

Evening Incident

Patty Lewis

SHE SAT ON the steps, idly digging her feet into the loose ground in front of her. She watched with satisfaction as the glossy brown of her shoes became streaked and dusty from the sandy earth sifting over them. She wondered whether anyone would reprimand her. Her dress was wilted and a little damp from the summer heat. She felt sticky and uncomfortable and wiped the moisture from her upper lip with a languid gesture. Her long braids lay limp and heavy on her back. How she wished she had blonde curls like Milly Davidson's!

The sun had now almost disappeared, but the air was still oppressive and thick. She stopped tracing patterns in the earth as she watched her father approaching the house. She arose hesitantly. She remembered when she was younger that she had run with joyous abandon to throw herself into his arms. But her mother thought she was too old for that now, and she could almost hear the words in the high arch tones of her Aunt Jane, "Why Laurie's practically a young lady now. I wish I had a nice girl like her."

Her mother usually sighed or smiled wanly while answering, "Yes, but she is such an odd child. I just don't understand her."

By this time, her father had reached the steps. He was mopping his face with a moist handkerchief and in his preoccupation almost passed by the girl.

"Father," she said somewhat timidly.

"Oh—hello, Laurie. How are you?" He smiled gently while gazing absently beyond her into the house.

"Daddy—I mean Father," she stumbled in her attempt at the aura of dignity and poise she so desired. Then eagerly she went on, words tumbling out.

"Something happened today, oh, it was . . ."

Her father turned toward her. "Your mother, is she—you haven't upset her, have you?" As she shook her head, he added, "You're not ill, are you?"

The sparkle died out of her eyes. She lowered her head to hide the disappointment in her face.

"Everything's all right," she said listlessly.

She watched his face lose its frown, leaving faintly discernible lines.

"Fine, fine. Well, I'd better go in now. Your mother will want me to rub her head. You know how this heat affects her."

He wiped his face again, as if to banish the fatigue that was so evident. Laurie wanted to say something to show that she understood and sympathized, but before she could think of anything, he gave her a quick pat on the head and went inside.

Laurie stood motionless. A few minutes later she too went into the house, being careful to close the screen door with as little noise as possible. The house smelled rather musty and the shades were still drawn against the rays of the sun as they had been all day. Her mother's door was half open and she crept toward it. She stood looking in, catching a glimpse of pale hair on mounds of pillows and her father on his knees by the bed. He appeared slightly incongruous entangled among the lace and ribbons. They did not see her and Laurie turned away silently.

She walked down the hall and paused in front of the mirror. She wished she were pretty—she knew how it upset her mother that she had not inherited her china doll daintiness. The face that stared back at Laurie did not please her with its high cheekbones and sunburned nose—it seemed to be all eyes. She sighed and started toward the kitchen, practicing small graceful steps instead of her usual coltish gait.

Gracefulness was forgotten, however, as she burst into the kitchen and confronted the large woman by the stove.

"Maggie," she said breathlessly, "guess what happened today. I . . ."

"Please, Laurie, tell me later. I've got to go in to your Ma. You know how she complains."

"Should I go see her now, Maggie?" the girl asked almost wistfully.

"You'd only make her nervous." Some of the gruffness went out of the woman's voice as she turned her red, perspiring face toward Laurie. "I mean, not just now, dear. It's so hot and all—later would be better . . ." Her voice trailed off uncertainly, for Laurie had gone, slamming the door loudly behind her.

Back on the steps, Laurie made herself take deep breaths. She clenched her fists. Sudden tears smarted unpleasantly in her eyes, but she winked them back at the sound of voices. Her name was being called at the gate, so she got up and ran down the walk to the two girls who were waiting for her.

"Hi, Milly, Jean. Where you going?"

"Oh, just to the drugstore, Laurie. Wanta go?"

Laurie glanced over her shoulder at the house. "Mother's not feeling well—she might want me here."

"Another spell, huh?" asked Jean, the younger of the girls. "Aw, they won't even know you're gone."

Laurie hesitated. Before she could answer, Milly Davidson was speaking. "Say, Laurie, it was nice you won the prize today for writing that poetry. But really, my dear, it was so strange! Not at

all like the rest of us wrote, and I'm afraid no one understood it. Of course," she paused significantly, "of course everyone knows you're Miss Andrew's pet!" She attempted what she hoped was a gay tinkling laugh, accompanied by a quick toss of her blonde curls. Unfortunately, the laugh came out high and shrill and did not sound as sophisticated as when she had practiced it. No one spoke. Then Jean ventured, "You can still go with us, Laurie."

"No." Laurie wheeled about. She knew they were watching her and she tried not to be all arms and legs as she walked hurriedly back to the house. She did not turn until she heard the indistinct jumble of Milly's words and Jean's appreciative giggle die away in the distance.

She was alone. She swallowed quickly several times. The heat seemed to close in about her, pushing against her throat and chest. She was conscious of people passing by in the street, of their laughter and talking, but their faces were blurred and unfamiliar.

She heard voices within the house. A high thin sound that might have been a moan or a laugh came from her mother's room. She heard the deeper sound of her father's adoring voice, low and soft by turns. She heard someone calling her. The sound was like that of the gnats which buzzed around her face, and she shook her head to rid herself of them until her braids flapped noisily. Presently the screen door opened and closed, and Maggie was beside her.

"Didn't you hear me calling? Your dinner's waiting."

Laurie did not answer. She merely shook her head.

"Are you sick, child?" inquired Maggie not unkindly. Again Laurie shook her head.

"They'll be wondering where you are." At Laurie's look, she shrugged and turned to go in.

"Well," she said perplexed and then sternly, "I don't know what act you're putting on now, young lady, but I'm not keeping your dinner all night!"

Laurie stuck out her tongue at Maggie's retreating back, not caring that it was not an adult gesture. There was a hollow feeling in her stomach and she clasped her thin arms around her body, swaying back and forth in her misery.

It grew nearly dark. Talking loudly, Milly and Jean sauntered by on their way home. They did not look into the yard, nor did Laurie call out. No one bothered her. She remembered the time she had broken her arm. She had not hurt then the way she did now. She had not been afraid then. She had been alone before, but this loneliness was not the same thing. In her imagination it was like a living thing, taunting her, clutching at her, stilling her protests, preying on her thoughts and emotions, leaving her defenseless and empty.

She did not know how long she was there. Lights gleamed here and there in the distance, and the air was so still that she could hear

the swishing sound of fans on neighboring porches and the slap of fly swatters as plainly as the pounding of her heart.

"I'd like to start running," she thought suddenly. She would run and run, past all the houses, past the drugstore and the school until the lights of the town were far behind. She would run until she could not hear or see or think, and she would never come back.

She swatted at a mosquito so hard that the slap stung her face. She remained unmoving on the steps, wondering how long it would be before Maggie called her again.

Trial by Conscience

J. H. Monninger

Would you dare
Convict me for my crime?
Perhaps it would be well
If just to ease my mind,
For in these gruesome nights
I still can find
Those fragments lying near the crater's edge,
The crater's edge one minute old
And I, a mere observer passing by,
Stopped long enough to vomit
Then to cry.
But I was not observer,
Why do I lie?
I am free. Your rules, your codes,
Your laws have set me free.
But then I know this cannot be,
For through the many misty miles of sea
Remains for me
The crater's edge.
Now I cry in my defense
"How could I know?"
For they were crouching low.
Yes, you try to ease my mind
By telling me I should be blind
To circumstance
That was not really mine.
Now you stand aghast to find
A man confused,
A killer of his kind.