

She seems disappointed. Look at her, she's deep in study. Wants to tell me something, I can see that. I sure wish she'd go ahead on and spit it out. Whatever it is, it can't be that bad.

Child, are you fixing to move to Alaska again? or what?

Her face has gone red again. What in the world is so hard to say?

Is that all? Well, Sandra honey, it don't matter none who you love, long as you love somebody. This Joanie person seems okay. Is she good to you? That's all that matters then. Don't you worry about what people think. People ain't dumb, they know there's always been women who loved other women, and men who, well, you know. You told your mom yet? You better do that, you know she worries about you. Yeah, you go on and do that now, I got to see to the tomatoes myself.

Poor thing. All that upset just because she's gone and fell in love with a girl. I could tell her a thing or two, but she'll find out what she needs to know. I'm glad her father didn't live to see this day. Men don't understand these things. I know John never understood about me and Betty Jo. Had to go all crazy and get a divorce. Betty Jo would have had a laugh about Sandra. Funny how things turn out.

She's evidently got something on her mind. Looks like the kneading is taking her mind off IT instead of the other way around. Whatever it is, she'll either tell me or she won't.

What time does that gal you brought down here get up out of the bed? Well, what did she stay up so late for? Didn't the light keep you up too? I never could of stood nobody reading in bed. You know how I am about that. When it's time for bed it's time for bed. Reading is for some other time. Where did you meet this gal... okay, Joanie then. Where did you meet Joanie?

Theater. I can't figure how she has time to write them pieces and put them on. Works all day, raises little Stormy all by herself and now she's putting on plays to boot.

Any men in the plays you put on? Well, I just wondered, that's all. Curious, you know. I don't know when's the last time you mentioned a man, and you're young and healthy yet. Why your mother had been married four or five times by the time she was your age.

Look at her blush. I wonder if she's got a beau she ain't mentioned.

How's your dough doing? Why look at that! It's as pretty as a new Playtex! Here, let's let 'em rest a spell. Just put her in a ball, slap her in that bowl and cover her up. Good, good. Let's clean up our mess now.

Sandra will you set your hiney down in the corner? If you're going to watch, I'd druther you watched from over yonder.

Oh now she's going to pout. Here she is plumb grown up with young'uns of her own, still pouting when her grandma don't pay her enough attention. Well, I guess it won't kill me to tell her how to bake bread, though God knows why anybody would want to do it lessen they had to. I'd go to the store and buy light bread if I had the money.

Here now. You see the ingredients ain't nothing but yeast and scalded milk mixed together good, then flour and lard. How much? Depends on how many loaves you're aiming to make. Just dump some in until it looks right. Now take this ball here and start working it. Wait, wait, dust your hands first ... that's good, you don't need to cover the whole kitchen floor. Okay, now work it. Here the table's big enough for both of us I reckon. Just do what I do.

Look at her. Thirty-three years old and never baked a loaf of bread in her life. Ask me, Helen spoiled that child. Of course, Helen is near sixty and I never caused her to bake bread, so I guess it's my fault when you come down to it. Ain't none of us had it easy though, what with one thing and another. There ain't a one of us could ever tolerate a man for any length of time. Although I'd still be with Clifford if he hadn't of died.

What? No, we got a ways to go yet. I was just thinking about your grandpa. Yeah, he was a good 'un. Don't let up! You got to knead that dough till it's as stretchy and smooth as the elastic in your drawers. If your arms hurt, you have to think about something else.

Helen, sugar, this feels to me almost worse than Clifford's funeral. I don't know how I can get through it except for your help and God's. Will you help me to bear up? Thank you, daughter, thank you.

Thank you, God. Thank you for giving me this one child. One daughter I can lean on in hard times. And thank you too for the chance to do better by her before it's too late. I see now why you took Clifford first instead of me. Now, God, can you take time out of your busy day to walk me step by step through this blamed auction?

Oh my Lord, would you look at that, Helen? They're fixing to try to auction off my old bacon grease. Get up there and tell them it ain't for sale, would you?

God? It's going to be a long day, ain't it?

Child, don't get underfoot. I've got to get this bread worked up early today because I got to get those tomatoes picked before they rot on their blamed vines. Cockeye! Now see what you made me do! I've dumped in too much flour. Hand me that can of lard.

Can't she see I'm busy here? Lord love her she's quick as a trout, but she WILL hang about asking questions.

Helen, I didn't mean to hurt your tender feelings. I'm a little edgy that's all, and I expect you are too. Let's get a cup of coffee and get out of these men's way. We'll pick out the best spot to watch the auction and have us a good old time. I always did like to hear a good auctioneer. How about you?

See, Margaret? That wasn't so hard, now was it? Poor little thing, she lights up like a kid when I give her some attention. I should of been a better mother to her. Well, maybe I can make it up to her in the years I got left. I'll get me a job and then I can buy her some pretties for her house, or some nice shoes, she likes shoes.

Helen, come here and sit down by me, I want to show you something. There, just pull up a patch of ground like I did. Okay. Here, hold this coffee while I dig in my pocket. I was going through my jewelry box that Sandra made me when she was little, remember that? I packed it. Well anyway, I was looking at all my old rings and things, and I thought maybe you'd like to have Mom's wedding band. Here, see does it fit you. It ain't much, just plain gold, and thin where she nearly wore it out Good, good. And then I was thinking, remembering how Sandra always wanted to wear this gaudy topaz set with the filigree necklace. Reckon she'd want that? Well I thought so too, so I'm holding it out for her. You want to take it and give it to her? Oh, that's right, I probably will see her next time you do. Reckon we'll both be right there when she comes home for a visit. Funny, I can't get used to the idea.

Here they come, all the neighbors, all the gawkers, all the old fools with nothing better to do.

Guess I'll just grit my teeth and bear it. God, give me strength.

What? Wait a minute, where're you going with that washtub? Hold on! I'm taking that television with me -- that was a Christmas present. That tub, that TV, those suitcases, that sewing machine, that basket of quilt pieces, them pillows -- I'm taking all that stuff with me, so leave them be until my daughter gets here.

Law, they're a carrying stuff out to the yard faster than if the house was on fire. I don't know if I can stand this. How can I just sit here while all the neighbors poke and paw through my and Clifford's belongings and offer up a nickel or a dime for things we saved up a year for?

Junior, don't be so rough with that table, it's got a leg that -- now look what you done!

What do you mean you'll put her in the junk pile? I ain't got no junk pile on this place. I can fix that table, just need a bit of glue and some

They ain't got time. The nerve of these fellows. I and Clifford always had time to take care of things. Oh the hell with it. I reckon they're right. Let them give her a toss. Some poor fool'll get her out of the trash heap and then they can fix that blamed table leg. Thank the good Lord, here comes Helen. Now I can get loaded up and just wait till this is over.

Helen, sugar, how was the drive? Good, good. Want a cup of coffee? Yeah, they said that too, but I can't make breakfast on a cold stove and I'll be damned if I'm going to give up everything I got and move in with you on an empty stomach.

Oh Law, she's taking it personal. Am I going to have to watch everything I say for the rest of my life? Clifford, you jackass, why'd you have to go and die so blamed young? Seems like we had just about got used to each other's ways. Now I got to go live with Helen and her easy-to-hurt self, plus little Howdie who probably won't think her old grandma is so wonderful once she sees me around day in and day out. Guess I better start learning how to hold my tongue, beginning now.

Funny, I can almost hear Mom's voice calling, "Maggie May, pull yourself together and get on with it. You're wasting your days." Mom and Clifford both gone. Wonder do they see each other now? Wonder when it'll be my turn? I'm not but sixty-four, but then Clifford weren't even sixty. Maggie May, get the job done. Let's see, have I got all my sewing stuff? Crochet thread? All my quilts and tops and pieces? Don't want Elsie Anderson getting hold of nothing I made. Can't stand that gloating thing. Anybody could enter the county fair. Honest folks is too blamed busy.

Land sakes, here's somebody driving in already and sun ain't hardly up. I knew I wouldn't be ready. Well nothing to do but make the best of it.

Hello! You boys come on in here and get a cup of coffee. How do. How do. Call me Margaret.

Call me the Widow Lawson. The idea. I ain't no black widow spider and I ain't that old. Now what'd they say their names was?

You'ns take cream and sugar? What'd you'ns say your names was? Jim? and Jim junior.

Of course. I've got a lot on my mind. You can say that again. Yeah, I'm about packed up.

Just need to clean up the kitchen, but I was kind of waiting to see did you'ns want me to make up a bunch of coffee.

Wanted the stove cold. I don't recall them telling me that. Probably dismissed the idea as too stupid to entertain. Surely they don't expect a body to skip breakfast on the day she sells all her worldly goods and goes to live with her only daughter. Clifford, am I doing the right thing? I don't know why I'd ask you, you never lived in town in your life. I can get a job, meet some new people, maybe have me some fun.

Clifford? I'm sorry I can't look at you – or touch you – or put a cover over you. You know how I am. Somebody'll be here directly to deal with you. But Clifford? I'm going to the barn now.

Wonder should I pack my bacon grease up to Helen's house? She ain't much of a cook, but everybody's got grease I reckon. Maybe I should give it to the hogs. God I'm going to miss them old hogs. I had Red ever since she was a piglet. Got her from old man Slocum. No, Margaret, you old fool, Red was one of Nifty's litter. Born right here. You wouldn't think pigs would want to eat their own grease. Wonder if humans would know human grease if they was fed it? Reckon not. My word, how morbid.

Where was I? Oh yeah, trying to decide what else to take. The washtub's already overflowing, and my suitcases are full of clothes. Don't know why I'm bothering to drag them old housedresses with me when I'm moving into town, but I can't bear the thought of Elsie Anderson buying my clothes for a dollar a bushel then examining every hem and seam for flaws. No, they'll just have to go with me, and I'll cut them up for quilt pieces if I want to.

I declare I'm not getting a thing done. Can't seem to bend my mind to the task. If Clifford was here it'd be a sight easier. Leastwise I'd have somebody to talk to. Of course, if Clifford was still alive we wouldn't be having the auction. Oh Law, don't get me started on that. If I start into bawling, I'll be a mess when folks get here.

you're right they ain't all funny. That one about the time you got bit by that copperhead, that ain't funny. (Chuckles) Ha ha, Yeah, it was funny when Sandra was little and right in the middle of you telling it she asked you "Oh Grandpa, did you die?" Ha ha. People sure like to hear you tell them tales. I like to watch them listening. Watch 'em draw in close and then rare back and laugh. It's a sight.

Albert was the best laughter. Helen says that's how come her to marry him, the way he throwed his head back and laughed. He was the best husband out of the bunch too. I mean Taylor wasn't bad, but he didn't live long enough to really get to know him. That Vince, he didn't act quite right as far as I was concerned. Then when they got divorced she had to pay him off. That wasn't right, I don't care what you say. She worked hard for her money, and it was Albert's insurance that bought their house. Yep, Albert was a good 'un. The good die young they say.

Cockeye! Time's a wasting. I got to get to those chores. I guess I'll just grab a cold biscuit with some molasses instead of cooking eggs and gravy. You sure you don't want some breakfast before I head out to the barn? Oh, I plumb talked your ear off. You napping?

Clifford? Clifford answer me, you're scaring me. Raise up your face now, don't set there all slumped over like that. Clifford. Oh Jesus. Shit fire. Clifford! If you're not really dead, you better tell me now.

Oh, Jesus, God, Mary and Joseph.

Margaret, get ahold of yourself. What am I supposed to do?

Call the operator.

Operator? My husband's dead.

Margaret, tell the woman what she needs to know. Good, good, you're doing fine. Okay, that's done. Someone will come soon.

Oh all right, but just a few minutes. (pause) Sure I remember that. We hadn't been married more than a year. Inez and Faye were still girls. Oh that old place, yeah, yeah. But Clifford, the happiest day of my life was when we bought this place. Remember that? You carried me up over the threshold and me as heavy as old Bessie nearly. You're so strong. Yes you are, why if you hadn't swung that ax the way you did, the head of it wouldn't have flown and hit you so hard. We're just lucky it wasn't the sharp end.

Why didn't you make a new handle for that ax a long time ago? We both knew it needed it. If you'd had a new handle when they called you about that job, you wouldn't be setting here with a dent in your head the size of my fist. I wish you wouldn't put off till tomorrow what needs doing today. You'll be the death of me, I swan.

After I eat, I got to get out to the barn and muck it out, then collect the eggs, separate the cream, churn some butter, and then I think I'll read for a spell before supper. You want me to read to you?

Yeah, Helen left them True Story magazines, and we got a newspaper or two ain't been burned yet. Mm hm. Of course, the Bible. Which one you want? True Story it is then. There's one story in there about a girl whose husband beat her something terrible. Put me in mind of Inez and Simon. Well, yes, Sandra and Ronnie too, but you know Slick is worse than Ronnie ever was. (pause). Anyway. More coffee in your saucer?

Anyway, this girl in the True Story, she got out, she got plumb away from her husband, took the kids and everything. Got herself a regular job and raised the kids and everything turned out fine. Gives a body hope, don't it?

I think that's what them stories is for. Well, not all stories. I realize that. I'm saying them ones in True Story magazine. The ones you tell, those are to make people laugh, I reckon. No,

Clifford? Clifford, are you still laying in the bed? I already milked the cows, fed the chickens, slopped the hog, and hauled a bucket of water up from the spring. Ain't you even gonna get up for breakfast?

Well. Let me feel your forehead. You don't feel hot. Let me look at your sore spot. I have to turn on the light now, it's plumb dark in here with the shades drawn. Close your eyes then, I gotta see. Yep. That a bad spot. You'd think a person'd get a goose egg from something like that, but you got a dent. I never seen nothing like it.

Why don't you get up and come set in the front room and I'll make you a cold compress to put on your head. Then we'll have breakfast. Well. Surely you'll have some coffee? Maybe some toast? We still got a couple pieces of light bread left from when Helen was down. I could toast it up in the oven for you. I'm gonna eat some eggs and gravy, you sure you don't want none?

Clifford, what was the name of that old man you always talk about who died? You know the one. That story you tell where you went down to try to lay him out for the wake, but he kept setting up? Oh. No reason. I's just thinking about it. You know how scared I am of dead people.

How come you to get that job of laying him out anyway? (Chuckles). Ha! I guess that's right. You always would do just about anything for money – except a regular job. (pause) I ain't aiming to argy [sic – argue] I'm just saying. Why, don't I know we wouldn't get to spend all this time here together if either one of us was out working a regular job. Remember how it was when I was going over to Fort Wood doing that ironing? Shoot. Here, let me change that compress for you. The coffee's ready, I'll pour you some in your saucer.

Now you know I ain't got time to set her jawing – I got to make breakfast then I got a hundred things to do. With you laid up with your head, it's only me gonna get stuff done.

And now, finally, in one blissful unexpected moment, my prayers were answered. I wasn't dead, but I had seen my father. I closed my eyes and smelled his fragrance again. I could still feel his hand patting my back.

Reverend Fuller's voice roared through my head. His words circled my brain and landed in both ears. "It's here! His love is here in this room! Praise God if you FEEL it! Sisters and Brothers, praise God if you feel the LOVE in this house!"

"Praise God," I said quietly.

Grandma looked down at me, squeezed me close under her arm and said, "Yes, Lord."

I sing the words "I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses ..." I close my eyes and create a scene for myself in my mind.

It's early morning and I'm going to see my daddy in heaven. No one else is around and I am not afraid. There's a great green garden. I pass by a tall white trellis covered with blood red roses as soft as my favorite velvet dress. I come to a stone bench and sit on it, swinging my legs, while I wait for my daddy to show up. Birds sing in the background. Sunshine breaks through the overhead boughs and touches my hand. I look up.

There's my dad, walking up the path. He hurries to me as I run to meet him. He kneels and holds me in his arms. My face just fits in the crook of his neck, and I smell bleach in his white cotton shirt, the tobacco smoke clinging to his jacket, the faint traces of Old Spice. His warm breath puffs against my hair and his right hand pats its familiar rhythm on my back.

As the last note of the hymn dies away, I slowly open my eyes. Daddy is gone, but he has left me the gift of his love. My chest is filled with it. I feel it pouring out with my every breath. Now it is filling the room. People are bathed in it. No wonder they seem so happy.

I take my place in the pew next to Grandma as the applause fades away. Reverend Fuller thanks me then begins to praise Jesus for making his presence known. Choruses of amens and yes lords are sounded.

Was it Jesus? I think it was Daddy.

The shock of my daddy's death had sent me reeling, and for almost two years now I had been praying to God every night that He would take me too. That He would let me die so I could go to heaven and see my dad.

Here at Grandma's country church where everything seems more alive, the congregation has heard me before. I like how they clap for the singing, and I barely even feel nervous.

The tiny church fills up quickly even though we're among the first to arrive. Like everyone else, we find our usual seats, pull a cardboard fan from the hymnal rack and begin to create a breeze.

Reverend Fuller soon gets us started with a few words. Then we sing some hymns and pray awhile. I'm impatient for my turn at getting the attention.

At last he calls on me. I go to the piano and take my place. I whisper the title of my selection to Mrs. Bellows who accompanies, then smooth the white cotton pique skirt of my dress, lift my chin, and give the nod.

For those few glorious moments, I am a gift from heaven. My voice pours out like heated honey and the sound seems to surround the entire congregation. The high notes dance in my own ears and make my stomach feel full and happy. I have no fear. I look up into smiling faces and wish the song would never have to end.

I can feel the love in this damp, humid room, smell it amidst the aftershave, toilet water, and healthy sweat. I feel lifted, and my voice rings out with no effort from me.

As the song comes to its end, the congregation applauds. Grandpa beams a broad smile, Grandma coughs into her hankie. The applause doesn't die. I stand there next to the upright piano, wiggling my toes in pleasure, waiting to take my modified curtsy.

Then Reverend Fuller's voice booms out above the clapping. "Sandra I believe we want you to sing it again, can you do that for us?"

The audience signifies agreement with shouts of "Amen, Brother," "Let us hear the little Sister again," and "Yes, Lord." I nod my head and Mrs. Bellows plays the introduction again. As

her up the hill to the house, and then spring ahead to open the screen door for her, hoping to get back into her good graces.

I needn't have worried. Grandma sets the bucket and ax down, takes my hand and leads me to the rocker. She wraps me in a summer quilt, for even though it's about as hot as I ever remember it, I am shivering. And then she rocks me in silence until I feel warm again.

Before bedtime, she decides it is time I learn how to piece quilts so I'll have something safe to do while she and Grandpa are out in the fields. And the next day, I make my first patchwork square. That night, Grandma embroiders a big old copperhead right in the middle of it.

"Praise God!" Grandma is shouting. I'd be embarrassed except that everyone else seems to be yelling too.

Reverend Fuller has us at fever pitch with his sermon on God's precious love. This is the summertime evening service. Every Sunday after supper, we clean up the kitchen and ourselves, pick up our bibles and our coins wrapped in hankies, and we climb the hot dusty hill to church.

It's a mile and a half up the Missouri limestone gravel road, but it's also thirty minutes of talking to Grandma and Grandpa without being told to do some chore. We talk about who'll be at the service, or what Reverend Fuller'll preach about tonight, or who got saved the week before.

Tonight I talk about the fact that I'm going to sing a solo. I'm excited because there's nothing I like better than singing in church -- especially by myself. Back home with my mom and sister and stepfather, I sing in our conventional, conservative church about once a month. In fact, singing has become my reason for attending church at all, since I got mad at God for taking my daddy to heaven.

Bent over, with the barbed wire at my back, and my face about eighteen inches from the snake's own face, I can see entirely too clearly its flitting tongue as it smells whether or not it should coil and strike. I'm frozen in position. If I dare to move either one of my feet, I fear I'll step on the snake and it will no longer be confused as to whether or not to bite me. If it strikes me, it will at least get me in the thigh, maybe in the crotch and I don't trust that my cotton panties are going to be much protection.

My hands seem glued to my knees, and I can feel both the sun and the wire barbs burning into my back where my sundress has dipped for fashion and comfort. My ears seem to burn with the sound of someone screaming, and I finally realize it is me when my throat begins to burn more than my ears.

The snake looks at me and keeps flicking its tongue. Still, it has not coiled. I know this is a good sign, but I'm praying for all I am worth that it will decide to continue on its journey to wherever it was going before I came along and straddled it.

Screaming, praying, burning. I remain frozen in position, only my lungs and vocal cords at work.

Suddenly, Grandma is yanking me to her side of the gate so hard I am flung several feet away from her. I watch with horror and not a little bit of awe as she wields the wood chopping ax and parts the snake's head from its body. The body writhes, but the tongue stops.

Grandma tosses the ax to the ground, grabs me up and inspects me for bite marks, then beats my butt for "gittin' into sich a pickle!" I cry from fear, anger, and hurt feelings. I couldn't help it, I tell myself.

Grandma flings the two parts of the snake over to the side of the yard, picks up the ax in one hand, the bucket in the other, and motions me to the house with a flick of her head. I follow

Grandma and Grandpa are out in the field digging potatoes to sell to the store. I don't like bending down in the dirt with the sun burning my back, so I've been allowed the luxury of scrubbing the floor instead.

It's not big. The whole room is maybe eight by ten feet and the woodstove and refrigerator cover a lot of that space. And Grandma sweeps it out everyday. But it's been months since it was truly scrubbed, and I know what awaits me: fine layers of ash and grime attracted and held by the even finer layers of bacon and sausage grease sent down every morning, noon and night when Grandma cooks the meat, potato and bread meals we all know and love.

I count the sixteen fat flies that sit on the windowsill avoiding the flypaper strips that hang from every ceiling in the house. Grandma would swat them dead if she saw them here. I shoo them outside with the handle of my mop.

I lift the heavy floral skirt my Grandma made for the sink. It hides the bucket which is the only drain in the house. It also hides the lye soap and stiff gray rags that will become the head of my mop. I empty the bucket out the door and watch the water run down the hard-packed earth, trying to find some grass to feed. There is none, and anyway it's August. The grasses have been dried up for six weeks.

The rain barrel is empty, so I walk down the road a quarter of a mile to the spring and fill my bucket with creek water. I'd get my hide tanned if I used spring water to wash the floor.

On the way back the bucket bangs my shins, and precious drops slosh out the sides. I walk slower and the weight tries to tug my shoulder joints from their sockets. I'm so focused on not spilling the water I don't see the copperhead waiting for me at the gate until after I've set the bucket down, lifted the barbed wire, and straddled the snake.

Well, he sounds real nice. Your dad and I oughta meet him.

Look at her blush. I guess her woman feelings have started up already. And it ain't been two years since she got the curse. Her just starting, me being about through. Guess there's woman feelings on both ends of the deal. Only hers are fresh and eager, mine are wore out and mad most of the time. This too shall pass, I need to remember that.

Remember child, this too shall pass. The embarrassment, the shyness, the being upset with grownups -- that'll all pass away. Just like for me, I have to remember the anger will pass away. We're more alike than either one of us realizes. Oh now, don't get that look -- I know you're different from me. But we're both of us women and we're blessed and cursed with all that means.

Now let's get supper ready before Clifford comes in here and wonders what his women-folk been up to all day.

Oh Law, here comes another hot flash. Hang on Margaret, this too shall pass.

I'm eight years old as I sit here in the outhouse, fifty yards up the hill behind the house, staring at the Sears catalogue draped over a rusting hanger, wondering how I'll ever get that worn kitchen linoleum to shine without wax.

Grandma says she "don't care iff'n it don't gleam" as long as I "git the blamed dirt up."

Smells buzz around my head along with the flies. I wipe myself with a page of fluffy bath towels and amble back down to the house.

Faye child, come here. Oh Faye, I'm so sorry. Let me see your poor face.

Darling, I am sorry, I am truly. Let me bathe it for you, here, let me see.

Oh no. It's going to be purple there on her cheek. Thank you God for placing a visible reminder of how sinful I was to hit this young girl.

You're going to have a bruise there, Faye. I'm sorry. I shoulda turned you over my knee for sassing, but I shouldn't of ever lost my temper and hit you in the face. That was very wrong, and I don't blame you if you're mad at me.

Are you? I thought so. Well, I don't blame you. What did Clifford say?

She didn't tell him?

Why not? I thought you'd run and tell on me. I see.

She's right, she's no tattletale. Maybe she's not such a child as I thought.

Well, I'll tell him what I did. I'll tell him why, too. But first I think the three of us ought to talk about this dating business.

Look at the hope on her face. Oh the innocence that she owns. Dear God, thank you for sending me this child. For giving me another chance to raise a daughter. Help me become a better mother before it's too late.

Ellis is his name? I like that name. It's a good clean name. What kind of boy is he, anyhow?

Wonder what a dress would look like made out of quilt pieces? On somebody thin like Faye it might look kinda cute. I could make a solid bodice, maybe use that peach color I've got set back for curtains. And then I'll set to work on a dress for myself. Maybe there's enough of that peach material to make a whole dress for me plus a bodice for Faye. Probably is if I cut careful.

her little high voice calling me Mother. Reminded me of when my own daughter was little. Of course, Helen didn't live with me that much. But now when Faye says "Mother" she says it like she was talking to the devil himself. Maybe I should let her date. Maybe she'd get knocked up and leave home.

Pour that right in the washtub there. Good. Now do what I told you a while ago. Get in there and start some supper. Yeah, well, I'm sick of potatoes, gravy and biscuits every night myself. You want to go kill a chicken and fry it up? I didn't think so. Well, I don't either. I don't live to cook and clean and sew new dresses for you, you know.

What do I live for? Why the impudence of that girl. I oughta

There! You been needing that for a long dang time. Go on! Go run to your father, see if I care!

Shoot! Blame it! Oh God why did you let me do that? I didn't mean to hit her Lord. I swear I didn't. Oh God, now Clifford is going to have a fit. If I was going to hit her I shoulda put her over my knee, not slapped her across the face like that. Shoot. My hand stings. Look at it. Red as a beet. She'll be swole up for sure. Clifford's going to spit nickels. Oh God. I'd better pray. Dear God, Father in Heaven, forgive me for hitting that child. I don't know what's come over me God. I'm not myself. I cry, I get mad, God, I even think of suicide and I know that's one sin You can't forgive. God help me not to be in too much trouble with my family. They're all I've got besides You God, and I can't even visit Your house because I don't have a dress to wear and I've cut my material into quilt pieces. I'm sorry. God, please help me stop crying and being such a fool. Please God. Oh no. Here comes Clifford. No, it's Faye again.

That girl'll be the death of me. And it's all Clifford's fault. He should of stayed a widower and raised those two girls his own self instead of chasing after me and getting me to marry him.

What do you need a new dress for? It ain't Christmas or Easter and I don't see you ballooning up like a spring pig. A date? Whose date? You ain't old enough to go on no date, you ain't but fourteen years old. Oh he did, did he? Well, your dad don't make all the rules around here, and if he said it was okay with him, I'm certain he meant it was okay with him if it was okay with me, which it ain't.

Blame his eyes! That man is foolhardy when it comes to his youngest girl. It's plain as the nose on your face that he loves her more than he does me. If he thinks for one minute that I'm going to stand still for this child going out and getting herself pregnant like her sister did -- well.

We'll just see about that young lady. And you'd better watch your mouth. You go smarting off to me one too many times and I'll knock you upside the head. You ain't too big to whip neither.

Look at her sulk. Law, I'm hot enough to die! The sweat's just a pouring off my head. I hate when it runs down my side like that too. I'll have to take another bath tonight, and it's only been two days.

Help me put the washtub on the wood stove, child. Because I said so that's why. Yes, if you must know, I am going to take another bath. Now go get a pail of rainwater from the barrel.

Like pulling teeth to get her to do anything. Used to be so easy when she was little. She was so loving and sweet. Poor little thing lost her mama when she wasn't bigger than a minute. I loved

Who does she think she is calling me fat? I ought to slap her silly. The skinny thing, she's plumb pitiful herself, no wonder she thinks I'm fat.

What does it say? I can't read those little bitty numbers. Thirty-six? It ain't no such a thing. You must have it turned inside out. Why your own father's waist ain't that big.

My God, she's right. Thirty-six of the waist? Why that's almost as big as my hips. What'll I do? Oh no, I don't want to cry. Oh what's the use.

Just leave me alone. I can cry if I please. Get on out and help your dad.

I'm hot. What's happening to me? I'm flashing, I'm fat, I can't keep myself from crying. I feel mad about half the time and feel like killing myself the other half. I hate my life! It's all Clifford's fault! If I hadn't married him I wouldn't be trapped out here on this blamed farm. I'd be living in the city, going to shows, going out dancing, wearing store bought clothes and eating store bought food. I never was fat when I lived in the city! Why do I even try to mess with making a dress? It's stupid! I may as well forget about going to church. Just stay here in my overalls cooking and cleaning and making garden. This dress idea was stupid. I might as well cut it up for quilt pieces. Where's my scissors? There. There. That'll fix you you damned ignorant rag! You call yourself a dress? Ha. You can just be a quilt. Even that's too good for you.

God Almighty Faye, you like to scared me out of my wits. What do you want now? Well, I'm cutting out quilt pieces if it's any of your business. Did you help your dad? Uh-huh, well go do your homework. Well then, go peel some potatoes for supper, just go do something and leave me be.

Oh Law, why don't this blamed dress top fit me? Seems like I can't do nothing right no more. I pre-shrunk the material, I used the same pattern I've used for the last two years, and I know I sewed the seams the same as I always do. So what is it? The darts seem like they're too high up for my breasts, I can't button the waist in the back. And, thank You, God, I know for a fact I ain't pregnant.

Faye, is that you coming in? Your dad wants you to help him out in the barn, so soon as you put your books down and change out of those school clothes, you get on out there, you hear?

I don't even have to see her face, I can hear what it looks like by the size of that sigh. I'll have to poke and prod at her for the next half hour to get her to do what she couldn't wait to do a year ago. I don't know what's got into that girl.

Faye? Come here a minute and help me fit this dress. No, it ain't for you, I'm making me a Sunday-go-to-meeting dress. I ain't had a new one in two years. Something seems to have gone wrong on this one, see if you can button me up the back.

Okay now Margaret, try to be still. You need this girl's help and you just have to get ahold of yourself. Oh Law, listen to me talking to my own self inside my head. What's next? The men in white coats? God! I wish she'd hurry up!

What do you mean it won't fit? I am not too fat! I'm just as fat or as thin as ever. I mean I'm the exact same size! Well I am. Give me that tape measure out of the drawer there.

This is a show to be performed by one woman, who plays both roles.

CHARACTERS:

Maggie Mae Lawson Country woman from rural Missouri, ages from late 40's to early 70's
Calls herself Margaret

Sandra Country girl, age 8-9

COPPERHEADS AND COMMON WOMEN

By

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