SCOTT MEMMER

One Evening in Winter

One thing for sure, it would be plenty cold out. It was always that way after a storm. Laura gathered herself into her moth-eaten woolens and wondered why she didn't just climb into her car and drive the two miles to the post office. But then she remembered how deep the snow was and the freezing rain the day before and how many cars she and Ma had seen stranded on the side of the road on the t.v.—and she thought better of the walking. So she climbed into her jeans and gray thermals, her faded sweater, woolen socks and thick padded boots, her tattered gloves, red scarf and green drab ski cap, her checkered red hunting jacket—the one Pa had given her with the right sleeve torn— and looked out the window to the barren cornfield below.

"Better hurry, Laur!" her mother shouted. "Gettin' late!"

Laura slipped her hand into the jacket pocket and checked for the key. Yes, it was still there—she could feel it through her gloved hand. She released it and let it settle into her pocket. Then she looked out the window again.

Already she could see the stark shadows lengthening into night, the chill creeping into snowbanks, lampposts and stalled cars—into the land Laura knew so well. The fences and the rivers, the pastures and orchards—everything she saw spoke of her father's life, gone now, and of what had gradually become her own. It had been two years since Pa died. For two years she and Ma had lived alone in this house. Tractors and cornfields defined his life; now they made up her own.

Laura saw the evening coming on, sifting out under the ceiling of the sky like an old cigar-faced man dealing poker. She heard Ma in the kitchen, singing faintly off-key one of those old love songs Pa used to sing before he died. She smelled the stew Ma was making. It had been Pa's favorite.

"Better go!" her mother shouted. "You know what day today is, don't you? Gettin' late, Laur!"

Laura finished lacing her boots and pulled the laces down good and tight. She stood, snatched the cap off her head, and gave her hair a few good swipes with the hair brush. She wanted to look in the mirror, but didn't. Instead she took several more swipes with the brush and stepped out into the hall. It was cold there. Certainly you're beautiful, she told herself. She set the brush down on the bureau and placed the cap on her head. Of course you're beautiful. Oh, hell, it don't matter. So what if you haven't been with a man since—

"Come now, Laura!" her mother shouted. "You ain't forgettin', are you?"

"No, Ma."

"Then get down here and get goin' before I boil all this stew away."

She was a large woman. She was heavy-boned and over-sized, with dark olive skin and long black hair. Her father used to joke to the fellas that she resembled a horse; and yet she had about her that distictly magnetic attractiveness, that aura of wonder and fascination, that exalted mystery, common to the Clydesdale and all other forms of prodigious life. She was strong as an ox, as the saying goes, and could lift nearly as much as her older brother Wayne. She had wide hips specially suited to child-bearing; had had one child, but it died in childbirth. Laura was thirty-four and single; she had never been married.

She trampled down the stairs in her hard boots, crossed the carpeted floor and presented herself to her mother in the kitchen. The old woman stooped over the stove. "Will you turn that stew down and let it simmer, Ma. You're liable to burn yourself, for heaven's sake."

"I'll thank you to mind your own business," the old woman said. "Seems I raised some pretty healthy children without so much simmerin'." Her voice trailed off. She spoke and moved in that slow-controlled motion singular to old people and very young children. The old woman blinked at her daughter and tasted the stew again. She jerked her head away and winced.

"I told you you'd get burnt, Ma."

"Okay, okay," the old woman said. She slid the lid on the pot, leaned over and turned the flame down to simmer. Her hand trembled. Then she straightened herself as much as she could, reached up—straining—and righted the cap on Laura's head. "You have this thing about wearin' your cap crooked, don't you? Used to drive your father damn near crazy. Now will you *get*! it's comin' on dark."

Laura pushed her mother's hands away and angled the cap back the way it had been. "Tell me, Ma—you sure today's the day? It's awful cold out there."

"Sure, I'm sure. And if you think it's too cold take the car. That's what the lady from the lawyer's office said anyway."

"Did she tell you how much the check was for?"

"I didn't ask."

"You shoulda asked, Ma."

"Well, I didn't!"

"We need the money," Laura protested.

"They'll be plenty," the old woman said. With this she went back to her stew, removed the lid again, bent over and adjusted the flame higher. Laura tugged the glove on her one bare hand and shook her head. "They'll be plenty," the old woman repeated.

Laura turned the storm door handle and stepped outside. Her feet crunched on the weathered ice. She eased the door gently into its frame (the spring was broken) and tucked the collar up around her ears. The air nipped at her cheeks.

Laura looked south over the farm to where the land sloped away and the gray woods rose up to meet the sky. The sky winked with its first few impressions of starlight. All about her the peculiar silence of farmland after a storm exhaled into the valley like an old man snoring. Above, Venus, always the first star out, shone like a proud Madonna saying grace. The land hushed itself into secrecy and held its secret close.

And then she remembered the dream, how she'd left the house that day and walked the entire length of the valley. It was almost dusk. Across the southern field she'd

trod, stumbling time and again on the shadowed furrows of the Jenkin's orchard, until, at noon, she arrived at the rusted old bridge that crossed the River Stimson. The river ran along the base of the hills at the far end of the valley. When Laura found herself there she stood on the bridge for the longest time and didn't know what to do. But then a voice called out inside her, a voice resembling her father's, shouting hurry, hurry, Laura, go home—and without hesitation—without any rest at all—Laura ran all the way home. It was twelve miles, but in dreams such things were possible. When Laura made it home she opened the kitchen door and found her mother lying unconscious on the kitchen floor. She was frightened—her mother looked so pale and lifeless. Laura felt her mother's wrist; she splashed water on her face until, dazed and shivering, the old woman came around. It had only been another one of her mother's fainting spells, but it scared the hell out of Laura. She awoke that night with a dry mouth and clammy skin and could not get back to sleep. She watched the snow fall outside her window and stayed awake until first light.

Laura gazed across the cornfields and saw the leaning towers of the cornstalks in the snow. She took one or two halting footsteps, stopped and listened to the beating of her heart. She heard the blood pulsing through her veins. Then she shoved her hands into her jacket pockets and set off across the field.

When she made the road she turned left cautiously (for the road was slippery now and covered with patches of ice) and proceeded west down the lane past the Jenkins' place. Walking this stretch, she always closed her eyes. There were things ahead she didn't want to see, and she wanted to make sure she didn't see them. She didn't want to see the Jenkins' love seat, ancient and rusting, beneath the old elm. She didn't want to see the duck pond, frozen and blanketed with layer upon layer of snow. She didn't want to see windows or stars or her own breath against the firmament of heaven. So she walked in the night, eyes closed, listening. Joey Jenkins was dead now, wasn't he? It didn't matter that she'd had his baby. It didn't matter that

they'd made love beneath the old elm. It didn't matter that the baby had died. Nothing mattered. Laura walked until she was well past the love seat. Then she opened her eyes. The road stretched on through the rows of stark, bare, unfruited trees.

The post office would be empty this time of night; it always was. It was an old building that creaked when you entered it and creaked when you left. Laura stamped up the steps and opened the door. She walked in and slammed the door quickly. It was cold out there. She creaked across the floorboards until she stood in front of the box marked "Woodley," removing one of her gloves, finding the key in her pocket and sneaking it into the lock. It would have been his child. She turned the key in the lock. He would have come home from the war and they would have had a family. She reached in and found the envelope marked "Mrs. Eliza Woodley." It would've been his family.

Laura stuffed the envelope into her pocket, shoved the key in her other and slipped her bare hand into its glove. She closed the door of the box, straightened the cap on her head and creaked off across the floorboards. She opened the door, stepped out, and slammed it shut. She clumped down the steps and into the crusty snow.

It would've been his family.

Several times on the way home Laura tugged one of the gloves from her hands and felt the crispness of the envelope in her pocket. She could hear it rustle between her fingers. Above, Venus shone in all her glory—the brightest star in the sky—while eastward the silver sliver of a moon strained against the horizon. The sky was black. The stars flickered like blue-green candles over the frosted terrain.

Hurry, a voice said.

Laura heard it and stumbled over the frozen hulks of the apples in the road.

Hurry, it said.

Laura made the edge of the field and started to run. Her legs moved sluggishly over the rutted path and the shadows of the trees played on the ground to define themselves in twisted, eerie, ghostly delineations. Her

father's voice shouted hurry, Laura, hurry.

The house was a hundred and fifty yards beyond. Laura saw it but she could not see her mother in the kitchen window. She smelled stew in the air, stew that smelled burnt, charred, carbonized. Her heart raced; her feet faltered over the path. I can't lose her! I can't—not now! The window glared vacantly into the snow. Ma! She clutched the envelope in her hand and dug her boots as deeply as she could into the frozen crust. The stew smelled closer now—pungent, acrid, definitely burnt. Her legs lifted; her lungs burned; her throat felt hot, scorched and dry. She tore the aluminum door open and lunged into the inner door with the full force of her shoulder.

For the longest time her mother just sat there and looked at her. It hadn't occurred to Laura that she might be perfectly well; might, in fact, be exactly as she had left her. But she was. She was sitting quietly on the living room sofa, humming to herself and reading a magazine. She'd merely suffered another one of her lapses of memory,—and forgotten completely about the stew. She was senile; she hadn't even noticed all the black smoke in the room. Laura stood in the doorway, stunned, ashamed, a little embarrassed. She could think of nothing to say. She leaned agains the door with her face flushed, her red scarf wrapped loosely about her neck, her green cap angled off to one side, and closed the door gently behind her. She removed her gloves.

"Mother," Laura said, pointing to the stove, "your stew . . ."

The old woman scurried to her feet and rushed to the stove. "Oh, I done it again!" She clawed at the knob and shut off the gas. Laura stared at the back of her neck and said nothing.

It was then that Laura came up behind her and embraced her softly about the shoulders. She pressed her face into the back of her mother's skull and held her body firmly but tenderly between her strong, bare hands. She felt the fragility of her mother's frame, the wizened angularity of her skull, arms and elbows. "Sometimes I worry about

you, Ma," she said.

The old woman stiffened. She tried to pull away but Laura held her fast.

And then Laura began to weep. She wept like a child with huge yearning sobs that shook her entire body. The tears ran down her face and down the back of her mother's neck. She wept for the pain of the lost child and the pain of her lost man, for the pain of a world she didn't understand, and for all the people in it who were gone, gone now, her father among them, whom she had never really known or understood—and for her mother whom she couldn't touch.

The old woman turned to face her. She reached up and held Laura's face between her rough hands. Then she pried herself away and went to the window. Laura tried to hold onto her hand, but couldn't.

"I never told you how sorry I was when your baby died," her mother said. She looked out over the snow and cornfields and watched some headlights pass on the road. "In my day we didn't talk about such things."

"It don't matter, Ma."

The car and headlights passed away and out of sight.

"You're all I have left now, Laura," her mother said. Laura watched her mother's breath frost the inside of the window. "Your brother never even came to the funeral."

"He and Pa could never talk. Maybe because he was more like Pa than anyone else."

"Sometimes I'd like to kick that Wayne."

"Me too, Ma."

Laura put both her hands on her mother's shoulders from behind.

"I resented your pregnancy, "her mother said. "From the very first day, I resented it." She placed her hands on the window sill and ran her fingers through the dust. "I never told you this, but I was pregnant the day I married your father. That's why I acted the way I did, Laura—I didn't want you to start out the same way. I know you thought it was Joey. It wasn't. It had nothin' to do with him. He was a good kid. I woulda been proud to have him as a son-in-law."

"You don't have to say nice things about Joey because he's dead."

"I know."

Laura lifted her hands from her mother's shoulders. "Pa never liked Joey. I don't know why."

"Your pa never liked anyone."

Laura reached into her pocket and her hand came upon the envelope. She had forgotten completely about it.

"I sometimes wonder if your father ever loved any of us," her mother said.

"Ma, look," Laura said.

Her mother turned from the window and saw the envelope in Laura's hand. "Oh, that ol' thing came today, did it? Well, give it here then. I been makin' enough of a fuss over it, hain't I?"

The old woman held her hand out for the envelope. But then, almost without thinking, almost as if by reflex, she reached up and righted the cap on Laura's head. She smoothed the hair all around the sides of Laura's face and then let her hand linger upon her cheek for what Laura considered an unusually long time. Some of the dust rubbed off her fingers and onto Laura's black hair.

Laura saw suddenly that it didn't matter about the check. Pa hadn't left them much, afterall. It didn't matter if the check was two cents.

Spring—that was what she thought about—that it would be here soon. She could almost see the season, smell it, hear it: the birds winging their way home at last, the brown molting sparrows and the brown earth and the cherry blossoms and the too-full streams and a sense that there was something vastly eternal about it, something forever being born.

Laura tried to think of a name for it, but couldn't.

Instead, she watched the envelope settle into her mother's hand and thought she saw an icicle drop from the eaves outside her window.