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Stained Glass

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Stained Glass

a short story

by

James C. Schaap

*All my life they have been coming, these feet. All my life
I have waited. Death will come only when I am worthy,
And if I am worthy, there is no danger.
I have therefore only to make perfect my will.*

T.S. Eliot

When Lionel Bergman, the emcee, walked to the front of the Fellowship Hall to announce the skit, Alice Koopman purposely watched his rather well-rounded buttocks jolt with each step. She hated to admit that she really felt no interest in their movement, but she ogled them anyway, angrily, her face drawn into what she considered an expressionless pose. And when he turned to face the group, he continued the obscenities he had begun earlier, before the hymn sing.

"Maybe you heard this one, but anybody know why Adam was created first?"

The crowd rumbled, anticipating answers, but no one offered any attempt.

Alice watched Bergman lean one elbow over the podium, and speak directly into the microphone. "So Adam would get a chance to say something!"

Pastor Alice Koopman looked around and smiled, a pathetic twitch on the ends of her lips, like the obligatory assent of a career diplomat. All around her, the ladies howled derisively, their husbands nodding approval. Bergman's pencil-thin mustache curled above the smile drawn across his face. His success in his business, one of the largest antique stores in the city, bestowed upon him a reverence which often brought this kind of leadership position. He owned a junk shop, in fact, strategically located in a recently renovated business district of one of Des Moines' less desirable areas, just one of a group of unique business enterprises—flower shops, delis, art galleries—designed to attract what Alice considered to be white, suburban shoppers who couldn't buy enough of life's necessities to total their spending power. The man stood back, waiting for the laughter to subside, his fingertips stabbed in his back pockets, drawing the edges of his coat back and away from his vested chest. Alice tried to strip him of the tie and shirt, tried to make him naked there in front, tried to make him feel some of the humiliation she felt. She worked at it deliberately.

"Oh, yes, there's a whole lot of them 'Adam and Eve' jokes—you know that the splitting of the first 'Adam' resulted in a force that no one yet has been able to control?"

The Martha Society, the oldest women's group in the church, roared again; their husbands, honored guests at the annual banquet, slapped their knees or clapped their hands. Alice Koopman, Minister of Youth and Music at Grace Community

Church, watched them, each couple lined up behind white papered tables, sitting together in little duos like a room full of Grant Woods.

"Anybody know when the first radio was invented?"

The entire circle stretched into silent anticipation.

Bergman pranced around the podium like a show stallion, teasing the crowd's readiness. And they sat there like fools, mouths opened, leaning forward on their stiff wooden chairs.

"Just after Adam, the Lord created the first 'loud-speaker.'"

Alice Koopman's first year at Grace Community had been easy, but ominously so. She was well aware of the situation which created her appointment here; the congregation, composed mainly of transplanted rural families, was in the middle of an obvious but unfeared identity crisis. While they were adamant in their desire to be the vanguard of significant change within the churches of the area, they were still solidly planted in the land which surrounded Des Moines, their roots often visible when red-faced, grandfather farmers would visit the children in "the city." The congregation knew that a woman preacher would be considered *liberal* in the rural areas, and her acceptance a change which would undoubtedly tickle the ire of the traditionalists in the back forty, a reaction more than furtively sought by the suburban congregation.

The church itself was a symbol of their miscalculated sense of identity. Thirty years ago, when the church had been built, the surrounding community had been pleasant, middle-class, and perfectly white. A few church families lived even within walking distance. Today, Grace Community was in a transition neighborhood. Black children walked the sidewalks around the sanctuary, black teenagers played ball in Meredith Park, directly across the street from the church, and more than three years ago a black family had moved into the church parsonage. Every Sunday, special patrols would monitor the parking lot during services, ever since a few of the big shots found snapped aerials on their Lincolns one Sunday morning after church—at least according to Pastor MacLeod, who had been at Grace for what seemed years. There had been more than a few break-ins in recent years.

The congregation stayed lily-white, of course, and while they annually provided a Summer Vacation Bible School for all the "darling little black children" of the neighborhood, the people had long since moved north and west to the new suburbs. But—oh, yes—for one or two hours per week, the congregation was proud of its refusal to leave the ghetto. It was a strange, confused church, she had told herself often, even if they were unaware of their own curious identity.

And on nights like this, Alice Koopman felt terribly oppressed, for whenever the roots of this congregation were exposed, she felt herself out of touch, and far out of place, if not out of time. She despised thinking that what she represented—one of the few female graduates from the seminary, Magna Cum Laude as an undergraduate, a committed female minister of the Word—might even faintly be considered as the flower of the mentality of these folks. And what was even more depressing was the simple fact that her life had created so little impact upon them that they could, even in her very presence, laugh—not just laugh, roar—like pitiable buffoons at the kind of sexist rubbish which was here not only tolerated but actually enjoyed. Her witness seemed to count for nothing.

Four women, their mid-calf dresses puffed out with pillows through their chest and belly, took their seats at the front of the room. Behind them, down the corridor of the wing and out into the old sanctuary, Alice could see the vibrant majesty of the

stained glass. The crowd laughed at the entrance of the four women. Each of them had found hideous old dresses and hats to match. They sat quietly in a semi-circle, knitting or crocheting—Alice had never understood the difference—when the skit began. She knew immediately that the stream of offensive material, begun by the Adam and Eve jokes, would continue, now, ironically, led by the women themselves.

She watched them talk about raising money, their long needles up to their noses. She heard them decide on a rummage sale, the laughter behind her underlining her own apparently unshared sense of shame at the explicit caricature. When they unveiled the table full of trinkets, plastic flowers, tasteless calendars—“No matter where I meet my guests, they seem to like my kitchen best”—and when she saw them milling over the junk, she knew the outcome of the skit’s plot. So she fully expected them to get catty—and how is it that the characteristics of a cat are always associated with women?—when they each spotted gifts which had been given to them by others in the sewing circle. Behind her, the constant plague of laughter, like a blight upon her consciousness, grew unabated. Yet, throughout it all she thought herself smiling, persevering, wearing her own saintly habit, but feeling none of that spiritual consolation supposedly concomitant with martyrdom. It was all too apparent to her that no one, absolutely no one in Grace Community, ever thought of her at this moment as being martyred, as suffering, as painfully recording every slur, every derogatory inference. Her sickness seemed to grow as she saw herself as others might have, smiling at this hideous bigotry.

When Lionel Bergman stepped back to the podium, she felt her stomach rise like overeager dough, pushing up in a constant assault and threatening to make her physically sick. He stood behind the microphone like some Las Vegas showman. “Why thank you, ladies,” he said. “Every year I’m just amazed at the talent we got right here in Grace Community.”

She glanced back at the program, fully aware of what she would see. Her own number was next. The thought occurred to her that she might claim sudden illness—that was just like a woman—and leave. If they wouldn’t believe her, she just might retch all over the table full of junk still standing at the front like some kind of altar.

“You know one night Eve seemed particularly depressed—you know how the women get sometimes—and well, anyway, she turns to Adam and she says to him, ‘Adam, will you swear to me that you love me?’ Adam turns back to her and says, ‘Who else?’”

Alice Koopman smiled again. On second thought, perhaps she’d retch all over Bergman’s ivory three-piece suit.

When the response subsided, he continued. “We’re really happy to have our own Pastor Alice tonight—still is hard for me to say that—but we’re happy to have her because we know she sings like a bird.” Then his eyes bore down on her, as if he expected her to fawn and blush like some Old Testament concubine. He walked off toward the other side of the room. Alice wished that she would have felt a strong desire to beat on him.

Pastor Alice Koopman had realized before that her position at Grace Community was less of a statement about women’s rights than a political compromise; after all, she was occupying a new position—Minister of Youth and Music. Singin’ and Sunday School teachin’ and leadin’ women’s society was quite acceptable for any woman. Her preaching credential would rot away, just like her highly ac-

When Lionel Bergman stepped back to the podium,
she felt her stomach
rise like overeager dough . . .

claimed paper on hermeneutics, down in the converted consistory room of the old church, the corner they had given her for a study.

She made it to the podium, dressed in the most gracious smile she could create. Bergman's cologne—probably some kind of musk—lingered in the air, and she fought with a desire to blow it out of the way like the smoke from a fat black cigar. Her pianist walked over to the mahogany upright to the left, seated herself, and watched for her cue.

Alice could barely remember her introduction—something about children. "I just want to take this opportunity to thank the women of the Martha Society for their work with the community children during the Christmas season. In my mind, your benevolence remains one of the most clear examples of Christ's mission on earth that I've seen in my first year at Grace. I will sing two texts from Handel's *Messiah*, 'He Shall Feed His Flock,' and 'Come Unto Him.'"

She nodded, and the pianist began. All around her she saw the familiar faces of the stalwarts. These were the people whose presence was missed if they failed to show for Sunday worship. These were the people who brought macaroni and cheese in hot Pyrex to every pot-luck on the church calendar. These men were the ones who came to the church in spring and fall for the clean-up Saturdays. These ladies topped the prayer chains. But tonight, Lionel Bergman's jokes still floating somewhere out through the museum of stained glass, the Martha Society and their honored guests looked like a roomful of midwestern distortions from the canvas of Thomas Hart Benton.

She looked away from their faces and down toward the music, still waiting for her entry. She saw the breath marks, pencilled in, from her undergraduate years. This had been her solo. She had sung it from the proscenium of the huge college chapel, and the audience had been spotted with college notables—professors of music, accomplished artists, poets, intellectuals, people who loved and understood music and art and religion. The mere remembrance transported her from Grace Community and into a world she could never forget. Her voice responded to the memory, carrying the text from Isaiah up and down, cleanly, clearly, a technically flawless performance, better, perhaps, than four years ago, better by far than what she could have guessed she could do here in the wing. Then the soprano air, the emphasis on *rest*—"And ye shall find rest unto your soul." When it concluded, she herself was thrilled. The applause broke her trance. There was no college chapel. The sound was heavy and thick, muffled off the slate walls. It was the sound of fat, meaty hands responding to something from Nashville, but lacking the enthusiasm. Her audience came back into view, and her sickness returned. There was an occasional smile. Pastor Macleod was nodding appreciatively, but his wife's eyes reflected her motherly regard and her quite sincere condescension. The Martha Society accepted her contribution; it was Bergman's jokes they would remember.

When it was over, she accepted some thanks, then walked down through the open doors of the wing and into the old sanctuary. It was quiet now, the rumblings of muffled voices still growled softly from out of the hall, but in the darkened

stillness, the orange and golds and deep blues of the windows burned a kind of settled relief right over the long rows of pews that stood like infantry lines facing the pulpit at full attention. She stopped momentarily at the far corner, away from the wing, and reminded herself that it was ironic how one could feel so "spiritual" when people weren't around. Doors closed, their metallic clicks echoing like the sound of a giant grandfather clock. Now it was silent. She sat down at the corner of the last bench from the front. It was almost scary now, because she was so obviously alone.

Perhaps she spent too much time by herself. Perhaps Macleod was right when he told her that, no, it wouldn't be such a terrible thing to more actively seek companionship. She crossed her legs and adjusted her skirt. It was the implication she despised, and Macleod knew it—the idea that somehow a woman needs a man to be fulfilled, lest she become a "spinster." She laughed, hesitating to go any further with the argument, already fully aware of a complex and painful indecision which she, only when alone, dared to confront. Why was she here? Was it, in fact, as many certainly felt, only to push the whole business of women's rights, to be a kind of martyr to a righteous cause for which she held the strongest commitment? The quiet sanctuary provided no answer. The windows gleamed with the vitality of a vision, a crested, colorful dream of clear, spiritual insight.

Hadn't she seen again tonight how obviously out of touch she was with her own flock? Hadn't the truth been painfully witnessed again? Her impotence in changing these people grew more oppressive weekly. For more than a year she had practiced her priestly function—leading the hymn-sings, accompanying the youth to their campouts, visiting sick—so when is it time for the Jeremiad? She was altogether too sure of the fact that she was simply regarded as "educated"—maybe even something of an "old maid." Martyrdom is a noble calling, not an office relegated to those considered simply "eccentric."

The bench creaked beneath her as she rose, disturbing the almost sullen stillness of God's house. She walked out of the sanctuary and stopped at the entrance, noticing the single lamb in the oval window above the oak doors. It stood alone in a background of colors not unlike the pulsating vibrance of blacklight. The streetlight in front of the church charged through the background field, highlighting the lone, white figure lying awkwardly, legs tucked beneath it, on the blue grass.

Alice walked down the steps to the basement, and without using the lights found her corner office. She left the door slightly open behind her, sat down at her desk, and gazed at the books on the shelves. Here in Grace Community, she thought of her library as a museum whose pieces were to be dusted on a bi-monthly basis. She fell asleep at her desk while paging through *The Confessions of St. Augustine*.

A steady metal clicking weaved itself into her sleep, then slowly drew her back into consciousness. She raised her head from her arms, cognizant of both having slept and having been awakened, her sense sharpened suddenly. The sound came from upstairs. She glanced down at her watch; it was nearly two o'clock. Hushed voices snuck down the darkened hallway and entered the study through her open doorway. Someone was in the church. She drew her chair backward slowly, quietly, and raised herself from the desk, using her hands to push herself up. The laughter

seemed muffled. Her first impulse was to use the phone that stood on the wall just outside her office. She moved slowly around her desk and snapped off the light. Noises continued. She heard the sound of a hammer. Her purse was on the chair by the door. In the darkness she searched for her coins, then withdrew what felt to be a quarter. She opened the door just wide enough to allow her to leave, then stepped quietly over the tile floor, the rubber soles of her shoes making her movement nearly inaudible. When she reached the phone, she stood back and waited, the purposely hushed voices coming more clearly. The voices were almost distinguishable now. There were two boys—black boys. She listened closely, standing perfectly still before realizing the extent of her own trembling. Her hands shook; she held them before her as if to authenticate her fear. It struck her that she might be dreaming, but the illusion wouldn't break when she tried to awaken herself. It was happening. So what were two black kids doing in Grace Community? They'd been here before, breaking in for money they never could find, maybe messing the place up a bit in retaliation. She thought again about the phone—police would be here in no time. She could simply steal back to her office, shut the door, and she'd never have to confront her intruders. The quarter felt slippery in her fingers. She raised it to the slot. No: her quickened breath warned her, but an unassailable resolve withdrew the quarter and dropped it back into a pocket in her skirt. She would do it herself. She would climb the steps and check it out. Anything else would be too easy.

But what were they doing? It was obvious that they were already in the building—they weren't trying to pick any lock. Her knees felt weak, and her cheeks burned. She drew her hair back behind her ears. The sound of the voices came ever clearer down the stairs. She was sure now that the kids were black boys, not more than twelve, thirteen years old. The sound of the tools was unmistakable. Fighting a battle within, but deciding to push her fate, she moved up the stairs slowly, the thick purple rug muffling the shriek of old wooden stairs beneath each step. The boys kept talking, their conversation covering whatever sound she made. The stairs wound around two corners, and as she turned for the final time, the voices seemed to come from a distance of no more than twenty feet.

"Can' get that sucker?"

"Gimme that big crowbar."

"You can' get it. I'm tellin' you, we gonna have to beat the thing out."

Slowly, she edged around the corner. Then she saw them. Her pulse seemed to explode through her hands, her neck. Couldn't be more than fourteen—the long, dangling arms of adolescents. But they stood near to her height. She knew that she felt dizzy, but she wouldn't acknowledge it. Each of them wore a stocking cap that covered half their heads.

"Soon as we beat on this thing, we gonna be asking for the police."

"Get that old screw, then."

One of them stood on a stepladder, the other watching from below. And then it all made sense. She had heard about gangs who roamed the Chicago streets, stealing stained glass windows, but she couldn't remember ever having heard about any such operations in Des Moines. She tried to gather her fear and grab at some mode of action.

"Got it!"

"All right! Now get that last sucker!"

It was clear now, even though her fear seemed to show no sign of relenting. These kids were the peons; some "fence," probably white, was paying them to do his

dirty work. It all came to her so fast that she had to remember her place in the whole business. Her body glued to the corner of the stairway, she felt almost calm. The boys were just boys, so young their voices still were sweet enough to sing high soprano. Their conversation was laced with what Alice considered the ugliest of obscenities. They used it as an adjective, as a pronoun, as a metaphor. She wondered about the metallic flash of a blade. Newspapers had often reported that even junior high kids right here in Des Moines took handguns to school. Her own fright loomed before her like a vision.

One edge of the oval window was loosened from the wall; she could see it move in the darkness, its exposed frame highlighted by the light of the street outside. Of course, she could die trying to speak to them, trying to be human. These kids could kill her right here on the entrance steps of the sanctuary. The lamb seemed somehow unaffected above her. "Little lamb, who made thee?" The line spilled out of her memory like wine from an overflowing glass. The lamb seemed so innocent, so powerless here, so tragically at ease. She wanted to collect the frustrations of a lifetime and scream at the lamb to come down from its blessed innocence, to take up the battle, to fight like the Man who had purged the temples of buyers and sellers.

Robert J. De Smith

Campsite, 2 AM

Around the campfire

We sit and tell jokes

For fun, and

Fall out of our lawnchairs, laughing,

But stay on the ground

Because pine needles, like fingers,

Are soft and warm.

But she found herself very much alone, still quietly tucked behind the corner, trying to assemble some way of dealing with the intruders, the boys.

Embittered and angry, she stepped forth from the corner, her resolution suddenly hardened by acrimony; if He wouldn't or couldn't do it, then she must. Trembling, her feet barely trustworthy, she made her way to the door, stood momentarily but an arm's length from the boy on the floor, then backed away and stepped up on the first step to the sanctuary.

The boys, their minds and sense totally occupied with what seemed the end of their quest, never noted her appearance. She had come as if out of nowhere, and when she let out a piercing female scream, fright turned them still where they stood.

"Don't turn around," she said immediately. "The police are all around the church, boys." Her voice reached low and deep. "Don't try to run. Your only way of getting out of this is with me." The boys stood perfectly still, stunned by the unexpected.

She hadn't the words to proceed. All of her inventiveness failed to conjure any way out of this. In the darkness she pulled both hands together and pointed them forward as if she were aiming a handgun. "Don't turn around. I've got you covered." It was a terrible line and she knew it the moment it was out. These kids probably saw as many John Waynes as she had.

"Now I want to know who it is you're working for—that's question number one, you hear?" Her voice broke into a shrieking clarinet. It struck her the question was apt. Colombo would have asked it.

Gas-Engine Mike

In overalls,

He tends three

Antique gas engines,

Shuffles from one

To the next

With a slick can of oil

And a rag.

The motors (for their part)

Hiss and pop at each other,

Arguing about who is

Oldest,

Strongest,

Or has the largest flywheel.

The old man

Could answer all those questions,

But he pushes back his cap,

Prefers to let the engines do the talking.

Robert J. De Smith —

"Listen ma'am," the boy on the ladder spoke, his black face obliterating the lamb, but silhouetted by the colors of the background. "We don't get nothin' for this. Some white man jus' tell us to get in the church and get that window. He give us a couple bucks."

"He ain't lyin', ma'am. The man be forcing us to do this thing. We both from really poor families, you understand? Don't be shootin' at us now, will you?"

"What's your names?"

There was no response. Neither of them turned. It was obvious they were scared.

"Now listen, if you're going to get out of this without trouble, you both better cooperate with me." She felt immensely proud of herself.

"Name's Myron, ma'am. Myron Burnett, and this here's Jack Williams." The boy on the ladder dropped his shoulders in disgust for his partner's quick confession.

"Listen, Myron, you keep your eyes on the door and climb up that ladder behind Jack and stay up there."

He followed her directions, never glancing at her. She stood back away from them, her hands sweating together. But it suddenly struck her that she still hadn't the slightest idea of what to do with them now that they were here. Her mind moved through alternatives as if she were thumbing through the card catalogue. March them outside and hope that a cop drives by? Just let them go? Keep them here till morning? Take them to her apartment? Try to call while they still thought she had a gun? When the alternatives were all spent, she realized she was quite firmly placed in a predicament which she seemed powerless to break on her own.

She thought to retrace her steps. "Now, who is it you work for?"

Myron looked up as if for guidance. Neither spoke.

"C'mon, he's the one the police will be trying to get. Now who is it?"

"They call him the Iceman, and I think his name is Bergman."

"Bergman?"

"Yeah."

Jack's head turned toward his talkative partner.

"Keep your head away," she said again.

"You really got a gun, woman?" he said.

"Now, who is this Bergman?" she said. "He an old man?"

"Don't know, ma'am; never seen him. All I know is he got some vans."

"Know anything about him?"

Jack's shoulders moved again. "Listen, lady, you gotta piece or not?"

"Let me ask the questions. You know anything else about the guy?"

Neither seemed anxious to reply.

"Well?" For a moment her fear dissolved in the heat of her righteous indignation, and hate itself gave her new strength.

"The word is that the man's got some kinda store on the west side—sells old junk. But I ain't go no way to prove that—it's just what they say about him."

She wished for a moment that she had owned a gun, just especially for this man, Bergman. Then it happened. Jack moved slowly, his head twisting down and away from the lamb, and when the light cleared the silhouette, she knew that he knew that nothing was in her hands.

"She ain't got nothin', he said. "Now shut your mouth and look outside, Myron. See if you see any police." They were both down in a moment.

Alice stepped up another step, thinking she could find refuge in the sanctuary.

Fear bolted through her again. But fear, as a weapon, had failed her now. The lamb wore a look of mocking complacency. He hadn't given her any sense of courage, and now he appeared to be perfectly oblivious to her temerity. Like the women of the Martha Society, Christ the lamb made her sense of martyrdom unfulfilling by His blatant disregard, His disappointing apathy.

"Ain' nobody out there but the van."

Her only weapon was gone. Hope, it seemed, had passed from her. She tried to continue the bluff. "Think they'd be standing right there? Listen, boys, the cops are out their waiting."

"What we gonna do, Jack?"

"Jus' shuttup." He slapped the crowbar into his open hands.

She sat back on the steps. "Maybe I'm still your only hope. You tell me the truth about the whole business, tell me everything you know, and I'll go to the judge myself and talk to him."

"Who are you anyway?" Myron said.

The window was loose in the frame, but the glow it admitted remained the only light in the entrance.

"I can take your case to the judge myself, you know. I'm the preacher here." It was the plain and simple truth. "I'm telling you, there's no way out, except with me. Let me help you. Please?"

"You the janitor. Ain't no woman preacher here."

"I'm telling the truth. I'm the preacher, and I can help you." Her tremors settled slightly when she told them the truth again. She laid her elbows on the step behind her, and felt as if her fear had left her, slipped spirit-like through the tall, oak doors at the entrance. All that was left was the truth. She had no need to hold her hands up together, to push their fear. There was no pretence anymore. Her knees dropped slowly to the steps, and she pulled her hands together.

"No woman preacher going to do anything, Myron."

She sat alone and unarmed. There was nothing left for her now but the truth and will of the Lamb.

"You going to get us, lady?" Myron said.

"I can forgive you now. I can," she said.

"Forgive ain't shit," Jack said. "Forgive don't keep us outta nothing. Got to be more than forgive."

"That's all I have," she said, "honestly."

And then the door opened and a man stood in the darkness, his figure cast sharp as broken glass beneath the ladder. Alice watched him, his eyes adjusting to the darkness. His shoulders were broad.

"What the hell's takin' you two?" The door closed off the streetlight.

"Ain' no cops out there?" Myron moved towards the doors.

"Course not." The figure moved forward from the doorway. He was tall and muscular, his face dark and masked by a full black beard, his white features visible only in contrast. "Who's this?"

"Says she's a preacher woman." Jack walked over towards her, took two steps up and looked down at her from behind. She could feel his sudden bravery surround her.

The man laughed, "C'mon, we gotta get outta here."

"What about the window?"

"Leave it. We can get plenty others. Cops been by once—don't want to have

them see the van next time through."

"What about her?"

"You got to take care of her. You sure don't want her to be pickin' you outta some line-up do you?"

Jack moved up the steps behind her and closed the doors to the sanctuary. She heard him step down until he stood directly behind her.

The man seemed to stay in the dark deliberately. Alice tried to catch his features, to draw them permanently in her mind.

"You work for Bergman, mister?" she said.

"Lady, you don't wanna know—you hear me?" When he spoke, his voice was expressionless, cold, remarkably unaffected. "Well—"

She could see Myron beneath him. He seemed to be waiting. And then, without warning, her head seemed to crack from the top of her skull and open like a split ripe peach. Unable to stop herself, she fell sideways on the steps, and rolled down, striking her head on the mat near the door. There was no pain. Her consciousness seemed suddenly dream-like.

"That ain't enough."

She barely heard it in the slow flutter of scenes in her head. Her eyes opened to the man standing above her like a long, wooden spike, his features gone in the deep distance.

"You gotta scare the hell outta her, Myron."

"Look at her. She forgot it already."

"Listen, man, you best make her want to forget. Get it done, Myron."

Alice Koopman lay motionless on the welcome mat, her eyes and mouth her hands powerless to check the flow of blood wetting her hair.

"C'mon, Myron."

"No way, man."

"Don't make no difference to me. She already knows too much." Then Alice felt her entire body rise from the floor and turn completely in the air before falling back, the toe of his boot still there like a bayonet in her back. She knew only that her body was out of control. Her head rested on the first step to the sanctuary, as if someone unseen had willed her a pillow.

"She knows what's good for her. Look at the face on that woman."

Her arms were powerless, her legs bent awkwardly beneath her. She tasted the blood the moment it came to her lips. She saw him open the door, and stand there—the three of them, shadowless in silhouette, against the light of the street, behind them Bergman's own ivory image set like a pillar before faceless women in neat rows, waiting as if to judge her. And she wasn't afraid.

Her hate was gone in the wake of the silence closed up in the sanctuary. She closed her lips until she found it impossible to keep them shut. The blood ran warm from the corner of her mouth. Time had become so irrelevant that forgiving this man Bergman rose artlessly from within her, borne on the clear revelation of her own imminent need for mercy.

Inaudibly she forgave them, even Bergman, as if he might have been lying here next to her, sharing her pain.

Her bloodied mouth seemed expressionless, her face almost innocent when her Shepherd came in a final quiet vision.

JCS