There was a pregnant pause, and finally Mary announced, "Mother, I'm not going to get married. I'm ruined for life!"

Donna scowled. "Don't be silly, dear. Lots of girls get into, well, fixes and situations they'd rather forget. And they do forget them, given a little time. We'll just pretend all of this Angelo stuff last summer and today never really happened. We'll pretend there never were so many dust bunnies at the bottom of the stairs, and tomorrow we'll wake up and everything will be, uh, just all right and back to normal! You'll forget that boy soon enough, probably sooner than I will! Then you'll finish growing up, go off to college, get married in a nice, white gown, raise a beautiful family with two children of your own, and maybe, just maybe, as modern science progresses, they'll find a way to eliminate dust bunnies totally and eternally from the lovely home in your future. I'm sure everything will turn out perfectly for you, Mary!"

"Yes, Mother." Mary started to cry for the umpteenth time. Donna was really tired of these tears.

Suddenly Donna had a shocking, terrible thought. What if she were wrong and Mary continued to feel ruined? What if she opted against homemaking, and instead decided to get a job like that Miss Johnson floozy? A working career girl! A Stone female without an Electrolux! Donna buried the painful images and said, "Now Mary, I want you to go to school this afternoon and..." Donna couldn't think of how to end her advice, so she fumbled a bit, "pretend nothing has happened, and, and, be a good sport!"

"Yes, Mother. Johnny Angel always said I was a good sport, too."

"Mary! Don't ever mention that name again! Now grow up, stop the waterworks, and go ponder what I told you about the dust bunnies. You'll probably have some questions later about the specifics of dealing with them, how to humanely kill them and so forth. These are questions that we don't have a chance to go into right now, but, if you ask me, I'll try to do my best to answer anything you want to know, even though this is a bit of a, well, an uneasy and embarrassing subject for me. But I can tell you truthfully, I really wish my mother had had this discussion with me back when I was your age."

"Yes, Mother," Mary said, her voice gaining some strength and dignity. "I'll think about killing dust bunnies all afternoon."

Mary didn't seem too embarrassed by the subject matter, and Donna was proud her daughter was acting so maturely and not even giggling or blushing. She wondered how she would have reacted to this discussion back when she was a teenager. Probably not half as well.

"And, by the way, I'll talk to your father about you being grounded for (what was it he said...), six years? I heard him doling out the sentence when you were in his office."

Donna smiled. "It seems to be a little excessive to me. You know, I think he was just reacting to his hurt and anger of the moment. Men are like that." She smiled again. "I'm sure he hates to see his little girl growing up so fast. But there's no need to worry. I'll take care of your father. You'll be back walking the streets in no time." Donna instantly realized those were not the exact words she'd meant to say. Never mind.

"Yes, Mother."

The Chevy pulled up in front of Hilldale High, Donna let Mary out, and then she drove over to the local Benner Tea where she filled her four wheeler of a shopping cart with two of everything orange or in orange packaging that she could find in the seven aisles in the store. Then she made a return safari through each echelon to supplement the colorful, interesting foodstuffs and household substances with drab, less interesting staples in assorted other colors.

When Donna felt confident she'd bagged all she'd need for the tribe to survive the upcoming week-end, it was off to checkout. Waiting for the next free cash register, she noted that the rest of the market's shoppers, or so it seemed, weren't appropriately fascinated by orangestuffs. Rather they seemed only interested in stocking up on spray cans of insecticide. Almost all of them seemed to be buying unusually large quantities of weapons to tackle flying insect pests. Donna felt they were overreacting a bit, but didn't have time to discuss the hoarding with anybody she knew at the market, for too quickly it was her turn to check out and pay up.

As box and can slid on the horizontal escalator in front of the register, she smiled continuously at the cashier, waited for the final computation of the tab, handed over the appropriate, crisp bills and exact change, and, after the helpful grocery boy aided her in getting the bounty stashed into the trunk of the Chevy, she at last drove back through the empty streets to her lovely, Hilldale home.

Mrs. Turnbull Pays Donna a Visit

“Oh, dear, I left the front door wide open,” Donna thought, as the car pulled into the driveway of the Stones’ house. It was no real problem, because the Stones lived in a safe neighborhood in which there had not been a burglary or any other felony since April 16, 1924 (although there had been four occasions with a peeping tom who was never captured back in 1948). So Donna felt secure as she launched into the kitchen with the first two of seven large, double bagged brown grocery sacks heaped with orange treasure and after-thought food. She nearly gasped, therefore, with no free hands to hide her sincere astonishment, when she stumbled upon Mrs. Turnbull, her relatively new neighbor from across the street, sitting at the kitchen table as if she owned the place. Donna felt two point six seconds of very strong territorial annoyance, but fortunately her training in social etiquette and fear of the gallows prevented her instincts from leading her for one of the sharp steak knives over in the silverware drawer.

“Oh, hello, Donna,” Mrs. Turnbull said, casually picking at her front tooth with her fingernail and acting as though her trespass was nothing unusual. “I heard some commotion over this way an hour or so ago, and then I was looking out my window a little while ago and I saw your door was wide open, so I thought I’d better come right on over here and make sure everything was OK.”

Great.

Donna noticed that Mrs. Turnbull, first name Midge, had helped herself to some of Donna’s Maxwell House in the interim. Though she would try to be pleasant to this coffee snatcher neighbor of eight months, it would be a struggle. Donna found it a daily aggravation that Mrs. Turnbull was always peering out her front room picture window that was lined up directly across the street from the Stones’ front door. Midge didn’t like to turn her rather thick neck to the right or left too much, so the days usually found her taking visual notes about any activity going on at the Stones’ house, particularly Donna’s activities. It was rumored that Madame Midge had the loosest and commonest tongue on the block, so Donna never called her on the phone, unlike most of her other neighbors. She had only rarely invited Midge into her house, and then only when there was absolutely no polite alternative.

“Thank you for your concern, Midge. Everything’s OK, I just had to run some morning errands and I guess I must have left in a hurry. Rest assured, I usually do close the door when I [flee, er,] leave the house. I’m sure you know that.” Donna began unpacking oranges and thirteen kinds of cheese from her grocery bag. “Maybe I should make us a fresh pot of coffee. That stuff in your cup must be fermenting by now, or at least be getting terribly stale.”

“Your eye looks swollen, Donna,” Midge observed. “What happened to you? Get in a fight with Alex?”

Donna felt her stomach muscles tightening. “Oh, it’s just a little bee sting from a run in with a swarm of bugs a while ago. I got stung several times when I went downtown to see

Alex,” she explained. “Only the battle wound above my eye really got so swollen that it shows, but they’re all a little sore. They’ll go down in an hour or two, I suppose. It’s manageable.” Donna didn’t have particularly strong physical reactions to bee stings, unlike Jeff. She wasn’t sure whether or not she was allergic to Midge, however.

“Baking soda will take out the poison and the sting, Donna,” advised her neighbor, patently well versed in folklore medicine.

Donna tied a mental string around her finger to help her remember to check and count the good silverware after Midge’s departure, for Midge had had the house to herself for untold eons before Donna came home to the rescue. Even though it was against her personal code of ethics to be suspicious, Donna didn’t really trust Mrs. Turnbull.

Turning on the gas, Donna lit the burner on her stovetop, dumped two scanty scoops of pre-ground Maxwell House in the metal filter of her percolator, ignoring all the while the coffee grinds’ syncopated pleas for mercy. Next she drew clean, fluoridated, chlorinated, Hilldale water from the tap into the pot, and sat her twentieth century cauldron down on the stove. At last she was able to return to one of the grocery sacks where she removed some carrots and yams, vegetables conveying only wee traces of eight year old DDT in their cells. After massaging them carefully between her index finger and thumb, she placed them neatly in the household refrigerator’s crisper so they would remain fresh, healthy, and colorful. Before closing the refrigerator door, she paused to take a quick second peek at her vegetables. They were simply lovely, and they warranted great admiration for having evolved such stunning coloration.

There would be no arguments or discussion about it; Mary would have to serve orange food at her wedding. That was all there was to it!

Midge’s husky voice interrupted the fashion show in the fridge. “Fresh coffee will be nice. How are the kids, Donna?” Pause. “How’s Mary?” Midge smirked to herself, but Donna sensed it anyway and instantly figured Mailman Dick had been snitching to Mrs. Turnbull about the morning’s crisis with her daughter. It seemed obvious that ignoring Midge’s nosy innuendo was the best course of action to take in this situation. Pretense was a well developed art form which most of the adults in Hilldale had perfected and Donna was a pretense virtuoso. Calling Midge’s bluff, she responded, “Oh, Jeff’s got a big, new, red pimple on his face, and Mary’s just...” she aborted her thought in midstream, then conceived a finale to the sentence, “just, well, you know how Mary is, always maturing so fast for her age.”

“Yes,” beamed Midge, “my Mike’s doing the same things boys at his age always do, too!” She was hoping Donna’s fresh brew would perk her up, because she needed some social energy for several sordid phone calls she planned to make very soon to a couple of unsavory friends. Before the day drew to a close she wanted to make sure the word had spread far and wide that Mary Stone, that fine upstanding young straight A student and TV starlet, dressed only in her nightgown and housecoat, no less, had jumped out the window of her father’s den and was seen bawling on the grass in the front yard of the Stones’ property on a Friday morning when she was supposed to be in life science class at Hilldale

High. Midge knew it was all true; she'd memorized the scene while surveying the neighborhood from her cherished periscope of a picture window.

Trying to take back the initiative, Donna asked, "When are you and Fred going to have another child, Midge? Everyone needs two children!" Donna had often thought Midge and Fred Turnbull were a little strange on that count, and though Jeff liked to go over to Mike's house after school, Donna would have felt better about Jeff being so friendly with young Mike if he'd had a sibling like most of the other children in town.

"Oh, I think one's more than I can handle, Donna," replied Midge, who, if the truth were known, felt terribly inadequate about her lack of a second bundle of joy. She wasn't going to bestow Mike with a brother or a sister, however, due to some organic problems she had that prevented her from conceiving children or any original thoughts. In typical Turnbull fashion, Midge refused to dwell on these shortcomings. That never helped, and whenever she did dwell, her dwelling ended up the stage for more scuffles with Fred. So why bother? "You know Mikey's latest thing?" she asked.

"No, what's that?" Donna said, hoping the coffee would soon finish and her neighbor would drink up fast and leave.

"He's got a couple of pet rabbits in the back yard. Fred built them a little hutch to live in, and you know, their poop doesn't even smell that bad! We might have been able to keep them in the house, if they just didn't have so many fleas!"

Donna softly choked, but put her hand over her mouth just in the nick of time so not even God, if He were close by, would know. Recovering, she inquired, "Mike, uh, has, bunnies?"

"Yes, Donna, and they're the cutest things!" At that instant, Midge could no longer ignore the tiny something crawling on her left leg just above her shoe. She shook her leg ever so slightly and scratched her shin with her right shoe. A distant, muffled little squeal of disapproval protested from down below, and the itching, biting feeling of whatever it was that had been on her leg simply disappeared. Midge continued, "One of them is named Bugs, ain't that the cutest, and..."

Donna pretended to listen, but all she could think about was Jeff playing with Mike's rabbit bunnies, getting rabbit hair and fleas on his clothes, bringing that fur and those bugs across the street and into the house, and how it would end up messing up the well-groomed living room. Then the rabbit fur would be feasted upon, giving newfound hope to those blankety-blank household bunnies she was fighting so insistently to send back to their maker. They'd end up getting fleas and the infestation would come upstairs and bite her in her bed at night. It was really no wonder the dust bunnies were breeding out of control this winter with neighbors like this!

"...and the other one is named Thumper, because he likes to kick Mike with his hind legs, and he's white and has black spots." Midge finished her report, took three deep breaths, and changed the subject. "Fred's thinking about running for mayor next June since he doesn't like the way things are being run down at City Hall."

Somewhat foolishly Donna retorted, "Well, you know what they say, Midge, you can't fight that place." Then she felt a bit devious and directed her gaze directly at Mrs. Turnbull. "We're not allowed to have pets like rabbits in our house, not unless the script for our TV series calls for them." Donna didn't want to miss this opportunity to remind neighbor Midge that the Stone family was on national television every week, and the frumpy Turnbells had never even been called on to be extras. Donna smiled, poured two cups of coffee, and went to the cupboard to get her anti-depressant. She put three drops of the miracle drug into her Maxwell House.

"What's that you're doing, Donna?" Midge never missed a movement; that was against her religion.

"Oh, you know, I was a little down in spirits, and it's some medicine Alex gave me to cheer me up." An uncharacteristically nasty thought crossed Donna's mind, and before she could return to her pseudo Donna propriety she asked, "Would you like to try some of it, Midge? I've been really seeing the world in a, well, different light, since this morning when I first started on this."

With no hesitation Midge declared, "Sure!"

Midge was a Dristan junkie and a chronic hypochondriac; any new miracle medicine that promised to cure any or all of her ailments grabbed her instant attention. There was always even that slight chance, however remote, it might help her with her organic problems.

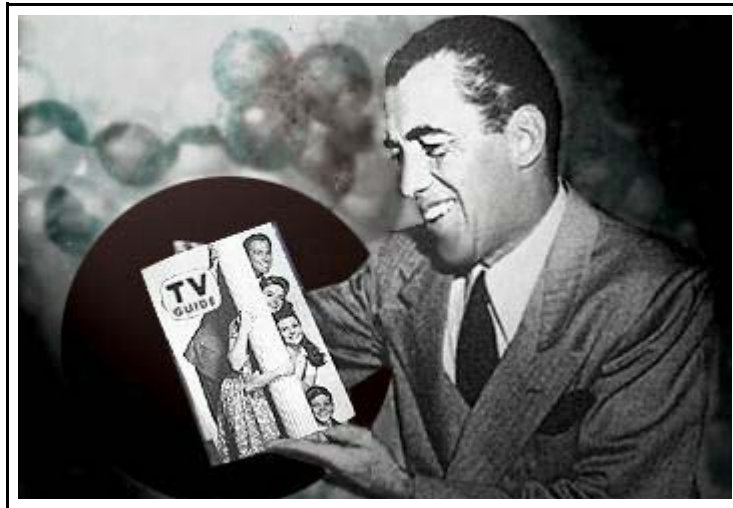
"This is a special test drug sent to Alex by the federal government!" Donna wanted to emphasize its importance. "They're only trying it out on people in several places across the country. Alex says it's also being tested in some rural areas of the South, where people can't even afford aspirin and the like, and then here in Hilldale. Alex really felt honored to be one of the handful of doctors they gave it to. I suppose he was chosen, well, most probably, because our family is on TV." Donna surveyed her neighbor's usually smirking face carefully, to see if she had managed to rouse any signs of impending annoyance. Then she put an extra drop or two of the federal happy juice in Midge's coffee and set it down in front of her. "Imagine, not being able to afford aspirin!" Donna chimed. "Now that's poor!"

"You've heard what's happening Sunday night, haven't you?" Midge's voice sounded so very serious, Donna knew to dread the punch line. Midge took a sip of the steaming, new coffee, and had to recoil a smidgen when it slightly singed the tip of her favorite, wagging organ attached to the bottom of her mouth.

Worried that there was another PTA meeting she'd forgotten, Donna glanced at the calendar on the kitchen wall. There were no appointments noted on February 9, so she replied, "There's nothing on my schedule for Sunday. I haven't heard about anything unusual happening."

Midge became hushed and serious, first weaving her yarn in a near whisper, seemingly fearful spies were teeming in the housewives' midst. "The Beatles, this group of

four longhaired English rock and roll hoodlums, are going to be on Ed Sullivan. I've heard they may be Communists!" Midge's face turned slightly red as she mentioned The Enemy. "Fred's friend Harvey Lankin down at the ball-bearing factory gets a newsletter from somewhere or another back East, and he showed Fred an article in it where these Beatles were exposed as card-carrying Communists!"



Ed Sullivan Admiring The Stones Family

"Beetles, huh?" Donna didn't know the spelling, but it didn't really matter since this was a verbal conversation rather than a letter or a written story, where misspelled words would be exposed more graphically to visual criticism. The very word, regardless of its alphabetical content, reminded Donna of her mother's warnings about bees and beetles, birds and swallows, and that she hadn't spoken with her mother in over two hours. Not since back before the bee storm.

"Yes, and to think they're letting something like that on national TV!" Midge's voice had elevated a few decibels as she sounded the attack on the Stones' weekly medium of choice. "I've heard there are a lot of Communists working at those networks. Is that true, Donna?"

"I don't think so, Midge. I've never met any, although we're generally too busy creating happiness across America to delve into people's private politics."

Normally Donna would have defended television more strongly, for its capitalists were going to help put Jeff and Mary through college, but she really could care less what Midge thought about it. She made a mental note not only to count silverware, but also to catch Ed Sullivan Sunday night, because if this English band proved to be a ratings boom for him, she might suggest the network write them into a script of one of the Stones' future episodes. A little rock and roll, if placid enough, might spice up the show. Maybe these Beatles could play at Mary's spring prom episode and turn it into a really big show. Not too much of their music, not too much drum banging like some of those rock and roll groups,

or it might force President Johnson to change the channel on his TV at the White House. Donna smiled, then wondered how far Midge's eyes would pop out of their deep, ugly sockets if these Beetles pulled up in a car across the street from her very own picture window!

There was a pregnant pause, which was aborted when Donna asked, "What do you mean by long hair, Midge?" Donna imagined some basically nice boys with hair a little longer than the style Alex wore. That would be all right with her, even if it was a touch shaggy. That fellow Elvis Presley had worn his hair like that in the 50's. It had been a shocking, passing trend that faded away as the more clean cut kids, the ones that didn't grind their groins like a blender in heat, kids like Harriet Nelson's son, had become more popular singers than Elvis.

"Really long hair. I mean hair like a girl's hair! Locks as long as mine!" squealed Midge. Giving an animated demonstration, she released an aerial shower of nearly weightless, white particles off her scalp as she grabbed and pulled on her own hair, which, judging from its appearance that particular Friday, had not coped well with Thursday evening's pink rollers she'd wrapped in it.

Donna affected a gasp, intentionally not covering her mouth, again envisioning new pickle recipes while trying to work on perfecting her upcoming flabbergasted reaction before the cameras. She didn't really care at all about Midge's hairdo or English boys with long locks. And it wasn't much of a challenge practicing her acting on this dull and easily fooled neighbor. Donna had only one sincere prayer as she feigned astonishment. She looked toward the upstairs bathroom and begged God to rid the house of any strange mites, fleas, or other creatures released from the ample dandruff storm raining off Midge's split ends.

"...and the young girls apparently love 'em. What's becoming of this world, Donna?" Midge took a long gulp of her coffee and burped, loudly enough she even surprised herself. She rarely covered her mouth to hide such events, but should have this time. "I can't imagine liking a boy that looks like a girl! Is that why we fought and beat the Krauts and Japs and keep the Ruskies and Red Chinese at bay?"

Donna had lost all interest in this tirade, and she yawned her opinion of the conversation, barely covering her face to hide fifteen aging stretch marks of boredom. She yearned to go over to the counter to admire her new, brown bagged, Benner Tea treasure chest. It was anxiously awaiting her attention, bursting loose its hinges with troves of orange-laden edible diamonds for the refrigerator and cupboards and poisonous rubies for under-the-sink. But no. The treasure trove had to wait impatiently for her attention. Instead she was resigned to the role of uninspired, polite hostess for this dullard of a Turnbull. How depressing!

Donna took a deep breath. It seemed to inspire some surprising depth of thought. "Well, Midge, I tell you, ever since President Kennedy was shot last November, our ratings have been up, but I've sensed some sort of change in the attitude of the public, judging from the mail sent to us, I mean the fan letters we get because of the TV show. Quite

frankly, Midge, I don't know what's becoming of the world or why young girls like boys at all. Even the ones with short hair are no angels these days." Donna beamed a second, proud to have encapsulated her feelings in eighty words.

"Ain't it the truth?!" interjected Midge, a poignant tone permeating her two bit response.

"Now Midge, going back to those rabbits Mike is keeping as pets, don't you think there are already enough bunnies in the world, or at least in this neighborhood?"

Midge ignored the question. She was on a roll and there was no stopping her now. "Red Communists are the problem with boys, Donna. They have agents everywhere! Even here in Hilldale!"

Midge would know, she kept a watch on everywhere in Hilldale, though most particularly on her neighbors across the street. Donna felt very annoyed. Midge cared more about preceived Reds than real, apocalyptic rabbits!

"Those damned Communists! They're trying to take over the world! My son Mike will never be one. We'll make sure of that! Fred and I will keep butch wax plastered on his crew cut until the final seconds of the inevitable, upcoming, nuclear Armageddon! This whole damned world is doomed to be blown to bits, Donna! And to think, you and Alex don't even have a bomb shelter in your back yard...what with all the money you two make!"

Midge took another big gulp of coffee, and noticed little colored disks were circling around in her cup in an un-American ethnic dance. The circles twirled joyfully on the crest of Maxwell House, happy to be thirteen assorted colors of browns and blacks that had never existed in the entire universe until that particular moment. Continuing despite having spied the galactic, socialist agents in her mug, Midge became a bit more subdued. "I sure hope Fred gets elected mayor next summer. He'll make some real, American changes downtown. And he'll get those Commie teachers out of our schools here in Hilldale. To fight the Reds at their own game, you've gotta start small and in small places, Donna."

"Yes, Midge. How's the coffee?" Donna smiled, realizing Midge's mind was definitely a small place to start with.

"It looks a little funny to me, maybe even sinister, but I can't really taste that medicine you put in it." Midge delighted in the smell and taste of Dristan, and was disappointed the new, federal medicine was so bland and unappetizing. "You know, Fred and me, we drink Folgers at our house. We really like it."

"The medicine may not have much taste, Midge, but I guarantee it will elevate your spirits. Soon." Donna smiled again, stood up, went over to the counter and unpacked three cans of pumpkin and two plastic bags full of pastel orange, sugary circus peanut candy from a still half full grocery bag. Studying the bon bons with their mass produced, perfect curves, ridges, and concave peanut shell dents, completely ignoring her unwelcome guest, she wondered if tomorrow would be a lemon colored Saturday to contrast against today's holiday of Friday orange.

Midge either felt slighted that Donna wasn't paying any attention to her anymore, or had run out of churning subject matter. "Well, listen, Donna, I hate to cut this short, but I need to get home to make a couple of phone calls."

Finally.

Donna turned back to her neighbor and said, "And I'm sorry, too, Midge, but I need to get these groceries unpacked before they spoil. Thank you so very much for coming by and checking on the house. Listen, I'll give you a call soon." Donna hid her hand and crossed her fingers as she said the last phrase, for then it wouldn't be a lie. She'd learned that helpful trick as a child back in Iowa. Her fingers still tied in a braid, she continued, "We'll talk, maybe over some Folgers next time. Give my best to Fred and Mike."

"Don't be a stranger, Donna."

"Oh, I won't, Midge," Donna replied, mindful it was hard to be a stranger to someone who was constantly spying on every move you and your family would make.

Midge stood up, waddled out of the kitchen, and was soon across the street in her living room on her scandalmonger Princess Phone Line to the outside world. But none of her usual contacts seemed very interested in a Mary Stone, prone-in-the-yard story, because the town's party and private lines were all abuzz in a very heated one track conversation.

Bees were in. Bees were hot. Only bees were worth a talk. Everyone had adopted their own theories why the peaceful city of Hilldale had been singled out and so savagely assailed, completely out of the blue, by such a mob of angry, out-of-town, Negro bees. Property values were already plummeting across the city's neighborhoods as scores were considering relocating to more distant, safer, villages. Everywhere a Friday state of mass, primal, middle class, paranoia was feeding on itself and getting worse by the minute. Rumors flew and murmurs were whispered of further, imminent, surprise, and unwarranted insect attacks.

Husbands left well paying jobs to defend their homes. Children were kept inside during school during recess, then sent home early, where entire families spent the early afternoon huddle in their depreciating castles, protected by tightly locked windows and doors.

Peeking through small cracks in the drapes, the brave of heart occasionally peeked out of their self imposed jails to see what new monsters might be flying around in the unsafe, outside world. Thus, a usually succulent tale of Mary Stone cutting class was buried on page seven of the day's Grapevine Journal. Midge felt thwarted and really pissed off about it.

Over by the city's sewer plant, Mother Nature took a sniff and didn't flinch from the smell that would make most American humans recoil or even vomit. No, no, no. She paused and smelled the rose scented Hilldale fear in the air, and it made Her laugh and laugh. And laugh.

Donna Gets a Temporary Job

Half an hour after Midge's departure, Donna had finished unpacking her Friday groceries, having properly introduced them individually to their new home as she progressed down through the goodies in each of the seven bags. She'd put everything away except for two boxes of Wheaties. She'd left them out on the counter and was four minutes into respectfully admiring the boxes' artistic layout when the phone call came from a harried Alex. Doctorworld was brimming with more swollen patients than Carter had over-the-counter liver pills. Overworked and strained, the windfall did have a down side. Alex was having trouble giving the business to all these patients without his secretary in his office.

"I've seen Gene Grey, Norma Shaughnessey, Roger Roundtree, and a bunch of others in just the past half hour alone, and am really stacked up and getting behind, Donna," Alex puffed. "I keep yelling 'Stella,' 'Stella,' from the office to the waiting room, hoping she's made it back from the riots and lunch, but I guess for whatever reason she's not coming back today. I'm worried about her, but, in the meantime, could you possibly come back to the office and help me out? I know it's a lot to ask after what you've been through this morning."

Donna smiled and quickly agreed to return to do whatever she could to help, although she felt exhausted and had planned to take a nice nap in front of The Match Game on TV. But in less than ten minutes, she'd finished the morning dishes in the sink, refreshed her makeup, re-sprayed her hair, and was out the door headed for the Chevy.

Two paces into her trek, Donna mistakenly stepped on a crack separating the cement blocks of the walkway that led to the driveway. It was an accidental oversight, and she quickly jumped off the cement upon hearing her mother, back in the house, scream, "Donna! My back!"

Donna froze for a moment, now standing on the grassy knoll by her bed of red and pink geraniums. Embarrassed, she looked up toward Midge's window, assuming her neighbor was on guard, hoping she hadn't noticed Donna's attack on her mother. Mrs. Turnbull was there all right, but not posted at the window for a change. Midge was too hard at work, visible through the glass, busy at work, frantically vacuuming her living room rug.

What unfortunate timing! Donna could only pause a moment to savor this chance for examination, because she had to go to work. She'd rarely been given the opportunity to scrutinize the Turnbull's house without a return stare from its posted window sentry.

What Donna spied was rather confusing. As Midge traipsed back and forth across her living room floor, she drove her vacuum with her left hand and carried her precious Princess Phone in the right one, towing it along despite the fact it was not even off the hook, growing out of her ear as usual. Donna found this mode for accomplishing housework a little clumsy and odd, and the only explanation for it that she could guess was that Midge was carrying the phone around for fear she'd miss the sound of its ringing while the vacuum was purring.

Further study of this unusual practice might be warranted when there was more time.

Next Donna focused directly on Midge's vacuum cleaner. This machine would never get a good review. Midge's sweeper was an upright, probably a Hoover, but definitely a second-class appliance that couldn't trap nearly as much dirt as her own superior Electrolux canister pro. "She's probably got a house full of rabbit hair, fleas, and pet 'Bugs' bunny fur, and who knows what else in there that she can't hope to control with such an inferior model!" thought Donna, smirking disapprovingly, feeling very happy to be one status rung higher than Midge on the vacuum totem pole of conspicuous consumption.

Having no further time to pursue her survey, Donna went over to the car and opened the door. She carefully edged herself onto the vinyl seat covering, buckled her safety belt, and slammed the door. Revving the engine, she backed out of the driveway, got the gasoholic buggy into drive and set her course for downtown.

It was such a more pleasant drive to the office this second trip of the day. No buzzing, no bells, no babies, no thoughts at all interrupted Donna's concentration or prevented her from watching out for the other guy. Hilldale was brighter than it had ever been in February, though Donna was surprised the streets outside were so lifeless. The town seemed beautiful, nonetheless. Everything was under control! Mary and Jeff were in class where they were supposed to be, the dishes were done at home, and Alex was finally waiting for her, needing her.

She arrived downtown after four red stop lights and exactly twenty-one minutes in the Chevy. Quickly she ran into her husband's waiting room, and soon the pleasant and quiet afternoon outdoors was forgotten. It was so chaotic inside the office! Feeling overwhelmed by the moaning, miserable crew of suffering patients (there was standing room only), Donna hid her initial fears of secretarial inadequacy and within a half hour was running the place like a seasoned pro, a real trooper.

She became a wizard at organizing the patients' queue, she excelled at pleading with agitated patients to, "Please be patient and don't stop breathing until the Doctor can see you," followed by a, "How are the two children, Mr./Mrs. So and So?" And as the clients returned from treatment, she would sting them for the second time in the day, albeit in a highly professional manner, this time with a polite request, "That will be eight dollars, please," followed by the query, "Did the doctor ask you to make a second appointment for further treatment?" and ending it with a polite "Thank you very much."

Through all the chaos and large profit margins she skillfully sported a sweet, disarming, Donna Stone smile and happily munched on salty chips from a bag she'd found in the middle right drawer of the secretary's desk. The only discomfort she felt was the strain in her jaw as she was eating, reminding her realize how very tired she really was.

When the afternoon finally ended, Donna hurried back home in nineteen minutes and thirteen seconds, and quickly cooked minute steaks and mashed potatoes and gravy for the family. The children had gotten home early, for school had been dismissed at 2:45 for bee vacation, and even Jeff had followed his father's instructions and already learned his lines by four o'clock. Mary still seemed withdrawn, and flatly refused to venture into the living

room for some reason or another, so she stayed in the kitchen sipping from three or four glasses of whole milk while helping her mother with the delicate procedures involved in cooking, frying, and mashing.

To add some interest to the evening meal, Donna put twenty-seven drops of orange food coloring into the drab, white potatoes. The children, particularly Jeff, were suspicious of these spuds at first, but soon they adapted and ate even more potatoes than they did the previous Wednesday night. Donna ate just a little meat and mash herself, asked the children to do the dishes, and then quite early excused herself from the dinner table to go to bed.

Dragging herself yawning up the stairs and into the master bedroom, she fell down, consumed by her fatigued body, shaking the springs and mattress of the twin bed only she possessed. Reassuring dreams came quickly and lasted throughout the evening and night. They were, however, interrupted a minimal five times by loud screams and squawks from the neighbors' house across the street. Each time Donna would hear the nearby noise, she'd rouse up a bit, but only enough to realize it was just Midge at work again, probably protecting Castle Turnbull from infiltrating Communist agents who were trying to stamp out real Americans and their debatable backyard pets. Soon after each loud episode waned Donna's eyelids would slam shut again and she'd return to the fantasy world of peaceful slumber.

Mother Nature Visits Hilldale

3 AM: Mother Nature was through with Her delicate procedure and She'd returned to Her apparent banishment in the outskirts of town. She smirked like so many of the mortals, pleased with Her success.

One hour previous, She'd donned the disguise of a cleaning lady and slid on the coiling wind into Hilldale. She'd avoided all the picket fences and chemical traps by bringing with Her fresh, country air to lift Her on Her mission. She'd soared above the tarnished ground, mostly above the sidewalks in town to avoid the baited traps awaiting Her in the desecrated yards and gardens.

As She glided over the streets, She paused to greet Her friends in an anthill, little ones eking out their living burrowing down below the narrow crack of the cement slabs in the sidewalk. They were Her good friends who deposited evidence of their social existence with dried spheres of unsightly soil mounded atop their little underground cities.

She stopped to wave good tidings and offer support to the occasional weed struggling hard to maintain its existence in the most pygmy of a crevice breaking the surface of blandly groomed Walnut street.

She applauded Her most tenacious children, the dandelions, the veritable dust bunnies of the lawns, eternal survivors in a sea of green blades otherwise lacking diversity. Immortal bloomers despite armies of weapons of genocide thrown at them by the indignant gardeners of the organized grass.

She winked at the evolving weevils, still happily eating their fill of poisoned backyard vegetables.

And She blessed the mosquitoes, buzzing into town to visit their favorite bloodsucking taverns and bars from their daytime hideouts near the undrained swamp by the Hilldale sewage plant.

As She passed the unnatural grass in the endless, manicured lawns, the blades called out their greetings to Her, too, remembering Her from the time they were in the womb of their seeds, but She spurned their cries, or worse yet, cursed them. They'd become simple seas of domesticated slavery, chattels of the most irreverent of all Her creatures, the urban sub-humans.

Fancy lawns and tidy gardens. Two of the many tricks these heathens had pulled to deny Her Her place as they worshipped their own concoctions and spells, and felt the comfortable illusion of safety far from their Mother, having cast Her out in their petty chains from their town.

Anger filled Mother. The wind growled at Her command. The wind growled when She commanded. It's not nice to fool Mother Nature. Hilldale would learn.

Beat the town of Hilldale on its own, chemical terms.

No key, no need. Nature sailed through the walls like a ghost into Alex Stone's office in downtown Hilldale, and She blew the doors off the locked medicine case in his waiting room with a quick burst of wind seventeen times stronger than any tornado She had created the past four months.

Six of Her countless branches grabbed six remaining brown vials. A substance this Dr. Alex had been sent from Washington, D.C.

Quickly She was out of the office with her load. Back above the main square She drifted over and above the city's Water Tower.

The Water Tower, a symbol of city purity, safety, and control. Soon a deceiving safety, The Tower of steel thought it knew it all from peering down on all the daily and nightly transactions below.

Mother Nature hovered above it, still free on outland air. She invited vials of spinning liquid to eddy out from Her grasps. Liberated, She commanded the vortex to drain through the tiniest of rusted holes She spied in the top of The Tower of bubbles. Even the drugs, not of Nature's own design, obeyed Her.

They spilled into the reservoir below, where She made sure drug and water churned clockwise enough to make Her own new devious brand of chocolate milkshake.

Water and drug were one. A solution for tomorrow's surprise. A surprise before there would be a chance to heal from the onslaught of Mother's nice bees.

You can fool some of Mother Nature some of the time, but She has too many tricks up Her sleeves to fool all of Her for very long. The Water Tower burped and groaned.

Pleased, She smirked. Her lightning bolted through the sky on all sides of Hilldale, followed by a clamoring thunder that immediately sent terror into the hearts of thousands of nocturnal, feeding dust bunnies throughout the city. Most of them froze into a motionless, catatonic state of worry that it might soon be going to rain.

The May-ikad-or or the Town of Hillypu

(Donna's Dream)

Near morning, Donna's pleasant dreams turned acetose and she had a terrible nightmare. She drifted off across the sea to Japan, where her very mature daughter Mary-Yum was about to be wed, and her groom to be was to be her brother, Jeffrey-Poo. All the family and folks in the city of Hillypu were happy the siblings had made such good friends. There was going to be a giant celebration, despite the fact Jeffrey-Poo's illegitimate chicken son had recently hatched from an egg on his chin. The thing had bonded to him and was following him around every where he went.

Not quite all was divine and sunshine for Mary-Yum, either, for she bore a developing baby angel with flapping, white wings growing out of her back. He burden was punishment for some unmentionable error of summer judgment. The baby angel was very animated and constantly pleaded not to be cooked, eaten, or maturely born on a Friday morning. This was Donna-Sing's burden, for only she could hear its endless protests.

The blueprints were all in place for the wedding when evil Midgeisha Turnbull-oh-oh, telephone handset roosting high in her hair, swept down onto the stage out of her large glass aquarium perched forty-four feet above the ground upon a magic beanstalk. She was dragging behind her a terrified Mailman of the prefecture, Dicky-San.

The spiteful Midgeisha immediately tried to stop the nuptials by pronouncing Donna-Sing's entire family agents of an evil television conspiracy of roundeye Communist Japs. Next she aimed her fingernail of great proportion and painted doom at Jeffrey-Poo, branding him to be a particularly evil enemy of Hillypu for having cohabited two years with a polygamous female chicken, having bore a half breed child recently, before he deserted the silly hen and fell in love with his tainted sister. Directing an unhappy glance at Mary-Yum, Midgeisha accused the maiden of being a state criminal, who, in her spare time, when she thought no one was looking out of their aquariums, murdered pure and innocent Hillypu rosebushes.

The town was not swayed by the evil Midgeisha, and the citizens drove her back up the beanstalk to her fishbowl, where she drank inferior coffee and plotted anew. She returned soon thereafter with the leader of Hillypu, the May-ikad-or Freddy-oyo, who was swayed to the evil one's side and going to disallow the happy wedding and boil all of Donna-Sing's family in vats of deep bacon grease. Freddy-oyo didn't count on forceful Father Alex-Ko, Donna-Sing's beloved husband, when he pronounced the sentence. Alex-Ko was so angered at the thought of his loved ones' greasy barbecue, he bared his big, right arm and sent its fist off toward the face of the May-ikad-or.

Terrified by the forcefulness Alex-Ko exhibited in his direction, Freddy-oyo, The May-ikad-or, avoided the blow and turned himself into two, orange rabbits, frothing at the mouth. They fled in opposite directions away from Alex-Ko, who was unable to hit them. As the rabbits retreated, they bit at the feet of all the citizens, bringing many cases of political rabies into the town. Soon thereafter, to punish the town for harboring unholy rabbits,

the bad omen of a swarm of ravenous beetles descended upon the corn and rice crops, eating them up (or was it down?) without cessation until the citizens swelled up with anger and staged a revolution that decommissioned the May-ikad-or of Hillypu, banning his cursed existence until past the end of time. The beetles disappeared.

A trial ensued and declared Freddy-oyo guilty of rabbit-inspired criminal insanity, and the punishment decided upon to fit this crime was to have Donna-Sing's own slandered family behead the former head of state. A string was attached to enforce the decree. The happy wedding of Mary-Yum and Jeffrey-Poo could not proceed until the May-ikad-or was dispatched.

Midgeisha the Malevolent would not concede to the agony of defeat. She metamorphosed herself into the fair maiden Stella-Ro, whom she'd really been all along, typed forty-four words per minute and lured an unsuspecting Alex-Ko away from his happy family by convincing him to go running off with her to Tokyo.

Donna-Sing was left alone to run the family office and was the chosen Stone to behead Freddy-oyo according to the edict of the court of Hillypu. The beheading ceremony was scheduled early on the Saturday morning of the joyous wedding day of Mary-Yum and Jeffrey-Poo.

Donna-Sing prepared herself that day, and carried her broom, snicker snee, and freshly baked chocolate chip cookies with her to the public spot of execution in the town square. As she stood next to the former May-ikad-or, she passed out lots of cookies to the onlookers until she was ready to perform the deed. The May-ikad-or's last words before the blade were, "Let them eat popcorn."

Donna-Sing swore at him, accusing him of being an evil dust bunny of post graduate proportions, then she bore down on his neck with her trusty snicker snee. Five chops later, as the detached head finally rolled across the stage of town square, but it continued its taunting of all the onlookers, accusing all who would listen of potato chip obsession with the unlikely statement, "Bet you can't eat just one!"

The head collected numerous cornstalks and corn silks and grains of rice wherever it rolled, and by the time the it stopped rotating, it had turned into Donna-Sing's own father's head. It lay still next to the spot where there was a photo album in which Mama-San, wife of the head, was trapped.

Donna-Sing became happy because this was an unexpected family reunion for her and her children. Suddenly, terrifyingly, a rain of basketballs from Heaven fell upon Hillypu, and one of them crashed down from the sky onto the photo album where Mama-San was entangled. The basketball burst it into eighteen distinct pieces, freeing Mama-San in the process.

Father's head turned and looked at Mama-San, then turned back and smiled at Donna-Sing. Then it bowed three times, and Donna-Sing picked it up so she, Mama-San, Father's head, and the rest of the family—except for Alex-Ko, who was having an evil but good time in Tokyo—all went off to celebrate the holy ritual of the big, church wedding.

All the family arrived safely in the church. it was orange and all the guests were dressed in a white light. Jeffrey-Poo and Mary-Yum walked dignified and maturely down the aisle and stood at the altar. They were just about to trade eternal vows of household allegiance, despite his illegitimate chicken-child standing closely by him and her maturing angel moppet growing out of her back.

But the services were interrupted by a strange noise. Donna-Sing looked back and spied Alex-Ko and despicable Stella-Ro, back from Tokyo, hiding in one of the back rows, loudly smirking and munching together out of the same bag of potato chips. It was disrupting and defaming the beautiful service.

Donna-Sing became very annoyed and extended the disruption of the beautiful service by rushing back in the church pews, screaming, "Frito Lay down and die, oh evil one!" Hence she did the snicker snee thing fast and hard to Stella-Ro's head. As it indelicately tumbled down into the aisle of the church after only one chop, for Donna-Sing learned quickly, out of its large, empty cavity surged a torrent of Negro bees who attacked the wedding guests indiscriminately. The bees were not happy to be loose upon the wedding because the beheading had breached their combs of special, African honey stored in the space where Stella-Ro's brains would have been if there had been any. But there weren't, and the sticky, sweet syrup now rolled freely over all the church floor and couldn't be eaten for bee breakfast anymore.

The deluge of wrathful bees even attacked special guests Kitty-crow, Betty-woo, and special guest dignitary and fan President Johnson, chasing them completely out the service. Finally all the kin, guests, and townfolk were chased away from the church and they all fled out of Hillypu and toward other settlements.

It was sad because everyone ran away so quickly that Donna-Sing and Alex-Ko did not have time to make up and get back together in order to do the front door of the wedding thing at the church door as was common practice whenever guests left such a ceremony. And to top it all off, as the guests scurried, the little angel fell off Mary-Yum's back and turned into a little new, girl daughter.

There were some final questions as to whether the marriage had had a legal ending, whether it really had been proper for Mary-Yum to marry Jeffrey-Poo, and how would chickens and baby angel girl daughters fit into the future episodes of the family's TV show. Mary-Yum became agitated, deserted Jeffrey-Poo, and flew far away to live in a dormitory convent for wayward Yums.

Before a happy ending could be found to all the woes, Donna woke up, sweating beads of ice and not smiling.

A New Ceiling

Saturday morning, 8 AM: A late awakening for a housewife with a hazardous teenager and near teen in her midst.

When Donna strode down the stairs more than four hours past her normal appearance for a Saturday, Mary and Jeff weren't getting along well enough to even consider get married; they were engaged in their usual, mutual bantering and verbal abuse. Before she could even get into the kitchen, Jeff nabbed his mother at the bottom of the stairs. "Mary's all scratched up and flipped out, Mom," he announced.

"Why, whatever do you mean, dear?" Donna asked, followed by a dainty morning yawn, properly covered by her left hand, which she noticed didn't seem particularly blue this morning. It was time to work on removing the bleary morning blues from her eyes instead of worrying about yesterday's woes. She surveyed the floor with a quick glance and didn't see any renegade beasts out of their dens yet.

"Just look." Jeff directed Donna into the living room, and there was Mary, wearing some old, tattered clothes and perched high up on the Stones' wooden step ladder. In one hand she held a kitchen spatula, usually reserved for proper use with bacon and eggs, and with the other she was balancing a bucketful of recently mixed plaster of paris. Mary was engrossed in an energetic household project, re-covering the living room ceiling with the wet mix. Carefully she had sculpted and smeared the plaster into interesting shapes that would have caught the attention of any twentieth century student of Picasso.

Mary spied the family's intrusion. "Mother, good morning. This ceiling is unstable! It's been dripping onto the floor too much the past two days. I want it to stay up here, like ceilings are supposed to. Like it used to!" Almost on cue some of the new, wet ceiling Mary was putting in place promptly lost its grip and fell to the floor. "Look at that, Mother!" she screamed. "See what I mean?!"

"Mary, dear, I think you're overreacting, though I admire your early morning energy being directed at home improvement." Donna was genuinely astonished, experiencing no thought of pickles, but she was not annoyed by her daughter's Saturday morning project. Thoughtfully she continued, "I haven't noticed anything unusual about the ceiling, except it moved around a bit when the walls and floor were trying to pull themselves loose from it yesterday afternoon. You shouldn't blame the ceiling for that, trying to hold on to the walls, I mean."

Jeff looked up at his mother and whined, "She's making me stay inside to help her make up new batches of plaster. I want to go across the street and play. This is nuts!"

Donna unraveled into an explosion of anger, enraged that her son could be so stupid at times. "Why do you want to go across the street, Jeffrey Stone? So you can play with the wild rabbits at the Turnbells and get more grass stains on your trousers?" Donna began shaking Jeff violently by his shoulders. She couldn't help herself.. "Why didn't you tell me Mike had some new, pet rabbits? Why were you keeping it a secret from me?"

Jeff escaped by ducking down and freeing himself from his mother's arms. "I don't know. Geez, I didn't think it was a big deal," he said, defensively. He'd really not expected this particular display from his mom.

"Well, it is a big deal if you're going to bring rabbit fur and fleas into this house and track up my clean floors with the neighbors' dirt." Donna peered hatefully around the room. "You'd better watch out, or someday I could mistake you for a big pile of household debris, Jeff, and before I realize it's you instead of dirt, it will be too late and you'll get vacuumed down into my sweeper!" Donna was very annoyed. Jeff was fearful, and he gave his mother a strange look.

Just then Mary squealed as another dollop of plaster fell neatly on the newspapers under her step ladder, just barely missing the first dust bunny of daybreak that was out scanning the floor on an early morning foraging raid. The creature growled and quickly jumped to the left before fleeing for cover, exposing its barking protest as nothing more than typical dust bunny bravado. Donna thought to herself how lucky she was that dust bunnies rarely eat plaster of paris or other wet food.

"Jeff, I need some more water for this plaster. Go get some!" demanded Mary.

"Ah, gee," moaned Jeff, feeling beaten, pausing several seconds in a last fleeting hope for deliverance before he proceeded to head off to God's upstairs bathroom and its four operational faucets.

Donna went into the kitchen, for she hadn't been there yet, and she needed to touch base with her sanctum before she decided how to handle the children and their latest bout of incessant quarreling. She put on a pot of coffee, the official morning elixir of support, started warming some milk to make hot chocolate for the busy kids, and then noticed the photo album from Iowa was on the kitchen table. Sitting on top of it was a note from Alex.

When the Maxwell House was done, and the milk was warm enough, she took both fluids off the stove, poured herself a cup of the adult drink. Carefully she counted out fourteen heaping teaspoonfuls of Nestlé's Quik into the scalding milk, and stirred them hard till the sweetened powder cried uncle and dissolved into the liquid. Finally she lit an orange candle she'd bought on Friday, put it on a plate and set it on the kitchen table, and sat down to read Alex's brief, polite commentary. "It was so thoughtful of him to write," Donna thought.

Donna,

Thanks for all your help yesterday afternoon.

Glad you slept in today. Made my own coffee and ate some toast.

I'll get lunch before I'm back to the house. Since we did so well in the office yesterday, I've decided we need to celebrate the bee stings of February, and I'm going to invite some of the doctors from the hospital and their families over to eat tomorrow night. Figure on twenty-five people. We'll watch TV after we eat, no need to go all out. See you in awhile -around two o'clock, probably.

Love and a peck on the cheek,

Alex

P.S. Maybe Mary should only be grounded three years and nine months, Donna. What do you think?

Donna smiled. Then she frowned. Then she became angry, and finally she took a big gulp of coffee. Three years was still too long for Mary to be a teenage shut-in, and even if Mary was going to be stuck in the house for so long, Donna didn't relish cooking for nearly thirty (including the Stone family), not the way things had been going. She might have to miss church just to clean the house again, and she felt she really needed to touch base with God in the next couple of days. Instead, she'd have to work all day Saturday and Sunday while the rest of the family didn't do anything to help.

At least she wouldn't have to clean the attic again, for it had just been purified the previous week, which was the sixth time during the past twelve months she'd rescued it from its usual filth.

Twenty-five guests and no maid seemed very inconsiderate with so few hours' notice.

"Jeff, I've made some hot chocolate for you and Mary. Why don't you come out here and get it?"

From the living room she heard Jeff call back, "Mary says hot chocolate's OK for her if you made it with milk instead of water. What else is there to drink?" Evidently Jeff was rejecting the concoction in either form, but at least Donna felt reassured that Mary wanted her milk again this morning.

"Oh, let's see, there's some orange soda pop, or I could make Tang, orange Kool-Aid, or orange juice, or even carrot juice dear," replied Donna, her excitement increasing with the prospect of each subsequent possibility. "Also there are persimmons, tangerines, and oranges in the fridge, if you'd prefer a piece of fruit. I could even make you some carrot sticks, if that sounds better than juice or fruit. Did you get your own cereal this morning, Jeff?"

"Yup."

"Aren't the Wheaties boxes blooming nicely right now?"

“Huh?”

Donna got up, got some of her medicine, which she'd forgotten, and used the dropper on its lid to count out exactly sixteen drops of happiness into her coffee. The candle in front of her flared up for an instant the medicine aroused it with the unfulfilled portent of highly combustible fumes, but then it sadly died back down and returned to normal.

Donna opened her Iowa photo collection, and yielded her attention to her snickering mother. “You never told me how terribly hard it was going to be to be a housewife, Mother,” she said.

Her mother looked up at her and began to laugh. “Nor did I tell you how hard it would be not being a housewife, Donna.”

The photo began to pull itself free from the corners that had bound it to the black paper of the photo book for the past thirty-five years. Right after it escaped, the entire picture slid off the page, down onto the table. Mother strained and pulled herself out of the photo, and then she stood up slowly, becoming rather translucent against the kitchen sky, and still standing only about 3 inches tall. Feeling rather in need of the tin man's oil can to lubricate her squeaking bones after so many years of photographic imprisonment, she stretched, then yawned, covering her mouth to hide the gaping, little hole, and soon began marching back and forth in front of Donna. Donna closed the album and moved it to the left side of the table. She felt slightly fearful. Mother was now loose in the kitchen, stomping across the table in a display of senior citizen calisthenics.

While mother was busy unhinging more than thirty years of immobility, Donna gazed up at the candle behind her and noticed a baby chicken beak was burning up in the center of the flame. It was screaming loudly, so she sympathetically blew the candle out to end the torture. For several seconds, little wafts of grey, fading smoke rose above the black wick, and the rescued beak temporarily hovered in midair with the drift. Then it crashed down on the table and clucked four times. Intrigued by the beak, Donna's mother walked over, picked it up, and thrust it on her face to use as a temporary mouth. Satisfied with her new, pointed orifice, Mother walked directly in front of Donna and looked up at her. “Endust,” she said, her new mouth working fine and very much giving her words the accent of a worldly hen. “You want any more nominally helpful advice?”

“Endust?” queried Donna.

“Endust!” Donna's mother began roaming around and pretend-pecking at the table. She paused, looked up, and reiterated her suggestion. “Endust is the only feasible solution to all of your troubles. [Cluck.] We didn't have it in my day, Donna.”

“What about those beetles?”

“They will change even your life. [Cluck, cluck.]”

“Are they these Beetles that are going to be on television?”

“[Cluck!] Could be. Didn't have television in the barnyard in my day.” Mother bent over, waved her arms like wings, and began scratching the table with her feet. She was

very much a content hen in the barnyard. “Did have beetles, though.” Jeff came in the room to get the children’s fluids, and Donna’s mother silenced and ran over for the secret safety of her photograph, fearful she would lay an egg and be discovered.

Underwear, Tang, Milk, and Endust

Jeff had made his decision. “Guess Tang sounds pretty good for me.” Donna smiled at Jeff and was pleased. Tang was an outer space drink, and obviously very healthy or else astronauts wouldn’t drink it when they went on their important missions above the planet Earth.

Donna got up, pulled a light blue metal glass from the upper story in the cupboard to the left of sink, took a step over to the tap, and began to get Jeff a glass of fluorinated, chlorinated, apparently pure Hilldale water. Opening the right cupboard door, she pulled down a virgin jar of Tang, unscrewed the lid, measured out two heaping tablespoonfuls of orange powder into the glass, and stirred it quickly into a nicely dissolved, artificially flavored, pre-sugared, beautifully artificially colored drink. “Want some ice, dear?” she asked, staring down at her masterpiece concoction, which justified framing more than drinking.

“Nope.”

“I’ll make a deal with you, Jeff. If you drink your Tang, every last drop, now, because you know people are thirsting to death in Africa, when you finish it, I’ll help Mary plaster in the living room. You can go outside and play.” Donna knew how important it was for a mother to be altruistic to get her children out of the way on their days off school.

“I’ll try not to get any more grass stains on my clothes,” Jeff said, penitently.

Donna smiled. Jeff was unmistakably nearing that age when he would be mature enough to feel appropriate, adult level guilt for his household sins. Realizing she’d probably been yelling too loudly at her son earlier, Donna tempered her next comment with a softer, motherly tone. “Dear, chlorophyll is somehow naturally attracted to you and your clothing. Don’t worry, grass stains can be obliterated with our modern laundry aids. Go play with the yard, go play in the grass, you just stay away from Mike Turnbull’s rabbits, OK? Rabbits carry all kinds of diseases and dirt on their fur. And they can bite people and carry rabies, too.”

“Sure, Mom, whatever you say.”

Jeff didn’t seem totally convinced.

“Do you have clean underwear on?” Donna asked, fearing this particular Saturday might be the day Jeff would be hit by a car, and his limp, crushed body would be examined while he was wearing dirty underwear. The ultimate family disgrace! Children’s Soiled Underwear Paranoia Syndrome (C-SUPS) was nearly as common as fear of nuclear attack, or even bee attack, in 1964 Hilldale.

“Changed ‘em this morning,” Jeff said, happy to alleviate any maternal concerns. “What’s that?” Jeff had just noticed the picture of his grandmother on the table.

Donna’s mother was pretending to be a simple photo again and her chicken beak mouth had vanished.

Donna wondered how her mother managed all these speedy transformations.

“Oh, it’s just an old picture of your grandmother Reed. You never knew her, Jeff. She died before you were born.” Donna sighed. She really wished her children had known her mother, damned girls’ basketball, anyway.

“She looks awfully old,” observed Jeff, not very tactfully. “Looks like she was old enough she belonged over in Westview!”

Donna saw the photo on the table twitch, ever so slightly, in apparent protest to her son’s tactless remark. “Oh Jeff, everyone over sixteen looks old to you,” she said, hoping Mother was listening and in a forgiving mood. There was no telling what the old ghost might do or say if she became angry.

Jeff eyed his mother carefully and became very serious. “Mom, you wouldn’t really try to vacuum me up, would you?”

Donna winked at her son. “I don’t think you’d fit in the vacuum, Jeff, though we could measure you both to see.” Not a bad idea.

Jeff, not completely reassured, was quite shaken up at the prospect of being trapped in a dark vacuum bag, or any other murky, enclosed space. When he was three years old he’d heard a story about a baby being flushed down the toilet into the underground sewer pipes, where the toddler had died in utter isolation. The tale left him with a fearful scar on his psyche and some lingering paranoia in his prepubescent brain stem. His mother’s earlier remark about being sucked up by the vacuum cleaner, though off the cuff, had reminded him he and all children daily risked potential parental abandonment. Trying to be brave, he smiled, for it was genetic trait inherited from Donna’s side of the family.

Jeff grabbed his astronaut Tang and Mary’s steaming hot chocolate, and left for the new ceiling and the living room. Peering up from her two dimensional dungeon, Donna’s mother spied his departure and again decided to rouse herself. More quickly and easily this second time, she was back up on the table.

“Endust will trap the dust bunnies,” she said, stepping off the photographic paper.

“You never warned me about dust bunnies, Mother,” said Donna. “I had to learn about them all on my own at dark slumber parties, and on the floor of the hotel room during my honeymoon.”

“It was different back then, Donna,” replied Grandma Reed, before huffily adding, “Westview! Hmmp.”

“But I should have known about them. I didn’t know what to do. I should have been warned. You should have said something. We did have dust bunnies back in our home, didn’t we?”

“Dust bunnies were on the farm and in the town. They’re a universal truth! You’d even find them on Saturn if you could go dancing there on a Saturday night, or you’d see them scampering way up on the top of Mt. Everest!” Grandmother Reed took a short

breath, then continued, “What did that male juvenile mean, I look like I belong in Westview?! Isn’t that where you modern folks send all the old kin to wither away?”

Donna ignored her mother’s two questions. Tit for tat. “And the bees? Lately you’ve been acting and talking so very strange.”

“Maybe that’s because I’m not really here, Donna.”

“Then where are you?”

“There.” Donna’s mother pointed to the kitchen cupboard where the Nestlé’s Quik was prominently advertising itself from the shelf and carefully concealing government medicine behind the can of chocolate powder.

“Where’s that?” Donna was beginning to hate riddles. “In the cupboard, Mother?”

“No, I’m here, there, and everywhere. But I’m not ready for Westview!” Donna’s mother was becoming less ethereal and more opaque as she gained strength in this most recent incarnation. She was beginning to lose that grainy old Brownie snapshot look and had started to cycle herself through an assortment of colors of the rainbow.

“Oh, that juvenile, as you called him, is Jeff Stone, your grandson. He didn’t mean anything by that statement. He didn’t even realize you could hear him, for gosh sakes. Mother, were the bees you were talking about the same bees that attacked our town yesterday?”

“Oh, those bees! You were pounding and pandering and you let them out of the box, Donna. You should know the answer to that question!”

Donna sat quietly, pondering why she was unsure of the answer.

The living room door slammed and the patter of pounding sneakers escaping out of the front yard was soon faded to silence. The only diversion came from a wren singing its traditional territorial folk song from the perch on its manmade birdhouse in the back yard near the clothesline. Jeff had evidently done his part for the world’s thirsting masses and left the property for his exciting, Saturday, boyhood adventures. Hidden in the lyrics of the bird’s verse was a shrill warning to neighborhood wrens in nearby lawns to be wary, because the buzz saw, boy human was on the loose again.

“Those were Negro bees from Africa, Mother, sent to us out of Brazil. You explain that to me!” Donna hoped her riddle would confuse even her mother, for, when she thought about it, it confused her. “I hit the box by mistake. I didn’t mean to do it. And how can they be African, but shipped out of Brazil? Brazil isn’t in Africa. It doesn’t make much sense.”

“Lots of parts of your life don’t make much sense, daughter. But what do I know? I’m an old woman. But you’re right about one thing, Brazil is in South America. Remember your maps and your arithmetic lessons, Donna. Cover your mouth when you burp or gasp or hiccup. And don’t forget, it’s very important to know that the bees will rise up soon and

Alex won't continue to get rich off bee stings." Mother was definitely smirking; she thought she knew it all.

"Mother, as long as you're discussing the man in my life, could I ask you if father ever brought home twenty-five dinner guests at one time?"

"You can ask me anything, Donna." Mother scratched her head. "No, your father was too considerate to do something like that, and I don't think he had twenty-five friends all told, Donna."

Donna barely remembered her father, for he'd been the unfortunate victim of a farm accident when she was six and he was still in his prime. He had been beheaded in a grisly tractor accident in a cornfield on the family farm, witnessed only by one of the neighbors to the lower forty as he drove by on his way into town.

The Reeds were spared most of the gory details, but what they did learn was that a row of particularly harrowing field corn, with premeditated intentions, had evidently spurned the harvest that September. Several of the stalks somehow booby-trapped the tractor Father was riding on, their roots tripping it and flipping it over into the dirt, which knocked Mr. Reed off and out. Most of the field of angry ears and stalks then descended upon John Deere's machine and the defenseless Mr. Reed lying prostrate nearby.

The county authorities had hushed up their findings at the site of the nasty mishmash. It had not been a very pretty sight littering the field, and they rightfully feared the complete story would cause undue consternation among the rest of the local farming community. The autopsy couldn't conclude for sure if it had been the tractor or the corn that had dismembered Donna's father. Nor could agronomists or engineers, studying the farm machine, conclude if the tractor's flipping over or the angry corn had been responsible for its dissection into more than twenty, useless, mechanical parts.

Donna had conveniently suppressed memories surrounding most of the dreadful four days after the accident, but two results of the tragedy were unforgettable: her mother had never been the same after the day her father didn't return from the cornfield, and the family soon lost the farm and moved into town.

And they never ate corn on the cob again.

Donna's mother sensed her daughter's unresolved grief. She stared up at Donna, stomped her little left foot on her daughter's right index finger to regain her attention, and said, "Beware of dinner parties, daughter. They, like your dreams, have the potential to turn sour."

"I don't know what I'm going to cook for so many people with one day's notice!" Donna moaned.

"Then let them eat rice."

"Not popcorn, Mother?" Donna paused, then giggled. "Rice is not a bad idea. I really do get tired of potatoes."

“Spice the rice!”

“And spike the punch?” Donna finally felt a little more in tune with the labyrinth of her mother’s conversation.

“No need,” said her mother, who knew more about the municipal waterworks than she’d let on. “A punch can be a spike, when it’s not a wedding party quaff.”

Donna feared her mother would think she’d turned into a lush or something. “I was only kidding, Mother. We won’t even have punch. Probably only iced tea or orange pop.”

“Snap. Crackle. Wait and see.” Donna’s mother headed toward her photograph. She was tired and needed to rest. efore she left, she gave out one final bit of nominally useful advice: “And stay out of cornfields or you’ll be in Westview before I am!”

Mary Goes Away to College Suddenly

“Mother, could you bring me some water?” asked Mary, interrupting the older generation from her plaster party on the other side of the kitchen door. “Jeff’s gone outside and I’m almost finished with the ceiling in here. I need to make up just a tad more plaster of paris.”

“Sure thing, dear,” agreed Donna. “I promised him I’d help you so he could leave.” Donna went to the faucet and filled a water glass with some evidently pure Hilldale water, then strode the worn path through the doors to the living room.

“My, the ceiling does look, um, different, Mary,” she said, being as polite as possible.

“This ceiling won’t fall down on me any now,” said Hilldale’s latest aspiring sculptress, delighting in her beautiful creation. This was true. Much of the plaster had already hardened into household marble, and if it were to fall now, it would have to come down in one, large, room-sized sheet..

Donna made a fearful observation, and said, “There seem to be a lot of nooks and bumps in the new ceiling that might eventually attract cobwebs, dear.” Cobwebs, Donna knew, were a larval form of dust bunnies that could attach themselves to any corner or recess in the house, unlike their adult life forms that were stuck on the floor. “I think we should paint the ceiling so no cobwebs will be able to hide up there.”

“I figured we’d paint it either beige or off-white,” said Mary. “Rose Anne Michaels’ mother chose a really nice color of beige for their living room when they were remodeling last month. We could find out what the name of that color was.”

Virtually every wall and ceiling in every house and most cottages throughout the empire in modern, 1964 Hilldale had been painted either beige (or one of its tan or sand colored derivatives), or else off-white. It was codified into the national, post World War, aesthetic law.

“No, why don’t we live a little more dangerously?” asked Donna, a twinkle in her eye, thinking about breaking the ordered rules of boring household identity.

“What do you mean, Mother?”

“I want to paint it bright orange!”

“Mother!” exclaimed Mary, before she started to giggle. “Hey, that sounds weird and kinda neat.” Good. Mary was game, Mary was still in the club! She understood.

“We’ll have a great time at Halloween next year!” Mary added.

“Orange it is. We’ll go out and get the paint, I need to go get some groceries, for your father has invited a zillion people over to eat tomorrow night. Then we’ll come back and make a Saturday festival out of getting ready for a really big party tomorrow. You can paint, I can do some preparation and housework...”

“We’ll make it into a weekend, cookout, fix up, clean up, household bee,” said Mary.

“Don’t even use that word!” retorted Donna, smiling. Both Donna and Mary laughed. Donna was glad everything had returned to normal, and Mary was now the same old daughter she remembered from the day before yesterday. She just knew Mary’s fast recovery was because she’d finally gone back to drinking her milk. Milk had been the saving drink that had brought her daughter back to her mature, even keel.

Mary looked down at Donna from her roost on the second rung from the top of the step ladder, and said, “I’ll go get cleaned up first. Give me a few minutes, Mother.” She climbed down the wooden, slightly plastered steps of the ladder and went off for her upstairs bathroom to clean errant plaster off her hands, take a Saturday shower, and spruce up.

Donna watched Mary leave, feeling rather sad, for she sensed the rearing of her lovely daughter was nearing its finale. Mary had learned all her lessons and seemed so much more mature today than she’d ever been before. It would doubtlessly be very soon when she would be departing the nest to fly away from her childhood security blanket of a home.

After a quick shower, while Mary was sitting in front of her mirror, putting a last dab of Clearasil on a potential blemish looming on her chin, she glanced around the bathroom several times. She was sure she had heard some strange noise. Looking up at the ceiling, she was relieved it seemed firmly in place; although shadows of tree branches from outdoors were doing the watusi across the paint. Glancing back at the mirror, she became altogether transfixed by her reflection, which wavered, blurred, and disappeared from behind the face of the glass.

Something dark and eerie was beginning. Appearing on the other side of the mirror were two unknown figures, at first indistinguishable, then clearing enough to see neither of them resembled her in the least.

Her image had been replaced by a bratty little girl who was smirking very coyly at her. Standing alongside the child judging from the logo on his suit coat, was a network executive from ABC. He was apparently inviting Mary to enter the mirror, to come and visit the universe on the other side. Waving at her with his left hand, wearing a charming smile on his face, he was gripping a gold and blue State University pennant with his right fist.

“It’s time to go to college, Mary,” the man said, his words reverberating through the bathroom walls and sounding more metallic than the radio in the Stones’ 1961 Chevrolet. “You’ve grown up more than we can handle over at ABC, Mary. The network has made a noteworthy corporate decision to write you out of this life.” The man smiled. “Mary Stone, come on down!”

“No!” screamed Mary, as a terrible scare trembled in her soul, liver, and healing rosebush lacerations. This was worse than if the ceiling came down on her feet again! She screamed for five seconds and threw both her hands on the mirror to cover up the horrific sight (mistake number one). Right away the network’s officer grabbed her and pulled her into a new life in the mirror. He sent her off to college, somewhere in the background of

the secret world, and pushed the little girl from the reflection side of the mirror out through the glass and into the Stones' house. Ten year old Trisha was free in the bathroom.

When she heard Mary scream, Donna had just started going upstairs to remind Mary to put on clean underwear before their trip downtown. Rushing to the bathroom, the screams stopped, and when Donna spied in through the door, Mary was gone. The first thing she saw was Trisha emerging from the mirror. She looked up and found an older, nearly adult Mary, behind the looking glass, walking away from her makeup palace toward an ivy lined building far in the background of the mirror. Donna thought this was very odd, so she turned to the little girl who'd already picked up one of Mary's hair brushes and was busy combing away. The lass was acting as if she felt quite at home.

"Who are you?" Donna asked.

"Hi, Mommy. I'm Trisha."

"Trisha? Mommy?" Donna was confused. She smiled and covered her mouth temporarily.

"Yes, Mommy." Trisha smiled at herself in the mirror, which had returned to its normal reflections of the bathroom. She glanced over at Donna's reflection to her right as she calmly brushed her shoulder length locks. "I'm your new daughter. ABC decided Mary had to grow up fast and go away to college, and you needed a second child, me, in order for us to remain a normal family and for the TV show to retain its strong Nielsen ratings." Trisha smiled.

"Mary didn't even say good-bye," said Donna, wondering where and how it was that Mary had vanished back of the mirror to go away to college.

"It's always like that on TV, Mommy, when your contract runs out. Don't worry, Mary will probably come back to visit some week or another. Mommy, I'm so glad I've adopted you." Trisha put her comb down, ran to Donna, and hugged her.

Donna was really worried about this unexpected change in the family's makeup. What would Alex think? What would Jeff say? Still, she was fascinated by this new, affectionate member of the household. She wondered how much Trisha liked milk.

"Where's my new big brother, Jeff?" Trisha asked.

"Oh, you know about Jeff! He's outside playing, Trisha. You'll get to meet him soon enough."

"Oh, boy!"

Donna hoped Jeff hadn't been replaced by anyone new. Two new children would be too much of an adjustment, what with a dinner party coming up tomorrow night. Suddenly Donna noticed Trisha bore an uncanny resemblance to Jeff. Thinking about it for a second, she decided that would make the adjustment period for the entire family a whole lot easier.

"Trisha, get ready so we can go shopping. We have to buy some paint and groceries."



Jeff and Trisha visit older sister, Mary, away "at college"

you're bigger, we'll probably decide you should use the word Mother. Won't that be nice, dear?"

"Oh yes, Mothermommy." Trishatrish beamed, gleamed, and twinkled.

Donna went downstairs to the kitchen and returned to the living room with a can of insecticide, which she first sprayed indiscriminately throughout the air in the room, then specifically underneath the couch.

"I know."

"You're a really smart little girl! Are you big enough to paint a ceiling?"

Trisha smiled. "I'm bigger than a bread box, Mommy!" She was fast on the way to becoming a new Stone.

"Get ready, Trish. Oh, may I call you Trish?"

"Sure, Trish is just what I'd always hoped you would call me, Mommy."

"And you can call me Mommy this year, Trish, but next year when

Donna Tells a Troubled Alex About Trisha

The phone rang twice, nearly three times, before Donna was able to answer it. She had to put down her can of Raid House and Garden Crawling Vermin Spray, having adequately just dosed the floor under the couch with a continuous two minutes of the toxin. It was Donna's new strategy of the morning. Go for the nest with an ample shot of insecticide, and not even dust bunnies deep in the carpet pile could live through that. They'd begun running out from under the couch as soon as she sprayed, and shortly thereafter the herd was turning belly up in protest, none of them able to escape more than a couple of feet from their nest. Within seconds, clutches of them were kicking, squealing, and dying in the trenches of the poisonous death chamber in the Stones' living room. Soon she would vacuum the bodies away before her new daughter, Trish, paid her first visit downstairs.

"Hello," Donna said, picking up the living room phone while inhaling her own poisoned air. She wasn't worried in the least because the can guaranteed its contents safe for human consumption.

"Donna, this is Alex," said Alex.

"Yes, dear, I recognized your voice." Years of marriage had paid off.

"Listen, when you were here yesterday, did anyone get into my medicine cabinet—the one behind the desk?"

"Why, no, why?"

"You didn't take any more of the medicine I gave you back home with you, did you?" Angst packed Alex's voice.

"No, I seem to have plenty of it. I've been taking it just like you instructed me to, but the bottle isn't even half empty yet. Oh, I suppose I should sound more positive, and say it's more than half full!"

"Well, the rest of the drug I had locked up here is gone. The door's pulled off the medicine cupboard and somebody took it! This is a real problem. I have to account for that medicine with detailed paperwork when the federal government test auditors come here in two weeks!"

"Sorry, I don't know what happened to it." Donna smiled. "Alex, do you know yet how many people are coming to eat tomorrow night?"

"The count's down to ten at most, maybe even fewer. Most everybody I've reached had other plans already. Guess I started planning too late. Donna, I've got to find where the medicine went. It really looks like somebody may have broken in here last night and stolen it." Alex had skillfully put two and two together to reach this conclusion, this despite the fact he didn't have Pearl Hodgkins as a fourth grade arithmetic teacher.

"Who would do a thing like that in Hilldale, dear?" Donna wondered.

“I don’t know. Probably some juvenile delinquents. Whoever it was, they don’t know what they’re dealing with.”

“And what’s that, dear?”

Alex paused. “I mean, if prescription medicine is taken by the wrong person, without a doctor’s approval, no matter what the drug is, it can be dangerous. Sometimes lethal.”

“Oh, I don’t think my medicine could be lethal for anybody,” Donna said, realizing even mental midget Midge across the street was probably still alive and kicking alongside the abundant vermin in her house.

“It’s really only for adults. Not meant for kids. That was made clear in the instructions sent with it out of Washington.”

“Gee. Ten guests or even less! That’s a relief. I’m glad there aren’t going to be three times that many. I was afraid I wouldn’t have enough place settings even using the everyday china.”

“Well, I’ve got to go. I don’t know what I’m going to do about this theft.”

“Call the police, dear. They’re always so polite and helpful. Call officer Grimes.”

“I will. First I wanted to make sure you didn’t see anything yesterday.”

“Oh, I saw a lot of things yesterday, Alex!” Donna smiled.

“I mean when you were here.”

“But I did! I did! I saw things when I was there. When I brought Mary in, I saw things. When we left there, I saw even more. When I came back to help you out, I saw a few things. While I was home, I saw so many things. It was a very seeing day. Did you round up Miss Johnson, or get her on the phone yet?”

“No. Her landlady says she never went back to her apartment last night. No one knows where she’s gone.” Donna smiled. Alex continued, “Well, OK. I’ll see you soon.”

“Maybe Miss Johnson came in, took the drugs, and left for Japan. You shouldn’t have given her keys to the office, Alex.” Donna giggled. “Not until she was off probation.”

“I don’t think she’d steal drugs, Donna. What do you mean, off to Japan?” Alex was in no mood for puzzles.

“Oh, nothing, Alex. Well, we’ll see who’s right about Miss Johnson!”

“I’m sure she’ll be back soon.”

Donna hoped Alex was wrong.

“Did they clean up the corpses down the street yet?” Donna asked.

“Huh?”

“Oh, nothing. Listen, maybe Trisha and I will stop by later. We’re going shopping for some paint. We’ve also got to get some more food for tomorrow’s unexpected party you’re throwing.”

“Trisha? Who’s that? Some new friend from one of your volunteer groups?”

Donna laughed. “No, Alex, she’s our new daughter. Mary’s all taken care of and grown up, so she left for college this morning after she re-plastered the ceiling in the living room. You won’t have to worry about how long to ground Mary, now that she’s gone. Our new daughter is named Trisha. She came out of Mary’s bathroom mirror, and was briefed in advance about her new life with us. By ABC, dear. She’s so young, but very smart, Alex. It will take a little while to get her to the point where she’s as mature and dignified as Mary was...”

“Donna, maybe you’d better stop by...”

“Oh, we probably will so you can meet her. You know, she looks a lot like Jeff, Alex. You’ll be a proud poppa,” Donna grinned.

“Donna, you come by. I do want to see you this morning.”

“OK, Alex, we’ll be there.”

“Peck on the cheek.” Alex was so thoughtful, even when he was risking arrest for losing his federal test drugs!

“Bye.” Donna smiled and hung up the phone. Then she got out her vacuum cleaner, and swept two hundred eighty-seven dead dust bunnies and five ounces of Raid insecticide from the carpeting into the bag, which was still half empty even after all the new carcasses and chemicals, and the debris from the previous day’s use.

Donna went outside to water the flowers, for Trish was still upstairs finishing her preparation for her first shopping trip with her new mother. Grabbing the garden hose and turning on the spigot, Donna looked across the street at the Turnbells, and noticed that Mike was out in the front yard with his father, Fred, digging a trench near the sidewalk. It already extended along half of their property, and was apparently about a foot deep, judging by the amount of dirt being piled on the sidewalks from the shovels. Looking up at their house, Donna waved at Midge, who was standing duty in the picture window. But Midge pretended not to see Donna and continued staring aimlessly straight ahead. Slightly embarrassed, Donna redirected her energies at her green hose.

Donna hadn’t noticed that Trish had come to the front door, where she was looking across the street at the nosy neighbor. “Mrs. Turnbull really stands in her window a lot,” Trish said.

“Gee, Trish, I didn’t realize you were there!” Donna said, startled.

“I’ll be back in just a second, Mommy. Before she left for college, Mary asked me to take one last look at the living room ceiling to make sure none of the old plaster is pushing off her new weird stuff.”

“Please say hello to Mary if you see her. We will have to get some new clothes for you, because Mary’s are going to be too large to fit you!” Donna beamed was glad the Stones could afford lots of clothes.

Donna turned and looked over at Midge again. She’d picked up the phone, and the sound of her booming voice could be heard, though not understood, even in Donna’s front yard. Donna felt annoyed. “I can’t imagine it’s that interesting for her to watch the street or us all the time, Trisha.”

“Maybe we should do something about it, Mommy,” Trisha said, a devious tone in her voice, before disappearing behind the front door and before Donna could ask her what they might consider doing.

The Corks

Donna wished Midge would stop observing the Stones so much and start spying on the rest of the neighborhood, even if it meant putting in new picture windows on other sides of her house.

Why couldn't Midge spend more time studying her own next door neighbors, the Corks? Now there was the really bizarre family in the neighborhood. They really justified a daily inspection! Unfortunately Midge would have a more difficult challenge on her hands watching the Corks, for they never opened their curtains and generally kept to themselves inside their house. It would be pretty difficult, without X-15 style infrared sensors, to spy on anything going on in the little one story house that sat so out of place in the neighborhood of two-tiered villas, over to the west of the Turnbells.

There were two human Corks in the Corks' house. The sadder case was the aged mother, known simply to everyone as "Mrs. Cork." She was unable to get around much, so she sat or lay on a dingy, old couch staring at walls that had not been freshly painted since the spring of 1938. She was nice enough and still strong of mind, but physically quite feeble. She should have been spending her last days in a proper nursing home over in Westview, but the Corks were too poor for that luxury. Her husband, Mr. Cork, passed on in 1955, and since that time the old lady had been waiting aimlessly to join him, hoping each day the reaper would approach her with the welcomed news that it was finally going to be her time.

In contrast to the pathetic, but nice, old woman, the real creature of the household was her son, Garreth. Still living with her, he was out of work, actually never employed, nor, shockingly, ever married. He was well over forty years old, and he kept a harem of twenty-five (give or take a half dozen) rather unhealthy looking, unfriendly cats, who terrorized the small dogs of the neighborhood whenever they were let out (although their latest challenge was to figure out how to break into the rabbit hutch sitting in the yard next door). The inadequate family pension the Corks received was spent feeding the cat pack first. Mrs. Cork and Garreth would feed only if the animals had first eaten their fill. The cats even ate their canned delicacies most calendar days near the end of the month, when money was low. Even when Garreth and Mrs. Cork had to go hungry or live on tea and toast. Though the neighborhood felt the situation to be disgraceful, everyone was too wrapped up in their own lives to be compelled or sympathetic enough to do anything about local hunger. Doing something about it would involve admitting it existed, after all.

On rare occasions when any of the neighbors would venture into the Cork house, rare except to take Mrs. Cork some fresh cookies or other sweet staples on special holidays, once one got past the smell, once one got past the smell, it was eerily like taking a journey into the dark world of the end of the nineteenth century. There were two oversized stuffed moose head trophies, bounty from who knows where or when, staring down at whosoever dared to enter the rather small parlor that doubled as Mrs. Cork's private "living room." Suspended by their necks on opposite sides of the room, they were surrounded by fading,

chipping walls that otherwise harbored abundant, yellowing, framed photographs and pictures covering almost every remaining space and angle.

The house was very dark, lodging forty year old air polluted by overabundant cat aroma, and to compensate for the blackened ethers, a tiny lamp with a dull, cracked orange lampshade, always lit, day or night, sat in one corner of the parlor. There were assorted, yellowing, shabby mementos, mostly old magazines, and yellowing sheet music from the past sixty years, all resting on every piece of yellowed furniture and dragged over and around the yellowing floor by the family “pet” tabbies. Much of the jaundiced paper clutter and the underlying, careworn rug in the room was suffering permanent cat stain.

Garreth would rarely, if ever, speak to any of the infrequent visitors. Usually he’d depart for the kitchen upon their arrival, leaving his mother to do all the entertaining. Most who encountered him found his silence and invisibility to be the better of two possibilities, for he harbored very unusual green eyes shining in front of demonic secrets no God fearing citizen probably cared to know. He nearly always had a terribly unhealthy smile plastered across his face; his natural smirk would have even made Donna’s mother go back to smirking school for a refresher course if she could have seen it. It was whispered he’d gone to Korea to fight, a rather normal, patriotic youth at the time, and he’d come back, well, Garreth.

Donna heaved the twenty-five foot green garden hose back into the garage. It was a wonder that Midge didn’t take more interest in the quirky Corks. Midge could probably invent Communist leanings in the house or something, and would have had more than enough dirt to last her a month’s worth of phone calls.

Mary, or rather, Trish and Jeff were prohibited from going into the Corks’ yard, and of course they were banned from inside the house unless Donna and some cookies accompanied them there, but Garreth had occasionally spoken to Jeff when he’d passed the house, walking by on the sidewalk. Usually if Garreth did speak, it would only be to talk to young people. And generally this was whenever he was outside watering his one large, three foot tall pet weed that, unfortunately, seemed to be surviving the Hilldale winter and flourishing almost as well as it had the past August. It was a weed species otherwise unknown throughout Hilldale (not that there weren’t other, more familiar kinds of weeds littering the Cork lawn, and an ample field of yellow dandelions, fertilized by cat, in yearlong bloom, pushing out the pitiful grass blades that couldn’t hope to compete with the overpopulating flowers after years of under-tending!). Donna hoped Jeff wouldn’t be tainted by even short discussions with Garreth, but she didn’t worry too much, because Jeff had pronounced the neighborhood weirdo “bonkers” several times when the subject had been whispered at the Stones’ dinner table.

Donna Takes Trisha Downtown



*A fan photograph for Mary, away at college,
kindly personalized by Trisha*

Finally Trish was ready to go shopping. She had taken such an undignified, immature, time to get ready, Donna realized there was a lot of motherly training confronting her on the family's horizon. But she was glad to have a new, pregnable challenge.

So Donna, Trish, and the Chevy steamed out of the Stones' driveway and headed off towards Mr. Jackson's hardware store. Directly in front of his business was the spot, where, the morning before, the bee riots had claimed two innocent lives. Donna didn't know the victims, neither June Jeffries, whose husband worked at the ball bearing factory, nor Madge Block, who left three orphans because her husband had passed away in 1960 and she'd not been able to find a substitute spouse. "I hope Mr. Jackson will have orange paint in stock," said Donna, not wanting to burden her new daughter with stories of the previous day's deaths or parentless children.

"I think it would be more fun to watch that paint machine shake it up from scratch, Mommy," said Trisha, excited by her new life and all the prospects of living with a famous, television family. As they drove down Tombstone Drive, Saturday seemed to be the complete opposite of Friday afternoon. People were outside everywhere in town, building new fences, trimming the grass with hand scissors, nailing boards over the windows and turrets of their castles, and staking out For Sale signs in the front of their properties. Lots of the activity seemed to indicate Hilldale was not back to its old self just yet. But Donna smiled, for the town's panic was definitely manageable now.

When Trish and Donna got to the front of the hardware store, they observed Mr. Jackson standing inside, busy with paper towels and Glass Wax, polishing his storefront window, very intently moving the potion around in circle after circle on the glass. The

streaks would seemingly never quite disappear, and nothing short of imponderable glass was going to suit him.

Entering the store, Donna said her hellos to her hardware master friend, and tried to introduce him to Trisha, but he was completely silent, too preoccupied, apparently, to stop wiping and wiping. Too busy to make time for his first customers of the morning. “Do you have orange paint in stock?” Donna inquired, hoping he would wake up and respond, but Mr. Jackson just seemed incapable of English. Or French. Donna didn’t remember a lot of her high school French, but she would have tried, gosh darn it, if only Mr. Jackson had spoken something. Donna shrugged her shoulders and took Trisha over to the paint department.

“Trish, I guess we won’t get to watch the fun, paint-shaking machine at work today. Mr. Jackson seems very preoccupied, and I certainly wouldn’t know how to mix paint, myself.”

“Oh, Mommy, it’s all right. Look, there’s some orange paint, anyway.” Trish really wanted everything to be just perfect, so she continued to look for a new angled solution to every potential problem.

There were two gallons of a light orange paint, not really as bright as Donna had planned, but, after surveying the other colors in the store, it would have to do. It was the closest to her fantasy ceiling color, even though a touch too pastel. Donna and Trish each picked up a gallon bucket and went to the cash register.

“Mr. Jackson, we need to buy this paint. Could you come over and ring it up for us?” Donna asked, hoping to finally get the businessman’s attention.

At last Mr. Jackson spoke. “No,” he said. “I ain’t got no nuts or bolts.”

“But Mr. Jackson, we have a paint purchase here. We have to paint our ceiling this morning.”

“No,” answered Mr. Jackson again. “No bee spray. All sold out.”

Donna felt a little bit indignant. “Really, Mr. Jackson, I think if someone came into a store I owned, I’d want to sell them something if they wanted to buy it.”

“Take it,” he said, abruptly, angry that he was being interrupted from the more important business at hand occurring inside the crystal ball of glass of his all encompassing window.

“Maybe we could pay for it later?” asked Donna.

“No. All out of two penny nails, too!”

“Is there anything I could do to help you, Mr. Jackson?”

“Nothing in stock.” Pause. “Damn this streak on this window!”

Realizing she was getting nowhere with Mr. Jackson, and angry he was swearing in front of a young child, Donna was inclined to leave immediately. It was then she noticed a

glass of water, half empty, on the edge of the counter by the cash register, halfway sitting off the counter and nearly ready to fall off. A young woman's face or head seemed to be adrift in the glass, but perhaps that was just imagination at work. Probably a weird reflection of a Saturday shopper over on the sidewalk of the Hilldale street.

"Would you like your glass of water over here, or anything else? Maybe that would help you feel better, Mr. Jackson...?"

"No. No! No!! No more water! It's water from hell!" At that moment Mr. Jackson started to have a nervous breakdown, shaking his fist at the window pane and speaking in tongues. His neck had turned a bright red.

Donna hurried her two gallons of paint and Trish out of the store so the new, little girl in her life wouldn't have to see any of adult life's unusual unpleasantness on this first morning as a Hilldale inhabitant.

As mother and daughter got to the sidewalk, each toting a gallon of new ceiling, which Donna of course would pay for later, after things returned to normal in the hardware store, Trish looked up at her and said, "It was really nice of that crazy man to give us this paint for free, Mommy."

"Oh, I'll pay for it later. He just seemed a bit touchy today. He's not really crazy. Touchy, that's all." Donna figured Mr. Jackson was probably traumatized by having two housewives stung to death outside his door the previous mid morning. If only she hadn't knocked open Jeff's package.

"Why pay for it, Mommy, if he doesn't want the money?"

"Trisha Stone! One should never take advantage of less fortunate people who are having, well, nerve problems."

Trish whimpered and began to hyperventilate. She didn't want new Mommy to show any anger toward her—ever, because the network executives who'd helped her get adopted might find out and send her back to the abusive orphanage behind the mirror.

"Trish, please cover your mouth when you're heaving air in and out of your mouth like that," requested Donna. "It's always the safest bet to cover your mouth whenever anything except talking or eating is going on near it."

[Gasp, gasp] "Yes, Mommy." Trisha's hand went up to her mouth in a split second. Donna smiled. And almost immediately after this sign of approval, Trish stopped wheezing.

The Stones had walked back to the parked Chevy at this point, so Donna opened the door and they put their paint in the car. Next it was off to Alex's office.

"We're going to meet your father now, Trish," Donna said.

"Oh boy!" Trish gasped and her head had begun pounding, the result of swimming in too much O₂.

“If he seems a little distant, well, don’t worry, I know he’ll warm up to you soon, just like I did!”

“I think we’ll get along just fine! Oh boy! Oh, boy!”

Jeff Makes Enemies with Garreth

Jeff made it back to his own front yard. It had been a difficult morning for the neighborhood Genghis Khan, and he had tired early of turning over rocks near the sewer creek to look for crayfish and snails. He'd nearly caught a couple of crawdads, but they kept managing to escape into their mud holes too quickly for him. Saturday morning reflexes got a C minus. He did find four snails, but they weren't big enough to work into his plan. He wanted to hide them on Mary's bed so she'd scream and act like a dumb girl when she climbed between the covers and discovered them there, dead, later that night. Since they were inferior and too small, he smashed them on the rocks by the creek and carefully studied their bleeding brown flesh as they began to dry into unappetizing escargot jerky.

On the way home he'd picked up a dirty, odorous jar he saw over by the junkyard across the train tracks from the sewer creek. It had probably been waiting for him there somewhere between five months to twenty years, judging from its worn appearance. It made a great jail for the three green and three multicolored grasshoppers he'd captured in the weed patch by the tracks, which soon got to commune in the jar with the two baby sparrows he'd pulled from their nest above the overhanging eaves of an old dilapidated outbuilding near the junkyard. With two races of hapless prisoners, Jeff raced home to set his plan to work. A morning of fun lay ahead.

When he got back home he was glad Mary and Donna were out. Quickly he went directly upstairs to his room, and closed and locked the door to hide his diddling. He grabbed a hammer from his clothes closet and the trials began.

All six grasshoppers were pronounced guilty of crimes against the state and sentenced to die. The sparrows were found guilty of lesser crimes, and condemned to undergo the astronaut training experience.

Going back to his boy-room closet, Jeff removed the transformer from the box housing his Lionel electric train set. Then he pulled down another box and grabbed the centrifuge from his chemistry set.

None of the victims would be allowed to appeal their sentences. Jeff stuck his hand into the jar and retrieved one of the larger grasshoppers, the one named Herr Goebbelschmidt. It kicked at his hand in vain, because the jailer was much stronger and much bigger, and no doubt Jeff looked particularly hideous to the unlucky insect through the hundreds of cells in its compound eye.

"Do you have any last words, Nazi grasshopper swine?" Jeff yelled at the victim. The grasshopper kicked and scratched at him again, but didn't speak. Not one word. "Then be prepared to meet your evil maker!" Jeff yelled. He plugged in the transformer, holding the victim in his left hand.

With his right hand he carefully took hold of one of the wires from the train transformer, and used the exposed end with its glistening, stripped copper wire to tease and massage the insect. For several seconds he gently and slowly rolled it around on the

grasshopper's thorax until he finally found the exact, correct spot and poked it straight through the tough outer shell and into the grasshopper's body.

Herr Goebbelschmidt and his damaged organs began to squirm and kick again, probably screaming protests only the other Nazi swine bugs over in the jar could hear, although they were acting in a reserved manner considering they were in their last minutes on death row. Holding the insect carefully, Jeff grabbed the second wire from the transformer and stuck it up the grasshopper's mouth. "Cover your mouth, pig, when you're about to die!" he screamed, poking the wire up toward the victim's brain through its brown-stained mandibles.

The circuit was complete. Jeff put injured Herr Goebbelschmidt down on the floor of his room and turned the electricity on. Low juice came first, tickling the condemned one only temporarily until it was time to raise the voltage higher and higher until it reached a crescendo that was strong enough to send the Lionel Express, when set up and running on its eternally boring oval, crashing off the curved ends of the tracks and onto the carpet.

Herr Goebbelschmidt squirmed, tried to jump, tried to pull at the wires with six, uncooperative legs, but the gruesome state of penetrating wires and fluid electrons dancing through its body were not addressed in three billion years of evolutionary survival skills. Any hope for escape was useless.

Jeff played awhile with the voltage, sending decreasing, then increasing amounts through the condemned Nazi bug, but soon its contractions were slowing, so he turned the transformer off and left the impaled, fried bug to die on the floor.



Left on his own, Jeff occasionally was prone to mischief

Now was time to discipline the birds. Jeff grabbed the two baby sparrows from the jar. They were featherless and their eyes were still not opened, so he guessed they were probably only about three days old. "It's time for some astronaut training, you bird-rats!" he screamed. Their little claws started squirming, hunting for the comforting straw and nest material that seemed to have disappeared beneath them.

Taking two of the 1½ inch tubes, the largest that could be positioned on the small centrifuge, he poked a sparrow down into each of them and carefully made sure they were tightly fitting with their ugly bottoms hitting the bases of the cylinders, their little violet eye sockets and nearly pink, bald heads sticking up. They were still too young to squeak or chirp out a complaint. The train transformer had to be unplugged so the cord of his centrifuge could replace it in the socket.

The resident wren from the Stones' backyard began to chirp really loudly. One of Garreth Cork's mangy cats outside let out a horny feline whine, which sounded nearby enough to be coming from the front yard. This gave the executioner an idea, but it would have to wait until astronaut training had begun.

Jeff turned the centrifuge on to its highest speed. The birds began circling around its center at two revolutions per second. Jeff watched a few seconds, then went back to his closet to get his BB gun and some ammunition for his assassination plot.

Sitting down on the floor to load the gun, Jeff watched the sparrows doing the twist in his torture mobile. It would take a while, he knew, before their astronaut training session would be properly finished, though the birds, with three billion years of evolution that never addressed such a gyrating situation, were probably already near death.

Jeff walked over to his window and peered out and down. There, near the grassy knoll by the Stones' driveway, was one of the particularly violent yellow beasts Garreth had coddled and raised into a violent fighting feline since it was a kitten. Garreth called it Fussy-Paws. Little dogs in the neighborhood, often under its sadistic attack, called it the antichrist. Jeff had yet another name for the feral beast. "Hey, JF-Kat!" he screamed down at the animal. The cat looked up and tried to run, just as one of Jeff's BBs pelted it in the back. The cat hissed and scampered out of the line of fire, its appropriate, instinctual response after three billion years of evolution. "You're a yellow bellied flea bag," Jeff yelled down at it. "Why don't you stay there and fight like a lion?"

Across the street, interrupted from a Saturday's manic trench digging, Mike Turnbull stood up and shouted over to his neighbor, "Hey Jeff! Way to go!"

"Hi, Mike," said Jeff, slightly embarrassed because he hadn't considered he was being watched.

"That scrubby cat'll stay out of your yard for awhile, Jeff!!" Mike was impressed.

"What are you digging up over there, Mike?"

"Oh, Mom says we need to put a moat in around the yard because she's convinced the Russians are coming this week and most of them can't swim. She made Dad and me come out to dig this thing today. Of course it couldn't wait. She had a bad night last night."

"My mom's been acting a little strange too. How's Bugs and Thumper?"

"I fed them this morning, but haven't got to play with them since. Do you wanna come over later? We could take them out and play around in the yard, that is if we ever get done digging here."

"Maybe I'll be over, but I'm not supposed to play with the rabbits anymore."

"Why not?"

"Who knows? Listen, I've got some sparrows and bugs over here I've gotta take care of first. I'll come over after that, if it's OK."

"Great."

"Maybe we could either take out the magnifying glass and go for the ants on the sidewalk or else go down in your bomb shelter and do something there."

"Sure. Both sound OK to me."

The Turnbells first home improvement when they'd moved to Hilldale was to put in a bomb shelter in their backyard. It was always stocked and ready. There were ample supplies of food, water, and a curious stash of butch wax on the shelter's shelves.

Jeff returned to his centrifuge and turned it off. The baby birds were very dead, and had become more interesting than when they'd been so vulnerable and living. He pulled them out of the flasks and examined them carefully. The entirety of their brains had been smashed down into their stomachs, and even most of the lower organs there were pretty well flattened toward their feet. Their skulls and heads, except for the tenacious little closed, bruised eyeballs and beaks, were left as simple lifeless flaps of skin. Some colorless liquid was dripping off the beak of one of them. Jeff smiled. It had been quite a science project indeed. He took them back over to his window and lay them on the sill to dry out in the sun for awhile.

Herr Goebbelschmidt was nearly dead on the rug, too. There were still a few little grasshopper twitches emanating from its muscles, but not enough to be of interest. Jeff removed the bug from its wires, took it over to the window, and threw it outside. He didn't want to mess with the other five grasshoppers at the moment, so he set them on the table by his window, closed the lid tightly on their jar and left them to slowly suffocate or await future experimentation.

Jeff was thirsty; he wanted some more Tang. So he went to the bathroom, washed his hands and face first, and headed downstairs. But just as he got to the bottom of the stairs, someone was furiously pounding on the front door. He walked over, and started to open it. When it was only about six inches open, he spied the angry bonkers visitor on the other side, slammed the door, locked it with its never used dead bolt, and sped back up to his room to hide, even though he didn't have time to make any refreshing Tang.

Garreth Cork was paying his first-ever visit to Jeff Stone.

Five minutes later, Jeff peeked out of the window. Garreth had left. Jeff had to go to the bathroom, so he went over to Mary's, cause it was closest and safest. He sat down, about to do his business, when a hand bedecked with a pinstripe suit raised up from down in the toilet and pulled him screaming and kicking, down to the sewers.

Seven minutes later, it pushed him back into the bathroom, but Jeff had changed. He was post pubescent, and at least three years older. Young Jeff was now relegated to morning and summer reruns.

Alex Meets Trisha

“Say ahh,” Dr. Stone said, gently to Sandra Klemper.

“Aah...” Sandra started to say, before gagging as Alex poked a flat wooden stick on her tongue and held his doctor flashlight to her face.

“What have we got down here?” Alex asked, rhetorically. “Your epiglottis is covered with...”

Right at that instant, uncharacteristically bursting in on the examination, Donna and the newest family member of the Stones’ interrupted the doctor, right as he was about to say, “...some strange white fungus.”

“Oh Alex, meet our new daughter Trisha!” Donna beamed.

Trisha smiled. “Hi, Daddy!” she said. “I’m from ABC.”

Alex felt confused momentarily, then decided that accepting the little girl who was smiling at him was perhaps in his best interest, especially if she was from ABC. It might cost a lot of money if there was a trial over the lost medicine, after all. ABC had lots of money.

“Isn’t she sweet, Alex?”

“...some strange white fungus. Where’s Mary, anyway?” Alex asked. He was really irritated Mary had left for college while she was grounded, and he wasn’t about to let her get away with it, if there was any way it could be prevented.

“Oh, ABC took her away,” said Donna, nonchalantly, realizing that even though she’d miss Mary, or for that matter even if Jeff were to leave she’d miss him, that there would always be new children that could come to live with her.

“We’re going to have to discuss this tonight, Donna. Today I’m expecting a lot of secondary appointments - patients from yesterday that are still very upset and traumatized. It’s still rather crazy around here. No secretary, humph,” he moaned. “I’m really glad to meet you Trish. How good are you at memorizing lines?” Alex was always so efficient.

“I can do it very well!” grinned Trisha.

“Good...” said Alex. “Oh, by the way, it seems nobody can come to dinner tomorrow, Donna.”

“Oh that’s terrible, Alex,” said Donna, actually relieved that she could go home and paint the ceiling, then relax for a couple of hours rather than cooking up a feast extraordinaire...

“Maybe we’ll try it next week,” said Alex.

“Just try to give me a little more notice, please, dear,” said Donna.

Donna realized there was not a lot more for Trisha and her to do in the doctor's office right then, so they made a quick exit, and left for the family home. Donna hoped she could find the right hair netting to use so she wouldn't dribble orange paint all over her hairdo, but one way or another that ceiling was going to get a nice coat of a pretty color. "Beige be Damned!" she thought.

And after they left, Alex redirected his attention to his patient of the moment. He looked deeply into the eyes, ears and nose of Sandra Klemper, when suddenly he fell entirely down her esophagus and took a trip through her digestive tract, courtesy of guide germ Randall Parsons.

When he came back to his senses, or rather to the reality of being an entity in an office rather than a germ in a colon, he was most disoriented, so much so he quickly wrote off a prescription for some antibiotics for Miss Klemper, said goodbye, told seven patients waiting in the reception area HE wasn't feeling very well and they'd have to come back Monday, and shut himself inside his office, sat down in his chair, and sat frozen in place for three hours and twenty-two minutes.

Donna and Trisha Come Home

After a quick twenty minute tour of Hilldale for Trisha's benefit, Donna drove carefully up to the driveway of the Stones' house, parked, and grabbed the paint she was so desperate to use. It was more than a slight fixation, it was as if she needed to paint the Temple before the roving gangs of dust bunny warriors could come to destroy her house and everyone in it. Through finishing the painting job, she'd save the whole clan from complete destruction.

She was suddenly interrupted in her latest epic fantasy when Trish said, "Look Mommy!"

Trish was pointing across the street.

Midge Turnbull was speeding out of her backyard after one of Garreth Cork's cats. The cat was carrying something in its mouth. It took Donna a second to focus properly on the sight, but suddenly she realized the cat had broken into the bunny hutch and killed one of Mike Turnbull's rabbits. Midge was chasing the terrified feline, and finally it dropped the dead bunny at the edge of the Turnbull's yard, jumped over the trench guarding the Turnbull's house, and escaped back to the Cork's yard across the street where it managed to run under the front porch and cower.

Midge was so angry, well, Donna had never seen her face that red, and it was really interesting that the whole neighborhood could hear her ranting, oh poor Midge, so probably somebody or another was telephoning somebody else to tell them...

Donna pulled out two of the Stones' lawn chairs they normally used for special evenings, like the Fourth of July, and sat them down in the front yard. "Oh Trish, I really want to paint, but let's just sit out here a minute and relax first," she said.

"Good idea!" said Trish.

Midge flew into her house and after a few more seconds of rage she reappeared, with came back out with a hammer in her hand.

"Goodness," said Donna. "Midge has a hammer. I wonder what that's all about!"

"Hi, Mom." Jeff popped out of the house just in time for the show.

"Jeff, be quiet for a moment please..." said Donna, then thinking to add, "This is your new sister, Jeff. Trisha."

Midge flew across the street faster than anyone could have believed possible, picking up the dead Bugs on her way, and flew into the Cork's front yard, which meant that Donna had to stand up and readjust the lawn chair in order to properly watch the continuing unfolding of this neighborhood drama.

Screaming something about evil heads of state, Midge held the lifeless rabbit to the front door of the Cork's house, and began pounding nails into it.

“New sister?” said Jeff, rather confused. “Huh?”

“Hi, Jeff!” said Trish.

Something happened right then that hadn’t happened in years. The dingy yellow curtains of the Cork’s house parted a bit, and the feeble head of Mrs. Cork peered out the window at her neighbor, the harebrained, hare-handed Midge.

Midge didn’t notice, however. She was putting nail holes through the rabbits paws and slicing open a new wound on his poor little tummy. Bugs was going to be Jesus for a day.

And almost as quickly as they curtains parted, they fell back into place, covering the window, for sadly Mrs. Cork’s heart decided at that very instant to stop beating. Perhaps it was the loud sound of the hammer, perhaps the unnatural sunlight shining on her face, perhaps she was really hungry, or perhaps it was just her time. But she died regardless, and this would not bode well for her son or his pet weed or pet cats.

“Mary’s gone forever, Jeff,” said Trish. “She went away to college.”

At this point Donna returned her attention to the children, for Midge was marching back across the street to the Turnbells’, and it seemed the show of shows was over for awhile. “Jeff!” Donna said, “You’ve, you’ve grown up so much today!”

“Yes, mother,” Jeff said.

Donna was pleased to hear Jeff use the word “Mother.” What a nice change from that ruffian who just that very morning she’d considered vacuuming up!

The Beatles Hit America, While Donna Plays with Fire

“Can I help you put the lawn chairs away, and maybe help you carry these paint cans into the house?” asked Jeff.

It was just too much. Donna was so happy, tears of joy began to stream down her face.

She was so happy she passed out, just like the previous morning. It was into a darkness and peacefulness she hadn't experienced in years. No nightmares haunted her, no dreams of marriages that could never be, and she was even allowed to snore with her mouth open.

And she slept for thirty-two hours. When she woke up, it was dark. Still peaceful. She knew what she must do. The television was on downstairs, she heard screams of the young women, some sort of new rock music she'd never heard before, music sung by men seeming to tell her “She Loves You, Yeah Yeah Yeah!”, and more screams from girls not much younger than her former daughter Mary. Alex was making loud noises about long hair or something, yes, yes, there was Jeff's voice, and Trisha's. The family was safe. It must be Sunday. It must be Ed Sullivan.

She peered out the window, and saw that shadows were looming in the Mansion Turnbull. There was obviously a commotion going on there, too. Opening the window for a little cold, fresh air, it seemed loud noises from television sets and irate parents were filling the streets of Hilldale.

The world seemed to have changed in that thirty-two hour period.

So Donna decided what she must do. She went downstairs, quietly went into the kitchen without disturbing the family in the living room, grabbed some matches and quietly sneaked out the back door. In the garage she picked up a can of gasoline, and ever so quietly she tiptoed across the street to the Turnbull's. She nearly tripped into the new moat surrounding their house, but managed to traverse it and get over by the big picture window. The gasoline smelled very nice as she poured it on the porch, and the fire felt warm when she lit it.

She walked silently back across the street as strains of “From me...to you,” came out of every set on the block.

Donna breathed a lengthy sigh. The February weekend from Hades (not hell, heck, Donna would never even think that word) was very nearly over! It had been an episode that had really tapped her resourcefulness more than any she could remember.

Perhaps she would make some Rice-a-Roni tomorrow. Tomorrow, after the Stones' lives were canceled by ABC.