

TRIANGLE



1951

SHE TRIED THREE DRESSES, and none fit her body. They belonged, in that moment, to someone else. Excitement changed her color so it went with none of her clothes. The glow so expanded her slender flesh that everything seemed corseted. Then the powder spilled to the floor like snow and she painted her lips upside down and blinked in the mirror as if she had seen a ghost.

"My land, Lydia." Helen stood in the doorway. "He's only a man."

"He's John Larsen," said Lydia.

"That's even worse. His hair doesn't fit his head, his arms

are too long, his mouth is thin, his eyes are like a squirrel's, and he's only up to *here*."

Lydia was crying. She sat watching the tears in the mirror.

"I'm sorry," said Helen. "But he's such a fool."

"Helen!"

"You're my own baby sister, that's all."

"I think he's God."

"Don't cry anymore. Anyone you say is God is God. It's just with our folks dead, I'm mother now, I want things right for you. I've had enough men experiences to know they are foolish liars, the whole bunch. Right out of the carnival—apes, clowns and calliope tooters."

Lydia was in a summer dream. "I think he's kind, handsome, and good. He tips his hat on the street to us. He's never come to our house before, has he? Never said boo. And then, suddenly, calling me on the phone today, saying he'd like to drop by for an hour to see me. I cried all afternoon, I was so happy. I've wanted him to call for years. I've seen him in front of the United Cigar store ever since I was sixteen years old, that was twenty years ago, and always wanted to stop and say, I love you, John, take me away from all this, be mine. But I always kept walking. And, do you know, once in a while, in recent years, when you and I walked by, it seemed there was something in his eyes, as if he were noticing me too. But he always smiled and tipped his hat."

"Men teach each other tricks like that. A front like a palace, and all outhouse and stucco behind. Put your face back on and wear something green to go with your red complexion."

"I didn't mean to cry it red." She looked at the old mouth on her wadded kerchief. "Helen, Helen, was it like this for you, ten years back, when you loved Jamie Josephs?"

"My bedclothes were cinders every morning."

"Oh, Helen!"

"But then I found he was playing that shell game you see at circuses. He asked me to bet everything on a hunch. I was young. I did. I bet that if I spent of myself freely, when the time came I'd know where to find him. But the time came and I lifted up one of three shells and Jamie wasn't there. He'd moved his little act up the street, and out of town on the Skokie Limited. I wonder if *any* woman ever found Jamie?"

"Oh, don't, let's be happy tonight!"

"You be happy by being happy. I'll be happy by being cynical, and we'll *see* who's happiest in the long run."

Lydia painted a new mouth and made it smile.



IT WAS A TENDER EVENING IN SEPTEMBER, the first smoky fire starting in the maples around the old, softening house. Lydia floated in the cavernous living room, lights out, only her face a pink lamp, so she could see him far away, like a figure in a melodrama, before he turned and rustled the leaves crisply on the front sidewalk. She heard him whistling an autumn song, down the street. She hurried over her speeches, and suddenly the words were a crumpled series of started but unfinished letters to her own spirit and flesh, heaped and blown about her

mind. She started to cry again, and this made the precious words run and blur, the polite stage instructions to her hands and feet threatened to be lost forever. She stopped the process by slapping herself, once, on the side of her face. Now he was walking up the steps to the silent house, now he sounded the silver doorbell, taking off his straw hat, which was a trifle late for the season, and clearing his throat three times, a customer demanding service from an inattentive clerk. He muttered under his breath, as if he too were shuffling the lines of his part, abysmally.

"Good evening!"

As if a gun had gone off in his face, John Larsen fell back from the door. Staggered by the sound of her own voice suddenly exploded from her mouth, Lydia could only sway in the doorway until the man out there found his smile and used it. Then, somehow, she opened the door and stepped out onto the porch.

"It's such a nice night," she said. "Let's sit in the porch swing."

"Fine," said John Larsen, and they sat in the shadowy vined, secret porch swing, away from the gaze of the town. He helped her elbow into the swing, and where he had touched was a brand that smoked and ached and promised to leave a scar for the rest of her life. She sat down dizzily, and the world moved this way, that way, she thought herself sick and then discovered it was the swing taking her up and down and this man still silent, wretchedly turning his hat in his hands, read-

ing the size tag with his small eyes, reading the label and the old price-insertion. The hat sounded like a piece of wicker furniture in his lap. He kept reaching into it to find his first speech and then, in confusion, looked as if he might get up and bolt the evening. Somewhere between the sidewalk and here he had lost his notes.

Out of a face that was a roaring torch, the flesh sunburned by her blood, the bones aching with warmth, Lydia felt her puffed mouth say, "It's nice to see you, Mr. Larsen."

"Oh, call me John," he replied, and propelled the swing with his shoes that now, with demon voices, squeaked at every motion.

"We've been hoping that someday you might drop by," said Lydia, and then realized it was too much to say.

"Have you, have you really?" He turned and gazed at her with childish delight, so it was all right, what she had said.

"Yes, we've often said we'd like you to drop by."

"I'm glad," he said, on the edge of the swing. "You know, it's a very important thing I've come to talk about tonight."

"I realize."

"Do you? Have you guessed?"

"I think I have."

"I've known you sisters for a good many years, to speak to in passing," he said. "I've seen you walking by together so many times. And I never got up the courage—"

"To ask to come to the house."

"That's right. Until tonight. And then today I got the

courage. Do you know why? Today's my thirty-fourth birthday. And I said to myself, John Larsen, you're getting old. You've been a drummer too long, you've traveled too much. The gay life's dead for you. Time to settle down. And what better place to settle than Green Town, your own hometown, and there's a certain girl there, really beautiful, maybe she's never looked at you—"

"But she has—" said Lydia, obliquely.

He looked stunned and happy. "I never dreamt!"

He leaned back in the swing, grinning. "Anyway, I said to myself, you ought to go call. Make yourself known. Spit it out. I never dared. You see, women can be so beautiful and far away, untouchable, the right kind of women. And I'm a coward. I really am, about women. The correct women. So what do you suggest I do? I had to come and see you first, to talk to you, to plan things, to see if you could help me."

"First?" said Lydia. "Help you? Plan things."

"Oh, your sister's really lovely," said John Larsen. "Tall and pale. I think of her like a white lily. The long-stemmed variety. So stately and grave and beautiful. I've watched her passing by for years and been in love with her, there I've said it, for ten years I've seen her walk by but I was afraid to say anything."

"What?" The torch flickered in her face and went out.

"So you say she likes me too? To think all these years wasted. I should have come sooner. Will you help me? Will

you tell her, will you break the ice? Will you arrange for me to come see her soon?"

"You're in love with my sister." It was a statement of fact.

"With all my heart."

She felt like a stove on a winter's morning, when all the ashes are dead and all the wood is cold and frosted over.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

She sat and the world rocked and this time she was really ill. The world dipped.

"Say something," he pleaded.

"You love my sister," she said.

"The way you say that."

"I love you," she said.

"What?"

"I love you," she said.

"Now wait a minute," he said.

"Didn't you hear me?" she asked.

"I don't understand."

"I don't either," she said, sitting straight. Now the trembling stopped and the coldness was coming out her eyes.

"You're crying," he said.

"It's so silly," she said. "You think about me the same way *she* thinks about you."

"Oh, no," he protested.

"Oh, yes," she said, not touching the tears with her hands.

"That can't be," he almost yelled.

"It is."

"But I love her," he said.

"But I love you," she replied.

"Don't you think there's a little spark of love in her for me?" he wanted to know, reaching out in the air of the porch.

"Don't you think you could have a little spark of love in yourself for me?" she said.

"There must be something I can do."

"There's nothing any of us can do. Everybody loves the wrong one, everybody hates the wrong one." She began to laugh.

"Don't laugh."

"I'm not laughing." She threw her head back.

"Stop that!"

"I will." She yelled out her laughter, and her eyes were wet and he was shaking her.

"Stop that!" he yelled into her face, standing up now. "Go in and tell your sister to come out, tell her I want to see her!"

"Tell her yourself, go tell her yourself."

The laughing went on.

He put his hat on and stood there, bewildered, looking at her swinging hysterically in the swing, like a hunk of cold iron, and looking at the house. "Cut it out!" he cried.

He was starting to shake Lydia again when a voice said, "Stop that!"

He turned and there was Helen, behind the front porch screen, in cool shadow, only a paleness, a dim chalk outline.

"Get away from her, leave her alone. Take your hands off her, Mister Larsen."

"But, Helen!" he protested, running to the screen. The door was hooked and she put her hand out, as if tapping the screen to loose from it the last flies of the old summer.

"Get off the porch, please," said Helen.

"Helen, let me in!"

John, come back! thought Lydia.

"I'll give you until I count to ten to get your hat and run."

He stood between the two cold ladies on the dark porch. Summer and autumn both were gone now. An invisible snow fell upon his shoulders and a wind came up from the interior of the house.

"How did this all happen?" He turned in a circle to the world, slowly. Somehow, to Helen, he seemed like a man on a shore and a boat, carrying her, the house that is, drawing out into the autumnal sea and nobody waving good-bye, but everyone separating forever. She could not quite decide whether he was handsome or ridiculous. The great horn of the sea was blowing and the ship moved away faster, leaving him stranded on the lawn, picking up his hat, looking into it, as if to see his entire life ahead of him, and the size of it was very small and the price tag was low indeed. His hands shook. He was drunk with shock. He reeled. His eyes wobbled in his pale face.

"Good night, Mister Larsen," said Helen, hid in the dark.

Lydia was swinging in the swing, silent, breathless now.

Not laughing or crying, just letting the dark world ride in stars one way, and the white moon another, just a body in a whirling arc, her hands at her sides, the tears drying on her face in the wind that she stirred by sailing.

"Good-bye." Mr. Larsen stumbled and fell, half across the lawn. He sat there a moment, as if he were drowning, putting his hands up in the air. Then he got up and ran away down the street.

After he was gone, Helen opened the door and came slowly out to sit in the swing.

They rocked for about ten minutes that way, silently. Then Helen said, "I don't suppose there's any way you can stop loving him?"

They swung in the night.

"No."

A minute later Lydia said, "I don't suppose there's any way for *you* to find a way to love him, is there?"

Helen shook her head.

The next idea to come to them was shared. One started and the other finished it.

"I don't suppose there's any way—"

"—he could stop loving you, Helen."

"—and love you instead, Lydia?"

They gave the swing a push in the grape-arbor night, and after the fourth swing back and forth, they said, "No."

"I can see us," said Helen. "Good God. Twenty, thirty years from now. You and me out walking for an evening

downtown. Us walking along Main Street, talking, alone. And coming to the cigar store. And there he is. There's John Larsen, all by himself, under the cigar store light, unwrapping a cigar. And we sort of slow down and he stops lighting the cigar when he sees us. And I look at him the way I look at him now. And you look at him the way you look at him now. And he looks at you the only way he can look at you. And at me the fool's way he looked at me tonight. And then we sort of stand there and you and I nod. And he puts up his hand and tips his hat. And he's bald. And we're both gray. And we walk on. Arm in arm. And do our shopping and spend the evening around town. And when we come back, two hours later, on our way home, he's still standing there, alone, looking off into nothing."

They let the cat die.

They sat there, not moving, thinking of the next thirty years.