

Third Place Winner, 1986 D. K. Brown Fiction Contest

GOING THROUGH THE LIST

By Helen Walker Jones

DURING THE MINI-CLASS "A SISTER WHO LOVES HERSELF Loves the Whole World" I sit primly in my brown linen dress, fanning myself with a ward bulletin I've found beneath the chair, wondering if I gave Jason his fluoride tablet at breakfast. The teacher, a girl of twenty-five, keeps tossing her head to show off the blond curls hanging to her waist. She uses expressions like "a marriage made in the celestial kingdom" and "little pitchers have big ears" and confides that she once wore the crown of Miss Kane County. Evidently, this girl loves herself; therefore, it must follow that she loves the whole world.

When the girl says excitedly, "The master bedroom is the soul of the home. Make it as pretty and feminine as you can, so your man will adore the lovely creature who lives there," I can't stop myself from picturing a brothel: lace curtains, a flowered carpet, and a woman in a pink corset reclining on a feather bed. I have to admit my concept of such places is derived entirely from Jimmy Stewart and Randolph Scott movies; still, I figure it's a fairly accurate picture.

Our bedroom is neither dainty nor luxurious. Rick refuses to sleep on anything but brown or navy blue sheets. The fancy pillows were a long-ago gift from my mother, and Rick merely tolerates them.

I have my year's supply of paper plates for compassionate service visits. The cookies are still warm and I snitch one, tucking the plastic around the edge of the plate again as I leave the house.

Sister Baxter waves at me from across the street, making me conscious that, like sorority women, Relief Society presidents should never eat while walking in public. I shove the entire cookie into my mouth and wave back.

Cynthia Mars is stretched out on her couch behind the screen door, holding her baby in the crook of her arm. "Oh, come in," she calls and I watch her switch off the television and drape a quilt over the bassinet. Through the screen, the girl moves in shadows, her blond ponytail bouncing across her shoulders.

"You're the same one, aren't you?" she asks, holding the door and stepping to one side with the baby on her hip.

"As what?"

"The lady who brought the booties, you know, from the Church."

"That's me," I say, conscious of the drawl creeping back into my speech. I brush nervously at my bangs, feeling how oily my forehead is. It makes me feel like a teenager. "I brought you some cookies."

Cynthia stares at me and I wonder if my slip is showing, or if my hair is sticking flat to my forehead. "Oh, then you don't know," the girl says at last. "We're vegetarians."

"There's no meat in these cookies," I say, wondering what on earth she's talking about. "In fact, they're zucchini cookies."

The girl balances the plate in her free hand, finally setting it on her rickety dining room table. "I'm not real sure if we're supposed to eat eggs, is what I mean," she says. "I'll have to ask my husband." The tablecloth is green and white gingham with sunflowers painted in each corner. It's a lie about the zucchini.

"Come on," Cynthia says, motioning toward the couch. "Let's sit." She pulls up her grey sweatshirt and offers a breast to the baby. "My husband and I, we're sort of into Zen Buddhist stuff right now, you know?" I try to smile. "No offense," the girl continues, "but don't expect us at Church."

"Well, if you ever feel like coming, we'd love to have you," I say weakly, regretting I'm not bold enough to rise up and bear my testimony. "How are you all doing, your health and everything, I mean."

"You from the South?" the girl asks excitedly, jerking away from the baby, who wails until she presses her nipple back into its mouth.

"Yeah," I say, "sort of. A hick town in West Texas."

"Odessa?" Cynthia says. "My aunt lives there."

"No. It's called Longfellow, actually, after the poet. But then we moved to Waco, which isn't really West Texas, but still. . . ." I feel foolish, rambling on about my hometown. A recent visiting teaching seminar gave these hints: never talk about yourself; always let them open themselves up to you; draw them out with questions. "Tell me about your aunt," I say quickly. "The one from Odessa. Is she a member of the Church?"

"Ah, never mind," the girl says. "There's not a fascinating bone in her body, but she talks like you." She presses the baby against her shoulder and begins patting it on the back. I realize I don't even know the sex, and since the infant is wearing

HELEN WALKER JONES is a freelance writer living in Salt Lake.

generic yellow, it's difficult to tell. The quilt hanging over the bassinet is green, so that's no clue, either.

"I just love Willie Nelson, don't you?" Cynthia asks.

"Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain," I say, wondering how I'll sum this visit up in welfare meeting.

"You're no Utah Mormon, I could tell right off," Cynthia says. I assume this is a high compliment. I wish I could leave; my panty girdle is killing my thighs.

"Listen," Cynthia says, flipping her head so her ponytail brushes the top of the infant's head, "Could somebody watch my baby sometime while I do errands? Don't you ladies do that sort of stuff?"

"We could arrange it," I say, writing my phone number on a scrap of paper from my purse, looking at the sunflowers on the tablecloth and wondering if the girl will dump the cookies into the garbage after I leave, or wait till her husband comes home to consult him on the burning "egg" question.

Cynthia Mars seems to think I'm eyeing the cookie plate, as she says, "I'd offer you one, but you're probably on a diet. Mormon women are all overweight, did you notice?"

I flush, remembering my daydreams about going off to a fitness farm. "Me in particular?" I say sweetly.

"No," Cynthia says. "Just as a group. You're not so bad, really, if you'd go natural, you know. Forget the bra and girdle, I mean. After all, this is the eighties."

"There is no zucchini in those cookies," I say, standing and brushing off my skirt as though it had crumbs on it. I don't even feel like saying good-bye, let alone call-if-you-need-anything or pray-and-you-shall-be-strengthened. I pull my sweater together at the neck, thinking of Cynthia's off-the-shoulder baggy sweatshirt, wishing I'd worn something besides this old denim wrap-around skirt and a pink cardigan. The outfit makes me look ten pounds heavier, at least.

"No hard feelings," Cynthia says, wrinkling up her forehead and smiling perkily. "I like people from Texas, really I do." I hold the screen door open and look back at the girl, who's standing now, switching the baby to her other breast. I can't imagine a nursing mother going without a bra. The very thought makes my back and breasts ache.

"Maybe I'll come to one of your meetings sometime," the girl says, "if you promise not to make chickens out of straw. My aunt in Odessa has one of them on her kitchen table that she made at Relief Society." She laughs in a mocking, insolent way.

I let the screen door close behind me and walk to the edge of the porch, then stop and turn back to face the girl. I'm dying to say, "When you're forty, your breasts will sag to your waist," but instead I take a deep breath, tuck my sweater into the waistband of my skirt, and say, "Next month we're learning to smock baby dresses." My voice quavers.

"It's a boy," Cynthia says from behind the screen. "We're naming him Waylon. You know, after Waylon Jennings."

I realize I haven't asked a single question about the baby—its sex, size at birth, the actual birth date, which the ward clerk will want to know. They probably won't have it blessed anyway, or maybe they plan to sprinkle its forehead and chant

"Om" while they burn incense. I suck in my stomach. I didn't even ask to hold the baby, a grave social faux pas if ever there was one. "Let me know if you need anything." My voice reminds me of a pull-string toy, repeating the Relief Society motto: Charity Never Faileth.

"If you ever go back to Longfellow," Cynthia says sweetly as I start down the steps, "I'd love to go along for the ride." She giggles. "Get it?" she asks. "Long-fellow. A-long."

"You're a real wit, Cynthia," I say, turning away.

Occasionally I glance back even after the yellow house has long since vanished behind the cottonwood trees; does she ever stare out the windows of the grubby house, feeling lonely, I wonder. Probably not. I also speculate about whether her master bedroom is the soul of the household, or if the non-egg-eating husband only lets her buy solid brown sheets.

THE list sits always on my nightstand:

1. Cookies to Sis. Mars
2. Funeral luncheon for Bro. Quantrill
3. Welfare orders—get signed by Bishop
4. Assign visiting teachers to nursing home women

"Figure it out," my sister Ingrid said over the phone when I called to announce my new church job. "Any Mormon woman without a kid under six automatically goes into the drawing for Relief Society president. They figure you have too much time on your hands. And miscarriages don't count a whit, honey."

"You make it sound like they draw names from a hat," I said.

"Who knows?" Ingrid laughed. "I'm not privy to the inner workings of the priesthood." Ingrid lives in Waco and she's always been prone to sarcastic comments about the Church. Her soft drawl reminds me of how people teased both of us when we were roommates at the Y. None of the girls we lived with had ever eaten grits or hush puppies or black-eyed peas. And they constantly yelled, "Hurry up, y'all" whenever either of us was late. I've consciously tried to lose the relaxed, slow-paced speech of my childhood, but once in a while someone will ask, "You're not from Utah, are you?" and I feel a sudden shyness and a nostalgia for Texas, a longing for the sound of my mother's old screen door slapping closed.

"So what are you doing in the ward now?" I asked Ingrid hesitantly, trying to distract her from setting off on a discourse about the inequities of the priesthood.

"I'm Primary pianist. Face it, Marn, I can't do any damage there. How can I teach false doctrine while I'm plunking out 'Book of Mormon Stories' on the old upright?"

I pictured Ingrid's inch-long fingernails clicking against the piano keys. She sells computers for a living and makes more money than her husband. On weekdays she farms her four children out to a little old German lady, not even LDS, who smokes and takes an occasional nip of cough syrup with codeine. The kids always smell of tobacco and once in Primary the oldest, Leah, requested "Bringing in the Sheaves" during choosing time.

"Listen, Marnie," Ingrid said, "Admit it—you're perfect as a

Relief Society lady. You always dragged home stray dogs, after all, and what a sucker for a sob story." I thought of our neighbor's dog, dead in the street just a few days before. At the time, I wondered if it was the Relief Society president's duty to make a meal for the family.

"Go see a Jimmy Stewart movie and you'll feel better," Ingrid suggested. This had been a joke from childhood. Our mother was such an avid fan that all of us children thought Jimmy Stewart was one of the General Authorities, since his portrait hung on the living room wall next to J. Reuben Clark and David O. McKay. When Ingrid and I saw "Mr. Krueger's Christmas" seated beside our own children, our mother was already dead, but Ingrid turned to me in the dark screening room on Temple Square and whispered, "Somewhere, Mama is clapping her hands with delight."

"She's just waiting for his arrival in the Celestial Kingdom," I whispered back, and the two of us sat through the sentimental story with tears in our eyes, remembering Saturday afternoon matinees with our mother in the old movie house in downtown Waco.

I never dared tell Ingrid that, while other people are doing meaningful things like sending milk to Poland or feeding Korean children for four dollars a month, I spend entire weekends trying to find storage space for old men's furniture because they're moving into nursing homes. Inevitably, I end up stacking the chairs and tables in the crawl space of our basement, alongside boxes from a ward member now residing at the State Penitentiary.

I'M lying on the bed now, my cheeks pressed against the smallest pillow, which smells strongly of fabric softener. I should have been a laundress, a washboard clamped between my knees, my gnarled knuckles working mercilessly at a stained collar. Maybe the master of the house would have fallen in love with my flowing dark hair and ignored my sandpaper hands.

Rick has taken Jason to Liberty Park to swing. "Go lie down a while," he said before leaving, so here I am on the navy blue quilt, leaning against the old but pretty pillows. Usually Rick isn't so solicitous. I wonder if he's feeling guilty about something—maybe the young girl whose desk is next to his. A recent BYU grad, the girl keeps asking Rick's advice on her articles. Once she even called him at home, asking for "Brother Elliott" and he seemed embarrassed. "Is she pretty?" I asked when he hung up.

"In a dippy sort of way," he said, laughing and tugging at his socks. "She thinks we work for the devil's newspaper. The city editor asked her to cover a story on Planned Parenthood and she's afraid to go alone, with all the picketers."

So he went with her on the assignment, leaving me to ponder why they didn't teach you to cope with these situations in Family Relations at Provo. A girl like that may be harmless, but it's still scary sending your husband out to work every day to be bombarded by gorgeous single women. If I'd been born five years later, I could have been a career woman like Ingrid—

maybe even a lawyer. Mother was mad for Perry Mason, too.

WHO died this time?" Rick says, coming back from the park with Jason, who flops onto his bed fully clothed. Rick unbuckles his belt and yawns.

"It wasn't a death," I say wearily. "Just a birth."

"When did the Bootie Brigade get so depressing?" He strokes my arm through the pink sweater.

"You're about as witty as Cynthia Mars." I press my hand over his, feeling the bulge of flesh beneath the wool. I wonder if the cute little reporter from the Y has ever been on a diet.

"Who's Cynthia Mars?" Rick asks, turning to pick up his briefcase. I know he's through listening. An idea is already forming for his next column. I positively expect "Bootie Brigade" to be the title for it.

"Never mind," I say. "There's not a fascinating bone in her body, but her aunt in Odessa has a straw chicken on her kitchen table."

"You lost me," Rick says as I pass the landing on my way upstairs. "But I love the name. Can I use it?"

"If you're ready for a libel suit," I say. Upstairs, I sink down onto the bed, pressing my face into the eyelet pillow again. This time it smells of "To a Wild Rose," the perfume Mother always wore. I wonder why I thought it was fabric softener, that distant scent that seemed so embedded. Mother must have sewed a tiny sachet into the middle.

From outside the window, I catch a whiff of smoke—someone burning leaves, probably—and think of old Brother Quantrill. I used to take him oranges, afraid he might get scurvy. "He lives exclusively on Cheerios and cigarettes," the bishop said in welfare meeting once, so I went to see him every Tuesday until he went into the hospital. Could he ever blow smoke rings! A pack of Kools and a book of matches sat on his coffee table next to the channel changer. "Got my necessities of life right here," he joked the first time I came. He told me his ancestors had been pirates, then changed his story the following week. "I just got mixed up," he said. "They was really staunch Confederate spies against the Union. Quantrill's Raiders, they called 'em."

"Sounds like a football team," I said, laughing.

The next month, Brother Quantrill was admitted to the hospital. "It wasn't scurvy, I hope?" I asked at the nurse's station, and they all stood there in their white dresses and laughed at me.

"Emphysema," a skinny nurse said, picking a burr out of her pearl-colored stocking, and I knew his funeral would be the next one to worry about. I began thinking about delegating the lunch.

Lying on my bed now, remembering the hospital, thinking of this room as the soul of the home, I think of the old man lying in bed with a hand on each of the side rails, saying, "Sorry, I ain't wearin' my garments. I been a faithful high priest long enough to know better."

I looked at his I-V tubes, thought of his smoke rings, and said, "Sorry, no oranges today."

THE house is quiet. Jason must be asleep and Rick is undoubtedly sorting through the chaos of papers he has spread out on the dining room table. I brush my hair and walk downstairs, noticing dust at the base of the rungs on the banister. "I'll have this cleared away before you know it," Rick says without looking up. I lean over to kiss him on the cheek and feel the hairs beginning to bristle. When we were dating, he shaved twice a day, to spare me from whisker burns. His whole body is hairy. Just last week Jason asked, "When will I get fur like Daddy?"

"Don't kid me," I say, feeling indulgent. "You'll be slaving over that column till three in the morning."

"Forgive me, then? You know how it is when I get an idea."

"Listen, I just want to get out in the air for a while," I tell him.

"Take the Mace," he says, rubbing the back of his neck and scratching his stomach at the same time.

ITS *A Wonderful Life* is going to be on the late show tonight. The rose scent of the pillow has made me feel homesick as I sit here on the porch steps with my skirt tucked around my knees. Engelbert Humperdinck is singing from a neighbor's upstairs window: "Please Release Me." I laugh, wondering if I should sing that for the bishop.

Maybe mother will meet Jimmy Stewart someday in the Celestial Kingdom, both of them grey-haired, wearing white robes. They could co-star in a Church movie to be shown at all visitors centers in the hereafter.

I entertain thoughts of calling Ingrid, then remember Texas is an hour later. Life would have been different if we'd gone to Baylor with all our buddies instead of BYU. I might have married some good ole boy and be living in Longfellow right now. He might have been somebody who'd stay up till one o'clock in the morning, watching Jimmy Stewart movies with me.

Sitting alone on a warm night always reminds me of the parched nights in Longfellow, when everybody left their doors unlatched, propped open with bricks, even while they slept. I was always afraid of what could get in through those open doors.

The sixty-foot cottonwoods are moving in the breeze, sounding like a whole congregation of people whispering at once. Would my life really be that different if I started sending milk to Poland?

RIK is snoring with his head on a pile of papers. I look at the thick dark hair on his arms and feel ashamed for having thought of marrying someone else.

"You're back," Rick says sleepily, stretching and putting on his glasses.

"Are you almost done?" I ask. "Shall we go to bed?" I stoop to pick up a marble from the carpet, then press my cheek against Rick's hair, bending over the back of his chair, feeling weary and disloyal at having thought of the good old Waco boys.

Our beautiful maple bed is upstairs. It belonged to Rick's grandmother and was shipped from Milwaukee on the train. I imagine turning back the dull brown sheets and slipping under the old navy blue quilt to get my feet warm on the backs of Rick's calves.

It's midnight now in Longfellow and in a dark windy house the man I could have married is pulling off his socks and tossing them in the direction of the hallway hamper, turning down the flowery sheets chosen by the woman he married who regards the master bedroom as the soul of the home.

The list is up there on my nightstand, reminding me to arrange a funeral lunch for an old man who liked me a lot because I brought him oranges and laughed at his ancestor stories and never complained about his smoking. The welfare orders still aren't signed and I'll probably never send milk to Poland or adopt a Korean baby. In the light from the old chandelier, I reach down and touch Rick's frayed pinstriped shirt collar.

In two days, Brother Quantrill will be buried. I wonder if he has given an accounting of his life yet. "I been a faithful high priest long enough to know better," he'll say, dressed in grass-stained jeans, his nicotine-yellow fingers fumbling in the dark for a match.

Upstairs, our bedroom is dark and windy, the small white pillows resigned to their spot on the drab blue quilt, dull stars in an overcast sky, the scent of my mother emanating from them even now, years after her death. ☞

THE VIEWING

Point of yet another unmarked road, space
To stretch and finish off our food, as still
As the sloping fields above the cliffs and hushed
As the flat ruff nudging the idle quay.
We walked out to the far end of the pier,
Our biscuits salted by the slightest wind.

Perceptions wrecked, strange instincts woke
As we observed the water's shallow set.
Before gray water focused into slate,
The image slowly registered as shark.
Leviathan long as the pier was wide,
Tethered tail and snout inverted, strung like bait,

So undefiled, so clean, so sound
As might prohibit spoilage and deny
Our dying. I gauged the flaccid tail-fin
With the rope and looked to sea—a picnicker
Pinioned in a far Atlantic cove,
Surprised to doubt the languor of my island.

—KAREN MARGUERITE MOLONEY