

Sandra Bartlette / SHORT STORY

Mother made a new apron the day after she and Father quarreled and he slammed the door and went walking. She didn't come away from the kitchen window for a long time and I tiptoed around the house feeling nervous because she hadn't noticed that it was past my bedtime.

She was wearing the apron when she met the doctor's wife, Mrs. Hallman, out by the clothes line, only you couldn't see it for the pouch of clothes pegs tied around her thick waist. Mrs. Hallman stood tall and slim, her red toenails sticking out the end of her white sandals and she smelled like the sweet william that grew in a patch beside the back porch. I hung around like a sticky fly in August, and listened while they talked. Mother played with the pegs in the pouch and made little squares in the dirt with her foot while Mrs. Hallman said how pleased she was to be living in the country instead of the city, so much nicer for the children, didn't she think? Then she asked which one I was and Mother told her, Lureen the fifth of ten and one was coming.

Mrs. Hallman said, "Oh how nice," her Jane Russell lips forming a raspberry circle and I wished suddenly that Mother would take off the pouch so the ric rac on the apron would show. Mrs. Hallman patted her flat stomach and told Mother that it sure was good to be slim again and that was IT for her. Then she laughed and her voice went high and tinkly like a wind chime. Mother laughed too, and her laughter was like rubbing two stones together.

At supper Mother said to Father that the kids were terrible. And how could she invite Mrs. Hallman in? He hadn't built the cage he'd promised now for a month and Butchie let Jeepers loose again in the kitchen and the twins wouldn't come down from the table. She'd offered Mrs. Hallman some tomatoes, but they're allergic to tomatoes, and it was too bad, but she couldn't play bridge with Mrs. Hallman because she had better things to do with her time.

When Mrs. Hallman came for coffee, Mother would send me to the cellar for a jar of jelly and spread a clean table cloth. Then she would sit drawing circles with her finger, smiling and nodding while Mrs. Hallman rattled her charm bracelet and talked about Toronto, and Minneapolis and "my husband the doctor". I would sit listening to her wind chime laughter unable to move when told to go out and play with the others.

When Mrs. Hallman left, Mother would bang pots and pans on the stove or put on Father's fishing hat and chop weeds in the garden making chunks of earth fly up around her feet.

The oldest daughter, Barbara, and I became friends. She played store with real groceries and let me watch. She had bubble gum and pop whenever she wanted it and sometimes gave me sips. She had her own bicycle and she wouldn't let me ride it. I gave up my perch in the maple tree where I'd spent the summer building a tree house and began moping about the kitchen complaining of having nothing to do. When I asked Mother why we didn't have one measly bike she slammed the oven door hard and said stoves were more important than bicycles, and if we ever got anything new around this house it would be a stove that works right.

Then Butchie tried fly casting at the telephone wires and caught a fish hook in his finger. Mother sent me to the Hallmans and the doctor said he'd come over and then stayed to have a slice of fresh bread, his eyes never leaving the cupboard where Mother had piled her batches of bread and buns. And when he asked if it was really true, did she really make that delicious bread, she smiled at him the way she smiles at Father when he pulls the little curl on the back of her neck and says she's keeping her girlish figure.

The doctor stood in the door with two loaves of our bread under his arm and asked if they could have the recipe. He said some more and Mother laughed high and tinkly like the wind chimes and said she'd always wanted to play bridge, she'd just never had anyone offer to teach her and yes, she'd be glad to give him the recipe.

She sent me the next day with the recipe which I put under a stone for a moment while I helped Butchie untangle Father's fishing reel which was tied to a kite. We couldn't fix it, so we buried the reel in the garden and when I got back I stood and watched the wind flip the paper under the stone. Then I saw Barbara's bicycle lying in her driveway and I lifted the stone and let the recipe blow away. I told Mother the doctor's wife said she didn't have time to bake bread.

When Father came home for supper, Mother was banging pots on the stove and said that she wouldn't bother with bridge after all, she had too much to do. Father said there was no rest for the wicked and Mother laughed, and her laughter was like rubbing two stones together.