

In Espalier

GEORGE COFFIN

It's three years now since the hyacinths were set along the gravel walk, and columbine mats in tangled masses in the corner plot this spring. Soot-smudged web films veil the hanging rows of bulbs, wrinkled and dried to nothingness in the shed. The tools, their rich patina dust-dulled, die too — die slowly in rich red rust. The formal order's gone now, or going at least, before the writhing, creeping motion of unleashed growing things. The growing things return, as they will, to the abandon of chaotic beauty unrestrained. Only the blossoming pear, twenty years in espalier, sends out its strong straight healthy shoots in pre-determined lines. So many thought it cruel; "unnatural," they said, to bind its limbs that way. But she had willed it so, trained against the warm south brick wall where it could get the sun free of the filtering shade that blocked it from the ferns and moss blanketing the unturned ground. And when it had borne fruit, they all said, "See what fine pears she has! Look, how plump and firm they grow along the strangled crooked limbs. Well, I never! And still, I don't know; seems like it should be more free. Such fine fat juicy pears."

The tree still bears.

Ethel set the large sack on the porch balustrade and tested its balance with a cautious poke. Before she opened the door, she lifted the tin lid of the mail box and removed three letters. Bills! They were always bills these days. The hinges screeched on the screen door and she thought that it should have some oil — and the house should have some paint, and young John should have a new suit. There were so many things they should have

these days.

One letter, the one without a window, said the title was clear at last, and the big house was hers to dispose of as she wished. Ten years ago it would have meant Johnny, and Florida in the winter, and Bermuda in the spring, and New York in the fall. Well, for a little while it would have meant those things. She folded the letter once and stuffed it into her pocket. Perhaps even without the money she could have gone, but the youngest child was duty-bound, bound to the small country town, bound to the house that she no longer loved, held back by the mother who couldn't see that Johnny was life, young life that was real. No starched idealistic dreams, those; but Johnny was gone now. She still kept another letter from a county hospital in the East; it said that he had died in a prolonged toxic coma with complications of sclerosis and other things she didn't understand. But if he had had the southern sun, if she had been with him to see that he ate more, drank less, and got enough rest, then things would have been different. She knew Johnny, and her mother didn't.

The baby was born in the Arnett house, and no one said a word; no one could. Old Mrs. Arnett would wheel the child out into the garden as she worked. And when her friends would stop, she'd show him with pride and say, "See what a fine grandson I have here!" And no one asked about Johnny, because everyone knew and didn't have to ask. "Everything's healthy-like when its out in the light," she thought. And everyone admired young John and the hyacinths and the pear tree all together because they had respect

for her. In time Ethel had accepted the security of her mother's home.

Setting the groceries down on the kitchen table, she carried the trash to the wire basket at the end of the path and stood back against the brick wall to watch the paper burn. Down the street she could see young John playing along his way home from school with his chums. Nothing would happen; she didn't have to worry about him on the side street of a small country town with people watching from their gardens and porches along the way. Nothing could happen; small towns were like that.

She leaned back against the wall with the pear blossoms frothing about her head and stretched her arms along the pattern of the limbs. The warm sun gave her a feeling of wistful laziness, and she thought of the house again and how it could be

sold. "Money these days goes so fast, though," she thought. "I really don't know where I'd go or really want to go now. Ten years ago it would have been so different. Funny, I thought it would mean so much."

The child came bounding into the garden and into her thoughts again.

"What're you doin', mom?"

"Watching the papers burn; just watching them burn."

She straightened her shoulders, stepped forward, and tossed the letter into the swirling flames, watching it curl crisp shimmering black as it burned. She pushed back a wisp of hair that curled forward around her throat, took the child by the hand and said, "Come along, son. We'll go to the shed and get the rake and shears. The place is so untidy that people will think we don't intend to stay."

INSIDE

EDNA HINTON

Outside my bedroom window there is rain
That weeps as though its heart were rent,
As though its anger broke upon the pane.

Outside, the siren of the wind, intent
Upon its dismal course, shrieks its alarm
At being bound, and dies down, spent.

Outside, the garden, that affords such charm
In brighter hours, is crushed into a broken bed
Of rot and devastation from the storm.

Inside, I stare as motionless and dead
As though the storm had been inside instead.