A Trick of Light

Christel Reges
Grand Valley State University

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She turned off of the main road into the long driveway, downshifting. The deep winter's frost had melted; Wanda could feel the truck's tires biting into the unresisting muck, plowing it into deep ruts. Mason would be angry. She should have parked out on the road and walked in, or slowed down well before the turn. She could hear his voice already:

"You're fifty-three years old, but you drive like a god-damned teenager!" He'd follow her from room to room if she tried to escape the sound of his voice. "Maybe you think driving stupid's going to make you young again.

Too late. She brought the pickup to a slithering halt where the ruin of an old flagstone walk began its graceful Victorian serpentine up to the kitchen door. Mud splattered the windshield. Home.

She killed the engine. The warm, busy, organized racket of the machine--motor and heater and radio--ceased, and in the abrupt silence, the young puppy awoke with a frightened yip. Wanda gathered the slipping, awkward bundle into her arms, as much to take comfort as to give it, and kicked the truck door closed.

The fresh wind blew against Wanda's face, and the limp satin envelope of the puppy's ear tickled her cheek. The wind was moaning; a familiar sound, but it never failed to chill her: above the gaunt white farmhouse, and behind it, a stand of ancient pine trees stooped and towered. They had been planted more than a century ago, as a windbreak. "Windbreak" was a poor weak word for them now. Wanda thought. They were ear-break, eye-break, mind-break. They touched the low, wet sky. They caught at the wind and set up a soft, boneyard rattling.

"Poor old scrap." She kissed the top of the puppy's head. "It doesn't look like much, I'll own. Still, I could show you places that make this look like a castle." After all these years, she thought, the sound of the wind through those pines still has the power to sink my heart. Eighteen years ago. She remembered Mason, a great, tall, black-haired man with
a fierce-looking mustache: he'd pulled her this way and that, showing her how fine it all was, so full of himself...

"And I couldn't hear a word he said to me!" She said suddenly, aloud, as she lowered the dog onto the long, damp grass. "All I could hear was that—howling, in the air above us, like hounds of hell baying for my soul. I should have run away then." She surveyed it all, the house, the dark trees, and the utter loneliness, with her hands on her hips. Why didn't I trust my heart? Right through there. I should have shot off through those trees screaming bloody murder—like you should, right now." She nudged the puppy gently with the toe of her boot.

"Well, go on. Get, Pandora!"

Pandora jumped, and landed her oversized paws against the hem of Wanda's skirt. Her paws were muddy, and her dark eyes supplicant. She looked beautiful and miserable, and Wanda bent down and laughed, pressing her hands gently on both sides of the dog's head.

"But you won't run away, will you? No, you won't. You've got no place to run to. I know that feeling."

Pandora had had no close acquaintanceship with stairs; getting in the back door became a surprisingly involved operation. The dog—her handbag—the key—the light switch—Oh, Lord, her jacket was thick with dog hair! Thank goodness Mason wasn't home. "There!" Wanda plopped the young dog onto the kitchen linoleum. Pandora flattened herself, from tail to nose-tip, against the scarred pattern of rose-and-trellis. Her eyes followed Wanda around the dark, shabby room with terrified devotion. Wanda was muttering to herself. "I had a heap of old blankets around here somewhere... good heavens! You don't suppose he would have burned those? And coffee. I need coffee."

She moved nervously and apparently aimlessly across the room, but in her wake warmth, light, and order began to emerge. A small lamp over the stove was lit, and another—shaded, chimneyed, oil-odorous—on the kitchen table. A scorched and speckled blue coffee-pot began its first raspy percolations on the gas range. The huge, ugly old refrigerator yawned icily, exhaled eggs and buttermilk, and was shut up again. Out of the depths of the room's one deep closet, after some thumping and exclamation, Wanda produced a worn and mended army blanket. It time and hard use had fad nearly matched the puppy's.

"You can lie here," Wanda whispered quarters and laid it in a shell. Pandora lay motionless in the front legs and gently over the hounds of hell baying for my soul. I should have run away then." She nudged the puppy gently with the toe of her boot.

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mended army blanket. It might once have been olive brown;
time and hard use had faded it now to a pale, mottled tan. It
nearly matched the puppy's brindled coat.

"You can lie here," Wanda said. She folded the blanket in
quarters and laid it in a sheltered corner behind the stove.
Pandora lay motionless in the center of the room; nervous
tremors convulsed her flanks. Wanda picked her up behind
the front legs and gently dragged her towards the blanket.
The long whip of the puppy's tail swept the linoleum.

"I reckon I can count on you staying put tonight, can't I?"

An hour later, the kitchen's two narrow windows were
misted with fragrant steam from the coffee pot; the odor of
drying puppy contributed a musty, wild under-note. Wanda
stood at the stove, immersed in the alchemical beginnings of
cornbread. She'd sifted the meal and flour into a golden
pyramid, and was mincing in the shortening. She used two
silver knives for this: the plating had worn off of them in long
brassy swaths all along the handles and they clicked and
flashed like sabres in the low, slanted lamplight. Three eggs
nestled, sacrificial virgins, in a teacup beside the open recipe
book. The red, white and gold promotional clock over the
refrigerator proclaimed "It's Miller Time!"

Tick... tick... tick... like slow breathing.

The abrupt crunch and roar of a car's tires threading the
driveway electrified Wanda, despite her determination to
remain calm. Through the thin curtains she could see the
unwieldy old Ford approaching with, oh, it seemed a
predatory slowness. Its headlights, like cat's eyes, peered
through the gloom. For a long moment the engine idled out-
side, and Wanda imagined Mason's eyes moving from the
mud-splattered truck, to the lights in the kitchen window, to
the shadow of her own lean, straight form, bending over the
stove. Any

moment now, any moment... she straightened herself, and
beat the eggs a little more spiritedly as she broke them, one
by one, into the soured milk.

Pandora slept. Wanda looked at her: the poor innocent,
unconscious offender. She tried to think of what she was
going to say when Mason came in, but when she tried to set
words in her head all she could see were those pine treesbe-
hind the house, rising up like God’s own Great Wall of China.

“It isn’t like we should expect him to be angry,” she said to herself, to the puppy, to the air. “However,” and as she said this the front door, the big door at the other end of the house, opened violently, crashed into the wall behind it, and was slammed thunderously closed. “However,” her voice had involuntarily dropped to a near-whisper, “He will be.”

“Wanda! That you?”

Wanda relaxed a little. She knew this script.

“Well, who else would it be? In the kitchen, Mason?”

He filled the kitchen doorway as completely as if he’d been bricks and mortar. His bleached blue eyes, beneath the drooping lids, were full of choler and something else: a self-conscious enjoyment of his position. Master of the castle. How patient and self-controlled he was! Yes, no question about it, he was taking this latest insult to his authority remarkably well. He radiated self-satisfaction.

Oh, go on, you old fool, Wanda thought. Enjoy yourself. But out loud she only said, “Hello, Mason.”

In reply, Mason ran his fingers through his short, grey hair and shook his head in a pantomime of weary bewilderment. “I could plant potatoes in the trenches you left in the driveway, woman.”

I wish they were deep enough to plant you, you old warthog, said Wanda—but only to herself. For the past couple of years, she had been noticing that she generally seemed to be having two different conversations with her husband: one outside, and one inside. She supposed she’d always been doing this, but lately it had become disconcertingly noticeable. Sometimes she became confused in mid-conversation, unsure which train of thought was which.

“Oh, my,” she said, scraping batter into a greased iron pan. “Are they that bad?”

“Inconsideration! That’s what I call it. Here you’ve got this fine home, everything you could possibly want.”

He crossed the kitchen as he spoke, dropped his dripping field coat onto the kitchen table, hooked an enamelled mug off a shelf with his thumb, and poured hot, clear coffee. Steam rose from the mug in a tall, twirling spire. It reached to the ceiling, flattened and disappeared. Wanda wished that she could disappear. She was like a flower. Mason filled his coffee-cup.

“If you want anything, get it for you. Within reason, and down the driveway.”

Within reason. Wanda’s, of course. My, she thought.

“Len, down at the Station”—and tanked up the truck—“she use for money?” I asked your account.” And there was good mood. ‘Well, that know where my wife is. tickled to know she’s home.’

“Oh, Mason! A truck! Oh, Wanda!” he re-paced, struck the kitchen, turned back towards his patience. “Wanda, look, I wouldn’t mention your name to certain things, but you choose to trapse all over, you’re turning out just like my good name gets dragged into the image.

“Turning out? Mason!”

“You’re an old fool.”

Wanda said nothing more. She put the oven, poured herself a her husband at the sink, picked the tablecloth.

“I drove to Catlett.”

“You’ve got a sister?” He looked.

No, Patty Page, she said.

“I had lunch with Patty Page. Mason put his cup down, turned towards his wife, to yourself? That’s a two, dinner ready.” He sighed.
down Great Wall of China.

So be angry," she said to whoever," and as she said
other end of the house.
"I will kill it, and was
her voice had in-
"He will be ."

this script.

in the kitchen. Mason?"
completely as if he'd been
you. Beneath the
something else: a
Master of the
he was! Yes, no
insult to his
and self-satisfaction.
I thought. Enjoy yourself.
Mason."
through his short, grey hair
weary bewilderment. "I
you left in the driveway,
important you, you old
by herself. For the past couple
she generally seemed to
with her husband: one
she'd always been
unspectacularly noticeable.
mid-conversation, unsure
hotter into a greased iron
it. Here you've got this
probably want."

, dropped his dripping
an enamelled mug off
clear coffee. Steam
It reached to the
Wanda wished that she
could disappear. She thought of outside, of the night unfolding
like a flower. Mason fixed her with a dark look across the top
of his coffee-cup.

"If you want anything, all's you got to do is tell me, and I'll
get it for you. Within reason. You don't need to go tearing up
and down the driveway like a mad dog all day long."

Within reason. Whose reason? she thought. Well, yours, of course. My reason's long gone.

"Len, down at the Shell station, said you'd been by there
and tanked up the truck. 'Tanked up the truck? And what did
she use for money?' I asked. 'Oh,' he said, 'I just put it on
your account.' And then he remarked that you were sure in a
good mood. 'Well, that's just fine,' I said to myself. 'I don't
know where my wife is off to, but why should I care? I'm just
tickled to know she's having a real good time!"

"Oh, Mason! A truck ride!"

"Oh, Wanda!" he retorted, mimicking her tone. He turned,
paced, struck the kitchen wall with the flat of his hand, then
turned back towards his wife with an expression of forced
patience. "Wanda, look here: I know I promised you that I
wouldn't mention your mother's name in . . . well, in reference
to certain things, but you force me, woman. When you
choose to tramp all over the countryside, up to God only
knows what, you know what people will say. They'll say
you're turning out just like your mother. Only this time it's
my good name gets dragged through the mud . . ."

"Turning out? Mason, I am all turned out by now. I'm an
old woman."

"You're an old fool."

Wanda said nothing then. She put the cornbread into the
oven, poured herself a cup of coffee, and sat down beside
her husband at the square wooden table. His coat had soaked
the tablecloth.

"I drove to Catlett, to visit Patty," she said.
"Your sister?" He looked as if he didn't believe her.
No, Patty Page, she thought.
"I had lunch with Patty, in Catlett," she said.
Mason put his cup down heavily. "You drove to Catlett by
yourself? That's a two hour drive. No wonder there's no
dinner ready."
He sighed and shook his head again and looked
at her as if her stupidity were an unending marvel in his eyes.

"Why didn't you tell me you were going?"

“Oh...” Her eyes searched the air, combing it for words.

“If I'd told you I was going to visit Patty, you'd have had half a
dozent good reasons why I shouldn't go.” She dropped her
eyes from his, and looked at her hands: thin hands holding the
white cup, steam rising up from the black coffee like a ghost.

“I didn't want reasons. I wanted my sister. So I went.”

She looked at him. Mason drained his cup and set it on the
table. He looked back at her. He looked puzzled. He
sniffed. “Girl,” he said, and shook his head. “Does it smell
funny in here to you. like something dead?”

Here we go. Wanda thought. Now or never.

“Mason, that is no dead thing you smell. It’s a nice, live
little puppy. See?”

In the shadow of the range, Pandora watched them with
eyes like wet black stones.

“Oh. Lord.” said Mason. “What have you done now?”

He passed his hand over his eyes like he was trying to
erase what he saw. “What have you done now?”

Wanda crossed over to where the dog lay. She knelt
down beside the blanket, and looked back at Mason. There
was a funny cross between fear and anger beating in her
heart. The only time I ever brought anyone home to dinner.
she thought. The only time. She spoke, and was surprised at
how calm and quiet her voice sounded.

“Tina’s old dog had puppies. The last litter. Tina said.
And Patty had three of them, because she’s got room, and
Tina hasn’t, anyway... there they were, three puppies, and I
was playing with them, and Patty asked me did I think I’d like
one, and—Honestly, Mason, the next thing I knew I was
halfway back home with a puppy in the back seat.” She half-
lifted Pandora into her lap. “She’s a very little puppy.

Mason.”

He looked at the animal appraisingly. “Young moose. he
said. “What kind of dog did you say that was?”

“Great Dane,” said Wanda, looking right into his eyes.

“But she’s the runt of the litter, I swear it.”

“That tears it, Wanda.” He slapped his knees and stood
up. From her low vantage point he looked enormous, his head
crowding the ceiling. “I don’t spend my money. I don’t
not sleep under the same roof as a barn. I don’t propose
towards the door. “You poor old vulture. Put it in the spring
goes back to Catlett.” You can have another pleasant

Wanda stood up. Her anger, she thought. Everything I
can feel so-drunk, almost, this morning. Mason. She was holding
blanket, jumbled together.

“You poor old vulture. Put it in the spring.

Then, somehow, the thought was going out onto the
grass of the back door, and she went down the stairs.

She looked up. The April wind, still cold even in the
gathering sweetness, was coming in closer and closer. until
looking up the skirts of them, and stood at the
fall away in a long line—hatched with
mismatched
lusterless and silent, a

High up in the pines, she breathed deep, filling her
April wind, still cold even in the
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combing it for words. “I’d have had half a ter. So I went.”

She dropped her thin hands holding the coffee like a ghost. “Does it smell bad?”

He nodded. “It’s a nice, live smell. It’s a nice, live smell,” he was trying to

“you done now?”

She watched them with

“you poor old vulture.” She realized by the shocked look on Mason’s face that she had spoken aloud. “I wouldn’t dare leave anything sweet and young and carefree under the same roof with you. You’d kill it, one way or another, you would.”

Then, somehow, the door was open in front of her and she was going out onto the porch, and then she was standing in the grass of the back dooryard with no recollection of having gone down the stairs. The night air was shockingly cool upon her face. After the close, tense atmosphere of the house, the sudden sense of freedom and solitude was dizzying.

High up in the pines, the wind was raising hell. Wanda breathed deep, filling her body with the moving air. It was an April wind, still cold enough to bite, but it had sap in it too, a gathering sweetness. She walked towards the great trees, closer and closer, until she had walked right underneath them and was looking straight up their fringed columns. It was like looking up the skirts of a clique of staid old dowagers, all their scraggy underpinnings exposed. And then she was past them, and stood at the edge of the meadow, where the land fell away in a long line-tipping angles of rocky earth, cross-hatched with mismatched fencing and with the muddy paths that the cows made-­until it met the Louisa River, running lusterless and silent, a twisting line of darkness far below her.

She looked up. There was still no moon, but the wind was breaking up the clouds, puzzlewise, and the true black of the
night sky was showing in the spaces in between. Wanda sat down at the top of the slope and stretched her legs out downhill. Water from the thawing earth soaked into the back of her skirt. She folded her hands loosely in her lap and sat still, like a good child, waiting to know what to do.

Pandora padded back and forth along the top of the hill, nose to the ground, whuffing and sniffing. She didn't seem to be so scared anymore, Wanda thought. She turned and looked back towards the farmhouse. There was no light in the house except for the kitchen lights. She could see a dark form moving back and forth in the lit-up windows, and then suddenly the kitchen door gaped open spilling amber light, and a lot of smoke like clouds pouring out, and Mason himself. Even from here, she could make out the tread of his boots on the old porch boards.

"That'll be the cornbread, burning," she said, and turned back towards the river. Across the water, where the land began to rise again, were the lights of the highway: an unending ribbon of brilliance.

"What am I going to do?" she asked. Terror and wonder were mingled in her voice and face.

"We could wait here until Mason comes looking for us." She looked at Pandora, who had stretched herself on the wet grass and was worrying a stick. "He won't find us if we don't call out."

Silence. The strange atonal melody of the wind, and the sound of Pandora's teeth on wood, like a rat's gnawing.

"Or, I could hire a...a Puerto Rican hit man. Tina told me about them. She said that in Richmond you can hire a hit man for only fifty dollars. Fifty dollars and they'll kill anyone. Boy.

"We could sit out here on the hillside until I freeze to death. But I don't think it's cold enough. Probably I'd live and have chilblains. That would be worse than dying."

She sat on, in silence, and stared down the retreating slope of land. Route 12 lay across the shoulders of the hills opposite like a band of living jewels, red and white, moving ceaselessly. All those tiny lights. They looked so bright and passionless, like stars, but Wanda knew that every one of them represented a human soul. They were going to their homes; they were leaving, sparkling, inching lights to many people. Some of them lost. A cold, round world.

"Pandora, look there. Brick, above the highway, dog onto her lap and staring. That's the Rolling Stones. How could I be lost, me, home, Pandora, all of them. What a man in there? We'll see.

She looked up at the stars...two...three stars. She asked herself. And struck the cold ground with a sound of Music. Right and tearing up that hill.

"Baby, did you ever feel I want to burst out saying what to do, only feeling--musical. sound of Music."

She looked down at her dangling, underneath one, without words. Wanda could not express it.

What a night, she thought, I do feel I want to burst out saying what to do, only feeling--musical, saying Sound of Music. Right and tearing up that hill.

"No, of course you have."

She walked on then, to the living wall, the stars, tops cut the horizon like everyplace else. The cliff, their shaggy heights and...
between. Wanda sat in the bed spreading her legs out and soaked into the back of her neck. She sat there in her lap and sat there, waiting, wondering what to do.

Standing at the top of the hill, she could see a dark form spilling amber light, and then she knew it was Mason, and Mason himself.

She turned and struck the cold ground with her fists. "Of course I'm not lost! How could I be lost, me, on my own ground? This is my home. Pandora, all of this. See that house? You know that man in there? We'll see about him! Come on, baby. Lost!"

She gathered the puppy up and tucked her, loamy paws dangling, underneath one arm. She began to walk back with such a sudden, released sense of joy that she hardly knew what to do, only feeling that walking, with whatever vigor, could not express it.

What a night, she thought. Look at those clouds race! I feel I want to burst out singing. Don't want to scare the dog, but I do feel--musical, somehow. Like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*. Right at the beginning, when she comes tearing up that hill.

"Baby, did you ever see *The Sound of Music*?"

She looked down at Pandora, and the dog met her eyes with a look of pure misery. "Please put me down," she said, without words. Wanda shook her head.

"No, of course you haven't. You're 'way too young."

She walked on then, quickly and in silence until she came to the living wall, the stand of old pine trees whose ragged tops cut the horizon like a saw, dividing her home from everywhere else. The changing sky shed an uneven light on their shaggy heights and made them seem almost animate:

homes; they were leaving their homes. She watched the sparkling, inching lights patiently, waiting for wisdom. So many people. Some of them must be, as she was, lost. Lost. A cold, round word, like a tombstone. Was she lost?

"Pandora, look there! See that place? White painted brick, above the highway? I was born there." She pulled the dog onto her lap and stroked the warm, breathing fur. "Yes, I was. That's the Rolling Road. That's a fine, big inn. After the cooking was done, Mama used to sit with us, fine nights like this, and tell us songs, and fairy stories... We had for ourselves a little chicken coop." She peered into the darkness, and caught her breath: "Yes. They finally tore that old shed down. All gone."

She looked up at the changing sky, in which a star... two... three stars could now be seen. "Am I lost?" she asked herself. And then she burst out laughing. She struck the cold ground with her fists. "Of course I'm not lost! How could I be lost, me, on my own ground? This is my home, Pandora, all of this. See that house? You know that man in there? We'll see about him! Come on, baby. Lost!"

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huge, ancient dancers, with sorrowing faces and rough gowns, arms outspread, touching fingertip to fingertip to fingertip across the world. Wanda stood at the edges of their skirts. Her shoes were muddy; her shoulders and her knees ached with fatigue, but she would have appeared to any observer as one of them, in the wild spring darkness: a small straight seedling dancer, young and old together. She looked up in bewilderment and rocked, rocked, unconsciously echoing the rhythms of the wind. There was no one to see her.

What happened? she wondered, as she watched them. Was it only a trick of light after all? Did they fool me—have I been fooling myself? These are my soldiers, my jailors: tall as the moon, deep as China, cold and grim. Look at them! They’ve all gone to ballerinas while my back was turned.

She walked underneath the pines, her feet sinking and sliding on the deep needles underfoot. She laid her hands on their corrugated trunks and looked upwards with a sense of daring. She expected—what? Silk, pleated cambric, plaited ribbons. Instead there was shingled bark, and the radial retreat of the branches upward, and high above she saw the sky looking down at her.

Go ahead and hide, she thought. Hide away. I know what you are. I saw you.

At the barn, Wanda stopped, and shoved open the heavy sliding door. It moaned and squeaked and rocked treacherously on its tracks. It was full of age and dry-rot. She stepped inside and set Pandora down on the floor. The breath of the barn was clean; it smelled of straw, dust, packed earth and engine oil. It smelled of long, useful, quiet years. Wanda raised the puppy’s long, hairy face with two fingers of one hand. With the other, she stroked the soft, crushed-velvet ears. “No crying,” she whispered.

From the dooryard, it was plain that only the kitchen lamps were lit, and through the nearer window she could see the dishevelled mountain range of corduroy and denim which she recognized as Mason. She saw his head drooping near the table top, and his arm on the table, and the bottle, and his hand grasping the glass.

“Hasn’t got the wits to put himself to bed.”

She rattled the doorknob experimentally, found that it was locked, and without hesitation she pounded beside of her fist: Bam! Bam! Bam! Mason opened the door with a great rush and Wanda nearly struck him.

“Oh, my, Mason! I didn’t know—slipped past him into the barn.

He stood in the doorway, his mouth set, a meadow. His eyes seemed to focus upon her skirt. It sagged with burrs and tiny bits of clover through her hair, pushing them away from her thought, like a wild woman.

Mason looked at Wanda warily, with a head; he focused upon her skirt. It sagged with burrs and tiny bits of clover through her hair, pushing them away from her thought, like a wild woman.

Meanwhile, Wanda had gone into the closet, removed the tied matches, shortening, salt.

“Dog’s in the barn.” She stared at her packing, but she looked able.

Mason's face swam in benevolence, if still considered, and he made steps toward Wanda, receding, evaded him and whirled charging bull. She plunged toward the parlor, emerging a moment before any sound.

“Pandora’s not going back.”

“Pan-Who?”

“The dog. The puppy.”

“Well. You suit. You given up expecting you to suit but yourself. You might as well like much of a life for that night after night.”

She turned to face him.
locked, and without hesitation dealt it four bold blows with the side of her fist: Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! On the fourth knock, Mason opened the door with such noiseless suddenness that Wanda nearly struck him in the face.

"Oh, my, Mason! I do beg your pardon!" she said, and slipped past him into the house.

He stood in the doorway, swaying like the big trees in the meadow. His eyes seemed to have retreated far inside his head; he focused upon her with difficulty. Wanda looked down at her skirt. It sagged wetly at the hem and was stuck all over with burrs and tiny bits of leaf. She ran a dirty hand through her hair, pushing it off of her face. I look, she thought, like a wild woman.

Mason looked at Wanda, and then he looked behind her, and around her, and then, finding nothing, he turned back towards the kitchen door. He swayed, and managed to catch himself by grabbing the doorframe. His lips moved thickly for a moment before any sound emerged: "Where's the dog?"

Meanwhile, Wanda had pulled a cardboard box out of the closet, removed the tied bundles of newspaper that were stored in it, and carried the empty container to the pantry, where she commenced at once to refill it: flour, meal, coffee, matches, shortening, salt, oatmeal....

"Dog's in the barn." She spoke tersely, and did not stop her packing, but she looked at Mason sidelong.

Mason's face swam into focus; he looked almost benevolent, if still considerably muddled. He took several steps toward Wanda, reached out to touch her arm, but she evaded him and whirled past, like a matador dodging a slowly charging bull. She plunged into the dark and cold of the parlor, emerging a moment later with three folded Afghans.

"Pandora's not going back to Catlett tomorrow," she said. "Pan-Who?"

"The dog. The puppy. She's staying here."

"Well. Well, you suit yourself, as usual. Wanda. I've given up expecting you to be sensible, or to think of anyone but yourself. You might think of her, though. Doesn't seem like much of a life for that poor little dog, alone in the barn night after night."

She turned to face him. "Mason, you amaze me. I
wouldn't dream of leaving that puppy alone in the barn all night! She'd be scared to death.

Wanda added a tin of sugar and a bag of caramels to the contents of the box. She opened the closet door and took out a straw broom, which she tucked under her arm at a cavalier angle. "I'm going to need this broom," she said. "You don't mind, do you? So much dust out there. Oh, mercy! My coat!" She disappeared into the parlor again. Mason stared after her. He seemed to have forgotten how to close his mouth.

"You've lost your mind," he said when she returned. She was enveloped from neck to knee in a baggy tan trenchcoat. "You've slipped a gear, haven't you?"

"Is that what you think? No. Me? Crazy? Not at all--Look here. I'm taking this little old coffee pot. I'm leaving you the big blue one. You know how to work it?--No. I'm not crazy. I'm practical. Look at you: you weren't raised in a barn. You don't propose to live in one and I don't expect it of you. Then take me: I'm a different breed. I was raised in a barn, now, wasn't I? Pretty nearly. Conceived, born, and raised," she added, and her voice had dropped a little, as though she spoke to herself. She put the broom down, leaned it against the wall as if its weight were suddenly too great, and crossed the room to the sink.

"I'll need this ammonia," she continued. "There's more upstairs, if you find you want it. and... what am I thinking of? That's right. My sewing basket."

"No," she added, a moment later. "This is absolutely a sane thing to do. I do belong in a barn."

She looked up at him. His face looked like a pan of fallen bread dough.


She led him across the kitchen, much as she had dragged Pandora a few hours earlier, and sat him, like a large battered doll, at the kitchen table. She took the glass and the bottle and put them in the sink.

"Now, let me get this straight," she began. "I'm crazy. my mother was a low woman, the house is no place for animals... have I missed any of those things mean and my Mama did have three different ones, and she was impulsive!"

"Let's say she was a go, Fair enough, let's. And care of her own, and worked, walked to the window and looked. She looked at her husband. "Me. Me, letting someone else run what it was. And I know Mason's clouded eyes and she was making an ounce of sense.

She left the window and mud crumbled from her skirt mean is. I don't know what I concluded. "I don't know what I is. I'm just going to do what I said."

She rose then, and smiled. Mason tried to stand him back into the chair. She shouldered her broom bundles. Mason tried to stand him back into the chair. She stepped over the threshold into mud.

"No," she added, a moment later. "This is absolutely a sane thing to do. I do belong in a barn."

She rose then, and smiled. Mason tried to stand him back into the chair. She shouldered her broom bundles. Mason tried to stand him back into the chair. She stepped over the threshold into mud. With a soft cry, the wind rushed through the mud. And don't you look so fine. And don't you look so fine. And don't you look so fine."

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The airtight stove in the kitchen reluctantly, to persistent application, and was throwing quavering percussive spurts. Pandora was asleep, before the fire. She shouldered her broom bundles. Mason tried to stand him back into the chair. She stepped over the threshold into mud. With a soft cry, the wind rushed through the mud. And don't you look so fine. And don't you look so fine. And don't you look so fine."

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animals... have I missed anything? Mason, I'm not sure what

any of those things mean anymore. It just seems so

my Mama did have three different husbands and none of them

much good, and maybe she was just a little bit, well, let's say

was impulsive!"

"Let's say she was a good deal more than that!"

"Fair enough, let's. And let's also say that she took good
care of her own, and worked hard. most of the time." Wanda
walked to the window and looked at the flying clouds. Then
she looked at her husband. "Do you know what I think bad is?
Me. Me, letting someone else tell me what my own life is,
and what it was. And I know, I know..." she looked into
Mason's clouded eyes and smiled. "I know you think I'm not
making an ounce of sense."

She left the window and knelt down beside him. Drying
mud crumbled from her skirt onto the floor. "I guess what I
mean is, I don't know what anything means anymore," she
concluded. "I don't know what good is. I don't know what bad
is. I'm just going to do what I want to do."

She rose then, and smiled, and began to gather up her
bundles. Mason tried to stand, too, but she gently pushed
him back into the chair. She kissed him on the cheek. "I'll be
fine. And don't you look so blue. In a few days, when I've
got the place fixed up, why, I'll have you over for coffee."

She shouldered her broom and opened the kitchen door.
With a soft cry, the wind rushed forward to meet her. Wanda
stepped over the threshold into the cold darkness and vanished:
a bright pebble into a deep well.

The airtight stove in the old harness room had yielded,
reluctantly, to persistent applications of kerosene and kindling
and was throwing quavering squares of light upon the rough
plank floor. Already the air was filling with dry warmth. The
coffee pot on the stove's one slotted lid spouted steam in white
percussive spurts. Pandora lay stretched, full-length and fast
asleep, before the fire. She was checkered fantastically in
light and shadow, and flanked by Wanda's drying shoes and
stockings.

Wanda pulled a fruit crate up close to the room's one
window. She sat on the crate and stretched her legs out, resting her cold feet against the radiant warmth of Pandora’s fur. Tomorrow all of this must be cleaned out and made habitable. She must take stock of the decaying oddments of furniture in the unused hayloft, and curtains, what about curtains? But tonight it was enough to be warm, and to rest. She leaned her elbows on the windowsill, among the matted cobwebs and dead flies. “What a pigsty!” she whispered tenderly. Dust lay upon the window frames, thick as velvet. “What a god-forsaken wreck. What a harness room this is! You’d think we lived in a barn.”

The lights in the kitchen burned on, yellow and weak-looking in the wild darkness. Wanda sat at the window for a long time. She filled her eyes with the image of her abandoned home, the kitchen windows like blank, staring eyes. She filled her mind with the thought of Mason in that house, without her. She watched her heart for a sign; she waited for love, pity, remorse, some bright, accusing memory. She waited for God, but the night abode, and a fine high wind tore the last rags of cloud from a thin crescent moon; she felt nothing, and she accepted this and thought, what a strange thing a heart is, to be so empty and so full at the same time.

On Sundays, after church, we would go to Federation. My father would park the car in front of the gray concrete, and we would walk around to the red painted door. My daddy would lift me in to press the buzzer that would let us into the cool darkness.

I could hear people talking and laughing, as Bill’s heavy footsteps came to open the door.

I would look into the peep seeing through the eye of the door. Tiny people sitting at the tiny tables, talking, laughing, throwing darts. Sitting in tiny chairs at tiny tables on tiny bar stools sipping...