

A NEW FORMAL

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The girl stood in the narrow doorway a moment before she went, slowly, into the living-room. She did not speak to her mother who was sitting in the dingy, brown leather chair by the window, did not seem to notice the anxious, gray eyes staring at her through old-fashioned, horn-rimmed glasses. She walked aimlessly about the room, then stopped to peer out of the window. "Mother," the girl began, still looking through the window into the cold, December twilight.

"Yes?"

"I wanted to know if you think," she faltered.

"Yes?"

"If I made it myself, could I please, please have a formal for Christmas?" She turned towards her mother at last. "Please, Mother?"

Her mother's gray eyes stared, unseeing, at the shabby green carpet. "Jane, I don't see how I can manage it. I just don't see how."

"Oh, Mother, I've got to," the girl sobbed, "I've got to have a formal. Our class is giving a play and then a dance. The teacher chose me to play the part of Mary. She said I read better than anyone in the whole class. It's going to be so much fun." The words tumbled out hurriedly at first, but the last sentence

sounded more like a prayer.

Jane waited expectantly for her mother to say something. But her mother sank deeper into the chair. The room was so quiet that the squeak of the leather rent the silence. Her mother's voice sounded frail and hopeless. "I don't see how I can. Maybe there's something in the attic we can make over," she offered at last.

"Make over!" the girl exploded. "Mother, you don't understand. I have the lead in the play. Johnny's already asked me to the dance. I can't wear something made over. ' . . . I couldn't!' Again there was a long silence. Each second seemed longer than the one before it. "I don't ask for much. I know you're having a hard time. I know we owe the grocer and everybody," her voice trembled, "but please, please just give me five dollars. I can make it for that. Please?"

There was no answer. There was nothing her mother could say. She sat there for a long time without moving. The girl finally fell on the couch, tears streaming down her face. At last the mother stooped up and a long sigh shook her thin body. "Do you want to go to the attic with me?"

The huddled figure on the couch did not move. Each sob seemed to shout, "I just have to I just have to have a new formal, Mother!"