*EQUINE INTRIGUE: A Maiden’s Tale*

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Violent death is upsetting. When you are sixteen, it seems incomprehensible. Murder exists in detective stories and movies and occasionally in the dark ghettos far removed from a genteel world. Suicide? Given the delights of home and horses, why would anyone wish to deliberately perish when there is so much fun to be had galloping and leaping fences?  
 Old people die, but they give you plenty of warning that they are departing so as not to make a fuss or shock you. And their funerals are pleasantly antiseptic and you get to dress up and the minister speaks comforting, sonorous phrases about life everlasting, amen. And, of course, there is always a nice reception afterwards and people try to be cheerful and ask about your horse.  
 Having said that, let me tell you about what happened when I returned home at Christmas of my junior year. It’s not pretty, so you might want to stop reading now. Well, anyhow, here goes…

I stood alone on the platform of the little wayside depot peering up the tracks through the light filtering snow of mid-morning mid-December. Distantly I heard the warning hoot of the approaching locomotive some miles up the Connecticut River valley as it neared a farm road junction. That morning I would be the only passenger boarding, a shivering schoolgirl heading home for the Christmas vacation of her junior year. My knee socks were not sufficiently high, nor my plaid skirt sufficiently long, nor my camel hair coat sufficiently warm to counteract the fact that my knees were now exquisitely and painfully freezing.   
 The less said about my school, the better. It was horseless, boyless, joyless, and perched on a cold hillside overlooking the leaden Connecticut River smack up against the New Hampshire state line. I never understood why I must be wrenched from my contented country life and exiled to that forlorn place. Father said it was for my own good.   
 All the other students had departed the previous day. But I had stayed on to meet that evening my art teacher’s visitor, a portrait painter who had come for the weekend. Supper in her cozy cottage, tucked in the pines on the campus edge, had been a chilly affair despite the fire in the living room fireplace. Clearly, the portrait painter was not amused at the possibility of another upstart entry into her vocation who one day might affect her future income. More mystified than discouraged, I walked back through the dark, still campus to my dormitory, its windows normally ablaze with the light of the studious, now with but a single light glowing above the doorway.   
 All my life I had loved to draw and, later, to paint. In fact, that past summer my father had arranged for me to intern with a landscape painter who summered up the road in an old farmhouse, the back part of which had been converted to studio space. That I did little but clean up after him and received no consequential instruction had not bothered me. I saw how he went about things, and, if he was not forthcoming, he did answer questions I put to him. Whether he was aware that I aspired to portrait painting, or cared, my presence in his studio, as far as he was concerned, was that of day laborer. But for some time, I had been determined upon a career of portrait painting. I fancied that, at this point, my strength was that I could catch a likeness though I was still obviously lacking the proper academic training that an art school someday would provide.  
 At last, the yellow orb of the locomotive’s headlight emerged from the winter gloom and the train panted to a wheezing halt at the forlorn little platform. Yesterday the train would have been filled to bursting with extra cars attached as all the boarding schools in the valley closed the same December day. Today the ridership was sparse and I had a pair of seats to myself as we began to trundle down the broad, placid valley. For an hour, there was nothing but flat cropland punctuated by long, gray abandoned tobacco barns, little copses of woodland, and small brick factories served by the freight line.  
 The train groaned to a stop in Northampton, and a few Smith College girls, late departers like me, boarded. Leaving the rural valley behind, we rolled along to the riverside city of Springfield and then, hugging the leaden river, ran through countless acres of drear tobacco fields, grinding to a halt at my destination, the Romanesque brownstone terminal in Hartford, the center of the nation’s insurance business and the capitol of the Nutmeg State (early Connecticut peddlers had sold wooden nutmegs to gullible farm wives ).   
 There is something special about a snow globe snowfall in a city at Christmastime. The railroad station was bustling with gift-laden passengers and festooned with decorations and wreaths and lights of the merry season. My father had dispatched one of the young men from his office to escort me to the taxi rank and accompany me to the Hartford Club where presumably father would join me for lunch. And in case he was detained, the young man would squire me. This was standard operating procedure for all my previous school vacation returns, so I was not a bit surprised when a note at the club desk informed me that I should lunch with my new companion, a perfectly nice young man and a recent Trinity graduate, at the club and that he would provide me with necessary funds for the purchase of gifts for the family. Furthermore, I was to meet father at his office at 5 o’clock sharp for departure for home. The chance that we would depart at the specified hour I had learned from past experience was laughably remote, but for me to arrive a moment late would meet with a wondering frown over a bristling mustache. Thus was life with father.  
 I spent that dark afternoon in the brightly lit and gaily garbed department stores that stood shoulder to shoulder on Main Street, a block from the insurance company towers. I lingered over a watercolor landscape for my parents, but in the end bought a cookbook for mother, a horsey novel for my sister of ten years, and a necktie for my father. At that point in my young life I was unaware that a Christmas tie had become a standing with a polka dot pattern and I liked it.

Permit me to interrupt my narrative and introduce myself. My name is Mary, but everyone calls me Unie although there is no agreed upon spelling of the word. I am called that because, in our little country town in the hills west of Hartford, the locals have taken to referring to father as Anonymous due to his years of contributing generously to local fund raising needs such as the volunteer fire department, the church, the grange and such, insisting that that term be used in the records rather than his own name. Since everyone knows well just who Anonymous really is, the practice is absurd but he continues oblivious to the obvious. When I began to attend the one-room schoolhouse down the road and across from the fairgrounds, my fellow schoolmates, all older and knowing that I was father’s daughter, decided that it would be a great joke to call *me* Anonymous rather than Mary. Unfortunately, their vocabularies being less than fully developed, they were unable to distinguish between ‘anonymous’ and the more familiar ‘unanimous’. When Unanimous became too much of a mouthful, it was abbreviated and I became Unie. As time went by, everyone began to call me by that name rather than my given one. Finally my parents succumbed, since virtually everyone else had forgotten that I was actually named Mary and if they were to refer to me as Mary no one would know whom they meant.  
 Our town was not like other rural towns in the Nutmeg State. If you were to drive through it, you would think otherwise. It had a village green surrounded by handsome white clapboard homes dating to the turn of the 19th century. It had ancient maples shading the green and those stately homes. There was the standard Congregational church of good proportions fronting the green although, architecturally, the steeple left a lot to be desired. There was a small combination grocery and general store with a filling station attached. Outside the village proper stood a handful of small residences of traditional storey and a half configuration. In our town, virtually every house was painted white and the barns were red or left to weather. Two lanes ran out into the farmland that comprised the bulk of the town landmass. Our farms were dairy with a scattering of poultry and several devoted to raising pleasure horses. From a hilltop, you could look in all directions and see a patchwork quilt of fields, pastures, orchards, and small woodlots stretching away to the far blue lines of hills on the horizon. Tractors had long since replaced teams of work horses, and most roads now had asphalt surfaces making mud season not much more than a painful, though recent, memory. Electricity had come to us during the early ‘thirties, and most everybody had a telephone, although most shared a party line.  
 In a former hayfield a couple of hundred yards distant from the village was our pride of place: the new consolidated school; one storey, flat-roofed, brick, with large windows that provided plenty of daylight to the diligent scholars. All across the state since war time, schools of like construction had been built to replace the one-room district schools (we had twelve). But the first six years that I spent as a participant in the town school system regrettably were housed in the aforementioned District 12 one room schoolhouse, woodshed attached, whose only source of heat was a parlor stove and only source of drinking water the hand pump outside. Only in my final year of education at public expense did I have the luxury of a ride in a big yellow bus to the spiffy consolidated school.  
 I said previously that our town was not like other towns despite appearing similar if not indistinguishable. This was the reason: my great-grandfather in the 1880’s and three of his friends in our family’s insurance business had decided that they wanted a healthful place to keep their saddle horses. His was the day of the horse, and the city streets were aromatic with the fetid smell of trodden manure and the pervasive aroma from livery stables, noisy from iron-shod hooves and wheels on cobblestones, and stultifying from the smokiness of coal burning for power and warmth. There was a general consensus that urban air was unhealthy. Since a new short-line railroad could bring them out from Hartford in merely half an hour to a land of clean, healthful airs, rolling hills, and rural spaciousness and since the local farmers were delighted to sell their farms to the city slickers at what seemed to them to be a real killing, great-grandfather and his cronies began buying farms at what seemed to them an absurd bargain, often combining several farms into one large holding.  
 As the word spread, more city men began to buy up the ever available farms until by the turn of the century, there were but a few farms still in the hands of townsfolk . Soon what had been subsistence farmland became Hartford’s horse country. When simple hacking about the countryside began to pale, great-grandfather purchased a pack of fox hounds from Maryland complete with huntsman. Gradually the countryside transformed itself from farmland to hunt country as jumps were constructed into and out of the fields and pastures. I once tried to count just how many and gave up at well over one hundred. Their maintenance would keep several generations of high school boys employed during the summer. As time went by, many of the new owners became commuters and built themselves homes of suitable proportions on their new holdings.  
 Great-grandfather owned the pack, thereby acquiring the title of Master of Fox Hounds, accepted annual subscriptions from fellow followers of the hounds, ran the hunt’s affairs, and paid the bills. Both grandfather and now father had succeeded him as MFH.   
 Great-grandfather had a small cottage built next to the kennels, which were across the road from his house, for the huntsman. The hunt kept about thirty hounds kenneled, and hunted Tuesdays and Saturdays from late August until snows that made following the hounds on horseback dicey. Since the same families, for the most part, still lived on the land of their forbearers, the country had stayed open to the hunt. Through some legal contrivance of long ago, should a property change hands the right of the hunt to access to the land persisted despite the change of ownership. Thus the country hunted comprised a lop-sided rectangle about five miles on a side.

“Unie, get up! I want you to take the punch bowl over to the Stevensons.”  
 I was contentedly snuggled under a heap of blankets against the bitter cold of an upstairs bedroom that leaked tendrils of icy drafts through the window casements. When I looked outside, yesterday’s snow had sugared the lawn and pastures and the morning sun sparkled through the crystals like so many million diamonds. Our house was an old tavern where, reputedly, George Washington had slept once on his travels through the state. Father, who was a passionate local historian, had frustrated himself for years trying to verify the truth of the claim. Our tavern lies some 17 miles from the one eastward and 12 miles from the one westward, so local tradition could well be correct. As father asserted, verbal history is more often trustworthy than not. He was invited to speak frequently about local history at Grange and church suppers and the like, so this bee in his bonnet was well known.  
 I liked our house although fashionable people would turn their noses up at it. The floorboards were broad pine boards and the knots stuck up like lumps as nearly two hundred years of foot traffic has worn away the softer wood. The chestnut frame had twisted and heaved so that hairline cracks ran through the plaster walls and low ceilings and the floors dipped and rose crazily. Wearing high heel shoes in our house was asking for a sprained ankle. Upstairs the tiny original bedchambers for travelers long ago had their partition walls removed and new walls erected to make for bedrooms of a more conventional size. Downstairs the taproom had become a living room. We also had a dining room which must have been a storage chamber. A huge central chimney was built in the center of the building, which was common practice, to provide as much radiating heat as possible on cold evenings. Our kitchen was an ell that stuck out from the house proper and had a woodshed attached for the firewood that mother used in the old wood range. People laughed at mother’s wood range as hopelessly backward, but it kept the kitchen snug and had all sorts of odd uses. Even though she mostly cooked on the electric range, it was awfully nice on a winter’s day when you came in from the cold of the hay barn or the stable and your fingers were frozen and aching. That morning the wood range was keeping my porridge warm and a pot of baked beans was baking in its oven.  
 “You need to drive over to the Stevensons as soon as you’re finished.”   
 Father drove our car to Hartford early in the mornings so I would have to drive the pick-up truck, a miserable device that had the creature comforts of an old-fashioned buckboard. Most everybody had a second vehicle, often a pick-up like ours but also a scattering of war surplus jeeps, well-worn war-time woodie station wagons, and an occasional odiferous farm truck. I had had my driving license since June, and my parents found it convenient to send me scuttling around the countryside doing their errands. It was not quite what I had in mind when I had thought how liberating driving would make me.   
 Our punch bowl was a vast crater and it travelled around from party to party as needed. The Stevensons always held a big party at their home for the hunt landowners and farmers the evening of the Friday before Christmas. There would be a five piece band for dancing, the sideboard would hold a pair of fragrant Virginia hams, a hired hand in the corner of the dining room shucked oysters, the dining room table disappeared under mounds of sausages, cheeses, casseroles, baked this and that, and on and on. The noise level would increase until you had to scream to make yourself understood by the person standing next to you. In our odd little world, when two women would meet at a social function such as the Stevensons’, the opening questions would not concern the well being of their children as in any normal society. Instead, the opening questions would concern the well being of their respective horses. Generally, the conversation would progress to their farriers and then on to the hay and grain they were buying and the outrageously high price being asked. At some point, they might or might not round to discussing their children. Often not.  
 I liked the Stevensons. Great-grandfather Stevenson, whose portrait along with that of grandfather Stevenson hung on the parlor wall, was one of the group of Hartford gents that great-grandfather induced to purchase the original lands. Great-grandfather Stevenson must have had potent genes because every subsequent Stevenson male was a dead-ringer for him: tall, lank, reddish sandy hair, pale blue eyes and the worst complexions imaginable. The appalling acne of adolescence left them with deeply scared, pock-marked faces. All were fine horsemen, and every May they hosted the hunt’s steeplechase on their land. This had become a major social event, and folks from Hartford and the suburbs flocked to their hillside to set up picnics and elegant tail-gate lunches and watch the races in the valley below.  
 Theirs was a big, long, white clapboard house that sat on a ridge top, and there the gusting wind was scuttling and swirling the fallen snow. All Stevenson males are Christened either Richard or Charles. Charlie was my age and my pal since we first started following the hounds on our childhood ponies. Dickie was several years older and a college sophomore. All Stevensons attend Choate, matriculate to Yale, and then become bankers.  
 I tried not to look at the hideous eruptions on Charlie’s face, and, since he must have been prepared for the inevitable since childhood, he seemed to accept what fate dealt him. We agreed that in the hunt tomorrow morning we would keep company again on horseback like we did so often as children. I left behind a house full of Stevensons and their hired help bustling about arranging and preparing for the annual onslaught that the evening, as always, would bring.

“Unie, sit down. I need to talk to you.” I was barely inside the kitchen door.  
 “Your uncle is not a well man.” A shiver ran up my spine. I do not know how to explain what I felt at that moment, but whatever it was produced a feeling of impending calamity.  
 Uncle lived across the road in what had been great-grandfather’s house. Actually we lived on a four corners: our house was the old tavern, across the road uncle lived in grand style behind a front of Doric pillars in what had been great-grandfather’s home, the third corner was the huntsman’s cottage in which the Ernest Riches lived and behind which was the kennel complex, and the fourth corner was a hayfield and out in the hayfield was a small kennel and fenced yard for bitches in heat.  
 “I know. I read your letters.”   
 Uncle was some dozen years older than my father, and had been poorly for some time. Father resembled an amiable bear, but Uncle resembled an aloof giraffe. Father barged through life; uncle sidestepped gracefully. Uncle dropped out of the family insurance company a few years ago when Auntie died, and he just mooned about: no interest in riding or old friends or his golf foursome. And he had begun to complain about the noise from the kennel.   
 “Penny is staying with him full time.”  
 Penny was the daughter of the poultry farmer up the road from us, and she had been housekeeping for her widowed father after completing nursing school and also had been doing private duty nursing. I liked her. She was tall, strong, good-looking in a rugged sort of way, competent, unflappable and independent. She told you what she thought, and you could take it or leave it as far as she was concerned. If she had been caring for Uncle, then Uncle was in good hands.  
 “What is really wrong?”   
 I thought he looked pretty awful at Thanksgiving, but he seemed to me still able to get around. My father had arranged long ago for a local lady to cook for Uncle since he was afraid that his brother just might forget that he had to eat. Father had been begging him to stop driving his car, but since Uncle rarely went any farther than the village’s single store for pipe tobacco, he probably constituted only a minor menace to the well being of the occasional fellow road user he might encounter.  
 “He had a stroke right after Thanksgiving. A little one, but he is not himself and he is terribly frail. “  
 “Can’t I go over and see him?” All my life, I had had free rein to come and go without invitation or announcing myself.  
 “I had better call and ask Penny. She has been taking him out in the car just to try to get him interested in living. He just sits in the library in his pajamas all day unless she drags him out of it. Look, I’ll tell Penny that you want to see him, and she can arrange a time.”  
 “Is it really that bad?’  
 “I’m afraid so.”   
 And now for a change of pace.  
 “Charlie and I are going to ride together tomorrow like we did when we were kids.” I knew she would not be riding as she would be over at the Stevenson place helping clean up.   
 “Go ahead. You had better trot your horse around today so she is used to you.” My mare had been exercised by the girl who cared for the horses, but it had not been hunted since Thanksgiving.  
 “And you had better get your boots polished, too.” The Thanksgiving hunt had been a wet, muddy affair, and father, as master, would not be amused were I to show up at the meet tomorrow looking less than proper.  
 I decided that I would ride my mare after lunch, and that I would drop in at the kennels now. There was a new litter in late October, and nothing is more fun than messing around with hound puppies. I knocked on the back door of the Rich’s cottage, and Mrs. Rich told me that her husband was off talking to the farmer where the hounds would meet tomorrow (I should explain for those who are unfamiliar with the sport that this term merely means where the hunt would start), but I could go through to the puppy room in the kennel and see the new litter. The hounds were outside in the big fenced-in exercise yard. All the hounds knew me so there was a lot of commotion when I entered but none of the barking or howling that always happened when a stranger visited. I let myself into the puppy room and flopped down on the snuggly blanket and let them crawl all over me and lick me and pull my hair and tug at my clothes  
 The kennel consisted of two hound rooms, one for the bitches and the other for the dog hounds, that is to say the males. There was a feed room with troughs for feeding the hounds, a puppy room, a storage room for feed and medicines, and an office for Mr. Rich. Everyone called him Mr. Rich, even father. He had a serene dignity and gentleness about him, and a vast competence in country matters. He rode like he was glued into the saddle, and when we were out in the field hunting he seemed to know what the pack would do before they did. The hounds adored him, the children of the hunt idolized him, and for the hunt members, many of whom had grown up hunting with him, he was the essence of a sporting life. He must have been a few years older than father as he was a veteran of the First World War and had a piece of shrapnel still lodged in his shoulder. He stood a bit less than average in height, was wiry in build, possessed considerable strength, and was quiet and sparing in speech.   
 Since I was old enough to toddle across the road to the kennels, I had practically lived there. I suppose I was the child that the Riches never had. When Mr. Rich would have to go to the feed store, the vet’s, or, more often, to a farm to repair a fence or gate damaged by the hunt, I would ride along in the truck with him. When he had to put down an old hound, I would hold its head in my lap, and we would bury it together. Since father was such as busy man and had little time at home, Mr. Rich was probably more father to me than father himself. No doubt this also occurred to father, although it never seemed to bother him. In an odd way, I think he thought it a good thing.  
 Father was the master of the hunt, like grand-father and great-grandfather before him. His exact title was Master of Foxhounds, abbreviated as MFH. If you asked father what he did as master, he would reply that he wrote the checks to pay the bills and that Mr. Rich did the rest. Of course, technically, he employed Mr. Rich. He and Mr. Rich sat down once a week and discussed the hunt, but otherwise Mr. Rich ran the hunt without seeming to do so.   
 Father rarely missed a Saturday hunt, but because of business pressure he almost never rode on Tuesdays. Mother always rode on Tuesdays and occasionally on Saturdays. And every January father went to a gentlemen’s club in Manhattan and put on his red tailcoat and dined with all the other masters in the country when the national association held its annual weekend meeting . The following evening he danced with mother at the association’s hunt ball at a hotel on Fifth Avenue

My sister had returned from her overnight at a friend’s house, and was already mounted on her pony and headed off to an afternoon ride with another friend who lived up the road by the time I was home from the kennels. I have not really mentioned her so far. I think she was a bit of a surprise to my parents. My mother had lost her first pregnancy, and after I appeared they were relieved to have a healthy child and determined not to risk fate. And then six years later came Susie. At this point in her life, Susie’s interest was horses and nothing but horses. She usually smelled faintly of horse, and mother was always after her to bathe more often.   
 After a late lunch, I tacked up my mare and headed up the long field behind our house to the ridge top with father’s gun dog, Buddy, trotting behind. The mid-day sun had pretty well melted the sugaring of snow except on the north sides of the stone walls, and the footing was firm and the ground as of yet did not have a bone in it (that means it was not yet frozen hard). The hunt season, which had begun in late summer when the hounds went out at daybreak before the heat of the day evaporated the scent, rarely lasted much beyond Christmas when the deep snow made hunting on horseback impossible. Some years when the snowfall was light, they could hunt off and on through the winter depending on what a given day brought. But the morning weather forecast had called for a stretch of clear skies, so I had hope of several more hunts during vacation.  
 From the broad top of the ridge I followed a route I had traced since I was old enough to be allowed off on my own pony, zig-zagging in and out of empty fields and pastures and woodlots with their meandering logging trails until the early sunset of late December started to turn the sky lemon. The cold had begun to seep into my shin bones and toes, and we turned toward home. A warm bath would feel heavenly, and anyway, this being Saturday and the Stevenson’s party, I had to make myself presentable. And I had to assemble my hunting clothes for tomorrow and polish those boots.

As I stood in front of my bedroom mirror, I took stock of myself—well, at least my appearance. My cheeks were wind burned from the afternoon ride. My hair, which I usually pulled back in a pony tail, hung to my shoulders. It was the color that mother referred to as mouse brown. My all-purpose black frock still fit tolerably well as I had reached my full height a couple of years ago. And mother let me wear her pearl ear rings and necklace, but never without the admonition to be very careful as they are real. My hands were not delicate debutante hands, but large and strong from years of slinging hay bales, doing chores in all weathers, and the like that goes with a country life. I knew I was not the kind of pretty that turns heads, but, on the other hand, I was not plain. Somewhere between, I suppose, and so far it had not been much of an issue. I overheard mother this past summer talking about me to a friend, and she said I was “at least marriageable.”  
 Father was stomping around in the parlor in his red hunt tailcoat, trying to hustle mother, who was by far the greater offender, and me along. The sitter had arrived for my sister, and father wanted to depart as he was mad for punctuality. And he said the sooner we arrived the sooner we could leave. Dragging mother home from the Stevenson’s would take all his powers of guile and persuasion as mother was keen on parties.  
 Finally he had pushed and prodded us into the dark, cold Chevrolet, and we were off to the party. Like a lot of wealthy men, father hated to spend money, and as far as he was concerned a fancier car, which mother would have enjoyed, was just a waste of the stuff. He would sit down at his desk and write a check to cover the balance remaining from the fund raising campaign to buy a new truck for the volunteer fire department without a second thought, but should he discover that he was being asked to pay 2 cents more this year for a bale of hay he would yell that they (whoever *they* are) will bankrupt him. As we pulled away from the house, I looked across the road at Uncle’s home. This time of year, in years past, it would have been gaily festooned with a huge wreath on each of the tall pillars of the colonnade and every light in every one of its many rooms would have been lit, casting a cheerful golden radiance about the place. This year, there were no wreaths on the columns and one light in an upstairs room shone dimly.  
 The Stevenson’s place was aglow against the dark sky picked out with bright pin points of starlight which promised good weather for the hunt tomorrow. Already, although we were among the early arrivals, there was a hum of conversation and behind it the band was tuning up. Then over all I heard the high skirling laugh, actually more of a giggle, of Dobson Green . I liked most everybody, but Mr. Dobson Green, how shall I put it in a ladylike way, I did not care for. He was one of the larger landowners; actually the money belonged to his wife who was a pathetic house-bound cripple who inherited a brewery fortune and bought the property from the heirs of one of the original purchasers. Since the party was given for farmers and land owners, Dobbie Green was a reluctant invite. He did not ride, but he kept a small stable of ex-flat track racehorses that he had trained for steeplechase racing by a long-suffering trainer.   
 He lusted for victory in our hunt’s races, although our race is small by comparison to the better known amateur races in which his horses competed. To qualify for entry into our race, a horse must have been hunted at least three times, and he made sure that father saw his prospective entry at the meets and then had it trotted back to the stable while the hounds were in the woods still trying to turn up the first fox of the day. Father was not fooled by this attempted subterfuge, but he had not said anything lest Dobbie convince his wife to close their land to the hunt. Of course, legally they could not do this by the restrictions of the original covenant, but the legal process to stop them would be tiresome. Anyhow, he considered himself a bit of a ladies’ man and a country gentleman, to boot. In fact he was neither. I suppose at one time he might have been considered attractive, but that was before too much booze turned his face florid and too much gourmandizing put a ribbon of blubber around his waist and doubled his chin. He stank of after shave which I thought he used to cover up the smell of alcohol on his breath. He crowed that he had never had to work a day in his life for he lived off his wife’s fortune. Worse yet, his appalling son, Dobson Junior, had long enjoyed tormenting me.  
 Father apparently had abandoned his stated desire to depart early. He was seated in a group of schoolmates from his childhood days long ago spent as a scholar at our District 12 one room schoolhouse, and they were swapping stories and recollections and disappearing into a cloud of cigar smoke. Rarely did father get to unbend from his life as an important man, and he was clearly enjoying himself and happy, for once, to again be able to relax and be just a country boy again. Mother was eyeing him suspiciously.  
 The noise was becoming considerable, and Charlie and I retreated to the long parlor which had been stripped down to allow room for dancing. We fox trotted after a fashion and box stepped to a slow waltz. And it was at that moment that that nauseating little oink, Dobson Junior, cut in. Why Charlie was cursed with his hideous acne and Dobbie Junior’s skin was clear and smooth defied justice. The little wretch attended a small boarding school, best unnamed, that catered to the academically ungifted and only required the parent’s signature on the tuition check. Anyway, while in his grasp, Dobbie proceeded to suggest a disgusting sexual feat that he would like to perform on me.   
 The party had reached a crescendo of sustained noise and jollity, thanks largely to the voluminous capacity of our punch bowl. But slowly the assault on the eardrums abated and you could almost hear the band thumping away in the parlor, and then notably as party goers began to take their leave and totter out into the bracing night air. Mother had finally dislodged father, and we were taking our leave of our hosts when I noticed Dobbie Junior leering at me through a momentary gap in the departing party goers.

Our little world was rimed with frost and the rising sun was casting long purple shadows across its whiteness. The scenting would be good.  
 Downstairs mother was making preparations for our day in the field. By the time I was back from haying the horses, the kitchen was fragrant with the aroma of bacon and she was cooking scrambled eggs in the huge cast iron spider. A pile of toast and a small vat of Dundee marmalade sat on the shelf above the wood range keeping warm. On the counter were the rinds of the oranges for our juice and a big pot of coffee perked merrily on the electric range. On a hunt morning, it was essential to pack away a substantial breakfast since one might not eat again until late afternoon. We carried a peanut butter sandwich with us in a small leather box that hung from the back of the saddle, a candy bar in a hunt coat pocket, and a flask in another pocket, non-alcoholic in mine and my sister’s and dry sherry in father’s.   
 The meet was at ten-thirty. Normally the hounds met during the autumn at ten sharp, but come the later sunrise of winter the time was pushed back to allow the ground a bit more time to thaw. In our country, most everyone hacked cross-lots to the meet rather than trailering the horses. Generally that meant leaving the stable a generous hour or more before depending on the location of the meet. Mr. Rich never wanted to hunt the same section too frequently lest the foxes move away. The three of us were tacking up the horses by nine. Then father trotted over to the kennels to help with the loading of the hounds into their truck, a noisy, boisterous affair since the hounds, when they realize they are going out, erupt in ecstasy. Once they were loaded, father and Mr. Rich would hack cross country to the farm where we were to meet, and the high school boy, who was hired to drive the truck, and Mrs. Rich would go by road.  
 My sister was to meet a friend with whom she would hack to the meet, so she left the same moment father departed for the kennels since her friend lived a mile distant which added another mile to cover to get to the meet. Already the sun was melting the frost to shimmering dew drops.  
 I trotted my mare down the road to the fairgrounds, past my old District 12 school house, now empty and looking forlorn. My intention was to cut in at the deserted fairgrounds and then make my way a mile or so cross lots to the Hooker farm where the hounds would be waiting. Try to picture me: my hair properly contained in a hairnet under my black bowler hat with a cord through the back of the brim connected to the collar of my heavy black melton frock coat, my white stock tie secured with a gold safety pin, tan leather gloves, a tattersall vest, and heavy tan twill breeches, and my battered, but polished, black riding boots. I should mention before proceeding further that the stock tie would be used, if necessary, to help splint a broken bone, the hairpin to secure it, and the cord attached to my bowler would retain the hat should an errant branch or some such calamity remove it from my cranium. Everything had a purpose. And father was very strict about proper turn out, that is to say one’s appearance, as a compliment to our host, in this case the Hookers. I knew he would have no compunction about sending me home if he thought I was not correct and presentable.   
 It was a fine, cold morning. The ground was already softening a bit under foot, and all about me were the russets and duns and grays of a rural winter landscape that rose and dipped, criss-crossed by endless low stone walls created by the toil of the early settlers who cleared these fields with teams of oxen that pulled sledges laden with the glacial detritus. Over the decades of the hunt’s existence, every field and pasture had had provided a way in and a way out—if not a farm gateway then a jump. Most of the jumps were places along the walls cleared of the brush and saplings that nature promptly produced unless man intervened with sharpened steel, but where barbed wire occurred a simple triangular board framework covered the bottom two strands and the top stand was removed.  
 Let me assume that your knowledge of this country pursuit is peripheral, and that you may be beginning to suspect that I am a blood-thirsty little beast lusting for the gory death of a cute, furry forest dweller. Actually, there was little chance of any harm befalling our foxes. The countryside was abundantly supplied with their dens. Further, there were numerous woodchuck holes, culverts, brush piles, and all sorts of other refuges. And the foxes knew every one in their territories. Once the fox decided to go to ground, the chase was over. How long it lasted was up to the fox. Some seemed to actually enjoy tormenting the hounds in pursuit. And we had plenty of foxes. Most nights you could hear them barking. The reason we had so many was due to the poultry farmers who tossed out the culls of the day, the unthrifty and profitless birds. At night, the foxes came out of hiding and made off with the carcasses. You found the bleached bones of chickens all around the countryside.  
 I rode on in the quiet morning, the only sounds the thud of the horse’s hoofs and the creak of saddle leather. Ahead I could just make out in the far distance the silhouette of the Hooker silos, and, when I turned in the saddle as we mounted a rise, behind me Uncle’s tall chimneys were a pin prick far away on the horizon. I told myself to remind mother to tell Penny that I really wanted to see my uncle.  
 Uncle had been my life-long pal, the incarnation of the word ‘avuncular.’ We understood one another. Father, by contrast, had a sort of grumpy, military air about himself. I knew father was a good man, and that he gave much of his money away, that he was busy running the family business and sat on several charitable boards and ran the hunt. But I could snuggle up to uncle and tell him what was bothering me. If I had tried to snuggle up to father, he would have told me to sit up straight and state my problem concisely.  
 When I trotted down the farm lane at the Hooker’s, the hounds were already out of the truck, milling about gregariously in the farmyard but with one eye on Mr. Rich. The fox hound is a friendly creature by nature. Some were flopped on the cold turf, waiting patiently for Mr. Rich’s horn to call them for the off, but others were wandering about looking for a pat on the head or a dog biscuit from a friendly foot follower. The fox hound is a remarkable creation, a big strong animal capable of galloping miles across country in full cry, at a speed only a fast horse can match, while following a mere whisper of scent.  
 There was air of geniality among the assembling riders for this might well be the last hunt of the season depending on what the quixotic weather could bring, and everyone seemed intent on making this a jolly outing. A tray of paper cups of port was being handed up to the riders, a drop of courage. The usual weathered faces that always turned out were there, of course, as well as a few nervous house guests of members. Then there were my sister and her pals on their ponies, several farm wives who occasionally rode, my contemporaries back from boarding schools (including especially Charlie), and today the Hooker’s son and daughter. In all, I suppose we amounted to thirty mounted. With the exception of a handful of gentlemen members in their red hunt coats and toppers, the rest of us were wearing our winter-weight black hunt coats and bowlers. In the background, the foot followers stood chatting while their army-surplus jeeps idled. They would follow as best possible by road, park, and scramble to get views of the action through binoculars. I think the farmers enjoyed having the hunt meet at their places: it was like having the circus come to town, a brief spot of excitement and color in a drab day-to-day routine.  
 To the side, father and Mr. Rich were conferring with the whippers-in. Like the gentlemen members, they wore red coats but, to distinguish themselves as master and staff, they wore the hard hunt cap. The four red-coated whippers-in helped Mr. Rich in various ways. Their general duty was to flank the pack and keep it together as the foxhound is a curious beast and prone to wander. But there was a myriad of other possible duties depending on what Mr. Rich needed doing. Because we had so many foxes, sometimes the pack split, one group chasing one fox and the other chasing a second fox. Then a couple of whips would follow the splinter group of hounds and make the best of the confusion of having two simultaneous hunts underway. In the late summer when the hounds first went out in the early morning, Mr. Rich would let me be a whipper-in since I knew all the hounds and they knew me. By comparison, his regular whips did not know but a few of the hounds by name.   
 At this moment, they were discussing how they would place themselves around the Hooker’s five acre woodlot into which Mr. Rich would soon send the pack to try to rouse a fox. When the fox decided that remaining in the underbrush was an unhealthy idea, it would break out of the woodlot and make for open country. Hopefully, a whipper-in would spot the departure and scream to alert Mr. Rich, who would be in the woods with the hounds. Mr. Rich would blow the short, straight brass horn that he carried on the front of his saddle to call the hounds to him, and all would proceed to where the whipper-in had seen the fox exit. Soon one hound would pick up the foot scent and bay (in hunting parlance, the hound “opened”), then another and another until the whole pack erupted in a cacophony that would make your hair stand on end. When Mr. Rich was sure they were right, he would sound the most famous of hunting calls, *Gone Away*, a long, trilling blat.   
 I have always maintained that the hunt horses knew *Gone Away*. Their ears pricked up and they surged forward. Father, as master, by right led the field of mounted riders, trying to pick a route that would keep up with the chase and give the followers a glimpse of the action. By this time, of course the fox had a big head start. Being a devious creature, the fox would amuse itself by trying to confuse the pack: running along one side of a wall and doubling back on the other side, splashing along in a brook for a distance rather than a direct crossing, running in a circle and then doubling back on its original route once the danger had passed. All of this, of course, brought the pursuit to a halt (a “check” is the correct hunting term), and the hounds would have to cast themselves about, circling to try to recapture the scent. A check, and they were common occurrences, would allow father to bring the field up to the action and allow the panting horses a breather.  
 Mr. Rich sounded his horn and trotted out of the farmyard with the pack on his heels, heading for the north side of the wood. The whippers-in cantered away to take positions outside the woodlot to view a fox departing. My sister trotted in the pack’s wake, privileged to hold the reins of Mr. Rich’s horse as it was apparent that he intended to dismount and take the hounds into the woods on foot. Father, leading the field of riders, trotted around to the south side of the woods since any sensible fox would be lying there to soak up the warmth of the winter sun.  
 We had hardly arrived on the knoll overlooking the woods when we saw a fox shoot out of it, streak across the field, jump the wall and disappear. A whipper-in saw the departure and screamed to alert Mr. Rich. Almost simultaneously on the far side of the woods we could hear another cry as a second fox broke cover. Mr. Rich sounded his horn, calling the hounds to him, and shortly he came cantering into view with some of the hounds in his wake and others scrambling out of the woods to follow him. The whipper-in trotted over to Mr. Rich to point out where the fox had left the woods. After a quick consultation, Mr. Rich brought the now assembling pack to the appointed spot and cheered them on. A snuffle or two, then one hound opened, then another and quickly a third and a fourth and then the whole pack erupted in song.  
 Everything seemed to happen at once. The pack in full cry had the scent and streamed toward the wall the fox had leapt. Mr. Rich put his horn to his lips and blew *Gone Away*. A whipper-in with a handful of hounds following galloped past us. In the distance, another came flying around the far edge of the wood, probably the one who had seen the second fox away. Since there was no way over the wall, they had to make for the gateway behind us. They thundered through and raced away down the adjoining hayfield, cleared a wall jump and were gone.  
 Father cocked his head to listen, and then led us through the gate at a slow trot, still listening to the pack’s cry. Both father and Mr. Rich had hunted this country all their lives, and knew well the possible routes foxes ran when they broke cover. Father was trying to decide where this one was headed. All of a sudden, he broke into a canter. Thirty excited horses broke into a canter behind him, and we crossed the top of the hayfield, out a far gateway, cut diagonally across a rough pasture, and, one at a time, began to jump a low stone wall. The first jump of the day always causes confusion as some horses inevitably refuse, are cursed by those behind, and try again after the rest depart. The procedure inevitably strings out the field of riders, and some gallop furiously to get back to the front where the action is and others are content to trot along at a safer pace, relieved to be, as yet, survivors.  
 Obviously, father had decided that, instead of following the pack, he would choose his own route to catch up to the chase, the hypotenuse of the triangle so to speak. We could hear the pack’s voice, strong as it rose to higher ground, muffled or indistinct when the pursuit dipped behind a rise of land. We must have run in and out of a dozen fields, over barways and stone walls, through gateways, over more walls and board fences over barbed wire. Father was closing fast on the pack. Suddenly, he pulled up. The hounds had lost their fox and were milling about. He waited a bit, motioned us to stay put, and trotted over to Mr. Rich to consult. I was pretty certain what they were discussing. The fox had been running a big loop counter-clockwise in order to return to the den in the Hooker woodlot. The question now seemed to be had the fox doubled back and begun to run clockwise. We had been running furiously twenty minutes or so, and the fox was probably as far from home as it intended to get.  
 Meanwhile, as we stood waiting, Charlie came over to me. Like everyone else, his horse’s flanks were heaving as it sucked in the cold air and blew it out its nostrils in puffs of steam.  
 “Mrs. Weatherbee went home.”   
 He seemed to think that was amusing. Mrs. Weatherbee was one of the stalwarts; small but tough, a nut-brown seamed face with iron gray hair, cigarette dangling from her lip, hands horny from a lifetime around horses. She spoke her mind, often in four-letter words unsuitable in church. I always felt sorry for her mild little husband. To wake up and see her face across the bed would be a jolt to anybody’s system. But she was a good sort and harmless and everybody liked her.  
 “Whatever for?” Mrs. Weatherbee was always one of the last to depart though the day be long and the weather cruel.  
 “Her house guest didn’t make it over the first wall. Well, actually, I’m wrong. His horse stopped short and he sailed right over,” he snickered. “Mrs. Weatherbee must be pissed-off big time. I thought I could see steam coming out of her ears, but she didn’t say anything and that’s one for the record book.”   
 The consultation between father and Mr. Rich ended and father trotted back to our group. Mr. Rich blew his horn for the hounds, and started, as I had guessed, to look for scent where the fox would have doubled back. In short order, the hounds hit the scent and were away again. The pace slackened, and father led us the same route that the hounds and Mr. Rich and his staff were taking. There was a long gallop to the top of a harvested cornfield, everyone picking a row to ride, then a jump into and out of several pocket-sized hayfields, a long, sloping canter down a big hayfield, through a gateway, along a farm lane for several hundred yards, and a wall jump into a stony pasture above the Hooker farm. The hounds briefly lost the line and cast themselves around the pasture as we panted to a stop, thankful for another break in the run. A good hound, when it loses the scent it has been following, will immediately cast itself. That means it will run a big circle, hoping thereby to catch the scent again. A hound near us spoke, and we were away again, picking our ways through the boulders, heading down to the farm. We shot out a gateway and we were behind the Hooker hay barn.   
 Then a strange thing happened. The pack had gone mute. Near the corner of the barn, one of the farm dogs was standing over the carcass of the fox, snarling at the hounds to stay away from its kill. A quick-thinking whipper-in slipped ahead of the hounds and dropped the long thong of his whip. Hounds fear the whip, even though it is only used for control, not punishment. When it is cracked, the report is like a pistol shot and lifts their heads. Then the Hooker’s son rode over to the dog and led it and its fox away, around the barn to another past of the farm, the dog still growling. Clearly, the dog had intercepted the unsuspecting fox whose attention would have been split between the pursuit well behind and the prospect of the welcome sanctuary ahead. It was just plain bad luck. Its neck was broken, probably before it even realized the danger.   
 Mr. Rich, recognizing the potential for a nasty scene should the hounds follow the farm dog, blew his horn and set off in the opposite direction with the pack trotting behind him. We got out into the middle of a harvested corn field, the stalks slapping at the horses feet as we crossed the rows. He stopped in the center of the field, and again consulted with father. They, in turn, consulted with the whipper-in who had seen the second fox break cover. After a few minutes of standing around, we set off at a walk, heading for an overgrown, south-facing abandoned pasture where it must have been assumed that the fox had sought refuge.  
 Their guess was correct, but the fox must have sensed our arrival and slinked out the far side. It was long after mid-day before the whippers-in were posted and the hounds sent in, inadvertently catapulting a couple of pheasants skyward, clacking indignantly as they soared away. The cover was so impenetrable that Mr. Rich had to stay outside on his horse. Finally, a hound spoke and, in short order, we were underway again, this time running in reverse, more or less, the route the first fox had taken when it decided, fatefully, to double back. The speed was slower now since horse and hound were tired and had settled into a more workmanlike pace. The fox, however, was fresh and devious and was distancing itself from its danger. For well over an hour, we chased it until, once again we returned to the Hooker woodlot where the hounds milled about the den, baying in frustration. The fox had gone to ground.   
 The day was getting on toward three o’clock, and father and Mr. Rich decided enough was enough. Mr. Rich sent off a whipper-in to find the hound truck. We walked, horse and hound, out to the farm lane and, in ten minutes, the truck rumbled toward us, spewing a cloud of dust behind. The hounds climbed into the box, gulped water waiting them in a small trough, lay down and fell contentedly asleep. Mr. Rich took out his horn and blew the long, mournful call *Going Home*. The sun was beginning to dip in the western sky as this was one of the shortest days of the year. It is courtesy to thank the master for the day’s sport, so father sat on his horse and received as the sun slid downwards and streaks of rose and purple and lemon began to cross the sky.  
 “Thank you, master.” I was not exempt.  
 “Be well, child.”   
 After a brief argument with my sister about the best route home, we parted, she with friends on their ponies and I with a husband and wife who were going my way. I turned up my collar against the quickening north wind and fastened the button under the collar to close the coat to the neck. The perspiration, which I had not noticed during the rushing about, was making my back cold. Sometimes what I enjoyed best of a day in the field was the slow amble homewards when the muscles could relax and the tiredness began to make itself felt. I longed for our warm kitchen, a hot bath, and solid food. Saturday night in the cold months always meant a pot of baked beans, steamed brown bread, and ham or sausages. No doubt my mare had ideas of a bucket of water, a scoop of molasses sweetened grain, a bale of hay and soft, clean straw underfoot, and, impatient, she broke into trot.

Mother announced at supper that father would be taking us all to Hartford for our church service tomorrow. We are Episcopalians, but more the hatch, match and dispatch sort. Normally, for reasons of community relations as well as convenience, we attended the village church which is Congregational, a denomination that father barely tolerated. The idea of substituting grape juice for communion wine he regarded as hilarious. As far as father was concerned, a proper church is built of stone, has a booming organ, a professional choir master and paid soloists, colorful vestments, stained glass, gothic architecture suitably restrained, and an urbane, mature, mellifluous and wordly clergyman. And that he found at the Episcopal cathedral on Main Street in Hartford.  
 As I believe I mentioned previously, our village church, by contrast, was typical of most New England village churches. Architecturally undistinguished, it was painted white and it had tall windows down both sides that provide a brightly lit interior. Like the faith preached, it was more or less colorless inside, and it had a faintly musty odor that all old country buildings seem to acquire. There my sister and I attended Sunday school, and throughout our childhood helped mother with tag sales and bake sales and pot luck suppers in the church basement. Father was apathetic about the whole business, but he covered the shortfall when the fund raising drive for steeple repair came up short recently, anonymously of course.   
 Poor timid Mr. Brown, the willowy young minister, hardly qualified in father’s estimation as a man of the cloth, although he conceded that you cannot expect much in country clergy. When the call went out for a new village minister, what father had in mind was what the English used to call a sporting parson, a man of the field sports as well as of the cloth. What we got was Mr. Brown who was allergic to horses. But father did his best to behave well during the service, although he occasionally emitted a derisive snort which got him an elbow in the ribs from mother. Mother told father that he scared Mr. Brown and that Mr. Brown was very sensitive. I should add here, to give a glimpse of the tenor of our family life, that mother early on had instructed me and my sister that if we ever were to repeat outside the walls of our house anything that father said about church and religion, in general, and Mr. Brown, in particular, she would suspend our riding indefinitely. We had learned not to cross mother. When she said she would wash our mouths out with soap, she always did and vigorously. With father there was always the potential for wiggle room. With mother, there was none whatsoever.  
 “Will you please make her take a bath. She smells like what I cleaned out of the stable this morning.” My sister stuck her tongue out at me.   
 “You *will* take a bath, Susie, and you will wear your gloves and a hat tomorrow,” mother instructed. We had to wear hat and gloves to the Episcopal services but not to church in the village. “Now finish eating and get upstairs and get clean. And use soap!”

After the service, father promenaded us down Main Street to the Hartford Club for lunch. Apparently many of his fellow club members had had the same idea, that recovery from their devotions required good food and strong drink, for the dining room was rather full of families. We returned home by early afternoon, at which point father picked up his shot gun and departed for the Millington Fish and Game Club to smash clay pigeons. I once asked mother why father often went shooting after church, was it a form of cause and effect or just coincidental. She said she was not sure.  
 Millington is a small industrial city of some thirty thousand inhabitants down in the river valley. Our town actually borders it, and that side of town orients itself to the city. There was a fairly dense concentration in that part of our town of small homes belonging to people who worked in the factories. Most of the population was first and second generation hard-working Sicilians and Poles, and, because of their ethnic groceries, churches, and clubs, there was a wisp of the Old World they left behind lingering still. The railroad that served the valley was what originally attracted great-grandfather as it could bring him to his Hartford office. Passenger service disappeared long ago, and the line was now for freight only. The feed store was in Millington alongside the tracks, and that was largely our only contact with the city.  
 While I was out doing afternoon chores, Mr. Rich called to ask if I could help him Wednesday as a whipper-in. Mother assured him that I would. Because this was Christmas week and Christmas fell on Saturday, the hunt had been pushed back from the regular Tuesday to Wednesday and a couple of Mr. Rich’s regular whips were unavailable then.  
 Monday morning, mother informed me that she needed me to take around to the farms the Christmas baskets that the hunt always provided in way of thanks. She had a meeting in Hartford at the Town and County Club that she had forgotten about and simply must attend. The T&C was the feminine equivalent of father’s Hartford Club. It was located in a dreary old mansion on a street that had once been full of fashionable residences but was now turning commercial. Mother was not keen on it, but membership was more or less mandatory given father’s position in the city. And she hated having to arrive there in our pick-up truck as father always took our car. She said it made her feel much too County.   
 “And don’t mix up the labels!” A few years ago, that had happened and some abstaining farmers had received bourbon in their baskets while the drinkers had gotten imported Swiss cocoa. That situation required some embarrassing phone calls and running around to resolve. So all of Monday, with father’s gun dog for company, I trundled about town in our farm truck making deliveries. My sister was off early on her pony to visit a far flung horsey friend. The weather was dreary which made a tiresome task duller yet. Actually, I liked the farmers and would have been happy to spend time with them, but most all were at chores so I just left the baskets on the back door stoops and went on to the next farm.  
 That evening, father decided that he would step across the road to visit his brother. He returned fuming.  
 “He accused me of stealing his first edition of *Childe Harold*! I told him I couldn’t abide Byron so why would I want it (father preferred Keats if he had to chose among the Romantics but he was not keen on any of them). He said he would call the state police if I didn’t return it. I’m going to call the barracks now and tell them if they get any calls from that idiot to ignore them.” And he stomped into the kitchen to phone.   
 “Incidentally,” this was directed at mother but I overheard, “Penny said that her father had been taking them for drives in the afternoon. Can you beat *that*!”  
 Penny’s father was no friend of the family. He was a widower with a large poultry farm up the road from us, actually it was the next place but a half mile removed as our land stretched a ways up the road. As a point of pride, he refused to allow the hunt on his land, but, since he only owned fifteen acres, that was of no consequence. And once, years ago, when I was foolish enough to ride across his field, he chased me with a pitch fork and caused my pony to panic and throw me. I never said a word to my parents, but ever since he could not look me in the eye on the rare times our paths crossed. I suppose he figured out that I had kept mum about the incident since father would have been livid.  
 When he decided to run for justice of the peace, mother took her name off the ballot. She said ten years was plenty of counting ballots at elections, listening to grievances about property taxes, and occasionally performing weddings (I remembered once watching an eloping couple married in our parlor on a suitably dark and stormy night). But, really, I think she did not want to be in the same room with the man although she would never have admitted that.  
 Two years ago, a curious thing happened. Penny’s father had not vaccinated his chickens in a timely manner and his flock was wiped out by an unexpected disease that was new to New England. Up until then, he had been reasonably prosperous, but suddenly he needed capital to re-start and the banks would not lend to him. Bankers want collateral they can sell if a loan goes sour, and all he had were empty chicken houses for five thousand birds and a rather plain-looking farmhouse, neither of which appealed to bankers as readily marketable. In desperation, he had to swallow his humiliation and ask father for a loan, probably realizing that the hunt needed his culls to maintain the large fox population in our area. Father advanced him the money on what must have been absurdly easy terms, and he had been making regular, though miniscule, remittances. I would occasionally see, in the day’s mail, envelopes with his name and return address in the upper corner written in a round, childish hand. Father never talked about any of this; actually my sister told me, and I had no idea how she learned about it.

Tuesday, father had arranged that I would have a private tour of the portraits in the Atheneum. The Wadsworth Atheneum, to use its proper name, is the oldest art museum in the country. The old part, built of brownstone, looks a bit like it was built for defense against siege with lots of castellated turrets. The new part is a jolting contrast to the medieval-looking old part, built in the ‘thirties in what was then the shocking Bauhaus style. The museum sits across the street from the Hartford Club and just down the block from father’s office.   
 For a while a dozen or so years ago, father was briefly on the museum board, but he could not abide the fey director, who had a love of all that was modern in the arts and was a spendthrift to boot. Father resigned in disgust. Recently, amid hard feelings all around, that embattled director had departed, and a more palatable replacement was now smoothing feathers. But father still had friends on the board, and was still a presence if only due to his proximity to the place. So it came to pass that, at two o’clock that Tuesday afternoon, I was to be escorted through the collection, both hanging and stored, by an associate of the new director.  
 Under cloudy skies, I drove the pick-up truck out of our hill country, across the broad plain of the Farmington River valley, and through the suburbs to the city. I admit I was nervous since I had never driven in city traffic before. Of course, I had made several trips into Millington to the feed store, but that was a far cry from driving in a big city like Hartford. Since this was Christmas shopping season at its maddest, parking nearby was hopeless and I had to leave the truck at the train station lot which meant a longish, cold walk up to Main Street. Father had instructed me that I was to meet him for lunch at the Hartford Club.  
 The Hartford Club is a solid brick edifice of Georgian design tucked aside the insurance buildings and the art museum. At lunch the bankers sat at their tables, the lawyers at theirs, and the insurance men at theirs. Nothing changed the day to day seating pattern but the death of a table mate. The atmosphere in the dining room was a dense cloud of tobacco smoke and the noise built to a crescendo about 12:30 and gradually subsided toward the one o’clock hour as the satisfied and satiated ambled officeward. They liked their club: solid, dark paneled, the leather upholstery comfortably well worn, antlered heads overhead, the attendants solicitous of their individual quirks.  
 Promptly at two o’clock, I presented myself at the museum director’s office, was greeted deferentially, told to wait, and shortly thereafter my guide, a sniffy, prissy young associate of the director, arrived looking as though this was the last straw but determined to make the best of it. I suppose a dignified aspiring scholar of art history must feel a bit peevish at having to act as tour guide for what he must have assumed was just another debutante from Miss Porter’s. Once we got that cleared up, his hostility mollified a trifle, and we got on tolerably well, although my interest was in the technical execution and his in the historic, and, frankly, he was eager to whisk me through the collection as quickly as possible.  
 When I returned home, mother told me the Penny had called to say that uncle expected us Christmas afternoon.  
 “Can’t I go see him before *then*? I haven’t seen him at all since I’ve been back!”   
 But she was adamant that we had better do what Penny told her he wanted. Uncle was not himself these days. I think it was at that moment in my sixteen year-old life that I realized just how impermanent existence really is. Father, in particular, and mother had always seemed indestructible, but really they were no more permanent than a leaf that drops from its branch and blows away to disintegrate under the winter snows. A bubble in the bloodstream and you cashed in your chips.   
 “You had better get your gear together for tomorrow. Mr. Rich will want you over there to load hounds so you had better be sure you have everything ready tonight.”   
 We kept all our riding gear hanging from one wall in the kitchen: bridles, girths, whips, crops, and the like. The saddles sat on saddle trees, the boots were lined up in a row, and the coats hung on pegs. To the non-horseman, this may look a bit bizarre, but keeping all of this warm and dry goes a long way toward preserving it. And we were not the only ones around these parts with such an arrangement.

When I came down to breakfast Wednesday morning, father had already left for work and a state trooper was seated at the kitchen table talking to mother. My sister was staring at him bug-eyed with her mouth hanging open. He was telling mother that they often get reports of theft from the elderly, but usually whatever supposedly was stolen turns up in a desk drawer or on a book shelf or some such place. She asked him to let her know, rather than father, if uncle made any more calls to the barracks, and she would try to handle the problem across the road.  
 I plowed through my stack of pancakes, a fried egg, sausages and bacon. Mr. Rich had called mother earlier to say that he would not need me to load the hounds as he had plenty of help in the kennel. Outside, the weather was ugly looking but nothing was falling from the sky yet. The scenting might be decent. A cold, damp day kept the scent on the ground, and hounds had to run with their noses low which made for slow hunting. The ideal condition for fast hunting was a cool, still day like you often get in November, when the scent is called “breast high” and hounds can run with their heads up. And the worst was a hot, dry day when the scent carried above their heads, and they could do next to nothing. That is why when we started hunting before Labor Day we always went out at daybreak when the scent was still manageable before the heat of the day sent it aloft.  
 I slung a whip around my neck, and went out to the stable. I had whipped-in on my mare before so I felt confident. As I led her to the mounting block next to the stable, I thought I felt a drop of something wet. The meet was a mile and a half up the road from our four corners. Already, a couple of riders had gone past our house heading for the meet at the Bigelow place, and the hound truck had rumbled by, the hounds baying excitedly. A couple of bachelor brothers ran the big Bigelow dairy farm, and their sister kept house for them. It sounds like a bizarre and unnatural arrangement, but, in fact, the three of them were normal and nice and simply preferred their own company, unlike my sister and myself.  
 Mother and my sister were still in the stable as I turned out into the road. I had not gone a hundred yards when Mrs. Weatherbee trotted up behind me, a cigarette hanging damply from her lip.  
 “It’s going to be a wet one, Unie.” I agreed. I felt another drop on my cheek.  
 “Listen, Unie, would you be interested in riding Bill’s horse for him in the races? He’ll never get down to one-sixty again, and he has been talking about finding someone to ride for him. He thinks Clipper has a real shot this year. Can you get away from school for the races, come a day early?”   
 The minimum weight for gentlemen riders acceptable to the committee (that is to say, amateur jockeys that no one on the race committee dislikes and wants to black ball) is one hundred and sixty pounds, and, in reality, no owner in his right mind would penalize a competitive horse by asking it to carry more weight. Lead saddle weights would have to be added to bring the weight up if I were to ride.   
 “They let us have one three day weekend a semester. I’d like that if Mr. Weatherbee really wants me.”  
 “Consider yourself riding. You know, Bill really has no say in the matter.” She chuckled to herself, and cantered on ahead.  
 I had ridden several times in pony races on race day at the Stevenson’s when I was younger, but they were flat races and lady riders never competed in the big race. I would be the first-- if mother and father would let me ride the Weatherbee horse. The big race was three miles over jumps, two laps of a mile and one half course. The jumps were ordinary stone walls built to a height of up to three feet. Unlike a board fence, the walls, though not particularly high, were broad and a horse had to learn to stretch out in order to land clear. On the hillside above the little valley, a thousand or so people would be watching as this was a long-established event on the social calendar stretching back to just before the turn of the century. It was not one of the important races, like the Maryland Hunt Cup or the Radnor Steeplechase, but it was one of the oldest. The requirement for acceptance was that the entry had to have been fairly hunted as attested by a master. That eliminated a lot of out-of-state horses that were campaigned solely as race horses by their owners in the amateur steeplechases along the eastern seaboard. Many owners rode their own horses in our race, but some, like overweight Bill Weatherbee, had to find jockeys. Dobbie, of course, would have an entry, and, since he did not ride, he would have to find someone to race his horse. I would not have put it past him to pay some hot shot from Maryland or Virginia as the locals were leery of Dobbie. It was against our rules to pay a jockey, of course.  
 There was only a handful of riders out for the day’s sport. No doubt the ominous black sky and the Christmas rush had something to do with the sparse turnout. The three Bigelows were having a grand time greeting everyone and handing up cups of the cider they made. The Bigelows were abstainers, so the drop of courage was cider rather than the customary sherry or port.  
 With a tip of his cap to his hosts, Mr. Rich sounded his horn and took the pack away from the farm and through the long Bigelow cornfield heading for a piece of woods at the far end of the field. My job, as whipper-in, was to trot along flanking the pack, keeping it together, and herding strays back into its fold. Since the woods were only a couple of acres in size, he set one whip on the east side, one on the west side, and sent Mrs. Weatherbee, who was acting as field master in father’s absence, around to the north side with the riders she would lead. The heart of the woods had been a stand of white pine, but this had been logged last year so there remained just a big open space full of low stumps and decaying slash surrounded on all four sides by deciduous trees still too young for saw logs. A rutted logging trail led in from the south, the side from which Mr. Rich cast the hounds. He asked me to stay with him and keep an eye open. As the hounds plunged through the logging debris, something made me look hard to my right, a subtle movement perhaps. And there was a sight I had never before seen. At the edge of the clearing, a fox was sitting on a fallen log watching the action. The fox saw me looking and instantly disappeared from sight. I called to Mr. Rich and pointed where the bold fox had been.  
 We waited for a cry from outside the woods to tell us the fox had broken cover, but there was none. So the fox was still in the woods and was now a danger to himself with thirty hounds in the same woods, any one of which he might run into with fatal results. Or the fox could have gone to ground, but Mr. Rich was pretty certain that there were no dens in these woods. Sometimes foxes will even climb trees, but these maples and oaks had clear trunks from having put all their growing energy into their crowns, trying to get to the sunlight. So where had it gone, I wondered. As if to answer my question, I heard a rustle and the fox raced past me out the logging trail along which we had come, heading for the cornfield. I turned my horse and raced down the slippery trail after the fox, trying to get a view of which direction it would take once in the open. Behind me, Mr. Rich was blowing his horn to call the hounds to him.  
 I galloped out into the cornfield in time to see the dark speck that was the fox swerve to its right and leap out of the field over a hunt jump into a steep sided pasture at the foot of which was the huge forty acre Bigelow hayfield. And then the rain began to fall. The hounds had the low scent and were coming on, but the cry was yet indecisive. A red coated whipper-in galloped up to me, wanting the direction the fox had taken, and Mrs. Weatherbee was coming on hard from the far side of the woods with the rest of the riders trailing along behind her. The other whipper-in was back with Mr. Rich, and it was clear the hounds were having a hard time with the scenting now that the rain was pelting.  
 After a bit, we finally got to the where the fox had exited the corn. Instead of leaping the jump as they normally would have done with decent scenting conditions, the pack climbed over. Mr. Rich motioned me to go first so we trotted up to the stone wall and jumped. As we landed, my horse skidded on the sopping grass, pecked, and nearly sent me flying between its ears.  
 “Follow the hounds, Unie,” Mr. Rich shouted. “I’m taking us the long way.”   
 There was a gate at the far end of the cornfield that let into the side-hill pasture. Clearly, after having seen my near fall, he was determined on the longer, but safer, route. If possible, the rain was falling even harder, and the hounds were snuffling through the steep pasture, trying to pick up the line. Every so often there would be a muffled cry, but short lived. The rain was killing the scent. And it was beginning to run down the back of my neck. My britches and riding gloves were sodden, and I could feel water running down the inside of my boots.  
 Twenty minutes later and still in the pasture, Mr. Rich blew for the hounds, and we trotted sloppily back to the Bigelow’s. Fortunately, the truck had not yet moved. Had it not been there, it would have been the job of the whippers-in to locate it and bring it back, a prospect that did not charm. As we departed, the ever cheerful Bigelows waved goodbye to us from their porch. Usually, when the hounds are loaded and riders begin to make their ways homeward, there is the pleasant babble of conversation. Not today. It was heads down, mouths shut, and keep plodding. I could see rain drops literally bouncing off the crown of the bowler hat of the rider in front of me.

Thursday dawned bright with the rising sun peering through the last remnant of storm clouds departing on the west wind. The day before Christmas Eve we always get our Christmas tree, bring it home, and decorate it. It is an all-day process. At breakfast, mother told me to take the pick-up over to Beezie’s and cut a tree. Beezie is an old friend, a widower, who lives a couple of miles distant down the fairground road. For a time, he raised several acres of Christmas trees, but now he had given that up and all that remained were a few dozen trees scattered about the hillside lot. He invited friends to take their pick.  
 “Take this to him,” she said as she handed me a longish box wrapped in fancy holiday paper. It gurgled. “And take your sister.”  
 “I don’t want to go. It’s boring.” Fat chance, Susie, I thought to myself.  
 “You’re going, period. Now go!”   
 I went out to the barn and fetched the buck saw, a pair of leather work gloves, and the six foot stick that we always used to measure a prospective tree’s height. The ceilings in our house were low, like most old country houses, to conserve heat in the winter, and the height of a tree standing in a field is hard to estimate. Thus the stick. So my sister, father’s gun dog Buddy, and I crammed ourselves into the cramped cab of the truck and set out after breakfast to cut ourselves a tree.  
 The hillside was still slick, as yesterday’s rain had frozen overnight, but the sun was up and beginning to melt the rime. As I suspected, my sister and I could not agree on a tree so we walked around and around the lot. At least Buddy was having a good time, his tail switching merrily as he investigated the hillside. Susie and I were far from merry, however.  
 “Listen, we’ll be here all day at this rate. That one over there isn’t so bad. Let’s cut it and get out of here.” She shrugged, and I threw myself down, scrambled under the prickly low branches, and began to cut with the buck saw.  
 “Push on it. The saw’s binding.” She pushed and the little spruce toppled gently to the ground. I grabbed a low branch and started to drag. All went well and we pulled away from Beezie’s, mission accomplished. Several hundred yards down the road, I realized we had forgotten Buddy. It was mid-day when the three of us pulled up on the lawn along-side the front of the house. The tree always entered through the front door.  
 I looked across the road at the big, still house where uncle was hibernating. It was not always that way, unadorned and somber. When I was younger, every Christmas day my aunt and uncle would open their home to all. Cars would be parked for a hundred yards along the roads of the four corners, and the place would be alive to bursting with callers. Upstairs in the ballroom a dance band would be playing, there was a tall Christmas tree in every public room (this house was high-style architecture of its day, so high ceilings), tables and sideboards were laden with food and drink, and inside there was a roar of merriment that you could hear outside from quite a ways away. The following days when cleaning crews arrived, I would see outside the house countless oyster barrels and crates of empty champagne bottles. But no more. Auntie had died in an accident vacationing in Florida, and uncle went into a funk.   
 There is something wonderful about a Christmas tree. In part, of course, is its aroma. This was a spruce so it was not as pungent as a balsam. And then there is that cold of the outdoors that the tree radiates in the warm room for a little while. Anyhow, I am getting carried away. We got it up and it did not tip over. A couple of turns managed to more or less cover up the gap between the branches that had disqualified it as salable. We strung the lights and all the bulbs, for once, lit. Throughout the afternoon we dived into the boxes of ornaments, pulling out old friends of Christmases past. The tree looked fine, and the ornaments shimmered from the reflected light of the red, blue, yellow, and green bulbs. Father arrived home early, and pronounced the tree a job well done. That said, Christmas might now commence.

We always went over to the Rich’s for lunch on Christmas Eve. The Riches used the old-fashioned term dinner for the mid-day meal, and I prefer that. Mrs. Rich cooked a roast beef because father loved her pop-overs, what the British call Yorkshire pudding. She made everything herself: horseradish sauce, several kinds of pickles, potatoes she had grown, beets she had put by, and an apple pie with a substantial wedge of wicked sharp cheddar cheese. Fortunately, the menu never varied, and it was the one meal of the year to which father avidly looked forward as it contained all his old favorites done well. We ate in the big, warm, cozy kitchen because their small cottage did not have a dining room. I should add that because of all father’s various charitable responsibilities, he had to attend numerous dinners in their support. Invariably, when father returned home from one of these occasions, mother would always ask how was the food, his unvarying response being “Indigestible!” I think it amused her.  
 Throughout the Christmas season there were parties every few nights in a more or less agreed upon sequence so that no two embarrassingly overlapped. The afternoon of Christmas Eve was traditionally the Morgan’s, and, since Mr. Morgan was a faithful whipper-in, we were obligated to attend. The Morgans lived in a large home on a hilltop that his father had built in what my father called the country gentleman style. There was a gun room, a billiard room, a library full of valuable sporting books, an office, and lots of paintings and etchings of horses, hounds, bird dogs, and trout and salmon. It could have been pretentious, but it was not as it was a true reflection of the Morgan’s way of life. They were a good sort although mother thought they were shallow. Four o’clock found us mingling with a slightly tipsy couple of dozen celebrants in the Morgan parlor.  
 “I’ve heard the weather will hold for the next five days and then snow.” Charlie Stevenson had slipped behind me and whispered in my ear. “That means we can ride again Tuesday. Good luck, huh?” I agreed.  
 The Christmas Eve service began at ten in the evening in the village church. Susie slept through it on the pew bench. Father was groggy but game. Mother never seemed to tire, was bright-eyed, and sang all the carols in a light, clear soprano voice. With the singing of *Silent Night*, we stumbled out into the bracing night air, headed home, and collapsed into bed. Christmas can be punishing to one’s system.

My parents did not think it proper to turn Christmas into an orgy of consumption. We were, after all, descended from one of the founding families of Hartford who had made the long trek into the wilderness from the Bay Colony. We were of stern stuff, not given to frivolity. Thus present giving was a subdued, practical rite.  
 Susie was crestfallen when she opened her big present. It was a flannel jumper.  
 “Oh, Susie, that’s just what you need,” exclaimed mother. “You’ll be able to wear it to school!”  
 My sister looked as though someone had let all the air out of her.   
 Father had given mother a book on the military history of the allied invasion. She smiled wanly, and gave him her present: Dale Carnegie’s *How* *to Win Friends and Influence People*. My present was predictable: a book of great portraits. It was a nice book, but what I really wanted to know was technique: how do you paint a fold of cloth, how do you paint hair or an eyeball or an ear.  
 I went out to the stable to clean stalls late that morning, and, just as I came back and was stripping off my barn coat in the kitchen, our telephone rang. It sat on a small table near the wood range, and mother, who was getting lunch together, answered it. I do not know how I instantly knew something was wrong. Mother stiffened, like she had just gotten a nasty carpet shock, and her face took on a look of deep seriousness.  
 “Put your coat on, Unie. Not *that* one!” I had picked up the barn coat. “Come with me!” We were at the front door when she saw my sister. “We are going across the road. You stay here and don’t you dare move. And tell your father when he comes downstairs where we are. At your uncle’s.”   
 Uncle’s house has a colonnade of four Doric columns stretching a full two stories in height. In the pediment, there is an oculus window. The double front door has a splendid ornate fanlight, and it is centered between the middle columns. There is a big, two storey wing off the main house that contains the service rooms below and bedrooms above. Underneath it, as the land falls away, is the wine cellar and a three car garage that nowadays held only uncle’s long, black Lincoln Continental.  
 Penny opened the door to us.   
 “I’ve called the ambulance, but I’m afraid there is nothing that can be done now. I was making tea when I heard him cry out.”  
 Far across the black and white marble checkerboard hall floor I could see uncle lying sprawled face down at the foot of the staircase. Mother and Penny stepped closer, and mother motioned me to get behind her so I would not have to see the gruesome scene.  
 “Unie, go find something to do.”  
 She pushed me away in the direction of the service wing. I tried not to look as I slid off to the side, but I could not help myself. I saw a tendril of dark red blood from Uncle’s skull on the marble. I shuddered and turned away into the big dining room that was the only formal room in the wing. I wandered through the butler’s pantry into the spare, utilitarian kitchen. I looked about the tidy room and I remembered the old cliché: everything in its place and a place for everything. As I slowly climbed the back service stairs, I thought I heard a car quietly pulling away, but, by the time I got to a window, there was nothing to be seen.  
 The second floor, as I mentioned before, contained the bedrooms in the wing and, in the main house, uncle’s library, which he also had used for an office, and the ballroom. Old houses like these, which were meant for entertaining, often had their own ballrooms. I sat down in a leather easy chair in the chestnut paneled library. According to mother, this was where uncle spent his time lately, and it had the look of being used. The rest of the house had that sterile smell that houses get when they are not used or left empty for a long time. There was no use trying to read. I got up and went out into the hall from which the staircase descended.  
 It was a grand staircase with intricately turned balusters and a thick mahogany rail. Four steps led down to a broad landing some twelve feet in length which was lit by a large Palladian window almost to the floor. At the far end of the landing, another twelve steps brought you down to the hall where uncle now lay. As a child, the landing was my favorite place on a sunny morning. I would sit there and look through the big window out over the fields and hills. I could see four ranges of hills, ranging from pale blue to the indistinct violet of the farthest. As the land fell away behind the house, I would imagine myself soaring out the window and up into the sky to circle with the birds far above.  
 I took the four steps to the landing. I did not wish to look down on uncle, so I sat down on the bottom step, but I could just see through the balusters mother and Penny sitting near him in the elegant, fragile hall chairs that were meant to be seen not sat in. I suppose at this point what did it matter. I could hear the front door open and father, who must have arrived while I was in the other part of the house, said, “I can hear the siren.”  
 “Unie, I see you up there. Go home and keep Susie away from this. Get up and go out the back way; don’t come down these stairs, for God’s sake.”  
 I started to get up, and then I noticed a tiny smear of fresh blood on the baseboard in front of me. My stomach gave an involuntary heave, and, for a moment, I thought I might vomit. I could taste bile. As directed, I scrambled down the back stairs, out the kitchen door, and around to the front of the house. The ambulance from Millington had arrived, and its whining siren was asthmatically sighing into silence. A state trooper pulled in behind it. The Riches were standing outside their cottage and the hounds were howling. I ran across the road to our house. I could see my sister’s face pressed against the parlor window.  
 “What happened? Why can’t I go over there?”  
 “Uncle fell down the stairs.”  
 “Is he hurt? Will he be alright?”  
 “No.”  
 “What do you mean?”  
 “He’s dead.”  
 My sister bolted for the front door, and I tackled her. She squirmed in my arms to free herself.  
 “Why can’t I see? It’s not fair! You got to see.”  
 “Because mother doesn’t want you to! She sent me back to stay with you. Believe me, you don’t want to see.”  
 “I do *so* want to see.”   
 The little monster had a morbid streak, apparently. But I was not about to let her loose and risk mother’s fury. If Susie broke free and made a dash across the road, I could not even begin to imagine the maternal wrath that would be directed at me.  
 “If you go over there, you will get me in huge trouble with mother and it will all be your fault!” She subsided, but I dared not take my eyes off her lest she bolt a second time.  
 Half an hour later, mother returned, looking exhausted. The ambulance had departed for the hospital, and father had caught a ride with the trooper.  
 “I’m going to the hospital in the car. There are several things that have to be taken care of. Penny is closing up over there, and she is going to lock the place up. That’s what the trooper wanted. So you two stay away, do you hear me?”   
 She knew that we knew where the keys to uncle’s house were hidden. Nobody locked their doors in our town, so this was a big deal. In a small rural town like ours, there was no need for a policeman. We did elect a constable, but the only time he was to be seen was directing traffic at the town fair at the end of September.  
 “And Mrs. Rich is going to feed you supper. She’ll call you, so you both be ready. And don’t fill up on Christmas cookies!”  
 She backed the Chevy out of the shed and was gone.  
 “What are they going to do?  
 I did not know how to answer my sister’s question. There must be some legal things that had to be dealt with, I supposed. And an undertaker to be hired. And an obituary to be written. And which cemetery. And what about a church. And a date for the funeral.  
 Death did not affect my sister’s appetite, and that evening she plowed into Mrs. Rich’s freshly baked pot of beans, ham, apple pie and a big glass of cold milk. I tried to eat, but I kept thinking about all I had seen at uncle’s this afternoon. I had helped Mr. Rich with the kennel chores later in the afternoon after our own chores were done, and that kept my mind occupied. But once I sat down at their kitchen table, I started to remember what I had seen. I suppose it was pretty mild stuff compared to what Mr. Rich had seen in France during the war when he was a young man, but it still bothered me. I had seen horses and hounds and father’s bird dogs put down, but that was part of a country life and, although I was always sad and cried a lot, I knew that was how our world worked.  
 Something nagged at me. I lay in bed, staring at the dark ceiling, trying to remember what it could be. You know how it is when, for the life of you, you cannot remember the name of someone or where you put something or—well, you know what I’m talking about. No amount of thinking about it helps, and then, all of a sudden, the next day the answer pops into your mind and you feel stupid that you could not remember something so idiotically simple. But sleep overtook me before the answer did.

The next morning, father retreated to his office upstairs to write the obituary. Actually, his office was the last of the tavern’s little bed chambers that somehow never got itself enlarged by combining with another to make a modern space. Both father and uncle were serious book collectors, although uncle had a far more valuable collection, and two walls of the little room were floor to ceiling book cases stuffed with everything from cheap paperbacks to expensive rare editions. Since father had no idea of how a typewriter worked, he drafted me to type four copies: two for the two Hartford papers, one for the Millington paper, and one for the New York Times. I am not a fast typist, and I spent the better part of the morning at the job since the obituary was lengthy.   
 Mother decided that, under the circumstance of uncle’s sudden death, we would not attend church. I had forgotten that today was Sunday. Instead, later that morning, she packed Susie off on her pony to visit a friend for the day, and she took me across the road.  
 “I have got to do something about *that*,” she said, pointing at the blood stain on the checkerboard marble, and she went off to locate a mop and a pail. Fortunately, very little had crept onto the white tiles.  
 I climbed the staircase to the landing, and sat down on the long oriental carpet in front of the big Palladian window. I do not know why my mind turned as it did, but I remembered now uncle and golf and the jolly times we had had together on the Millington Country Club course. Of course, that was several years back when auntie was still alive. He belonged to the venerable Hartford Golf Club where his foursome of decades played during the days he was running our company, but, in his later years, he liked nearby Millington where he could tee off at seven in the morning before anyone else was on the course. The night before, he would phone me and ask if I would loop for him the next morning. In case you are not a golfer, that meant would I be his caddy. I began, after a while, to understand that curious game. We consulted on strategy, and I think he was amused that I actually could suggest a reasonable plan for his shots. On the greens, he would often take my advice, so often, in fact, that ultimately he relied on me to call the putt for him. I loved the way the course looked with the early morning dew glistening on the soft contours and the way it smelled from the freshly mown grass. And he paid me generously for looping.  
 “Unie, what *are* you doing. Get down here and help me clean up this mess.  
 As I was getting to my feet, I looked to my left. The bloodstain on the baseboard was no longer there. And then I realized what had kept me awake last night. If uncle had fallen the four steps to the landing and hit his head on the baseboard, why would he then arise and stagger the twelve feet across the landing to the staircase to the hall and then plunge down *that* flight. It did not make sense to me. I looked carefully at the oriental carpet. The morning sun was pouring through the Palladian window, turning the somber colors of the carpet brilliant. Something had ever so slightly caused it to rumple, and I flattened out the carpet by tugging with my foot.  
 “Now, Unie. *Now!”*  
 We did the best we could to clean the marble floor, and, at last, all that remained was a dull discoloration on one white tile. No one would ever notice the stain on the two black tiles.  
 “I want to stay here a little longer, mother. I’ll lock up.”  
 “Whatever for?” And then she realized that was a bit unfeeling. “Okay, but not too long, dear.”  
 For some reason I cannot explain, I wanted to sling uncle’s golf bag over my shoulder one last time. He kept the clubs in a closet in the library. I got the bag out, and sat down on the carpet with it and began to go through the pockets, putting the contents before me on the rug. There were half a dozen balls, one with mud still clinging, a handful of tees, several rumpled Millington scorecards with the scores and dates penciled in, one Hartford score card with his foursome’s names and scores, and a dry, crusty, tan leather golf glove. Clinging to his six-iron was a wisp of dry grass that fluttered to the floor when I pulled the club from the bag. I bundled everything back into the bag, and slung it over my shoulder just like I used to do when I looped. As I took several turns around the big room pretending I was once again strolling a fairway with uncle, my eyes began to fill with tears which ran down my cheeks. Stop it, you fool, I said to myself, and then I began to sob. When, finally, I was tired of circling the room and my tears had stopped, I put the bag in the closet, locked up, and walked across the road to our house.  
 “Yes, bishop, yes, I understand. Thursday will be fine. Ten o’clock? Yes, yes, fine.”   
 Father was on the phone to the bishop at the cathedral in Hartford. Our family throughout the generations had always considered it our spiritual home so, naturally, uncle would be buried out of it.  
 “Unie,” father said, “I want you to add this to the obituaries you typed.” He handed me a scrap of paper on which he had written the information about when and where the service would be held. “Then go across the road and tell Mr. Rich to go ahead with Tuesday’s hunt. He thought maybe we ought to cancel because of your uncle, but it will probably be the last chance to take the hounds out. Snow’s coming mid-week, I hear.”  
 Sunday evenings always seemed different. Probably it had something to do with Sunday supper: pancakes (or waffles, if mother was feeling ambitious) and maple syrup and sausages and pickles (to cut the sweetness of the syrup on the palate). It was the kind of meal that cheered and braced one in anticipation of the rigors of the coming week. This time there was no jollity. Father was distracted and made jottings in a notebook while he ate, something he would have considered appalling had anyone done such a thing in his presence. Mother hardly ate anything, I was not particularly hungry, and my sister gobbled a stack of pancakes and then, for the second day in a row, asked for a second helping and then a third. The Christmas tree lights had not been lit today, and the wrapping papers still littered the parlor. We all went to bed early.

My parents departed for Hartford after breakfast Monday: mother to deal with the florist and the organist, father to deal with the lawyer and the cemetery. I was instructed to stay inside as neighbors would be dropping by with casseroles and cookies. Why, in the country, tragedy evokes such a response I cannot explain, but, by mid-day, we had acquired three casseroles and a tin of chocolate chip cookies. Mother had left a note that the mother of one of Susie’s friends would stop by for her late morning, and that Susie must be clean and presentable. How I was to clean the little barbarian and make her presentable was beyond me. But by departure, she looked a little less awful than usual and was in a happy state of mind to learn that they would go to lunch at the hotel in Millington and then to a movie matinee. During the afternoon it seemed as all the Millington florists had only one destination, and the house began to take on a floral aroma. As dark began to fall, I supposed that lighting the Christmas tree would be inappropriate, but I longed for its cheer. When I was a small child, I would crawl beneath the tree and lie on my back and look up through the branches at the bright lights reflecting off the ornaments. One more time would not do any harm I thought, so I lit the tree and crawled under it. I lay there for several minutes contemplating the colors until my mind drifted away to what I had seen on uncle’s stair landing. A sharp rapping on the back door ended my reverie. Another casserole had arrived. Shortly thereafter in quick succession my parents returned and then my sister. We had a tuna fish casserole for supper and chocolate chip cookies for dessert.  
 “I have to go into Millington tomorrow morning to deal with the funeral home,” mother said as we were washing up after supper. “And your father is going back to Hartford to talk with the police about parking and he has to clear up some details at the cemetery.”   
 The cathedral was on Main Street across from the three big department stores, and, since this was the busiest part of the city and the church had limited parking in its lot, funeral parking would be a significant consideration for what would likely be a large turnout. Uncle, before his retirement, was an important man in the city.  
 “So, you and your sister should go hunting. That will keep you both out of trouble until I get back.”  
 “Mother, there is something that’s bothering me about uncle.”  
 “I’m tired, Unie. It’s been a long day. Can’t it keep until tomorrow?”  
 I suppose had I rephrased my statement that mother might have reacted differently, but my mind was unsettled about what I had seen on the landing and what it could possibly mean. And she did look exhausted. So I sat alone in the kitchen distractedly cleaning my boots, brushing the nap on my now dry hunt coat, and oiling the bridle and breast plate.  
 Once again, I lay in bed unable to sleep. Something else was bothering me, something that did not seem right. I had thought that the landing business was all that kept me awake last night, but now I realized there was something else, too

Tuesday morning broke mild and clear, mild for December, that is. Mother had an unusually hearty breakfast ready since the meet was at the Ingersoll’s which was a longish hack and we could be in the saddle for a long time today. Both Susie and I had good appetites that morning. We were dressed, tacked up, and on our way with time to spare.  
 “Unie, what’s a funeral like?”  
 “It’s just like a regular service, I guess.” I had only been to Auntie’s, and her service was at the cathedral, too. Susie had been deemed by my parents as too young to attend then.  
 “But, I mean, can you see uncle or anything?” I could not decide whether she was apprehensive or eager to take a good look.  
 “No, the coffin’s closed. And then afterwards, we all go to the cemetery to bury him, and after that there’s a reception at the club. And you have to wear black. Do you have a black dress?”  
 “I guess.” And, on that inconclusive note, the conversation came to an end and we rode on.  
 The Ingersoll’s place is another example of what father called country gentleman architecture with a winding drive and lots of board fencing. Everything was immaculate, outside and inside. Even the grass around the pasture fence posts was neatly trimmed. The Ingersolls were the only people who painted their board fences white, as it was common practice to leave fencing to weather: no risk of lead poisoning and cheaper, too.  
 The Ingersolls were an impressive couple: he, tall and striking with streaks of silvering hair above his ears; she, a fragile china doll with pale hair, too frail for a robust country existence and rarely seen out of doors. Julia Ingersoll, the daughter, was my age, and I had to admit that I envied her. She was a beautiful child, and grew into a devastating head-turner. Julia had long, straight blond hair, an exquisitely lovely face, a flawless complexion, a vivacious personality if she thought you an eligible suitor, and a kind of natural grace both on and off a horse. And she had every young male, and I suspect some not so young, lusting after her. You could always tell where she was in the hunting field because there would always be a gaggle of potential swains clustered about her. It was as if Hollywood had cast her for the part.  
 The turnout was remarkably good. I suppose the mild day had something to do with that, because usually the final meets are sparsely attended. Mr. Ingersoll, in stout tweeds, was handing up cups of port from a silver tray. There must have been twenty-odd mounted. About ten of them were in the close vicinity of Julia, the rest were lady members. The hounds were milling about on the broad Ingersoll lawn, and Mr. Rich and the whippers-in were off to the side consulting. It was an expansive, handsome scene that sere winter morning with the big white house as a back drop, the bay horses, the tri-colored hounds, the black coated riders, and Mr. Rich and his staff in red. I had seen it countless times, of course, but it always impressed me in its aesthetic rightness. Someday I wanted to paint just such a scene on a large canvas and frame it in a grand, ornate, gilt frame.   
 But that would have to wait. Mr. Rich blew his horn, and we trotted along the lane bordered by board fences that wound behind the house and out past the barns and stable. He was aiming for the woods at the top of the long hayfield, the pack bobbing along obediently at his heels. The whippers-in peeled away and dashed off, red specks positioning themselves as instructed outside the bare wood for a view of a departure. Mrs. Weatherbee, who was to lead the field of riders, took us off to one side, and Mr. Rich sent the hounds in on the north side. Again, he was hoping to push out a fox, presumably taking its leisure on the warm, sunny south side. The hounds were in the woods about ten minutes when there came a scream from the far side whipper-in. Mr. Rich trotted around the edge of the woods and blew his horn for the hounds. But the hounds had already found the scent themselves, and the woods erupted in noise as they barged through the undergrowth. Mrs. Weatherbee trotted after Mr. Rich.  
 Off in the distance, we could see a whipper-in standing in the saddle and waving his hunt cap. Hounds were spilling out of the woods in full cry. Mr. Rich broke into a gallop as hounds streamed in the direction of the whipper-in. The pack scrambled through an overgrown fence line into a small cornfield, emerald green with a cover crop of winter rye, cut across it, and disappeared up a woods road. Mr. Rich and the whipper-in soared over a board-fenced jump after them. Mrs. Weatherbee was going hard at the fence and the rest of us were trying to sort ourselves into some kind of jumping order as the jump was a narrow one and must be taken single file. Ahead, we could hear the scream of the pack and that excited the horses to frenzy. Even those horses that might have thought twice flew over the jump, gathered their balance, and tore up the woods road, sparks flying from their hoofs when they clipped a rock. The road was short, and we galloped out into a long cornfield.   
 Way off in the distance was a blue line of hills, and the field sloped several hundred yards down to a small cornfield, and beyond that yet another and another beyond that. It was one of my favorite views: a long, continuous tan carpet rolling away, bisected by three pencil-thin dark lines of trees that separated the fields. But there was no time to look. The fox had run straight and the scenting was breast-high and the hounds were flying. There was a kind of breathless madness. Certainly the horses felt it and laid their ears back, and we charged along the rows of stubble heedless of the dangerous consequences a stumble would produce. At the end of the field was an opening for machinery which we took several abreast. Horses panted to a stop in the small field we had entered, sending several riders shooting up their horse’s necks. Mrs. Weatherbee immediately saw her line, cantered across the field and dropped out of sight. There was a steep drop to a bare trickle of a stony stream, and, on the far side, an equally steep bank ascending to the next field. The only way to cross was to force your horse down the bank and hold on for dear life when it leapt to the far side and scrambled up. You were quite likely to eat a mouthful of horse’s mane in the process, but, if you were lucky, you would be still mounted, though bounced around and breathless. Most everyone got across. I looked back over my shoulder, and I could see several dismounted riders and one horse trotting loose.  
 Hounds had checked momentarily near a large pile of manure in the middle of this large, slightly canted field, and we were able to trot a short distance down its slope before they found the scent again. Mr. Rich blew his horn, and we broke into a quick canter and then a pounding gallop. Another stream flanked this field, bordered on both sides by narrow bands of trees. It was broad and shallow, and when the horses ran through a cold spray of water splashed up into our faces. And we were in the fourth of the cornfields that I had spied as we emerged from the woods trail.  
 This field had a distinct contour, rising and falling, and as the pack dropped into a depression their cry diminished only to increase as they mounted a rise. We were no longer running downhill, and the horses were beginning to tire from the mad rush. Hounds were starting to find the scent difficult, and the pace slowed to the relief of man and beast. For a quarter of a mile, for this was a long field, we ambled along behind the hard working, frustrated hounds. Clearly, the fox realized it could not outlast the hounds at the pace we had been going, and it had begun to twist and turn to throw off the pack. I found that I could actually relax and sit up in the saddle and stretch. That lasted but a moment. The fox had made a dash for the swamp at the far corner of the field, and the hounds were on its scent and moving fast.   
 Mrs. Weatherbee took us into a canter and then another flat out gallop, and in the distance we could see the hounds disappear into the line of trees at the end of the field. Mr. Rich jumped over the low wall at the gap in the tree line followed by a couple of whippers-in. Some fifty yards beyond was the swamp and refuge. We slowed from a gallop to a canter, then trotted up to the wall, and hopped over. The hounds were prowling around, and riders were looking at each other with an expression of relief and gratitude for having survived.  
 Mr. Rich promptly swung the pack into the farm road that bordered this field at a trot so that the fox could have a chance to recover. Had it been chivied further would have been cruel and unsporting. We headed back towards the Ingersoll place at a walk to allow the horses to cool. The fox had run straight rather than the loop that foxes usually took away from the Ingersoll’s. I was right behind Mr. Rich and I could overhear him talking to a whipper-in about this unusual departure. Although the chase had not been exceptionally long, the pace had been furious.   
 We had gone a ways along the road when a black-coated rider trotted across the cornfield to join us. Apparently, he was one of those I saw dismounted after the first stream crossing. He caught up to Mr. Rich, and I could hear what he told him: Julia Ingersoll had broken her nose in a fall in that steep little ravine. Mr. Rich shook his head. Damaging a land-owner’s daughter was never helpful.  
 After twenty minutes, we arrived at the second of the Ingersoll coverts. This one was an abandoned sidehill pasture growing up from scrub to saplings. It was getting on towards mid-day, and I was growing hungry. Mrs. Weatherbee sited us on a small rise as Mr. Rich positioned his staff and sent the hounds into the scrub. I took out the flask from the big pocket inside my coat and took a swig for I was desperately thirsty from the mad dash through the dry, dusty cornfields. It was tea, still lukewarm from having been close to my body.  
 And then what I had been trying to recall last night in bed suddenly came to me. Penny had told mother that she had been making tea when she heard uncle fall. But when mother had sent me away so that I would not have to see the gruesome sight, I had wandered into the kitchen. And I now remembered the old saying that had struck me then: a place for everything and everything in its place. There were no tea cups, no kettle, no tea cozy, no teaspoons, no sugar, no tea. Everything was still in its place.   
 But there was a trace of blood on the baseboard on the landing from the second floor which later had been removed. There was a slightly rumpled carpet on the landing. And there was uncle lying face down on the checkerboard hall floor. And I recalled that I was sure that I had heard a car driving away as I climbed the back service stairs. And I remembered father’s astonishment to hear that Penny’s father had been driving uncle around in the afternoons, presumably in hopes of stimulating uncle’s interest in life.   
 But what did it all mean, and why would Penny’s father, who had a life-long resentment against our family and had been humiliated by having to come to father in desperation for financing when all others had turned him down, suddenly take time from his poultry business to engage in such a selfless good deed. I remembered how mother would never admit that the reason she retired as a justice of the peace was due to his election to the board. I knew that it disappointed her to no longer perform weddings. She had enjoyed that aspect of the otherwise tiresome job.  
 Could it be that…..oh, no it could not possibly. And yet, all the facts *could* lead to such a far-fetched conclusion. Had Penny’s father married uncle to his daughter in order to get uncle’s money? He had driven him about. Why not to the Millington hospital for a blood test for a marriage license. I knew that marriage licenses were issued at the city hall in Millington, and, although eyebrows might have been raised, it could be done. Presumably, uncle had been able to answer the questions on the application even though he might have been unaware of what he was doing. And he could still sign his name even though he might have had no idea what he was signing. He had become so dependent on Penny that he might well do whatever she said. And, furthermore, although our family name was well-known in Hartford, we had had little to do with Millington so we were not as well-known there. And ours was a common surname, and an inattentive clerk might not have made the connection.  
 It was mighty risky, and the timing would have to be near perfect. Father had seen uncle on Monday, and that was the last any of us had seen of him. Had he been married at that point, there was the chance that he might tell father and that would most definitely have wrecked the scheme. And Penny had put me off all week. We were told we were not to see uncle until the afternoon of Christmas day, at which time he was in no shape to reveal what might have transpired in the interval.  
 It was wild, but it was possible. Certainly, it answered all the questions. But the chance of such a plan back-firing somewhere along the line was near certain. Yet was the prize worth the risk? Uncle was a rich man by anyone’s standards. His widow would inherit half of his estate. So uncle had to die. Had uncle lived and had father known, father would have acted decisively and had the marriage annulled forthwith based on mental incompetence. With uncle dead, who could say for certain what his mental state actually might have been.  
 If there had been a marriage, the license would have to be registered with our town clerk since a marriage had to be registered in the town where it occurred. And I remembered that our little town did not offer marriage applications, only Millington did that. I knew all this from mother’s years as a justice. So, as I sat in my saddle, the marriage, if, there indeed was one, was still unrecorded because the town office was closed Mondays. Surely, had the certificate been received by the town clerk last week, she would have certainly questioned it immediately. She and mother had been friendly for years. And since uncle was still alive Friday, all hell would have broken loose when father learned about what had happened. With uncle alive, all would be undone. Again, for such a plan to succeed, uncle had to be dead.   
 And now I was pretty sure just how that happened. The blood stain on the baseboard on the landing I had assumed had been the result of an accidental fall. But if my theory was correct, the fall was not an accident but a vigorous push from behind. Then uncle had been dragged across the landing and sent flying down the long flight to the hall floor. I remembered the oriental carpet was slightly rumpled. Whoever cleaned the baseboard of blood must also have straightened the carpet and overlooked the slight rumple in it that I had noticed. And then there was the sound of the car departing.   
 It made sense in a crazy way. But was it just the silly imagining of a school girl with a suspicious nature. If I was right, and the more I thought about that the more I thought that I simply had an over-active imagination, then the license, with the performing justice’s signature that made the form legal, would be at the town clerk’s office now. Or at least in the mail box outside the town office, since mail came mid-morning and Mrs. Carter, the town clerk, picked it up when she returned in her car from lunch at home. The town office was shut from twelve to one o’clock. Since Saturday was Christmas, there was no mail and, of course, on Sunday the post office was also shut. So the first chance to mail the license would have been yesterday, Monday. And I could not imagine Penny’s father would have the gall to hand it directly to Mrs. Carter. Mail that was picked up in our town went to the Millington post office, since our little town was too small to have its own post office, and local mail would be delivered the following day by the rural carrier.  
 The hounds were working the overgrown pasture, but to little avail. Covert drawn blank is the hunting term when hounds cannot turn up a fox. Mr. Rich had called the whippers-in to come in and consult. I was pretty sure that he would conclude that he needed to collect the pack and move on, probably to the Wardener woodlot, a small but reliable one, a quarter mile east of the Ingersoll place.   
 “Susie,” I called, “what time is it?” She and her pals had been fidgeting nearby, bored by the slow search of the pasture. Susie always had a cheap wristwatch in a pocket. I hoped she had remembered to wind it.  
 “It’s two o’clock.”  
 “No it’s not. It’s twelve twenty-five.” One of the ladies had overheard us.  
 If I was right in my assumption, and if I rode hard, I might just get to the town office before Mrs. Carter returned from lunch. Then I could look in the mail box and prove to myself one way or another whether I was just a silly girl or whether I had actually guessed right. And if I had, what then?   
 The Ingersoll place, as the crow flies, was about a mile and a quarter from the town office which stood in a small one story clapboard building next to the consolidated school in the village. But I was on horseback, and on a tired horse’s back. I took a deep breath, quietly turned my horse away from the field of riders, and slipped out of sight. We trotted into a hayfield and paused. I knew where I was, but I had to think about the fastest route to the village. I could not afford to make a costly error now as time was running out on me if I was to intercept the letter.

There was an opening at the lower end of the field and we made for that at a trot. I was sure now that I had the best route in my mind so I kicked my horse into a canter. We exited the field and entered a flat farm road that ran through woods for several hundred yards, cantering the whole way. It ended at a pond, and a rough trail bent away and down through the woods to a gap in a stone wall. We leapt the barway, which was nothing more than a couple of saplings, and trotted out into a rough pasture full of boulders and sprawling juniper bushes. I had to be careful as the footing was bad. The pasture dropped steeply down to a brook, but there were springs in the hillside and the cattle had made a muddy mess where they had trod. So we descended with care. The brook was narrow and the cattle had made a crossing that was easy to find. But picking our way downhill had been painfully slow. We splashed across into a pine wood. I had always loved the resinous smell of white pine, but there was not a moment to lose and no time to appreciate the tall trees. There was a mat of soft, slippery pine needles underfoot, but the going was good and the trail rose gently from the brook. We ran out into the Boyd’s back pasture at the crest of the ridge above the village, and bent left along its overgrown edge. The turf here was good and we again broke into a canter. But the pasture narrowed at its lower end to a narrow, muddy gap through blackberry bushes that tore at exposed skin and caught and dragged at my wool coat. I put my head down and we bulled through into another pasture. This one was really not much of a pasture as the lower end was wet and reedy, but we stayed on the high side and trotted carefully to a metal gate that emptied onto the road between the Boyd and Clark farms. The gate was ajar, since cattle had been in the barns for several weeks, and we slipped through into the road. Now we could make good time as we would be heading downhill to the village. I decided we would make better time if we left the road and cut across the big Clark hayfield that ran down to the farm. I knew the middle was treacherous because there was a spring there. The spring dried up come late May and grew good hay, but with the autumn rains it would again be wet. So we ran a loop around the field, not the most direct but the safer route. As we ran out through the open gate at the end of the field, I hoped that there would be no Clarks around expecting me to stop for pleasantries. We trotted the long, curving drive past the house and barns and dropped down the short farm road between the pastures to their long, dead flat hayfield. Looking up from that field used to be one of my favorite views with the house and barns silhouetted against the sky and the black and white cattle grazing the hillside.   
 But time was the enemy, and we broke into a gallop. The ground was solid underfoot and my horse knew where he was, and he pounded across the three hundred yards to the far end of the field and leaped over the hunt fence. We landed in a trail and ran through a mixed stand of oak and maples. A low overhanging branch slapped the bowler from my head, and it bounced up and down on my back as we plunged along. The woods opened into an overgrown clearing. I wanted the bowler back on my head for protection, but there was no time as we bounded across a broad and deep brook, dashed up a logging trail, and crossed a farm road into a narrow corn field. We nipped its narrow end and, at the far corner, jumped a wall into another hayfield. The bouncing bowler gave me a good whack on my head as we landed. It was not one of the soft felt type worn by City gents in London, but a hard riding bowler, more a helmet than a hat. I made a grab at it, caught the brim, and crammed it on my head as we dashed across the field and down a steep farm machinery trail through a belt of woods. We were almost there. The trail spilled us out into a long, narrow hayfield. At its far end was a brief belt of trees and beyond, barely visible, the white clapboard town office. My horse got himself balanced again, and we cantered the length of the field.  
 I had no idea of time, but I had to risk that I was still ahead of Mrs. Carter’s return from lunch. I dismounted, tied the reins to a convenient branch, and scrambled through the trees. The town office sat alongside the brick consolidated school. Some twenty yards separated the two buildings, and one looping driveway serviced both. At the edge of the drive stood the mailbox, an oversized rural type of galvanized metal on a sturdy post. I paused at the edge of the tree line. My horse whinnied, confused about being abruptly abandoned. To get to the mailbox, I would have to cross some twenty yards of open field. Anyone looking out of the windows of the town office would surely see me, and anyone looking from the school would also see me, and if Mrs. Carter drove in she would most certainly see me. I could see a couple of cars parked in front of the school, but none in front of the town office. I took a deep breath, hoped the building was empty, and ran hard.   
 I yanked open the lid. Inside was the Millington newspaper and a dozen or so business size envelopes. I grabbed the envelopes. What was I looking for? Four were official business with the state of Connecticut return addresses. Clearly not those. Two were from Millington city hall. Not those either. Another two bore the return addresses of attorneys and one the return address of a real estate agency. Not those. Three were hand addressed. One had no return address. Maybe, maybe not. The other two had return addresses. One was from someone named Visconti and I recognized the address as one of the roads on the far side of town, the side that bordered Millington. Not Visconti. The last one had no name but the return address was R. D. 41. We were on the rural delivery route, too, like most people in our part of town. We were R. D. 40.  
 I heard the distant approach of a car. I stuffed the letter in my coat pocket, slammed the lid shut, and ran, blind with terror. I hurled myself headlong into the trees, and rolled to a stop against the bole of a young maple. I looked back over my shoulder. Mrs. Carter’s car was at the mail box. She had rolled the window down and was reaching into the mailbox. I lay there breathless.   
 Mrs. Carter parked in front of the town office, got out carrying the mail under one arm, and unlocked the front door. At that moment my horse chose to whinny. Mrs. Carter paused and looked about for the source. Could she see my horse through the belt of trees? Apparently not, for she opened the door and entered. I crawled a few yards, got to my feet, brushed myself off, and untied my horse to mount. My horse decided to be difficult and walked forward, leaving me hopping along holding onto the saddle, with one foot in the stirrup and one still grounded. Fortunately, a clump of still green grass attracted her attention. She stopped to graze and I mounted and headed homeward.  
 “Where were you?” Susie was already in the stable, the bridle and breastplate slung over her shoulder, the saddle held firm against her chest.   
 “My horse was tired and I didn’t want to stick around. I had a feeling they weren’t going to find.” It was a lame excuse, but at least it was irrefutable.  
 “Well, they didn’t. The Wardener place was blank, too.”  
 She went into the house, and I unsaddled my horse and gave him some hay and water. Our trip back from the town office had been leisurely, and he had cooled so that he did not need a rug. We did not keep our horses in stalls. Father thought they did better if they had the option of being outside and he seemed to be right. You could see on winter mornings depressions in the snow in the paddock where the horses had bedded themselves the night before. They came into the stable stalls for hay and water and when a hard, cold wind was blowing. Otherwise, they preferred to be outside.  
 What the devil was I going to do with my purloined letter? Stealing the U. S. mail was a federal offense.  
 I remembered that a while back the police had caught a bad apple from Millington who had developed a nasty habit of stealing from rural mailboxes. It was front page news, and I remember asking father why the paper made such an issue about the theft being a federal crime. The fellow who had been caught had a long record of petty thefts locally but had never spent much time behind bars, but when he committed a federal crime he really put his foot in it. The punishment, I remembered, was long years in prison. No mercy.  
 The letter was in the outside pocket of my coat. Clearly, it could not stay there. Mother took all our hunt coats to the cleaners as soon as the season ended, and she would go through all the pockets extracting the odds and ends that had accumulated over the season: wire clippers, hanks of baling twine, wrappers from candy bars—that sort of thing. It would be just my bad luck to have her scoop up all our coats, vests, and britches first thing tomorrow morning and run them into the cleaners in Millington. I did not know what my parent’s plans were for tomorrow, the day before the funeral, but I was not about to take anything for granted. I could just see the expression on my mother’s face when she discovered the letter in my pocket and noticed the stamp was cancelled. It would not take but a moment to realize she had a mail thief for a daughter. What would follow was not pleasant to imagine, but the word mortifying crossed my mind.  
 I removed the letter and stuffed it under my vest. It promptly fell to the ground. I picked it up and stuffed it inside the waistband of my britches. Much better. When I had finished my horse chores, I collected my tack and headed across the dun colored grass to the kitchen wing. Mother was baking something that smelled awfully good. I hung up my bridle and breastplate, placed my saddle on its tree, put my bowler on its peg, and stripped off my coat. We had good, substantial cedar hangers for the coats. Hunt coats are heavy and also expensive: substantial wool inside and out and lots of pockets, again inside and out.  
 “Unie, what’s wrong? Are you all right? Did you hurt yourself?” The letter had shifted inside my britches. It had slipped down and one corner was poking into my skin. I had winced and mother had seen my grimace.  
 “It’s not that time of the month, is it?”  
 “*No*, mother! I’m fine.” I scrambled up the back stairs from the kitchen, trying to grab the blasted thing that was jabbing me with every step.  
 I closed the door to my room, not that that would stop my sister should she decide to burst in on me to talk about the day’s hunt. The first run had been as fast as any either of us had ever experienced, and Susie would likely want, at some point, to talk about it. Most hunts had runs that were quick, with lots of ins and outs and plenty of jumping, but this had been a lung bursting gasper. No doubt the fox was still recovering in the swamp, and wondering what had made him choose to try to out run rather than out fox the hounds. But I had to do something with the stolen letter. Neither Susie nor my mother had any compunction about going through my drawers. Mother at least had a reason, since she did my laundry and put the clean clothes away if I was not around to do it myself. Susie poked around in my stuff simply out of sheer devilry.  
 Then I remembered something from a mystery novel I had once read. I pulled out the drawer from my cheap pine desk, and placed the contents on my bed. Then I turned it over and taped the letter with cellophane tape to the bottom of the drawer. I replaced the contents and slid the drawer back into the desk. Barely had I closed the drawer before that little beast of a sister burst into my room and hurled herself onto my bed and began to breathlessly recount her day’s hunting. She had not seen poor Julia Ingersoll, but she heard from those who had that she had gotten an iron horseshoe square across the bridge of her nose. The good news was that she still had her teeth.  
 Supper finished off the last of the casseroles. We had had tuna fish, green bean and mushroom, macaroni and hamburger, and now something cheesey and noodlely with little slices of hot dogs. Father announced that tomorrow he was going in to the office to be sure all was well there and to the cathedral to verify the same. He said he would be home early. Mother raised an eyebrow at that. Then I was informed by mother that, in the morning, I was to return the casserole dishes to their owners as well as the cookie tins to theirs. It was Susie’s turn to dry the dishes after supper and mine to fetch a several day supply of firewood for the kitchen range from the woodshed. As I was groping around in the semi-dark of the woodshed, I could see that the ground was already white and snow was falling at a good rate.

We woke to a fine winter day. The sunrise sparkled on several inches of snow, but not enough to get the tractor started. Our tractor had a front bucket, useful for lots of odd jobs around the stable but also for snow plowing. But unless the ground was frozen hard, snow plowing ripped up the grass as well as the gravel in our short little driveway. We kept our vehicles in an open sided shed extension attached to the woodshed which, as I previously mentioned, was connected to the kitchen—what the architectural academics call New England continuous architecture. Mother did not need to tell me what Susie and I would be doing right after we ate our breakfast: the snow shovels were hanging in the shed.  
 As I was returning in my nightgown from the bathroom, I happened to notice that the letter was lying underneath the desk. Apparently, the cellophane tape did not bond tightly to the rough underside of the drawer and the letter had dropped during the night to the bare pine boards of the floor. I had pulled the desk chair aside to retrieve it. At that moment, my sister was passing my open bedroom door heading toward the bathroom. Her curiosity was awakened at the sight of me on hands and knees under the desk.  
 “What are you doing?”  
 “Nothing.”  
 “You’ve got a letter! I bet it’s from your boy friend at school. Can I see? Who is he?”  
 “It’s none of your business. Now get out!” I pushed her back through the door and slammed it shut. Now what was I going to do. For dead certain, Susie would prowl through all my possessions trying to find it when I was out of the house returning the casseroles and cookie tins. I dressed in chore clothes and stuffed the letter into a deep side pocket of my trousers. At breakfast, Susie started in again:  
 “Unie got a letter from her boy friend.”  
 “Shut up.”  
 “Susie,” mother said, “it’s not any of your business. Who is he Unie?” The double exposure effect of that statement stiff-armed me. Now what? Tell the truth? Unthinkable. Deny there was a letter? Quicksand awaited that course. Mother was not only whip-smart, she had unnervingly good intuition. I decided the best course was a bald-faced lie.  
 “Just a boy at school.” Our school and its brother school across the river had Saturday social events: mixers, class dances, movies—that sort of harmless stuff.  
 “Where is he from, Unie?” While mother was asking that harmless question, my sister was making disgusting kissing noises. “Stop that, Susie,” she warned. Susie stopped abruptly.  
 “I don’t know. I don’t really know him that well.”  
 “Well, anyhow, it’s your business. And you,” this directed at my leering sister, “keep your nose out of it. Now finish your breakfast and get out and shovel, both of you. And then you, Unie, take this back,” she pointed at the casseroles and cookie tins, “and you, Susie, are coming with me into Millington. We have got to get you a dress for tomorrow.”  
 The driveway from the shed to the road is not more than fifteen yards, but broad to allow the passage of a couple of vehicles abreast. It was hard shoveling since the ground was still unfrozen and the shovels kept digging in. But there were but a few inches of snow and, within half an hour, we had it tolerably clear. The mid-day sun would melt what we left behind. As I was picking up the casserole dishes to take to the truck, a thought occurred to me.  
 “When will you and Susie be back?”  
 “I don’t know. Why do you care?”  
 “I just thought you might stay for lunch.” If I could get everybody out of the house then maybe I could open the letter.  
 “Please, mother, please. We could go to the hotel. I loved that!” Susie was an expert whiner. The effect on father was usually more productive than on mother. Mother was made of stern stuff.  
 “Stop that whining. You won’t get anything if you whine. Alright, I suppose so. Just this once.”  
 “Yippee!”

Now I had my chance, but I still had my deliveries. I made a mental map of the shortest route. Because father had taken the car and mother would use the pick-up, I had to drive the old flat bed farm truck that was hardly ever used. It was big and clumsy and low on gas. But it started. I drove into the village, bought gas, and began my mission. It was nearing mid-day when I rolled the flat bed back into the shed. I figured that I had at best a couple of hours to myself. But how to open the letter? I was afraid to slit the envelope. If I were somehow caught with the letter in my possession, I would be in deeper trouble if it were opened. Then I remembered from a spy novel from my childhood that spies steamed open letters and then resealed them and no one was the wiser.  
 I took the kettle that always sat on the back of the wood range full of warm water and placed it on the electric range. In a matter of moments, I had it boiling and emitting a column of steam from the spout. Now what? Hold the flap over the steam to melt the glue but how close. Too close and I might just produce a soggy lump and possibly cause the writing ink to run. Too far away and I might not get the flap to release. I compromised and decided that I would hold the letter as close to the steam as I could without burning my hand. For a while nothing seemed to be happening but, at least, the ink on the envelope was still intact and had not run. When the paper began to feel damp I thought I had better stop for a while. I tried to lift one corner of the flap and it began to come free, but I could detect that the edge of the flap was also beginning to tear.   
 I stopped and thought. What I needed was a broader lift and fast before the glue began to dry. There was a table knife in the drying rack. I grabbed it, inserted it under the corner of the flap ever so carefully and gently pried up. The tacky glue slowly released as I slid the knife deeper until at last the flap came free. I turned off the electric range and replaced the kettle. I was about to extract the letter when I heard the tires of a car in the driveway. The ice cold grip of panic seized me by the scruff of my neck. I looked through the kitchen window. But it was only the Reverend Brown from the Congregational church in the village. Thank god! He got out of his sensible gray Plymouth coupe, and walked gingerly across the slippery path to our kitchen door and knocked. I stuffed the letter back into my trouser pocket and opened the door.  
 He had come to offer the family his condolences and support. I thanked him and explained that I was the only one at home and if he should come back in the evening he would find the whole family at home. He said he would try, but I doubted he was keen on returning to try to console father. I was sure father would have been a lot happier if the Reverend Brown would give us a pass in the consolation department. The Reverend Brown cautiously made his way back to his car. Mid way along the path, he lost his balance and pirouetted on an icy patch. He spun around, his arms groping the air for support, one leg suspended aloft. But gradually all the parts gracelessly re-united, and he gathered himself, shaken but with no harm having befallen him. One more reason, I thought, that we would be unlikely to see him later.  
 I sank into a kitchen chair and panted. What deviltry had I wrought? My breath slowly returned to normal, and I withdrew the envelope from my pocket. The pressure of my leg against the cloth of the trouser leg had been sufficient to re-seal the flap. Through my clenched teeth, I rasped a well-known four letter obscenity. What was I to do now? I had no idea when mother and Susie might return. And then it occurred to me that I had better sand the path that had nearly been the Reverend Brown’s literal downfall. So I put on my chore coat and went out to the wood shed where we kept a barrel of sand for such needs. In ten minutes I had laid a blanket of sand from the driveway to the kitchen door.  
 I hung up my coat and took the kettle from the wood range. In five minutes I had it boiling again, and I began to steam the envelope flap. The telephone rang.  
 “Unie, we’re at Strang’s.” Mr. Strang kept the little grocery and general store in the village. Mother tried to patronize Mr. Strang although his prices were much higher than the larger Millington stores. “Is there anything you need?”  
 I answered in the negative. They would be home in a few minutes since the village was barely a mile distant. I had to hide the letter. I turned off the electric range, and thought furiously. The stable and barn were out. Susie spent far too much time out there, and I had no idea what winter weather drifting through the gaps in the siding might do to the paper. My bedroom was definitely out. I could not continue to carry it around in my clothing. So what was I to do and do quick?  
 The cellar door led off the kitchen into the full fieldstone cellar under the tavern (the kitchen ell had only crawl space beneath). I flicked the switch at the head of the stairs and descended through over-hanging cobwebs. The cellar was rarely used. Mother sent our laundry out and, since she did no canning, she had no need for cellar storage. There were a few boxes, a couple of wooden barrels, electric wires going every which way in the joists overhead, plumbing pipes nailed to the joists and sills, and the oil furnace which was a recent replacement of the old one which had conked out at incredibly inconvenient moments. On a shelf against the wall was a row of coffee cans. The cans contained nails of various sizes, the sizes marked on the lids. I rejected the one marked 16d as well as the 10d. For some unforeseen reason, and so far the unforeseen seemed to be a large component of my illegal deed, we might actually need a nail and those two sizes were the likely ones to be required. I opened the can marked roofing nails and dropped the letter inside. Little likelihood of roof repair I hoped. I barely had the cellar door shut when I heard the sound of mother returning in the pick-up.   
 That night I had a nightmare. Police were chasing me through a poultry house, frightened chickens flying everywhere, around and around, in and out until they finally captured me by jumping on me and nearly suffocating me. I was led to the gallows and a noose put around my neck. When the trap door in the scaffold clanged open, I was catapulted back to consciousness, wondering momentarily where I was and badly shaken. I awoke with a headache and a stiff neck. I usually promptly forgot dreams and considered them meaningless, but this one lingered and I had a pretty good idea what was behind it.

We were scheduled to depart for the funeral right after breakfast. The day was clear, the wind was brisk, and, for once, we were departing on time, mother and father in front, Susie and me in back.  
 “You know, dear, I saw a lovely light blue Buick on the dealer’s lot in Millington yesterday.” Mother was leading up to something and father knew that.  
 “There’s nothing wrong with this car,” father said, defensively.  
 “I know. I was thinking it would be nice for me so I don’t always have to drive the pick-up. I feel like such a bumpkin in the pick-up.”  
 “Well, you’re not. Anyhow, I’m not made of money.” That was always father’s excuse, and mother made sure it never worked.  
 “Yes you are, darling. You bought the fire department its truck last year and that was very expensive, remember?”  
 “Well, I don’t have any money left.” Too weak, mother had him now. Check with mate to follow.  
 “Of course you do, dear.”  
 “Well, I don’t want to talk about it anymore now. Can’t it wait until tomorrow?”  
 “Of course, sweetheart.” Mother looked back over her shoulder at me. There was just a hint of a smile on her face. We drove the rest of the way to Hartford in silence.  
 The police had cordoned off a stretch of curbing in front of the cathedral. The hearse was already drawn up and a policeman waved us to the curb behind it. People were already entering the front door, but we were ushered around to a side entrance since the family of the deceased always enters the nave from the front. We were all the family that uncle had so we were ushered into a comfortably furnished room with bucolic, peaceful landscapes hanging on the walls, waiting for our entrance. Mother took Susie aside to instruct her about what would happen and how she should behave—or else.  
 The pews were filled, the service of the burial of the dead was brief and dignified, uncle was wheeled out, and we set off in a cavalcade to bury him. I noticed that Penny attended the service, as I would have expected, and I wondered whether she intended to come to the cemetery to see, if I was correct, her husband buried.  
 The cemetery was at the south end of the city on a ridge of land that sloped westward. It could have passed for a park with tall shade trees, winding lanes, ponds, and a small gothic stone chapel. Clearly, it was where the fashionable chose to partake of their eternal rest. There were mausoleums and monuments all about. Uncle was to be buried on a hillside next to auntie. It gave me the shivers to see her gravestone and realize that she was really just below my feet. There was a pile of dark red earth off to the side. Hartford sits on a sandstone belt which stains the earth that distinctive color.   
 The ceremony was brief, and the biting wind whipped the bishop’s robe about. And then uncle slowly disappeared into the earth. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection unto eternal life. Susie sobbed, father looked grim, mother stood unflinching, and I looked around and saw Penny. What must have been going through her mind I asked myself.  
 The reception upstairs in the Hartford Club was restrained and brief. By early afternoon, we were on our way home. No one had much to say. I might have been able to say a lot had I only had time to unseal the purloined letter. My headache returned, in part because I realized that I had done neither of the vacation homework assignments that were due Monday when we resumed classes. How typical of my miserable school to try to spoil a vacation, knowing full well that no one would begin until the last moment but all would worry the entire vacation about it. I consoled myself that at least I had two days left to write a poem, something I was sure I was incapable of doing, and write a four page American history paper, subject of my choosing.   
 After supper I asked father if he had any poetry books that I could use as reference. With a twinkle in his eye, he handed me a slim volume of poetry by Ogden Nash. I had heard the name, but it meant nothing to me. So I took my leave of the family and crawled into bed. I loved to read in bed, propped up on a couple of pillows. Usually, shortly my eyes would glaze and the book slip from my grasp and I would turn off the bedside lamp and pass into dreamland. What father had not told me was that Ogden Nash wrote funny poetry. I started to chuckle, then laugh outright. I think that was the first time I had laughed since I had been home. Instead of sliding off into unconsciousness, I was bolt awake, turning page after page until finally, exhausted, I reached for the switch and turned off the light. For the first time in several nights, I slept soundly.  
 I was still buried in Mr. Nash’s poetry at breakfast Friday morning when inspiration seized me. I grabbed a pencil and a pad of paper and began to write. At that moment, father entered the kitchen. He was about to say something about not reading at the table when mother shussed him. I scribbled on, scratching out, erasing, writing in the margin and re-writing. Finally, I had a poem. This is what I wrote:

*Hippity hoppity,  
 Hippity hoppity  
 Down the lane I scamper*.

*Hoppity hippity.,  
 Hoppity hippity,  
 I trip and twist my ankler*

*I chip my tooth,  
 I scun my knee,   
 My fingernail is torn.*

*Hoppity hippity,  
 Hippity hoppity,  
 That’s all. Good-bye.*

Father looked over my shoulder at the finished draft. He emitted a mirthful snort. Project one complete. I had thought I was incapable of writing a poem, but the words had just spilled out of me.  
 I borrowed his notes and a manuscript of the talk he had given to several local organizations about the tradition that George Washington had slept in our house. By noon, four hand-written pages later, I was ready to type, double spaced, what was damn close to an outright piece of plagiarism. I had changed the wording around a bit (father’s text was a whole lot more amusing), but I was not keen to have father cast an eye on my effort. He would not have been amused. On the other hand, he might have figured that any school that was so mean spirited as to assign vacation homework deserved just such a result. I was not about to take the risk, so I ran the pages upstairs and dumped them in my suitcase.  
 I had forgotten that this was New Year’s Eve. So, apparently, had my father. Despite much groaning, father finally climbed into his tuxedo. Mother was adamant that they must keep a cheerful front to the world. Father said he did not give a damn. That never worked with mother, and he was marched, sputtering, out to the car. That afternoon, building on the success of Ogden Nash, he had given me two books that he assured me I would enjoy. One was by James Thurber, who had a home not too far away in the town of West Cornwall, and the other by Robert Benchley. By their departure, I was well into Thurber and laughing hard. Mother had assured us that they would be back early. Father regarded staying up to welcome in the New Year to be a stupid custom since the New Year would inevitably arrive, with him upright or, preferably, without him, recumbent.  
 Was this the moment to go to the cellar and retrieve the letter? Susie was asleep on the parlor sofa, my parents were away. Would I have as good a chance again? After all, Sunday afternoon I would leave for school, and there was no way to tell if I might have as good an opportunity again. The moment passed as Susie stirred and turned on the radio. The broadcast from Times Square was underway.  
 “I wish we had a television,” she moaned. “Then we could actually watch.” There were a few televisions around town, more every month, but I was sure that my bookish parents would be among the last to acquire one. Father had made frequent remarks about the disfiguring effect that the television aerial had on a building. But Susie had a point. I went back to Mr. Thurber’s *The Night the Bed Fell.* The letter would have to stay a while longer nestled among the roofing nails.

All Saturday morning I buried myself in Thurber and Benchley. Other than horse chores, there was nothing doing outside. In the afternoon, father decided that he would go to the gun club and shoot clay pigeons until he realized that the club would be closed. He then decided to set up his own launcher behind the house, something he did often enough that the banging was accepted by our horses and the hounds across the road without reaction. When father was bored, he liked to smash clays. So he dragooned me to pull for him. The black discs soared out against the backdrop of the cold white hillside to disappear in a puff of gray dust when the number 8 shot struck them.  
 Later in the afternoon my parents were due at a cocktail party and they decided to take Susie with them so that she could play with the daughter of the hosts while the party was in progress. How anyone who had celebrated past midnight would consider another round of strong drink the following afternoon was beyond my reckoning. Clearly, my moment had arrived. I retrieved the letter from the cellar. My suitcase had a fabric lining, and, because it was an old timer with destination labels pasted all over the sides, the fabric had a rent in one corner. By folding the envelope almost in half, I was able to slip it through the opening. If you looked hard, you could see the outline of it, but the chance that it would be discovered was unlikely. I decided to pack since I was tired of reading. It had been arranged that I would ride to school with the Barkleys whose daughter was a year behind me. They lived in Hartford so we would have to depart at mid-day to arrive at their home for an early afternoon departure. My parents would return the favor after spring vacation.

Returning to a place you dread in the dark late afternoon of a bitter early January day does nothing to lift one’s spirits. No month is nearly as long in duration as January, and nowhere that I knew felt as hopelessly forlorn as that campus clinging to its frigid hillside with the north wind sweeping through and distant views across the river valley to what appeared to be relentless wilderness. Add to that my lingering worry that I had committed the federal crime of mail theft and that if I were to be discovered I would face a long prison sentence. Further, if I were to prove my suspicion to be correct how would I reveal that a crime had actually been committed. Or, for that matter, should I? If I was right, then I had foiled the plot. I did not like the idea that my uncle likely had been murdered for profit, although he was certainly a dying man. I was fairly certain that he had been thrown down the stairs, but I could never prove the crime now. The conjecture was driving me mad. But the arrival of my roommate put an end to my hope of at last resolving my quandary. The envelope would have to wait until tomorrow afternoon after classes.  
 Monday morning, I turned in my history paper and my poem of which I was rather proud. No flights of fancy for me, no deep thoughts about life, no marveling at nature; none of that stuff, just a scun knee. I detested being back in class, sitting on an uncomfortable desk chair and trying to pay attention to subjects that held little interest for me. Why had father sent me *here* ?  
 The western sun poured through my dormitory window late that afternoon. I had the envelope on my desk and at last I was alone. My roommate would be at the gymnasium pool for another hour. I looked hard at the envelope that had caused me so much worry. I decided that there was no reason now not to simply slit the flap and extract the contents. Inside, to my great relief, was the proof of what I had guessed sitting in the saddle at the Ingersoll’s covert.   
 I looked closer. The signature looked odd. I turned over the marriage license. The impression of Penny’s father’s handwriting was distinct, a little too distinct. I flipped the license over and looked even closer. The ink in one spot did not fill the impression completely as it should have done. It appeared to me that the signature had been traced onto the license by superimposing another signature and pressing down to leave an impression that could be subsequently inked. So Penny’s father had not signed the document. Penny had done it herself. But he must have been involved in somehow procuring the license. Perhaps he backed out at the end. If he realized that his daughter had committed murder to further his plan or her plan or their plan, that would explain his unwillingness to participate further in the scheme which he must have realized was already fraught with peril.  
 What was I to do with this incriminating document? I dared not leave it in my room. We never locked our doors. Destroy it? Save it? Turn it over to the police or my parents? What? Perhaps the safest course would be to simply burn it. After all, I had discovered and thwarted Penny’s plan. But after all the trouble I had put myself through, I could just not bring myself to destroy it. Turning it over to the police would require me to explain how it came into my possession. The consequences could be dire. What my parents would do with it was unpredictable, possibly nothing or possibly something that would lead to an ugly result. If so, again the question of how the document was obtained would trace back to me, the mail thief. In the end, I decided to take a chance by asking for help.  
 After supper, when I was supposed to be in my dorm room studying, I slipped out and made my way cautiously across the dark campus to the cottage of my art teacher. She was the only faculty member who had shown the slightest interest in me, and I took a chance that she might be willing to help me do what I had in mind. I kept a sharp lookout as I did not want to be accosted by a passing faculty member who would want to know why I was not in my room at my books. I am not good at bluffing, and I might get myself into trouble trying to explain myself. After all the trouble this license had already cost me, it would be ironic to stumble now. But I got to her door undiscovered, knocked, and was promptly admitted with a wondering frown.  
 I explained that I had something that I wanted to place in safe keeping, and that it would be better for us both if that was all she knew. She dithered a bit, but finally she said that she had a lawyer in Greenfield, a small city ten miles to the south where the faculty did its shopping and business. She thought that to place it in his hands might be the best answer, but with my name on it, not hers. She gave me an envelope and I wrote my name on it and sealed the flap. Then I added: To be surrendered only to the above in her presence. My teacher said she intended to go into Greenfield on Wednesday afternoon, and would hand deliver it to him. That, I thought, should do it.  
 At last, I had a clear mind and conscience. That did not last long. The next morning, my English teacher passed back to us our poems with a grade in red crayon. Mine was F, and a note that she wanted to talk to me immediately.  
 “Where did you get the poem that you turned in?” The bell had rung and everyone had filed out.  
 “What do you mean?”  
 “That’s not student work. I’ve read enough student poetry to know it when I see it.”  
 “I did *so* write it.”  
 I was dumbfounded. If I was going to be damned for plagiarism, certainly my history paper should have been the culprit, but I had gotten it back that morning with an A- and a complimentary note for a job well done. Now there was irony for you.  
 “We will see about that! I think I know where you got it.”  
 “I had been reading Ogden Nash, but I didn’t copy any poem of his.” I was near tears now.  
 “This isn’t over. Now go on to your next class.”  
 What should I do? I knew she would never find what she was looking for. I had long wished for some way to remove myself from the school but not as a disgraced plagiarist. The resolution was not long in coming.

Two days later, I received a note that I was to present myself at the headmaster’s directly after lunch. As I drew near at the appointed hour, I noticed a light blue Buick drawn up in front of the headmaster’s brick residence. The headmaster’s wife, looking herself very much like the cut flowers in the hall, graciously swept me along to his book-lined study. Inside were the headmaster, silver-haired and florid but lacking his usual urbane serenity, my teacher looking red-faced and flustered, and my father, also red-faced, not with embarrassment but fuming with fury. Apparently, he had been notified that his daughter was to be expelled, and that he should come to the school to collect her.   
 “I told this person,” he said, pointing at the headmaster, “that I had been there when you wrote your little poem. And I told this person,” pointing at my shrinking teacher, “that she is a damn nincompoop.”  
 “We realize now,” said the shaken headmaster, “that a bad mistake has been made, and we want to apologize.”  
 The room became quiet. The only sound was that of the grandfather clock ticking. They looked at me quizzically, waiting for a response.  
 “I don’t accept.”   
 Father looked at me, startled. The other two looked dumb-founded.  
 “I’m sorry,” said the headmaster, “but what else can we do?”  
 “Apologize to me in chapel on Sunday in front of the whole school.” I turned on my heel and left.  
 I was half-way back to my dormitory when father drew alongside in the light blue Buick. He rolled down the window, winked at me, and then pulled slowly away in the powerful automobile and disappeared down the long sweeping campus avenue that led to the road back to the town. I suspected that just possibly this might be my last year in exile.   
 Of course, there was no chapel apology. I had not really expected that there would be. But my schedule was rearranged so that I now had a different English teacher. January dragged on. Snow came regularly, icy winds scoured the hillside, and when the clouds lifted, the sky became a cold ultramarine blue that made me shiver. The long January that I had dreaded had gotten off to a rousing start, and shortly more alarms were to follow.

Mother wrote to me faithfully every week. The contents of her letters were mostly the kind of stuff the Millington paper’s town correspondents wrote under the heading “Social Notes from All Over.”Usually it was pretty tame stuff: firehouse suppers, church events, a little bit of harmless local gossip, and something about my loathsome little sister. However, the letter I retrieved from the school post office the week following father’s descent upon the school, all guns blazing, was another matter. Apparently, mother had been talking after church to Mrs. Weatherbee who had informed her that I was willing to ride her husband’s horse, Clipper, in the race. I excerpt the relevant portion:  
 “I told her that there was no way that you were going to ride in that race, and that it did not matter what you two had agreed to. Girls do not ride in such dangerous races. When I told your father he said he most certainly intended to talk to Bea and Bill about this notion of yours.”   
 I wrote back immediately that I *really* wanted to ride Clipper, that I had experience racing, that Mr. Rich thought I was good enough to whip-in, that what did it matter if I was a girl as long as the horse did not care, and anyway please, please, *please*.   
 Shortly thereafter an envelope bearing the return address of father’s company arrived in my mail slot in the post office. I dreaded opening it. There was but one sentence on father’s personal stationery, typed by father’s secretary. It read: “You have permission to ride William Weatherbee’s horse ‘Clipper’ in the hunt race May12th.” Father had appended his signature. I knew I would be the first female to ever compete in the main race, a race that had been run for almost fifty years, excepting the years of the two wars.

Ten days later, another letter from mother arrived containing a newspaper clipping. It was a brief obituary clipped from the Millington paper. Penny’s father had died. The service was to be limited only to the family. Who else, I thought uncharitably to myself, would want to come. He had been a miserable old bugger. When I read mother’s letter, I sat down in amazement. What the obituary had not said was that he had hanged himself in one of the chicken houses. His son, who was a decent sort, had found him the following morning while he was picking up eggs. Mother also wrote that father already had met with the young man and forgiven the outstanding debt so that he could start fresh.  
 My thoughts swirled about. Hanged himself? Why? Fear that his treachery would be discovered? But how? I had the proof that he had not signed the marriage license. I was certain, if I so wished, I could prove that Penny had signed it. Possibly, he could not live with the knowledge that he had killed an innocent man, for I was pretty sure that his greater strength had sent my frail uncle flying down two staircases. Or could it be that he had not been involved at all and that when he realized what had been done in his name that he could not bear the humiliation. Deep down, I did not really believe that he did not have some part in the scheme. Then I began to consider that, in some way, I was to blame for his death. Their idea was foolhardy, even stupid, and it would have been unlikely, in reality, to have worked even if I had not sabotaged it. But I did and he was dead. Whatever the true explanation was, it had passed with him.   
 I had expected a return of my nightmares after this gruesome news, but none arrived and I slept soundly. I supposed that propriety required that I write a note of condolence to Penny however ironic that might seem given the facts as I knew them. I tried several drafts, but none seemed to feel right. I could not bring myself to write that I was sorry about his demise. What could I say? I would have liked to write that now, with him gone, the sky was a little brighter, the air a little clearer, but certainly that was out of the question. In the end, what I wrote was this:  
 “It must be difficult to lose a father. Remorse must have overcome him. I hope you and your brother will carry on.”  
 That will give you something to ponder, I thought to myself. By now, she would have long realized that their plan had gone awry, but *how* she would have had no idea. As I dropped the letter in the post office mail slot, I thought to myself “There, chew on that!” The word ‘remorse’ should get her thinking hard that perhaps her nasty plan had been uncovered. If it had, though, why had nothing yet happened? She could worry on that a while. I did not know what I was going to do about exposing her, probably nothing since I would implicate myself, but if, in the interim, I could cause her some sleepless nights then so much to the good.

January lasted about six weeks and February another five. Or, at least, so it seemed. The winter term dragged to a halt in the middle of March preceded by a week of final exams. At best, I am a respectable student, not the motivated sort that takes information in and spits it out. That kind gets the good grades and the applause, but, in the end, my kind, the ones with imagination and a creative outlook, are the ones who succeed. At least, I told myself that. In any case, I was looking forward to getting home again and up on Clipper’s back.  
 The Weatherbee’s had a big indoor riding arena and an outdoor track of several hundred yards with a lot of gravel in its base so that it drained well. Spring came early but the ground was still a little too sloppy for serious riding. Clipper had been hunted through the past autumn, and the Weatherbees had kept him active indoors throughout the winter. If he was not in shape, he was at least not out of shape. I planned to get him used to having me up and jumping him a bit indoors. Then the Weatherbees would exercise him long and slow with lots of uphill work once the ground firmed. I would return on a weekend school pass the Friday before the race and hack him over the course that afternoon to get him remembering both me and it. We would race the following afternoon. Clipper had raced only twice before, both times in our hunt’s race, with Bill Weatherbee up, never running better than fifth. But the Weatherbees loved the horse, in a way he was the child they never had, and Bea wanted a more competitive ride for him. Both times previously, Bill had been well over the 160 lb. minimum limit. I, of course, would have to carry weight to get up to 160.   
 As I mentioned before, Bea Weatherbee pretty much ran Bill despite the fact that her husband was a well known Hartford realtor. The Weatherbee name had for two generations been associated with both Hartford area and suburban commercial and residential real estate. Like most salesmen, Bill was professionably likeable. His forehead was inexorably extending itself upwards and his girth was wrapping itself over his belt line. There was a twinkle in his eye and a sweet smelling pipe in his mouth. He had but one fault: he had graduated from Harvard. He worked that fact into every conversation somehow. You always knew it was coming, but you never knew quite how it would arrive. But, like death and taxes, it always did. And as a subtle reminder, he had a vanity license plate that read H26, the year of his graduation.  
 I had been home several days, most of which I had spent with Clipper and Bea Weatherbee, when one afternoon, while both mother and I were making bread in the kitchen, the phone rang. Mother answered it and immediately looked grim. She listened hard, nodded her head a couple of times, muttered something indistinct, and finished up by saying how very sorry she was.  
 “That was Clara,” she said. Clara is an old friend and the town gossip. “Polly Ingersoll has leukemia. They had kept it a secret as long as possible, but it’s well advanced now. Clara said that Penny is taking care of her.”  
 “What does that mean?” I had heard the name of the disease but I knew next to nothing about it. Something to do with the blood I recalled.  
 “What it means is that it is very, very serious.” There was a deep crease of concentration on mother’s forehead.  
 “Is she going to die?”  
 “I don’t want to talk about it.” I took that as a yes.  
 She left the kitchen, the bread, and me. I continued kneading. Mother and Polly Ingersoll, Julia’s mother, had never been friends but they had been friendly. Their paths crossed at parties and dances and at the hunt’s social activities, and they were both good organizers and had worked together several times putting on the elegant hunt ball the night before the hunt races. That was the big social event of the hunt year, held in the upstairs ballroom at the Hartford Club. Everyone dressed up: the ladies in ball gowns and the gentlemen in white tie and tails. The men who were members of the hunt wore red tailcoats instead of the usual black. I had been too young to attend, but, I thought to myself, maybe I would like to go this year. I could ask Charlie Stevenson to take me. I decided when mother was in a better mood I would ask her. She always thought I was too much of a tomboy so I doubted she would say no. Except that I was racing the next day. Anyhow, it was worth considering.  
 As I have said previously, I spent most of my time with the Weatherbees. They lived next to the Ingersolls with a quarter mile of fields and pastures separating the two places. No two establishments could have been more different. The Ingersolls kept a spic and span operation, everything trimmed, repaired, paved and painted. Their neighbors had a more relaxed outlook, and their place had a weathered appearance and well-used aspect. There was nothing shiny and polished as you would find down the road at the Ingersolls, but everything worked as it was intended. Although the hinges could use a little oil and their gravel road to the stable needed a bit of grading, nothing was seriously out of place and the horses were well cared for even if there hooves were not polished like those of the Ingersoll horses.  
 In fact, Clipper still had his winter coat although he was beginning to shed it. One day early into the second week of vacation, I was currying him in the stable, pulling loose great gobs of winter hair, when I noticed over my shoulder that someone was watching me. The building was not well lit, and I could not recognize whoever it was but she looked feminine and harmless.  
 “Can I help you?” I called over my shoulder.  
 “It’s me, Unie.” The voice was muffled but sounded familiar. She came closer. It was Julia Ingersoll, but something was radically strange about her. “I heard that you were over here. You’re going to ride Clipper in the race, aren’t you.” I did not know that was common knowledge, but in a small, tight community like ours there are few secrets kept for long.  
 I was about done with Clipper and he was becoming bored with my combing, so I detached the lead rope and he trotted down the alley and out into the paddock. I took a good look at Julia, and I realized what had confused me about her. Her nose looked like the noses you sometimes see on prize fighters. The bridge was mashed flat. In profile, rather than the elegant aquiline nose so much admired at the final hunt, the shape was concave. Thus, the voice, once a clear, fine soprano, was now labored and fuzzy. Her hair, always shining and blond, was lank and matted. Her carriage, once almost balletic, was shuffling and tentative. Previously, she would not have crossed the road to say hello to me, now she had come here of her own volition. It was Julia, but a different Julia, a far different Julia.  
 “I heard about your mother last night. I’m really sorry.”  
 “It’s okay. Do you mind if I hang around here?” I had heard that she did not return to her school after the accident. I suppose she must be pretty bored and discouraged. To realize that your mother is dying and that you will never again be the belle of the ball must have been crushing.  
 “I hear that Penny is taking care of your mother.”  
 “She’s living with us.”  
 “She took care of my uncle. Do you like her?”  
 “My father likes her. A lot.” I decided to drop the subject. “Can I do anything over here? It’s pretty boring at home.”   
 “Sure. I’m here every day from nine ‘til three. Come on over, I’d like the company.” It was getting on to three o’clock so I said good-bye to Bea, who was busy sewing up my silks for the race, and asked her if she would mind if Julia helped us. She took a good look at Julia who was standing by my pick-up. I was going to give her a ride home.  
 “That’s Julia? The poor girl, of course.”  
 The following day winter turned to spring. The outdoor track had dried, and Clipper soared around it, eager and happy to run again. The Weatherbees had purchased him for next to nothing several years ago, just another flat track thoroughbred who never fulfilled his promise and would no longer be worth the cost of keeping in a racing stable. Horses like Clipper were regularly fobbed off as pleasure horses, hunters, and steeplechasers. Clipper had substance now that he had matured, the fragile bones in the leg of a three-year old had developed and hardened and Clipper looked tough, well muscled, and fast. He had a soft eye, a reassuring quality when you intend to put your well-being on a racing horse’s back, and, for a horse, he had brains. You could not help but like the big bay with one white sock on his off hind foot.  
 The weather was just so fine that Julia and I decided to walk the race course at the Stevensons. But first, Bea wanted a trial fit of the crimson jersey she had sewn for me. Bea could do many things well, from seamstressing to slaughtering and dressing a hog and a lot in between. Those nicotine stained, horny hands of hers could do amazingly delicate work as well as sling hay bales, drive a tractor, or reassure an excited horse.   
 As a child, I had competed in the children’s flat races that precede the ladys’ one lap steeplechase and the big race so I knew parts of the course well but much was unfamiliar. I had phoned ahead, and, when we arrived, Charlie and Dickie were waiting for us. The race course lies in a broad valley below the back of their house. Their big hillside sloping down to the valley floor on race day would be filled with a thousand picnicking spectators. At the foot of the hill a paddock of snow fencing, borrowed from the town highway garage, would be erected. The nervous horses, led by their grooms, would wind their way down a long farm road from the barns to reach it. Inside the paddock they would be walked for a while and then saddled while curious spectators squeezed up to the fence for a close-up view of the horses. Then the call would come for “Riders Up.” The four of us headed across the valley, taking the looping route the horses would follow that avoided the course itself, to the far corner where the race would start. There was a stout, weathered pole set into the ground where the starter would give his commands. In a steeplechase, there are no starting gates. Everyone just circles about waiting for the off.  
 The main race was a bit over three miles, run as two laps. You had to be alert because on the second lap there were three jumps that were not jumped on the first lap and one that was jumped first time around was eliminated on the second lap. If it sounds confusing, it was. Unlike the famous steeplechases in Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania which were run over tall board fences, our jumps were stone walls. The glacier left us boulders, round and, therefore, difficult to stack high. Consequently, the wall jumps tended to be broad but rather low, rarely much higher than two and a half feet. It took an experienced horse to jump these well, since the leap resembled more a track and field broad jump rather than a high jump. Horses used to racing over board fences had significant difficulties when they encountered our broad boulder-built walls.  
 After an hour of walking, everyone was becoming bored except me. I was trying to memorize the course, and I was not dead sure that I had it right in my mind. I knew that race day it would be well marked with tall flags on all the jumps, but I wanted the course clear in my mind before I returned to school next week. Essentially, the course was run over two enormous hay fields and four pastures, two of about five acres and the other two of three acres. There was a small, meandering brook that bisected the course. The brook was hard to see and it could trip up a horse whose rider did not anticipate leaping it. I decided that I would come back by myself and walk it again with a notebook in hand. The following day I returned alone and made notes and diagrams.  
 Julia seemed to cheer up those last days of my vacation. The anticipation of Clipper’s upcoming race gave her something to look forward to. Once she had enjoyed being the center of attention, but now, with her damaged face, she only wanted to be inconspicuous. I was sure she realized that she was pitied by those who had seen her, and that her future, once so bright with the choice among countless suitors, probably now doomed her to a life as an old maid. Further, life at home must have been excruciating as her frail mother slowly deteriorated. I remembered what Julia had said when I asked about Penny: that her father liked her-- a lot. That could mean several things, and I thought, with Julia’s sour outlook on life, that what it meant to her was an interpretation that was less than honorable.  
 The last day of vacation, Bea, Julia, and I sat down for a strategy session. I would be home again in five weeks. Julia would help out around the stable and act as groom race day. Bea and Julia both would exercise Clipper on the track and intersperse track work with long, slow hill work to build muscle. A week before the race they would take him around the course at a walk and trot. Horses have a good memory for terrain, and we thought that showing Clipper the course again could help. The afternoon of the Friday before the race, the day that I returned from school, I would trot and canter him around the course. I decided to give the hunt ball a pass as I wanted to get a good night’s rest. Saturday, Julia, the Weatherbees, and I would meet after breakfast, load the trailer with all the gear, and leave as soon as possible so as not to get mixed up in race day traffic. We decided the less time Clipper spent in the trailer the better for his state of mind. Horses know when they are going to race, and we wanted to keep him as calm as possible and not waste any energy fretting. And last but not least, I pulled over my head my racing silk, the crimson jersey that Bea had made. It fit. We were ready to go racing.  
 I had seen little of my sister since the public school vacations and the private school vacations did not coincide. But every day when the big yellow school bus deposited her, she would want to know what I had done that day with Clipper and Bea. In her estimation, my riding the race transformed me from an annoying elder sister into an object of esteem. It took me by surprise, and our usual adversarial relationship temporarily disappeared. Since she was a blabbermouth by nature, the news of my riding in the race soon spread throughout the town. No longer was I just another sixteen year-old going on seventeen, I was a jockey.

Back at school, time moved slowly with five weeks until race day. My mind was not on my studies, and what had formerly been enjoyable, like my art class, seemed stale. I was painting a still life of fruit and vases that term, but I could not get excited about it and the result was lack-luster and I did not care. But soon I began to look at the calendar differently. No longer was it April 20th, it was twenty-three days to the race. When I looked at time in that way, it suddenly seemed to move a great deal faster. I was not exactly nervous, since I knew I could ride a horse fast cross country, but all the years of hunting really did not prepare me for this kind of riding. Racing meant strategy and pacing and anticipation and going all out over the jumps. No orderly single file jumps, as the hunt protocol required, but a devil take the hindmost rush at the walls. And the other jockeys would not give a damn whether I was a girl; I would just be another obstacle in their way to the finish line. Although I would not let myself worry about falling—I had taken tumbles hunting—a fall at racing speed was dangerous and there was always the danger of being trampled by horses coming up from behind.  
 All of this set my skin to tingling with nervous anticipation. And then ten days out, mother sent me articles she had clipped from the Hartford newspapers. Usually the papers paid little attention to the racing, sending a reporter and a photographer on race day but providing no pre-race attention. This year was different. Both the *Courant*, the morning paper with Democrat tendencies, and the *Times*, the afternoon paper with Republican leanings, had feature articles about the race. To my chagrin, I was the reason for their attention. Father, of course, was a well-known public figure in Hartford which made for even better copy. If I was on edge before, now I was jumpy.  
 I decided that I must find some way to burn off the nervous energy. I tried the gymnasium, but I could not find anything there that interested me. But a good long walk around the campus at a stiff pace seemed to work and walking kept my legs in shape. I had explained to the dean of students that I was racing Saturday the 12th, and good luck was on my side and she turned out to be a horsewoman herself. I showed her the articles from the papers, and her eyes lit up. By rights, I was allowed to leave campus after my last class Friday morning, but when I explained my need to take Clipper around the course that afternoon she told me that as far as she was concerned I could leave after breakfast and wished me good racing luck.

Bea Weatherbee had arranged with my parents that Bill would drive to the school and bring me home so that we could talk strategy in the car. The appointed hour came and went, and I began to wonder if something had gone wrong as the sun climbed higher in the sky. I began to really fret when an hour slid by with no Bill Weatherbee to be seen. And then, at last, H26 came gliding into view. Despite his Harvard degree, he had gotten lost which, frankly, was a pretty hard thing to do given that there were only two turns once one entered the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.  
 We talked about the two races he had ridden on Clipper. His assessment was that he had asked too much too early both times. He also admitted that in the first race he was grossly over the weight limit and in the second he had starved himself for two weeks beforehand and had no energy. Of course, no matter how astute the strategy, once the race starts all a jock can do is respond. The race runs itself for the seven or so minutes it lasts. He did mention one salient point, however. The finishing straight veered off the course and ran close to the bottom of the spectator’s hillside. Be prepared for the roar of the crowd and keep Clipper’s head straight he cautioned. And there was one other thing that was generally overlooked. The finishing run appeared flat upon entering but in reality it rose slightly, almost imperceptibly unless you were looking hard, and then it sloped gradually downhill two hundred yards to the line. Bill Weatherbee was adamant that I should not go to the whip until Clipper crested the rise. Then I should tap his flank to take off. If I were to slap him hard, Bill said, that would startle him and upset him. A tap, he said, was all he needed to turn on the after burners.   
 We drove straight to the Stevenson’s where Clipper and Bea and Julia were waiting. Everywhere you looked preparations for tomorrow were underway. A crew of caterers was at work in the house preparing for the big party the Stevensons hosted prior to the race. Another crew from the town garage was erecting the snow fence paddock. Parking signs on posts were being set in the field in which four hundred or so cars would park. We tacked up Clipper, who had been happily grazing on lush new grass beside the barn, and I changed into riding clothes that mother had dropped off at Bea’s place that morning on her way to Hartford. As one of the organizers of the hunt ball, she would spend the day in town and change into her gown at the club. Father, of course, was already at his office so he would dress there and then walk over to the club, resplendent in his red tailcoat and white tie. Susie, I was told, was staying overnight with friends and would not be racing in the children’s race tomorrow. She had told mother a whopper and was paying the price for the indiscretion.   
 Clipper and I trotted out onto the course and popped over the jumps, all thirteen. The walls were flanked by outgrowth of scrub and brush, but mowed tight on both sides of the jumps. The jumps on the first lap were flagged with a pair of blue banners atop tall poles, one on each side of the jump, those that were to be jumped again on the second lap had one blue and one red banner, and the jumps that were only jumped on the second lap had two red banners. It sounds more complicated than it really was. And the Stevensons had gone around the course with a tractor and mowed the route so, unless a jockey was not paying attention, there was no real problem. Most jocks walked out on the course in the morning before the race, anyway. When I was sure I had the course committed to memory, we trotted back up to the barn and the Weatherbees and Julia.  
 “Well?” Bea looked up at me, quizzically.  
 “All set.”  
 “Then get down and we’ll go over the runners. I’ve got a list of them here,” she said, showing me a race program.  
 The four of us huddled together while Clipper went back to the succulent grass he had been cropping. Julia knew Will Carpenter’s Fearless since they had ridden together often in hunts. He was steady and a good jumper, she said, but lacked a real burst of speed. Dobbie Green had sent his best horse to Pennsylvania to get him ready for the Radnor Hunt’s steeplechase the following weekend. His second horse was unknown quantity and none of us had any knowledge of the jockey. Like many owners, Jack Breen would be riding his own horse, a horse Bea thought would be a potential winner.  
 “Green with a white stripe, that’s Jack. Stay close to him.” And so it went for half an hour. I was to shadow Jack if possible and also the black with red sleeves of a horse Bill knew from the Millbrook Hunt in the Hudson River valley. We agreed to meet at the Weatherbee stable at ten in the morning.  
 Bea drove me home and told me to get a good night’s sleep. A crew was setting up the barbeque pit behind our house for the pre-race party my parents held for associates from father’s business. All over town tomorrow there would be festivities: pre-race cook outs and post race parties that lasted well after dark. The smoky aroma of grilling meat would hang over the countryside all day. I ate the left-overs that mother had saved for my supper and, after tending to our own horses and feeding Buddy, I went to bed. I was exhausted and I slept the sleep of the just until bird song coming in through the window awakened me at day break.  
 Downstairs, hanging on a peg on the kitchen wall, was my racing gear. There was the crimson jersey on a hanger, a jockey’s helmet with the crimson Weatherbee silk stretched over it, a new pair of lightweight white cotton britches with the purchase tag from the Hartford saddlery still attached, and, on the floor, my hunt boots freshly polished. Next to the boots was a new canvas carryall. I was the only one awake so I whiled away the hour in the kitchen rocking chair looking through the race program.

I was too nervous to eat and too hungry not to. I never before had any problem putting away a big breakfast of bacon and eggs and toast and marmalade. Today, I would soon discover to my dismay, was to be different. The food landed in my stomach alright, so far so good, only later would I begin to feel that I had swallowed a living creature that was fighting hard to escape.  
 All went well. It was a gorgeous morning of apple blossoms and lilacs. We convened at the stable, loaded Clipper, drove without incident to the Stevenson’s barn, and unloaded. The barn was a great dark cavern now that it was emptied of its winter hay. Each bay was roped off for a horse or pony. We were closest to the barn door, the consequence of a little favoritism no doubt. So far so good. The two children’s races were scheduled for one o’clock and one-thirty. The ladies one lap race would start at two o’clock and my race at three. I had lost track of time and when I asked Bill, he looked at his watch and said a little past noon. Already, the atmosphere and noise and smells of a country fair in full swing had descended upon the quiet rural countryside. I think it was the smell component that finally did me in.  
 Charlie had been hanging around us all morning, and now I realized that I needed his help desperately. Everything inside me wanted to escape, sweat was breaking out on my forehead, and I was growing queasy.  
 “Charlie, can I use a bathroom in the house?”  
 “You can use the one in the stable over there, Unie. The line is short.”  
 “No, please. I really need it now,” I pleaded. He must have noticed that I was turning green, and he hustled me up to the house, through the swarm of the party underway outside, and up the stairs to the second floor. I slunk gratefully into a bathroom just in the nick of time. Twenty blissful minutes later, Charlie knocked on the door and asked if I were alright.  
 “Can I lie down?”  
 “Are you going to be okay? You can use my room. It’s almost one o’clock now. When do you want me to wake you?” He looked panicked “Do you want me to get your stuff? You can dress here if you want.”   
 I thanked him, told him where to find my carryall, and asked him to tell the Weatherbees not to worry. I had to weigh in on the old platform scale in the hay barn as soon as the ladies’ race was complete. We then would be given the plates of weight to be inserted into the weight cloth that went under the racing saddle, and we would walk Clipper down to the paddock. I would be ready. My eyes shut and I slept.  
 Half an hour later, Charlie shook my shoulder. I stretched and yawned and wondered for a moment where I was. Then, with a sharp jolt of recognition, I knew. He had brought my carryall, and in a few minutes I had pulled on britches and boots while he waited patiently in the corridor. I left the silks in the bag since I did not want to be more conspicuous than necessary returning through the party to the barn. Now I was ravenously hungry, and I grabbed a buttered roll from a waiter’s tray. Then I noticed Julia’s mother.   
 She was seated in a wicker garden chair with a blanket over her frail shoulders. Jim Ingersoll and Penny were standing behind her. Her face was gaunt and her hands were like bird claws. She smiled at me, and I went over to her. She told me in a thin voice how much Julia had enjoyed helping us get ready for today, and she told me to please be very, very careful. I thanked her and told her how much I had enjoyed Julia’s help this spring. Charlie nudged me to get moving. I said goodbye and began to walk on toward the barn. I had gone a couple of paces past them when something made me look back. Jim Ingersoll and Penny had their backs to me and for the briefest of moments their little fingers intertwined. A shiver ran up my back. I grabbed another roll and jammed it in my mouth.

I will not bore you with a play-by-play account of the race. We walked Clipper down to the paddock without incident. Julia led him around the paddock several laps and then saddled him for me. Bill, in his tattersall shirt, Harvard necktie, tweed jacket and cap, looked the part of the proud owner of a race horse. Bea, still in her chore coat, had crammed an old tweed bucket hat on her head. The two of them were in the enclosure in the paddock with the other owners and hangers-on. Bill stepped out to give me a leg up at “Riders up.” The paddock gate was opened, the horses filed out, and we cantered off to the start almost half a mile away. Mr. Rich and a couple of his whippers-in were dressed in their red coats, and they accompanied us. They were the outriders who would be responsible for catching runaway horses should a rider fall.   
 There were eight horses entered. We milled about the starter. When he was satisfied, he let off his starter’s flag, and we surged forward. Well before the first wall, the horses had sorted themselves to find clear running room. The jumps were broad enough for four horses to jump simultaneously and we soared over the first. At the second jump, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a horse go down. It soon re-joined the race, riderless, with the reins slapping at its forelegs. Several jumps later it must have been snagged by an outrider because we never saw it again. Near the end of the first lap, the horse carrying black and red silks made a run at the front, leaving the rest of us far behind. At that point, with so much distance still to run, it was a concern but not yet a worry. At the beginning of the second lap, it jumped a wrong jump and disqualified itself. Pay attention, I told myself.  
 The horses cleared the final jump, strung out in a line, Clipper sitting third behind Dobbie’s entry, Jack Breen leading. At the head of the finishing straight, Dobbie’s jock went to the whip and surged to the front. The wall of noise coming off the hillside, as a thousand voices began yelling, must have spooked the poor creature, and he veered. I remembered Bill Weatherbee’s caution that the in-run had two parts, and by the time we crested the inconspicuous rise, Dobbie’s gold and pink was coming back fast. Over the crest, I asked Clipper for his run. We pounded down the straight alongside Jack’s green and white silks, but at the line we were fairly beaten by a length.  
 By the time we had turned the horses, the finish line had filled up with people—owners, grooms, friends, hangers-on, race committee members, curious spectators, the press, and so on. Susie broke free of the crowd and came running toward me, the Weatherbees, Julia, and my parents coming on behind with a newspaper photographer in their wake.  
 “Almost,” I said as I dismounted.  
 “When did you go to the whip?” Bill asked, with just a hint of suspicion in his voice.  
 “Just when you said.”  
 “Then you did all you could do. Good job, Unie.”   
 There was a chorus of agreement, and the photographer’s camera emitted a loud click. The Sunday *Courant* article that mother mailed to me at school early in the week carried the sub-head “Girl Jockey Second.” And that was that.

The Winchester Model 12 slide-action shotgun, according to father who occasionally let me shoot his 20 gauge at the Millington Gun Club skeet range, is one of the finest guns ever made in this country despite being moderately priced. When you pull the trigger, you slide the fore end back thereby ejecting the spent shell through a side portal. When you push the fore end forward, a new cartridge is drawn up from the magazine into the firing chamber. This push/pull action is why guns of this type became commonly known as pump shotguns. Unlike a double-barreled gun, that is two barrels configured either side by side or over and under with each barrel containing a single shell, the magazine of a pump shotgun chambered five shells.  
 Father believed that when he shot at a cock pheasant that he flushed over Buddy’s point, two shots were sufficient. If he missed with the first, he could still kill with the second. If he missed with the second, the bird would have already flown out of killing range, about forty yards, and to shoot further could only risk wounding the bird, not bring it down for the pot. And that, he contended, would be an obscenity. However, a truly accomplished pump shotgunner could send all five shells through the gun almost as quickly as father could pull the second trigger of his side by side. I append this information as it bears upon subsequent events.

Two weeks after I had returned to campus and shortly before year-end exams were to begin, I received a letter from mother in which she mentioned that Polly Ingersoll had gone downhill rapidly and that her doctor anticipated that shortly she would lapse into a coma and pass away quietly. Later that week, I received another letter upon which was pasted a label with the Weatherbee’s name and return address. The envelope was bulky, and I assumed it contained the same newspaper clippings about the race that mother had sent me previously. Consequently, I did not open it until the following evening.  
 In it was a note from Bea, which I set aside to read later, and three lengthy newspaper articles. One was from the May 25th morning edition of *The Hartford Courant*, another from the evening edition of *The Hartford* *Times* of the same day, and the third from the Millington *Daily Reporter*. The articles had nothing to do with the race. In summary, this is what the three articles contained.  
 Seventeen year-old Julia Ingersoll had taken from the gun room of her father, James Beach Ingersoll, a twelve gauge Winchester Model 12 shotgun. She loaded it with five pheasant load cartridges. She then proceeded upstairs to her father’s bedroom where she shot and killed both Jim Ingersoll and Penny. At the time of the incident, two-thirty on the afternoon of May 24th, Polly Ingersoll, her invalid mother, was resting quietly in a semi-conscious state in guest bedroom into which she had recently been moved, at the further end of a long corridor that connected both bedrooms. Julia promptly called the state police barracks to report the incident, her mother’s doctor to request an ambulance be sent for her mother, and, finally, Bea Weatherbee whom she requested to come immediately. She then proceeded back to the gun room, loaded one cartridge in the now empty Winchester, sat down in a club chair in the gun room, placed the barrel in her mouth and pulled the trigger.  
 Pen and paper were clearly not Bea’s best medium, but herewith is a distillation of what she wrote:  
 Bea had not liked Julia’s tone of voice and suspected that something was amiss. When she arrived the house door was unlocked, common enough country practice, and she entered, called out to Julia, and, upon hearing no response, began to look cautiously about. Something smelled odd to her, and then she recognized the distinctive odor of spent gun powder hanging in the still indoor air. She ascended the stairs, again calling out to make her presence known. She thought she heard something, and tentatively opened a bedroom door. In the bedroom, she found Polly quietly napping or so she thought. She continued to open doors and investigate until she came to Jim and Polly’s bedroom. The door was open, and under the bed sheets were the corpses of Jim and Penny, torn apart by shotgun blasts.   
 When she recovered her wits, she descended the stairs, fearful and badly shaken, and looked about for Julia whom she eventually located seated in a comfortable leather club chair in the gun room with a shotgun in her lap. The blast had sprayed leather, upholstery and blood against the wall behind the chair and ruined a perfectly nice Frank Benson etching of ducks alighting. She left the house and vomited for several minutes. She then heard distant sirens and sank to the ground and waited.

I am sorry that my story does not conclude with a happy ending and wrongs righted. Sadly, life is not tidy and, often, unjust.  
 \* \* \*

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