

A Chain of Love

A Story

THEY had observed Papa's birthday with a freezer of cream, even if it was the dead of winter, and they had given him a Morris chair that was not brand-new but was what he had always wanted. The next morning he took sick, and nobody could figure the connection between such nice hand-turned cream that Rato almost froze to death making and a heart attack which was what he had according to Dr. Sledge.

Of course, Papa didn't want to go to any hospital. He would die at home if it was his time, he said, but Dr. Sledge and the family saw it different so they carried him in to Raleigh to the hospital in Milo's car, pulled out the back seat that hadn't been taken out since Milo stopped going around with that Abbott girl, and spread a pallet and laid him out back there on pillows with his head resting on the hand-painted one off the settee, the grey felt one from Natural Bridge, Virginia, that he had brought Miss Pauline, his wife, six years before she died, off that two-day excursion he went on with the County Agent to the model peanut farms up around Suffolk.

As much as she wanted to, Mama just couldn't get away to stay with Papa right then. She made him a half a gallon of boiled custard like he asked her to, to take along, and she rode to Raleigh with them, but she had to come on back with Milo in the afternoon. It worried her not to be able to stay with Papa, but they were having a Children's

Day Exercises at the Church that coming Sunday—mainly because the Christmas pageant had fallen through when John Arthur Bobbitt passed around the German measles like a dish of cool figs at the first rehearsal—and since Mama had organised the local chapter of Sunbeams almost single-handed, she couldn't leave them now, right on the verge of public performance. So they took Rosacoke and Rato along to stay with Papa for the first few days until Mama could come up herself. There was no need to take on a full-time nurse for him, Dr. Sledge said, with two strong children in the family dying to sit with him, anyway.

From the first minute Papa had his attack, there wasn't any question of Rosacoke not going with him if he had to go. She sort of liked the idea of going to the hospital. In fact, there was only one thing that made her think twice about it, which was that she would miss one Saturday night with Wesley. Wesley Beavers was her boyfriend, even if her Mama didn't like the idea of Rosacoke going in to town with a boy two years older than her every Saturday night to the show and sitting in his car with him—and Rato up there on the porch in the pitch dark looking all the time—and telling him good-bye. That was the best part of any week—telling Wesley good-bye like she did when he would pull his Pontiac up in the yard under the pecan tree, and all those little spring frogs if they were alive would be singing-out over behind the creek, and then for a minute they would be

quiet like they had all died together or had only stopped to catch their breath.

But Wesley would be there when she got back, and anyway, going to the hospital would give her a chance to lay out of school for a week, and it would give her all that time with Papa. She liked to be with her Papa. Rosacoke's Papa was her Granddaddy. Her own Daddy was dead, run over by a green pick-up truck one Saturday evening late, a long time ago, almost before she could remember.

But Rato could remember. Rato had seen a lot of things die. He was named for his Daddy, and he was the next-to-oldest boy, nearly nineteen. His real name was Horatio Junior Mustian. Rato didn't mind staying with Papa either. He didn't go to school, hadn't gone in four years, so he didn't have the pleasure of laying out like Rosacoke did. But seeing all the people would be enough for Rato. Not that he liked people so much. You could hardly *get* Rato to speak to anybody, but if you let him alone he would get all the pleasure he needed out of just standing there, taller than anybody else and thinner, and watching them.

DR. SLEDGE had called on ahead, and they didn't have any trouble getting Papa in the hospital. He even had the refusal of a big corner room with a private bath, but it was twelve dollars a day, and there was no use to try the good will of Blue Cross Hospital Insurance. Papa said that himself. So he took a ten-dollar one that was standing empty right across the hall, and they wheeled him in on a table pushed by an old coloured man who introduced himself as Snowball Mason and turned out to be from Warren County too, up around Sixpound Township, and made Papa feel at home right away. They laid him real easy on the bed, with all his clothes on that he had insisted on riding in, and before he could get his breath good, in came a nurse who got around that adjustable bed on her stumpy legs like she was on roller skates, with her dyed black hair screwed up and bouncing around her face,

and called Papa "darling"—you would have thought she had known him all her life—and tried to get him in one of those little night shirts the hospital furnished free of charge without showing *everything* he had to the whole group. Everybody thought she was real cute, except Rosacoke, who had undressed her Papa before and could do it in the dark.

The nurse finally got Papa fixed and stepped back to look at him like she had just made him out of thin air. Before she left she combed his hair and said she would be seeing lots of him in the daytime. Milo said it was a pity they couldn't have somebody that peppy around Papa night and day. But Rosacoke said she could manage fine and wasn't exactly a moper herself. And Papa agreed to that.

As soon as the nurse got out—after coming back once to get a bobby pin she had dropped on the bed—everybody began inspecting Papa's room. There was a good big sink where Rosacoke could rinse out her underwear that she hadn't brought much of and Rato's socks. (Anywhere Rato went, he just took the clothes on his back.) And Mama liked the view out of the window—right over the ambulance entrance where you could see every soul that came in sick. She called Rato's attention to it, and the two of them looked out for a little while, but it was getting on towards four o'clock, and as much as she wanted to stay around to see what Snowball was serving for supper, Mama told Milo they would have to go. Mama couldn't stand to ride at night.

Practically before the rest of the family left, Rosacoke and Rato and Papa were all settled. There was one easy chair in the room that Rosacoke could sleep in, and since Rato couldn't see stretching out on the floor with *his* bones, he shoved in another chair out of the parlour down the hall. That dyed-haired nurse saw him do it. She gave him a look that would have dropped anybody else but Rato dead in his tracks, and she said, "You camping out or something, Big Boy?"

"No'm. Setting with my Papa," was all Rato said.

THE first thing Rosacoke did when Mama and Milo left was to open up her grip and spread out her toilet articles all over the glass-top bureau. That was about all she brought with her, except for two dresses and a copy of *Hit Parade Tunes and Lyrics* so she could get in some good singing with the two-station radio over Papa's bed. And right at the last minute her Mama had stuck in what was left of the saltwater taffy Aunt Oma sent from Virginia Beach that summer. It seemed like such a good idea too. Nurses always hung around a patient who had his own candy like Grant around Richmond, Mama said.

Papa didn't object at all to Rosacoke looking at herself all afternoon in the big bureau mirror and painting her face to try it out. Her Mama would have jerked a knot in her if she could have seen the sight Rosacoke was making of herself, but Papa always said Rosacoke looked like a picture show star, and since the only picture show Papa had ever seen was *Birth of a Nation*—and that was forty years ago in the old Henderson Opera House with a four-piece band in accompaniment—then it must have been Lillian Gish he thought Rosacoke looked like. And she did a little, not as tiny but small all the same—and she already had her full growth almost—with a heart-shaped face and long yellow hair and blue eyes. That was what Rosacoke liked the best about her face, the eyes. They were big, and it was hard to say where the blues left off and the whites began because everything there was more or less blue, and out of the far corner of her left eye there came this little vein, real close under the skin, that always seemed to Rosacoke to be emptying off some of all that blue and carrying it on down to her pale cheek.

But she couldn't stay there staring at herself all the time—she wasn't that good looking, and she knew it already—so after the doctors began to ease up with the visits on the second day, Rosacoke got a little tired. That is, until the Volunteer Worker from the Ladies' Guild came in in a pink smock and asked if maybe they wouldn't want some magazines, or a deck of cards maybe? She

had a push-cart with her full of razor blades and magazines and things, and all Rosacoke had to do was to look at her Papa, and he, so happy with a lady visitor, pointed to his little black purse on the table. The best thing Rosacoke bought was a deck of Bicycle Playing Cards. Her Mama would have had a spasm if she could have seen Rosacoke right there in the bed with her Papa teaching him to play Honeymoon Bridge and Go-Fishing, which she had learned awhile back from town girls on rainy days at little recess. She decided in advance not to even say anything about Slap-Jack. That was her favourite game, and she knew Papa would have just loved it, but she had the sense to realise that he would get all excited waiting for a Jack to turn up and probably have a stroke or something. So they stuck to quiet games which Papa took to real well, and you could have knocked Rosacoke off the bed with a feather when *he* started teaching *her* and Rato to play Set-Back, playing the extra hand himself.

They could count on the cards keeping them busy until that Sunday, but they would have to do something with them then. Mama had told them she would be coming down on Sunday to stay some time with Papa. Milo would bring her up after Children's Day Exercises. Milo was her oldest boy, and he pretty much ran the farm alone with what help Rato could give him. He would probably have to bring Sissie along for the ride, even if Papa didn't like her one bit. Sissie was Milo's new wife. Just trying leaving Sissie *anywhere*.

THE doctors didn't tell Papa what was wrong with him, and Papa didn't tell them but one thing either, which was that he wanted to die at home. He told them they had been mighty nice to him, and he appreciated it, but he couldn't think of anything worse than dying away from home. They said they would take care of that, and they said he was to rest until they told him to stop and that they would send Dr. Sledge a full report on him. And Papa didn't worry. He had left it in their hands, and if a medical

doctor had walked in one morning and said he had come to saw Papa's head off, Papa would have just laid his neck out on the pillow where the doctor could get at it. But the doctors didn't bother Papa for much of his time, and taking them at their word, he spent a good deal of every day sleeping. That was when Rato would roam the halls, never saying "p-turkey" to anybody, just looking around. And when Rosacoke could see that her Papa was asleep good, she would tip over and listen to his chest to make sure his heart was still beating regular before she would walk across the hall to the corner room, the one they had offered Papa. It was still empty, the door stayed open all the time, and she didn't see any reason for not going in. There was this gorgeous view out of the window of that room—a white statue of Jesus standing in front of the hospital holding his head bowed down and his hands spread out by his side. His chest was bare and a cloth was hanging over his right shoulder. Rosacoke couldn't see his face too well, but she remembered it from the day they brought Papa in. It was about the sweetest face she had ever seen. She was sure of that. And she came in that empty room more than once to look at him and to recollect his face like she knew it was.

But that didn't go on too long because on the third day Rato came in from sitting in the hall all morning and said they had just now put some fellow in that empty room. Rosacoke was sorry to hear it. It meant she wouldn't get to go over there in the afternoon anymore, but she didn't say that. She would rather die than tell Rato how much time she spent over there looking out a window.

Papa wanted to know who it was they had put in that twelve-dollar room, and Rato said it was a big man. Papa was a little disappointed too. He almost had it figured there was something wrong with that room lying empty three days like that. Rato said the man's wife and boy were with him.

"I expect it was his boy," Rato said. "Looked like he was anyhow. The man himself didn't look a bit sick. Walked in on his own steam talking and laughing."

Rosacoke wanted to know if they were rich, but Rato couldn't say, said he didn't know. You couldn't ever tell about Rato, though, how much he knew. He wasn't anybody's fool. He just liked the idea of not telling everything he knew. Keeping a few secrets was about all Rato had.

"He's sure getting a nice room," Rosacoke said, and she had to walk over and button up her Papa's night shirt. She made him stay buttoned square up to the neck all the time because she couldn't stand to look at his old chest. Papa said he was hot as a mink and that his chest had been that hairy ever since he shaved it to be Maid of Honour in the womanless wedding Delight Church put on when he was seventeen years old.

RATO had been telling Rosacoke since the first day that she ought to walk down to the big ward at the end of the hall and see this old lady with all the cards. So on the afternoon they moved the man in across the hall, Rosacoke walked down there, and it was the way Rato said. There was a lady, older than God, lying in the first bed by the door, and up above her was a beautiful shower of greetings from her Sunday school class and her many friends, fanned out on the wall with Scotch Tape. Rosacoke thought she was asleep, but before she had been there ten seconds, the old lady shot bolt upright in bed and spoke in a voice that struck you more like scraping your fingernail down a black board than anything else. She asked Rosacoke to sit with her and hear about her getting religion at age seventy-two in front of a meeting of nearly two hundred people, but Rosacoke said "No thank you, ma'am" because she knew that once she sat down she would be there the rest of the day, and anyhow, she didn't like the old lady. It was nice for your friends to send you cards, Rosacoke thought to herself, but that wasn't any reason to make a show out of them like you were the only person in the whole hospital who had *that* many friends and all of them with nothing in the world to do but sit down and write you cards all day long.

She was walking back down the mile-long

hall towards Papa's room when she saw him—not right at first—at first she was too busy looking at all the people lying back with their doors open. She didn't know a one of them, not even their faces the way Rato did. The only one she knew was Snowball standing in one room talking to some old man that looked so small in his little outing pajamas, with his legs hanging off the bed no more than an inch from the floor like thin dry tan gourds swinging in a wind on somebody's back porch somewhere. Snowball saw her and remembered her as being from Warren County, and he bowed to her. She started to stop and talk, but when she happened to look up, there he was—Wesley—sitting way down across from Papa's door, dressed to the ears and looking at the floor the way he always did. Wesley had ridden fifty-six miles to see her! She held herself in from running and speeded up her walking a little, trying to keep from looking like she had seen a ghost which was close to what she had seen considering it was the last thing you would expect Wesley Beavers to do. He hadn't seen her yet, and she could surprise him. She hadn't really missed Wesley so much up to now, but since he was here she knew how sorry she would be to miss a Saturday night with him.

She was almost on him, and he had his hand over his eyes for a minute—it would be Wesley all over to go to sleep waiting for her—so she came right up to him and said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Beavers, is there something I can do for you?" But it wasn't Wesley at all. It was somebody she hadn't ever seen before, somebody who didn't really look very much like Wesley, when you thought about it.

It took whoever it was a little while to realise she was talking to him, and when he looked up he looked sad and nearly as young as Rosacoke. He looked a little blank too, the way everybody does when you have called them by the wrong name, and they don't want you to know it. In a minute he said, "Oh no ma'am, thank you." "No ma'am"—like Rosacoke was some kind of nurse.

It just about killed Rosacoke to have done

that like she was trying to get fresh with him. All that was left to say was, "Excuse me." And she almost didn't get that out before shutting Papa's door behind her. Rosacoke asked Rato, who was standing by the window having some Nabs and a Pepsi for lunch, to please peep out and see who that was sitting in the hall. As if Rato had ever peeped in his whole life. He had done plenty of looking but no peeping. So he just pulled open the door like he was headed for dinner or something and gave the boy a good look. Before he got the door closed good, he said, "Nobody but that man's boy from across the hall. That man they moved in to-day."

Rosacoke said, "Thank you," and later on that afternoon she wondered if, since he looked like Wesley, that boy could say good-bye like Wesley could.

IF they didn't do anything else, those folks across the hall at least gave Papa something to think about. They kept their door shut all the time, except when somebody was going or coming, and even then they were usually too quick for Rato to get a good enough look to report anything. Something was bound to be wrong, though, because of all the nurses and doctors hanging around and the way the boy looked whenever he walked out in the hall for a few minutes. Rato reported that he saw the man's wife once. He said she was real pretty and looked like she was toting the burden of the world on her shoulders. Even Rato could tell that.

So Papa couldn't help asking Snowball the next time he got a chance what was wrong with that man. Snowball said he didn't know, and if he did he wouldn't be allowed to say. That made Papa pretty mad. He knew Snowball spent about two-thirds of his time in that man's room taking bedpans in and out, and it looked like to Papa that Snowball's white coat had made him a little uppity, had made him forget his Sixpound raising. And he told Snowball that at the top of his voice. Rosacoke could have crawled under the bed, but there was no stopping Papa once he got started. You just pretended hadn't a thing happened, and he would quiet down.

She could tell it got Snowball's goat, though, and she was sorry. He walked out of Papa's room, his ice cream coat hanging off him like somebody had unstarched it.

That evening right before time for him to go home, Snowball came back in. He didn't have on his white coat, and that meant he was off duty. He had on his sheepish grin trying to show he had come on a little social call to see how Papa was making out, but Rosacoke knew right off that he had come to apologise to Papa, who was taking a nap, so she shook Papa and told him Snowball wanted to speak to him. Papa raised up and said, "Good evening, Snow."

Rosacoke couldn't help smiling at how Snowball turned into a snake doctor bobbing up and down around Papa. He said he just wondered how Mr. Mustian was coming on this afternoon, and did they have any old newspapers he could take home to start fires with? Papa said he was tolerable well and hadn't looked at a newspaper since the jimson weeds took over the Government. What he meant was the Republicans, and he said, "The bad thing about jimson weeds, Snow, is they reseed themselves."

But you could tell Snowball hadn't come in at five o'clock on his own time to hear that, and it didn't take him long to work his way over to Papa's bed and lean over a lot closer than Papa liked for anybody to get to him and say it the same way he would have told a secret, "Mr. Mustian, they fixing to take out that gentleman's lung."

"What you talking about, Snowball?"

"That Mr. Ledwell yonder in the room across the hall. He got a eating-cancer. That's what I hear his nurse say. But don't you tell nobody. I just thought you might want to know so soon I found out . . ."

"A eating-cancer? That's what it is?"

"They don't seem to be no doubt about it. I done already shaved his chest for surgery. He taking his operation in the morning at eight."

Papa wanted to know, "Is he going to live, Snowball?"

"Can't say, Mr. Mustian. He spit the first blood to-day, and alls I know is they ain't

many lives past that. They ain't many. And if they lives you almost wish they hadn't. That's how bad they gets before it's over."

And Papa remembered that was the way it was with Mr. Jack Rooker, who swelled up to twice his natural size and smelled, a long time before he died. "I can recollect sitting on the porch in the evening and hearing Mr. Jack screaming clean across two tobacco fields, screaming for his oldest boys to just let him rest because there won't nothing nobody could do for him, not nothing. And I'd say to Pauline, 'Pauline, it don't look like Jack Rooker is ever going to die, does it?'"

That was a long time ago when Papa was a lot younger and a lot farther away from dying himself. That was why he could feel so for Jack Rooker back then. It had just seemed like Jack Rooker was going through something that wouldn't anybody else ever have to go through again.

SNOWBALL was nodding his head up and down saying, "I know, yes sir, I know." But Rosacoke could tell that Snowball had made his peace with Papa and was ready to leave so she stopped Papa from going on about Mr. Jack Rooker and told him it was time for Snowball to go home. Papa thanked Snowball for coming in, like he had never been mad at him a minute, and he told Snowball that he would be counting on him keeping them posted on all that happened to that fellow across the hall.

Rosacoke followed Snowball on out, "Snowball, what's that man's name again?"

"Mr. Ledwell."

"Is he really going to die, you think?"

"Yes'm, I believe he is. But, Miss Rosacoke, you don't have to worry yourself none about that. You ain't going to see him."

"I know that. I just wondered, though. I didn't even remember his name."

Snowball said he would be stepping along, and he would see her in the morning. But Rosacoke didn't hear from him until way in the next afternoon. Papa was taking his nap, and she was almost asleep herself when Snowball peeped in and, seeing Papa was

asleep, whispered that the gentleman across the hall was back from his operation.

"How did it come out, Snow?"

"They tell me he doing right well, Miss Rosacoke."

"Has he waked up yet?"

"No'm, he lying in yonder under his oxygen tent running on about all sorts of foolishness like a baby. He be in some pain when he do come to, though."

"Are his people doing all right?"

"They holding up right well. That's his two sisters with his wife and his boy. They setting there looking at him and waiting to see."

She thanked Snowball for letting them know and said she would tell Papa when he woke up. When Snowball left she stepped into the hall herself. The door over there was closed, and for the first time it said "No Visitors." She wanted to wait until somebody opened the man's door. Then she could at least hear him breathing, if he was still breathing. But there wasn't a sound coming through that oak door as thick as your fist, and she wasn't going to be caught snooping around like Rato so she went back in to where Papa was awake playing a game of Solitaire, which that dyed-haired nurse had taught him how to play. That was *all* she had done for him.

SINCE they were away from home, they went to bed around ten o'clock. That is, they cut out the lights and Rosacoke would step in the closet and undress herself with the door half-shut. The first evening she had shut it all the way, and Papa told her there was no use to be so worried about him seeing her as he had seen her strip-strode naked two or three hundred times before she was old enough to walk, and then the talking would slow down, although Papa was liable to talk on for another hour in the dark about things he remembered. But it would all begin to quiet down soon enough, and Rato would be the first one to sleep. After Rosacoke's eyes had opened full to the dark, she could look over and see her brother stretched sideways on his chair with his long hands caught

between his drawn-up knees and his head rolled back on his great thin neck and his mouth fallen open. Most people seemed to be somebody else when they were asleep. But not Rato. Rato went to sleep just like you expected he would, just like himself who had stopped looking for awhile. Then Papa would fall off, sometimes right in the middle of what he was remembering, and Rosacoke could see him too, but he was different—sweeter and with white hair that seemed in the night to be growing into the white pillow that his dark leather head rested on and holding him there for always.

After Papa slept Rosacoke was supposed to, but she couldn't this night. She kept thinking about it, the man and his boy. Papa had forgotten all about Mr. Ledwell. She hadn't told him anything about the operation, and she had asked Snowball not to tell him either. She didn't want Papa to start back thinking and talking about that poor man and asking questions and sending Rato out to see what he could. She had it all to herself now. Snowball had told her Mr. Ledwell's boy was staying with his Daddy through the nights. Mr. Ledwell had made the boy promise him that before he would go to the operating room, and the boy would be over there now, awake maybe, with his Daddy that was dying and she here on her chair trying to sleep, with her Papa and Rato, her Papa turned into something else in the night.

She might have gone on to sleep then if she hadn't thought of Wesley. If she was at home she could go to sleep knowing she would see Wesley at seven-thirty in the morning. He drove the school bus, and he went nearly four miles out of his way, on the state's gas too, to pick her up first so they could talk alone a few minutes before they looked up and saw all those Tharrington children up the road there knocking together in the cold and piling on the bus not saying a word, with purple splotches like thick cobwebs all down their legs that came from standing in front of an open fire, Mama had told her. And in winter afternoons Wesley would put her out last, into the cold white yard that would be nearly dark by five, and

she would walk on towards the light that was coming already from the kitchen windows, steamed on the inside like panes of ice stretched thin on frames.

She remembered, lying there, that Wesley had said they were going in to Warrenton this Saturday to see a travelling exhibit sponsored by the Lion's Club. It was going to be an exact copy of the Florida State Electric Chair with some poor dummy strapped in it. Wesley was interested in anything mechanical, and she would have gone with him (there was no charge for admission the paper had said, only the chance to make a silver donation to the Club's Blind Fund) if that was what he wanted to spend the evening doing. You could count on him striking up friends with the owner of the Chair, whoever it was, and talking until time to head back home. But that would have been all right with Rosacoke. She would have waited and been glad if she had got the chance. But she wouldn't now, and Wesley would probably ask Martha Duke Aycock to go with him—which was what Martha Duke had been waiting for all her life. That was just Wesley. Let her miss school even two days at hog-killing, and he practically forgot her.

IT WAS thinking about all this that kept Rosacoke from going on to sleep. She tried once or twice to empty her head the way she could sometimes at home, by closing her eyes and thinking way out in front of her, but she couldn't even do that to-night. In her bare feet she got up and felt for the closet door. She took her robe down from a hook and put it on. It was a peach-coloured chenille one that she had made herself, and it had been honourable mention entry at the 4-H Fall Dress Revue in the Warren County Armory before a grand turn-out of parents and friends. She took her shoes up in her hand and opened the door. The hall was empty and the only light was the one at the nurses' desk, and that was so white, shining into both ends of the long hall and against the white charts hanging in tiers. The two night nurses were not there, or she could have

talked to them. Rosacoke hadn't ever talked to the night nurses, but they seemed nice enough not to mind if she did want to talk. They were probably out giving sleeping pills now so Rosacoke walked towards the big ward to pass time.

It was dark down there, and all these sounds came out to meet you a long time before you got to the door like some kind of Hell you were hearing from a long way away—a little moan strained out through old dry lips and the grating of each private snore as it tore its way out of the throats of the ones who were already asleep. Rosacoke stopped in the open door. The nurses were not there. About the only thing she could see was an old woman sitting up in her bed, bent all over on herself and scratching at her hair real slow.

Rosacoke knew there ought to be something you could do for these people, something you could say, even in the dark, that would make them know why you were standing there looking—not because you were well yourself and just trying to walk yourself to sleep but because you felt for them, because you hadn't ever been that sick or that old or that alone in all your life and because you wished they hadn't been either.

You couldn't stand there and say to the whole room out loud, "Could I bring you all some ice water or something?" because they probably wouldn't want that anyway, and even if they did, the first ones would be thirsty again and pitching around in their hot sheets before you could make it all around the room. You would be there all night, and it would be like trying to fill up No-Bottom Pond if it was ever to get empty.

From the open door of the ward, Rosacoke could see that one of the nurses was back at her desk, and she walked in that direction stopping to look at the flowers waiting outside the room of an old gentleman who said they breathed up too much of the good air at night. She was some way off when she saw the man's boy. There was no doubt about it being him this time, and she was not surprised to see him now.

The boy walked fast up to the nurse, his

shirt open down the front, the white tails sweeping behind him in the light of the one lamp and his chest deep brown almost like he had been working in the field, but you knew he hadn't. Rosacoke could hear what he was saying. His voice trembled a little.

"My father's nurse says please call Dr. Davis and tell him to come now. It's serious."

The nurse took her time looking at a list of numbers under the glass on her desk, and then she called. She told whoever she talked to that Mr. Ledwell had taken a turn for the worse. Then she got up and walked into Mr. Ledwell's room. She told the boy to wait outside. He sat beside his father's door where Rosacoke had seen him that first awful time. Rosacoke looked on at all of it from the dark end of the hall. She wasn't going to walk by him in her bathrobe, even if it *had* won honourable mention, but she could see him plain because a table was by his chair, and he had turned on a small study lamp which lighted up his face that was so tired. His chin hung on his hand, a dead weight on a delicate scales, and his eyes were closed. If he had opened them and looked down towards the dark, he might have seen Rosacoke—at least her face—but he didn't. And when his eyes did open, they were the deepest and saddest eyes in the world to Rosacoke, that pulled hard at her, even though they didn't see her, and asked her—or maybe it was only the dark they asked—to do something.

But she didn't. She couldn't, after the mistake of that first time. She shuddered in the hard waves that flushed over her whole body and locked her there in the shadow. Once she put out her hand and her foot and took one small step towards the boy, whose head had dropped onto his folded arms, but the bleached light of the nurses' lamp struck her robe, and she dropped back the way one of those rain snails does that is feeling its way, damp and tender, across the long grass until you touch its gentle horns, and it draws itself back, hurt and afraid, into a tight piece that you would never guess could think or move or feel, even.

Rosacoke couldn't have said how long she stood there, getting so tired she knew how it

felt to be dead, before the doctor they had called came in. He didn't have a tie on, and sleep was in his eyes. He saw the boy and touched him and said something, and they both walked into the room. Before they closed the door a sound like a mad child catching at his breath after crying ran out behind them to where Rosacoke was.

She didn't know what was happening, but the boy's Daddy might be dying. She knew that much. She felt almost sure that if the man died they would make some kind of public announcement. But he didn't die and she had waited so long she was almost asleep. The hall that she had to walk through back to Papa's room was as quiet now as a winter night in an attic room when you could look out the window and see a sky, cold and hard as a worn plough point, shining with the moon. All those old people in the ward were asleep, or maybe they had given up trying and waited. It seemed like when you waited at night for something—maybe you didn't know what—the only thing happened was that time made noise in a clock somewhere, way off.

IT WAS the next morning that Rosacoke made up her mind. If that Mr. Ledwell had lived through the night, she was going to call on him and his family. It was the only thing to do, the only Christian thing to do—to go over there and introduce yourself and ask if there was anything you could do to help like setting up at night. The way she felt about it, she might have gone over that very morning if it hadn't been that the room was so quiet. She hadn't seen a soul go or come since she woke up. She didn't know how Mr. Ledwell was getting along after everything that happened the night before. She didn't know if he had lived out the night. All she could do was to wait for Snowball to tell her. She wasn't going to ask Rato to do any more looking for her, after the last time.

Snowball was late coming by that morning, but he did get there finally, and he called her out in the hall to talk. He said Mr. Ledwell had a relapse the night before, and they

thought he was going to pass away, but he pulled through unexpectedly.

"He not going to last long, though, Miss Rosacoke. The day nurse tell me he full of the cancer. It's a matter of days, they say, and he know that hisself. So all of us try to keep his spirits up. He ain't a old man. I old enough to be his Daddy. He resting right easy this morning, but he was bad sick last night. In fact, he was *dead* for a few minutes before the doctor came and brought him around. They does that right often now, you know."

That made Rosacoke think of the day the little Phelps boy fell in Fleming's Mill Pond, and some men from Warrenton pulled his body out, the mouth hanging open in one corner like a finger was pulling it down. They said that boy was dead as a doornail until those men pumped the air back in him. But what Rosacoke wanted to know was, where had Mr. Ledwell and the drowned Phelps boy gone if they had died for awhile? And if you were to ask them, could they tell you where they had been and what it was like there, or had they just been to sleep? She had heard that somebody asked the Phelps boy after he got well enough to go back to school what dying was like, and he said he couldn't tell because it was a secret between him and his Jesus. Rosacoke's Mama said that was about all you would expect out of a Phelps, anyway, and that she wouldn't have asked him if you had paid her cash money. Besides, she said, you couldn't just suppose—right off the bat—that the boy had gone to Heaven, and if he hadn't you could be mighty sure he wasn't going to admit going to the Other Place. Mama was pretty sure, you could tell, that *that* was where he waked up. She never had a kind word for any of the Phelpses since they bootlegged their way to big money some years ago. But not everybody felt the way Mama did. A church of Foot-Washing Baptists up towards South Hill heard about it and invited the boy up to testify but he wouldn't go. From then on Rosacoke had looked at that boy like he was something not quite natural, somebody that had seen Hell with his own eyes and

had lived to tell the tale—or not tell it—and she had followed after him at little recess hiding where he couldn't notice her just so she could look at his face close up and see if his wonderful experience had made him any different. As it turned out it had. He was the quietest thing you could imagine, and his eyes danced all the time like he was remembering, and you couldn't ever know what, not ever.

Before Snowball left Rosacoke asked him what he thought about her going over and seeing Mr. Ledwell and his family.

"It cculdn't do no harm I can think of, Miss Rosacoke, if you don't stay but a few minutes. He can't talk much with his one lung, but he be mighty happy to have a visitor for a little bit. You wait, though, till he get a little of his strength back from last night."

She wasn't planning on paying her visit right that minute, anyway. She had decided not to go over until she could take something with her. She might *be* from Afton, N.C., but she knew better than to go butting into some man's sick room, to a man on his deathbed, without an expression of her sympathy. And it had to be flowers. There was that much she could do for Mr. Ledwell because he didn't have any friends, because he and his family had moved to Raleigh less than six months ago. Snowball had found out the Ledwells were from Baltimore.

Of course, there wasn't a flower for sale anywhere in the hospital, and besides, it wasn't cut flowers Rosacoke had in mind. She got a dime from Papa by telling him it was about time she dropped Mama a card as to how they were getting along. She hunted up one of the Volunteers herself and bought two postal cards with the State Capitol on them. She wrote one of them to her Mama.

Dear Mama,

We like it here alot. I hope you and Baby Sister, Milo and Sissie are all o.k. When you come up here would you bring some of your altheas if they have bloomed yet.

Yours truly,

Rosacoke Mustian

She wrote the other one to Wesley Beavers.

Dear Wesley,

How are you getting along? I am fine but miss you alot. Do you miss me? When you go to see the Florida Electric Chair think of how much I would like to be there. If you see Martha Duke Aycock tell her I said hello. I hope to see you Monday.

Your friend,

Rosacoke

She did hope the altheas had come out. Mama had got this idea out of *Life* magazine that you could force things to bloom in the winter, and she dug up a tremendous althea bush and set it in a tub and put it in the kitchen by the stove and dared it *not* to bloom. If it had bloomed, Mama would be proud to pick a handful of the oily purple flowers that bruised if you touched them and hold them in her big lap all the way to Raleigh on Sunday.

AND Sunday came before she thought it would, and there they all were in time for lunch, almost before Rosacoke had gotten Papa shaved and herself decent.

"We didn't look for you so early, Mama. Things ain't even straightened up yet. Why, I thought you had Children's Day to get behind you before you could leave."

"Well," Mama said, "I'll tell you. I didn't stay for the whole thing. Once I seen the Sunbeams through 'Come and Sing Some Happy, Happy Song,' I felt like I could leave. I did hate to miss Bracey Overby's rendering of Taps that was to conclude the Exercises, but I knew little Bracey would do all right. He'd been practising so much he was right pale, anyhow. *Then*, after leaving out of church like a Red Indian right in the middle of everything so we could get up here early, of course, some Negroes had to drive up to the house just as we was pulling off. They had this very skinny black baby with them, and they wanted your Baby Sister to blow down his throat." The Negroes were always doing that. A child who hadn't ever seen its Daddy could cure sore throat by breathing on

it, they said. It *was* an awful thing, but Baby Sister enjoyed it, and you couldn't very well deny her any powers she might have, especially on Sunday. Nobody had denied Baby Sister (eight years old and getting a little big for the name) *anything* she wanted to do since she had the humiliation to be born six months to the day after her Daddy got run over. Even the hospital nurses didn't deny her—Mama dragged her in past a dozen or more signs that plainly said "No Children Under 12" and Baby Sister in Sweetheart Pink so bright you couldn't have missed her a mile off, and nobody said a word.

Right before anybody had time to wonder where they were, Milo and Sissie walked in from parking the car. Sissie looked like she had been hit, head-on, by a Mack truck. It turned out she had left home with two reasons already for being mad—she had to shell butter beans all the way up because Mama was the only woman in Warren County, you could be sure, who had frozen all her butter beans *in the shell*, and she had to sit on the back seat to do it because Mama and that Baby Sister had spoken to sit on the front, with Milo and the heater. So she sat back there shelling, and when she had finished (it took her a good hour, and they were nearly on the outskirts of Raleigh) she lowered the glass on her side, intending to empty out the hulls, and threw out the beans instead. Mama capped the climax by laughing about it, and Sissie hadn't said a word since. When she walked into Papa's room she said "Good morning," and that was the end of her for the day. It was probably a good thing because nobody could get Papa any madder than Sissie when she started running her mouth.

Mama brought three things with her—her grip to stay a few days, a suit box of lunch, and enough altheas to fit out six bushes, at least. She made it plain right away that Rosacoke would have to go on back with Milo and Sissie in the evening. Rato could stay if he wanted to and, of course, he did. Milo said he thought he would be leaving between eight and nine o'clock. What he was planning to do was to pacify Sissie by taking her

out to eat supper at this Chinese café she liked so much and then going on to see a Sunday moving picture. But he certainly couldn't tell Mama that. It would have killed her.

ROSACOCKE couldn't object to leaving. In some ways she would be glad to get home, and Milo's plans would give her time to pay her visit to Mr. Ledwell, who was sinking fast now. It would give her time to do all she wanted to do, all she thought she could do—pay her respects and give them her flowers that would say better than she could how much she felt for Mr. Ledwell, who was dying in this strange place away from his friends and his home, and for his people, who were waiting.

The day went along fine, except for Sissie, but then you never expected Sissie to act half-way decent. A few things happened and the worst one was they couldn't get Papa's room dark enough because if you could Milo said his necktie would light up and say "Kiss Me In The Dark!" He had got it that week by COD mail, and Mama said he nearly had a fit and fell in it to bring it with him so she told him he could. They all sat around with the blinds pulled like they had lost their minds, but the only thing the tie would do was shine solid green all over. Rosacoke was glad he didn't get it to working, but Papa couldn't get over the idea. He asked Milo to leave the tie over with him for a few days so he could see it good and show it around a little, but Milo was intending to wear it to some crop-dusting movies at the high school that coming Thursday.

Another thing was, after they had eaten the lunch Mama packed, Papa reached over and pulled out the playing cards. Rosacoke had taken pains to hide them way back in the drawer, but Papa pulled them out in full view and set himself up a game of Solitaire and looked over at Mama and grinned. Mama made some short remark about it appeared to her Papa was learning mighty fancy tricks in his old age. Papa asked her couldn't he teach her a few games, and she

drew up in her chair like she had swallowed a ramrod and said she had gone nearly fifty years, seven of them as a deaconess in the Baptist Church, without knowing one playing card from the other, and she guessed she could go on in ignorance the rest of the time. But that wasn't the thing to stop Papa. He just stopped offering to teach her and sat there the rest of the afternoon dealing out hands of Solitaire until he was blue in the face. He played right on through the nap everybody took after lunch. You couldn't have stopped him with dynamite.

About five o'clock Milo started his plans to work by saying he and Sissie were going for a little ride, and he told Rosacoke to be ready to leave for home around nine. Whenever Milo left a place, things always quieted down. Even Baby Sister, who had pestered all afternoon to make up for Sissie going on strike, was worn out so in the quiet room Rosacoke took down her grip and packed in almost everything. She took her only clean dress, which she had washed in the hall bathtub the night before, down to the nurses' utility closet and pressed it. Everybody thought she was getting ready to go home. When she got back to the room she washed her hands and her face and stood in front of the mirror combing her hair and getting up her nerve. She turned her back to Mama and put on a little lipstick and rouge to keep from looking so pale. Then she picked up all those altheas out of the water Mama had set them in and dried off the stems with a clean towel and wrapped white tissue paper around them. Mama told her she was getting dressed too soon, and Rosacoke said, "I guess I am." But before Papa or Mama or Baby Sister had seen her good, she slipped out of the door in her yellow dress holding the flowers. She had tied a white card to them. Snowball had got it for her the day before. It said, "From a Friend Across the Hall."

IT TOOK her three steps, and she was standing in front of the oak door, twice as tall as she would ever be, that said "Ledwell." Behind it was where Mr. Ledwell was and his people, where he had laid down that

first day Rato saw him talking and laughing, where he had gone out from to take his operation, and where it was not his home.

Rosacoke was nervous, but she kept telling herself she looked nice as she could, and she had the altheas in her hands to hide the shaking. She knocked on the door, and she must have knocked too soft because nobody came. She knocked again and listened. There were sounds behind the door, and the Ledwells might not have heard her so she pushed the door open a little, and it was dark in there. She was about to close the door and leave when she saw the yellow moving light of candles coming from a part of the room which she couldn't see into. She stepped all the way inside the room that was as dark as an open field at night with only the sky. Rosacoke couldn't see at first, but soon she could tell that there were five or six people in the room. Mr. Ledwell was a long ridge on the bed that the sheets rose and fell over in little gullies like after a rain, and his boy was standing by his head holding one of the candles. In the light of it the boy looked like Wesley Beavers couldn't look in a hundred years. The same light that fell on him fell down through a clear tent that covered his Daddy's head and chest. A little of it fell on three ladies off in a corner kneeling down right on the hard floor and on a man standing near the bed by a table with two candles on it. He was all in black, and falling down from his neck was a narrow band of purple cloth with fine gold crosses at the ends. He was talking in words that Rosacoke couldn't know, almost singing, in a low voice that was far away now because he was an old man with white hair. Finally he looked up at Mr. Ledwell's boy, and the two of them pulled the tent back off the poor man. Rosacoke knew he was alive because she could hear the air sucking into his throat, and his eyes were open on that boy and on the yellow candle.

Three times the old man in black moved his hands carefully in the air, wide and long, over Mr. Ledwell. Then he took a piece of cotton in his hand and waited for Mr. Ledwell to close his eyes. He wiped the cotton

over the lids, and they were shining for a second, wet and slick, under the light before Mr. Ledwell opened them again and turned them back to his boy. The boy rolled his Daddy's head to one side and then to the other while the old man touched the cotton to the ears that looked so cold, and all the time Mr. Ledwell was trying not to take his eyes off his boy like that sad face in the soft light that came and went was all that kept him from dying. And except for that same soft light, the walls of the room would have disappeared and the ceiling, and Rosacoke could have walked out through where the walls had been. It seemed to be time for her to leave, anyway. She didn't know how long this would go on, and she didn't know what it was. She only knew they were getting Mr. Ledwell ready to die in their own way. She had taken the first step to leave when the boy's face turned up and saw her through all that dark. His face changed for a minute, and you might have thought he smiled if you hadn't known that couldn't have happened now, not on that face. That was why she didn't leave. He had looked at her like he knew why she was there, almost like he would have needed her if there had been time for need. But the old man touched Mr. Ledwell's lips, and Mr. Ledwell strained his head up off the pillow and sucked at the cotton before the old man could pull it back. He must have thought they were giving him something to drink. And it went on that way over his hands that had to be pulled out from under the cover and his feet that seemed to be tallow you could gouge a line in with your fingernail. When they finished with his head they put the tent back over him, and Rosacoke couldn't hear his breathing quite so loud. From his feet the old man walked to his head. He put a black wood cross that had Jesus, white and small, nailed on it, in Mr. Ledwell's hand. Then he shook a fine mist of water over him and made the sign again, and Rosacoke heard words she could understand. The old man told Mr. Ledwell to say "Thy will be done." Mr. Ledwell nodded his head and his eyes opened. He took his hand and tapped on the inside of the clear tent.

When his boy looked at him, Mr. Ledwell's voice came up in pieces—but you could hear him so plain—"Don't forget to give Claude Adams one of those puppies." The boy said he wouldn't forget. Mr. Ledwell looked easier and when the old man reached under the tent to take the cross and Jesus away from him, he nodded his head, over and over, as he turned the cross loose.

The old man went over to talk to the lady who must have been Mr. Ledwell's wife. She was still on her knees, and she never took her face out of her hands. That was when Rosacoke left. They might turn on the light, and there she would be looking on at this dying which was the most private thing in the world. She stayed that long because the boy had looked at her. He might have forgotten now. He had never looked at her again.

A chair was by the door. She laid her flowers down there. In the light somebody might see them and like them and be glad that whoever it was stepped over to bring them, stepped over without saying a single word.

SHE waited in the hall for the sound of his dying because he was so ready, but it didn't come, and she walked back into Papa's room. Baby Sister was asleep at last in Mama's lap, and Papa's cards were still spread out on the bed, but Papa was only turning them over now, not really playing. The one light on was the one over Papa's bed, and the room was a little dark. The first thing when Rosacoke came in was that her Mama wanted to know where in the world she had been with the flowers, and Rosacoke said she had been to see a friend. Papa asked her who, and she told him, but Papa didn't remember Mr. Ledwell. He hadn't thought about Mr. Ledwell since before his operation, but just to say something he asked how the man was coming along, and all Rosacoke said was, "He ain't doing so good, Papa." And to her Mama, who had never had a secret in her life, who had never wanted a secret, she said, "Mama, please don't ask me who that is because I don't know."

It was when Rosacoke was packing the things she had left out until last that Rato walked in. Nobody had seen Rato since noon. Sunday was his big day. He walked in and said it just like he might walk in the kitchen and drop a load of wood in the box. "That man over yonder is dead. Ain't been five minutes."

Mama said she was always sorry to hear of any death, and Rato said if they would leave the door cracked open they could see the man because a nurse had already called the undertaker to come after his body. But Rosacoke said "No" and she said it so Rato wouldn't dare to open the door one inch.

Papa played with the cards on his knees but he was thinking. He was so old himself that you couldn't expect him to be too sad. Lately he always said he knew so many more dead men than he did live ones that there wasn't a soul left who could call him by his first name. And that was the truth. That was the thing that took the edge off death for Papa—grieving over so many people, so many of your friends, burying so much of your love with each one of them until you had buried all of them—everybody you had nearly—and pretty nearly all your love, and death didn't hold fear for you anymore. It wasn't like you didn't know where you were going or what it would be like when you got there. You just trusted, and you hoped for one thing, you tried to see to one last thing—for a minute he stopped his card playing, and he asked Mama could he die at home, and Mama told him he could.

That was what made Rosacoke think so long about Mr. Ledwell, who had died in that dark room. She wouldn't be able to go to his funeral, wouldn't even be asked to go. But that wasn't so bad. She had done what she could, being away from home, hadn't she, and he had died—not cut up or shot or run over—but almost in his sleep with his wife and his boy there, and with all that beautiful dying song, you knew he had died sanctified. If he had to die that was as good a way as any, leaving his living picture back here in that boy.

But then she hadn't seen him alive really.

She hadn't ever told him—out loud—or any of his kind that she felt for them. She hadn't ever said it so loud she could hear her own voice—that Rosacoke Mustian was sorry to see it happen. That was why she said something at last. She had been quiet for so long, and now her slow lean voice cut through all the dark in the room.

"It don't seem right," Rosacoke said, "It

just don't seem right. It seem like I had got to know him real well."

And her words hung in the room for a long time, longer than it took Papa to pick the cards up off the bed and lay them without a sound in the drawer, longer even than it would have taken Rosacoke to say good-bye to Wesley if it had been Saturday night and she had been at home.

Peter Levi, S.J.

For Robert Frost

And age can be a time
to make a hedge or a rhyme,
cock an eye at the morning,
for blood and heat to resign
their passionate storming.

Then let a fall of snow
mute time's overflow,
let blood's courage and heat
be chill and run slow
with an austere beat.

No passions can save
an old head from the grave:
each blood-controlling moon
that drags wave after wave
dims and hurries down.

Old age can be a time
for a garden, a rhyme,
some solitude of mind,
for the flute and the bell chime
and music of every kind.

A vain ironic mood
keeps it cleanest and good,
since only irony
can keep the truth in the blood
from a mere motion and liquidity.