

THE ISLAND



1952

THE WINTER NIGHT DRIFTED by lamplit windows in white bits and pieces. Now the procession marched evenly, now fluttered and spun. But there was a continual sifting and settling, which never stopped filling a deep abyss with silence.

The house was locked and bolted at every seam, window, door, and hatch. Lamps bloomed softly in each room. The house held its breath, drowsed and warm. Radiators sighed. A refrigerator hummed quietly. In the library, under the lime green hurricane lamp, a white hand moved, a pen scratched, a face bent to the ink, which dried in the false summer air.

Upstairs in bed, an old woman lay reading. Across the upper hall, her daughter sorted linen in a cupboard room. On

the attic floor above, a son, half through thirty years, tapped delicately at a typewriter, added yet another paper ball to the growing heap on the rug.

Downstairs, the kitchen maid finished the supper wine-glasses, placed them with clear bell sounds onto shelves, wiped her hands, arranged her hair, and reached for the light switch.

It was then that all five inhabitants of the snowing winter night house heard the unusual sound.

The sound of a window breaking.

It was like the cracking of moon-colored ice on a midnight pond.

The old woman sat up in bed. Her youngest daughter stopped sorting linens. About to crumple a typewritten page, the son froze, the paper shut in his fist.

In the library, the second daughter caught her breath, let the dark ink dry with almost an audible hiss, halfway down the page.

The kitchen maid stood, fingers on the light switch.

Not a sound.

Silence.

And the whisper of the cold wind from some far broken window, wandering the halls.

Each head turned in its separate room, looked first at the faintest stir of carpet nap where the wind stroked in under each breathing door. Then they snapped their gazes to the brass door locks.

Each door had its own bulwarking, each its arrangements

of snap-bolts, chain-locks, bars, and keys. The mother, in those years when her eccentricities had spun them like tops until their sense flew away, had supervised the doors as if each were a precious and wonderful new still life.

In the years before illness had stuffed her unceremoniously in bed, she had professed fears of any room that could not *instantly* become a fortress! A houseful of women (son Robert rarely descended from his crow's nest) needed swift defenses against the blind greeds, envies, and rapes of a world only a bit less feverish with lust in winter.

So ran her theory.

"We'll never need *that* many locks!" Alice had protested years ago.

"There'll come a day," the mother replied, "you'll thank God for one single solid Yale lock."

"But all a robber has to do," said Alice, "is smash a window, undo the sill locks and—"

"Break a window! And *warn* us? Nonsense!"

"It would all be so simple if we only kept our money in the *bank*."

"Again, nonsense! I learned in 1929 to keep hard cash from soft hands! There's a gun under my pillow and our money under my bed! *I'm* the First National Bank of Oak Green Island!"

"A bank worth forty thousand dollars?!"

"Hush! Why don't you stand at the landing and tell all the fishermen? Besides, it's not just cash that the fiends would come for. Yourself, Madeline—*me*!"

"Mother, Mother. Old maids, let's face it."

"Women, never forget, *women*. Where are the *other* pistols?"

"One in each room, Mother."

And so the home-grown artillery was primed and set, the hatches dogged and undogged from season to season, year to year. An intercommunication phone circuit, using batteries, was wired upstairs and down. The daughters had accepted the phones, smiling, it at least saved shouting up the stairwells.

"Simultaneously," said Alice, "why not cut off our outside phone? It's long past time anyone called from the town across the lake to either Madeline or me."

"Pull out the phone!" said Madeline. "It costs like hell each month! Who could *we* possibly want to call over there?"

"Boors," said Robert, heading for the attic. "All of them."

And now, on this deep winter night, the one single and solitary sound. The shattering of a windowpane, like a wineglass thinly burst, like the breaking of a long warm winter dream.

All five inhabitants of this island house became white statues.

Peeking in windows at each room, one would have imagined museum galleries. Each animal, stuffed with terror, displayed in a last instant of awareness; recognition. There was a light in each glass eye, like that found and forever remembered from a noon glade when a deer, startled and motionless, slowly turned its head to gaze down the long cold barrel of a steel rifle.

Each of the five found their attention fixed to the doors.

Each saw that an entire continent separated their bed or chair from those doors waiting, ready to be locked. An inconsequential yardage to the body. But a psychological immensity to the mind. While they were flinging themselves the short distance, the long distance to slide the bolts, turn the keys, might not some *thing* in the hall leap a similar space to crack the still-unlocked door!?

This thought, with hair-trigger swiftness, flashed through each head. It held them. It would not set them free.

A second, comforting thought came next.

It's nothing, it said. The wind broke the window. A tree branch fell, yes! Or a snowball, thrown by some winter-haunted child, soundless in the night, on his way nowhere. . . .



ALL FIVE MEMBERS of the house arose in unison.

The halls shook with the wind. A whiteness flaked in the family's faces and snowed in their stricken eyes. All made ready to seize their private doors, open, peer out and cry, "It *was* a falling tree limb, yes!" when they heard yet another sound.

A metal rattling.

And then, a window, somewhere, like the cruel edge of a giant guillotine, began to rise.

It slid in its raw grooves. It gaped a great mouth to let winter in.

Every house door knocked and yammered its hinges and sills.

The gust snuffed out lamps in every room.

"No electricity!" said Mother, years ago. "No gifts from the town! Self-sufficiency's our ticket! Give and take nothing."

Her voice faded in the past.

No sooner had the oil lamps whiffed out than fear took fire to blaze brighter than logs and hearths, than slumbering coals, in each room.

Alice felt it burn from her cheeks with a ghastly light. She could have read books by the terror that flamed in her brow.

There seemed only one thing to do.

Rushing en masse, each room, a duplicate of the one above or below, four people flung themselves to their doors, to scramble locks, throw bolts, attach chains, twist keys!

"Safe!" they cried. "Locked and safe!"

All save one moved this way: the maid. She lived but a few hours each day in this outrageous home, untouched by the mother's wild panics and fears. Made practical with years of living in the town beyond the wide moat of lawn, hedge, and wall, she debated only an instant. Then she performed what should have been a saving, but became a despairing, gesture.

Yanking wide the kitchen door she rushed into the main lower hallway. From far off in darkness the wind blew from a cold dragon's mouth.

The others will be out! she thought.

Quickly, she called their names.

"Miss Madeline, Miss Alice, Mrs. Benton, Mr. Robert!"

Then turning, she plunged down the hall toward the blowing darkness of the open window.

"Miss Madeline!"

Madeline, pinned like Jesus to her linen-room door, rescrabbled the locks.

"Miss Alice!"

In the library, where her pale letters capered in darkness, like drunken moths, Alice fell back from her own shut door, found matches, relit the double hurricanes. Her head beat like a heart gorged, pressing her eyes out, gasping her lips, sealing her ears so nothing was heard but a wild pulse and the hollow in-suck of her breath.

"Mrs. Benton!"

The old one squirmed in bed, worked her hands over her face, to reshape the melted flesh into a shocked expression it most needed. Then her fingers splayed out at the unlocked door. "Fool! Damn fool! Someone lock my door! Alice, Robert, Madeline!"

"Alice, Robert, Madeline!" the echoes blew in the unlit halls.

"Mr. Robert!"

The maid's voice summoned him from the floor, trembling.

Then, one by one, they heard the maid cry out. One small dismayed and accusing cry.

After that the snow touched the roof of the house softly.

They all stood, knowing what that silence meant. They waited for some new sound.

Someone, treading slowly on nightmare softness, as if barefoot, drifted along the halls. They felt the house shift with the weight now here, now there, now farther along.

Two phones stood on a far library desk. Alice seized one, chattered the hook, cried, "Operator! Police!"

But then she remembered: *No one will call Madeline and me now. Tell the Bell Company to pull the phone. There's no one in town we know.*

Be practical, Mother had said. Leave the phone itself here, in case we ever decide to reconnect.

"Operator!"

She threw the instrument down and blinked at it as if it were some stubborn beast she had asked to do the simplest trick. She glanced at the window. Push it up, lean out, *scream!* Ah, but the neighbors were locked in, warm and apart and separate and lost, and the wind screaming, too, and winter all around, and night. It would be like shouting to graveyards.

"Robert, Alice, Madeline, Robert, Alice, Madeline!"

The mother, screaming, blind idiocy.

"Lock my door! Robert, Alice, Madeline!"

I hear, thought Alice. We all hear. And *he'll* hear her too.

She grabbed the second phone, gave its button three sharp jabs.

"Madeline, Alice, Robert!" Her voice blew through the halls.

"Mother!" cried Alice over the phone. "Don't scream,

don't tell him where you *are*, don't tell him what he doesn't even know!" Alice jabbed the button again.

"Robert, Alice, Madeline!"

"Pick up the phone, Mother, please, pick—"

Click.

"Hello, Operator." Her mother's raw shrieking voice. "Save me! The locks!"

"Mother, this is Alice! Quiet, he'll hear you!"

"Oh, God! Alice, oh God, the door! I can't get out of bed! Silly, awful, all the locks and no way to get to them!"

"Put out your lamp!"

"Help me, Alice!"

"I am helping. Listen! Find your gun. Blow out your light. Hide under your bed! *Do* that!"

"Oh, God! Alice, come lock my door!"

"Mother, listen!"

"Alice, Alice!" Madeline's voice. "What's happened? I'm afraid!"

Another voice. "Alice!"

"Robert!"

They shrieked and yelled.

"No," said Alice. "Quiet, one at a time! Before it's too late. *All* of us. Do you *hear*? Get your guns, open your doors, come out in the hall. It's us, *all* of us, against him. Yes?!"

Robert sobbed.

Madeline wailed.

"Alice, Madeline, children, save your mother!"

"Mother, shut up!" Alice swayed and chanted. "Open your doors. *All* of us. We can *do* it! Now!"

"He'll get me!" screamed Madeline.

"No, no," said Robert. "It's no use, no use!"

"The door, my door, unlocked," cried the mother.

"Listen, all of you!"

"My door!" said the mother. "Oh God! It's opening, *now*!"

There was a scream in the halls and the same scream on the phone.

The others stared at the phones in their hands where only their hearts beat.

"Mother!"

A door slammed upstairs.

The scream stopped suddenly.

"Mother!"

If only she hadn't yelled, thought Alice. If only she hadn't showed him the way.

"Madeline, Robert! Your guns. I'll count five and we'll *all* rush out! One, two, three—"

Robert groaned.

"Robert!"

He fell to the floor, the phone in his fist. His door was still locked. His heart stopped. The phone in his fist shouted, "Robert!" He lay still.

"He's at my door now!" said Madeline, high in the winter house.

"Fire through the door! Shoot!"

"He won't get *me*, he won't have his way with *me*!"

"Madeline, listen! Shoot through the door!"

"He's fumbling with the lock, he'll get in!"

"Madeline!"

One shot.

One shot and only one.

Alice stood in the library alone, staring at the cold phone in her hand. It was now completely silent.

Suddenly she saw that stranger in the dark, upstairs, outside a door, in the hall, scratching softly, smiling at the panel.

The shot!

The stranger in the dark peering down. And from under the locked door, slowly, a small stream of blood. Blood flowing quietly, very bright, in a tiny stream. All this, Alice saw. All this she knew, hearing a dark movement in the upstairs hall as someone moved from room to room, trying doors and finding silence.

"Madeline," she said to the phone, numbly. "Robert!" She called their names, uselessly. "Mother!" She shut her eyes. "Why didn't you *listen*? If we had *all* of us at the very *first*—run out—"

Silence.

Snow fell in silent whirls and cornucopias, heaped itself in lavish quietness upon the lawn. She was now alone.

Stumbling to the window, she unlocked it, forced it up, unhooked the storm window beyond, pushed it out. Then she straddled, half in the silent warm world of the house, half out

into the snowing night. She sat a long moment, gazing at the locked library door. The brass knob twisted once.

Fascinated, she watched it turn. Like a bright eye it fixed her.

She almost wanted to walk over, undo the latch, and with a bow, beckon in the night, the shape of terror, so as to know the face of such a one who, with hardly a knock, had razed an island fort. She found the gun in her hand, raised it, pointed it at the door, shivering.

The brass knob turned clockwise, counterclockwise. Darkness stood in darkness beyond, blowing. Clockwise, counterclockwise. With an unseen smile above.

Eyes shut she fired three times!

When she opened her eyes she saw that her shots had gone wide. One into the wall, another at the bottom of the door, a third at the top. She stared a moment at her coward's hand, and flung the gun away.

The doorknob turned this way, that. It was the last thing she saw. The bright doorknob shining like an eye.

Leaning out, she fell into the snow.



RETURNING WITH THE POLICE hours later, she saw her foot-steps in the snow, running away from silence.

She and the sheriff and his men stood under the empty trees, gazing at the house.

It seemed warm and comfortable, once again brightly

lighted, a world of radiance and cheer in a bleak landscape. The front door stood wide to the blowing snows.

"Jesus," said the sheriff. "He must have just opened up the front door and strolled *out*, damn, not caring *who* saw! Christ, what *nerve*!"

Alice moved. A thousand white moths flicked her eyes. She blinked and her eyes fixed in a stare. Then slowly, softly, her throat fluttered.

She began a laugh that ended with a muffled sobbing.

"Look!" she cried. "Oh, *look*!"

They looked, and then saw the second path of footprints which came nearly down the front porch stairs into the white soft velvet snow. Evenly spaced, with a certain serenity, these footprints could be seen where they marched off across the front yard, confident and deep, vanishing away into the cold night and snowing town.

"*His* footsteps." Alice bent and put out her hand. She measured then tried to cover them with a thrust of her numb fingers. She cried out.

"*His* footsteps. Oh God, what a little man! Do you see the size of them, do you *see*! My God, what a *little* man!"

And even as she crouched there, on hands and knees, sobbing, the wind and the winter and the night did her a gentle kindness. Even as she watched, the snow fell into and around and over the footprints, smoothing and filling and erasing them until at last, with no trace, with no memory of their smallness, they were gone.

Then, and only then, did she stop crying.