

# After the Toast and Tea

Maurice Kenny

**A**UNT MAY stood close to the bleeding hearts and plucked the dead blooms from the fat bushes. Slowly she began to lift a spray of the pink flowers and smelled the faint perfume. The May flowers were dying. Most of the pod-like blooms were wilting on tufts of grass, while only a few were nodding on the stalks toward the green. The air was scented with the delicate smells of lilac and purple snapdragon, and golden sun rays

drifted aimlessly across the old-fashioned garden paths. She bent her round back, stooped to pick a withered violet that had bloomed a month too late, and heard a boy's voice on the breeze coming from beneath the stout maple tree. He sat beside the trunk reading poetry to his sister who looked up at the dancing leaves. The woman straightened, turned to face them, and noticed the thick leafy branches majestically shadowing and cloaking the children with rambling arms as though to ward off all evil.

The boy was twelve and his sister a few years older. He read and she dug into the ground with her fingers as she listened to him. The girl was pretty with long black hair that rippled down her back. Her nose was small and delicate, her mouth was red, her eyes were black and expressed nothing but contentment. Though the boy was younger he seemed her twin. Both had the same coloring of hair and eyes; both their cheeks were high and prominent as though Indian blood flowed through their veins. But the girl's complexion was an olive hue while the boy's seemed white as though he were anemic.

'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease has all too short a date.'

Aunt May pushed back the brim of her garden bonnet and smiled, forcing the pinched face to wrinkle. Her mouth formed a hub for lines that flowed across her face. The old woman's nose was short, snubbed, and covered with beige powder to hide the sand-sized black specs that dotted her skin. Her eyes were large and round like fish eyes, but sparkled with a childish joy.

"How lovely they look," she thought to herself. "Innocent, sweet . . . though somewhat pathetic. A body'd never know the girl was any trouble. Oh! if it could always be like this . . . quiet, peaceful. No disturbance. I hate to follow around watching like a beady-eyed hawk to see she doesn't fall in the well, or break my china. But what else *can* I do?"

'So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
So long lives this and this gives life to thee.'

Aunt May smiled again and turned back to her garden chore . . . the clipping, pruning, plucking, and the smelling of the various blooms that flowered in neat thin rows about the cobblestone paths. She brushed an ant from a paddle-like petal of a sunflower and sighed. "Funny they didn't grow higher this year. Enough rain and lots of sun. Seeds must be wearing out. Like me. Mother planted them when she and Papa were

first married. They've lasted pretty good. More than likely will outlast me. Lucky if I see five more springs," she thought.

A bird winged over the garden trees, and she watched it soar off in the azure sky towards the cottony-puffs of clouds that roamed noiselessly over the emerald hillsides and sun-bright valley. Her tanned, withered fingers rose like those of an Indian scout to shade her eyes from the sun's glare, as she scanned the sky and watched the black spot vanish beyond the puffs. She wet her crinkled lips that seemed violet in the day-light with her pale tongue and once more bent to pull the weeds that forever flourished in her garden.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "my back! I must be filled with the cramps," she said aloud rubbing the rolls of fat near the spine just below her ribs. "Cup of tea might do me some good. Might put some spunk back in me. It's the hour anyway," she said to herself. "Let's have some tea," she called to the children. "Come and bring Susan, Frank. I'm going in to put the kettle on. Hurry now."

"All right, Auntie," the boy called as he closed his book.

"Don't be long," she said hobbling off towards the house like a brave wounded soldier.

"We won't be."

As Aunt May approached the house she noticed the morning glories with their pastel petals clinging with closed lips to the grey strings that crept from stakes, wedged into the rich loam, to the chipped eaves of the weather-beaten house. She saw a shutter sagging, flapping against the sideboards in the light breeze that quietly swept across the stilled lawn. "Going to paint you some day," she whispered to the aged house. "Can't right now," she shook her round head and her red-tinted pin curls jiggled. "There's no money. Maybe. If I could get another pupil I would have it. I guess you won't run off to somebody else before I can get to you," she murmured. The woman stood there a moment, breathed the clear air, and waited as though the warped boards might answer. "You'll stay," she said and mounted the wooden steps that creaked and groaned from her weight. "Can't take all this flesh, can you?" she asked the steps. "I'm getting too fat. Like a round tub of butter. Too many preserves, I guess." She grasped the faded skirts that hung to her mud-spotted boots in her tanned fingers and slowly climbed, wobbling upon each step like a baby learning to walk, to the slanted porch.

Her blind cat sat in a rocking chair sleeping and sunning itself. She stopped and stroked the blue-black fur that shimmered like velvet, and the animal rolled over on its back purring softly but still asleep. "You old dear," she said tickling its grey belly. "You old, old cat. Come on now an' I'll give you a plate of milk. Come on now. Get up, pussy. Too sleepy? Too old?"

So much of us is old around here. Old and dying, or dead. Thank God for Frank. What would we do without his funny little laugh and capers? Eh? The child's a true blessing. Like his reading, too. Eh, pussy? Reads like a charm. 'Tis a charm. Indeed. Ought to be an actor when he grows up. Shame his Mama can't hear him read. She'd be proud. Poor dead woman. Well. Come on now. We're neglecting the tea."

The cat stirred, stretched its knobby legs, and jumped from the chair to follow Aunt May into the parlor. Blind as it was, it made its way easily across the thin layer of carpet towards the kitchen, following the musty geranium-smell that clung to his mistress' skirt. Half-dazed by the light of the outdoors, yet capable of seeing a film of dust on the center table, she walked through the parlor. She passed her pudgy finger across the mahogany top and shook her head. "My goodness," she said aloud, "what a poor housekeeper lives here!"

Everywhere were little figurines: girls and boys on tip-toes, black horses and earthen brown horses; china flowers, red barns and thatched cottages, old peasant women with long flowered aprons and white caps, and young men with blond moustaches and patched breeches. Pushed to every wall, shelves held the purest crystal vases and precious china on knotty boards.

"Better get the duster out," she said to the cat.

The room was furnished with high leather chairs and a long, deep-maroon horse-hair sofa. Floor-length laced curtains, torn in places at the hems, hung from the ceiling, and a carpet, walked to its yellow threads, stretched from one end of the room to the other showing only remnants of dulled green leaves and orange and red poppy petals. A huge marble hearth, cold and ivoried with age, faced the porch door. There were plants and leafy ferns of various shades of green, in ash-colored pots, upon the mantel. Before a window, on the right side of the room, sat a rocker, and near it was a pile of muddy drift wood collected from the river shore, and a bouquet of dead buttercups. In the center of the room, a huge, brass-based chandelier, with a pink globe speckled with blue dots, dangled from the ceiling on frayed cords. On the opposite side of the room from the rocker sat a table bearing another oil lamp, its glass globe smudged with bluish soot.

"Let's have strawberry jam?" Aunt May said to the cat. "And cinnamon toast with the tea. That should be a treat." The cat purred and rubbed its furry body against the old woman's skirt as if to agree with her. "Then after tea we'll let Susan sit in her chair by the window, and Frank can read to us." As she passed through the room her foot accidentally brushed a piece of glass and sent it across the floor. "Oh! my. What's this? My Pollyanna! Broken! Oh! no, not Pollyanna. Did you do

this, ol' puss-an'-boots? No, no, of course you didn't. It was that girl. That girl!" Slowly she went to her knees to gather the fragments in her apron. Tiny specks of tears clung to her lower eye-lashes. "My poor, beautiful Polly," she moaned and cried like a child with a broken heart. "She's got to go," she said rising. "She's just got to go now."

The children closed the screened door and, laughing gaily, found chairs in the parlor.

"We'll go to the creek tomorrow," Frank said to his sister who took the rocker by the window. "We can see the frogs there. You'll like them, Susan. They'll hop all over you if you can catch them. But you must promise not to squeeze them too tight."

Aunt May wandered through to the kitchen without speaking to the children. There she laid the fragments upon the table, and walked about filling the kettle at the pump, pulling a bottle of jam from behind the cookie can, and shoving kindling into the stove. "Nothing's safe anymore. Body might be murdered in her own bed some night. Good Lord! Papa's fine house might be burnt down on our very heads. She's got to go. Soon," the woman said to herself while working about the kitchen and listening to the girl rocking and the boy reciting a poem.

A few minutes later the water was bubbling in the dented kettle and warm smells of burnt bread filled the room. She set out the teapot and three cups, a bowl of jam, three soap-white napkins initialed with large Gothic M's, and a plate of sand-colored buttered toast on a tray.

"Frank," Aunt May called, "come carry the tray to the parlor, please."

"All right."

The boy rushed to the room, his cheeks flaming with the sting of the sun and his black curls falling down his wide brow. His eyes sparkled with delight when he saw the sweets, and his tongue traced along the edge of his tenuous lips. "Jam, Aunt May? Good."

"I thought it might be a nice treat. But sister can't touch it. She's been bad again."

"Another doll of yours?" the boy asked, bowing his head and shoving his hands into the deep pockets of his corduroys.

"Yes."

His smile disappeared and the happy glow in his eyes faded. "She didn't mean it."

"It's still bad, Frank. She must be punished."

"Don't know it's bad."

"Course she does," said the old lady stressing the does. "She hears. She might not speak with sense, but she can hear well enough. How many times I told her not to play with them!"

If she could write and read, I'd make her translate the whole of Cicero. Pollyanna was my favorite."

The boy stood motionless wanting to plead for his sister, but not knowing how, or daring. His brow became a mass of little lines, and his lower lip sagged. He stood there holding the tray, his mind filled with excuses and explanations, his tongue refusing to move. Finally the iced fear melted. "You won't send her away will you, Aunty?" he asked kicking the table leg with his shoe. "You won't, will you, Aunty? Please, say you won't. She's sorry, and I won't let her do it again. Honest."

"Too late. Polly's broken. There's only one place to send her to, boy." She always called him boy when he was in wrong or when she wished to be firm.

"Where's that?" he asked, his fear returning.

"You know, the place we talked of before."

"Oh! not there, Aunty. They'll beat her like Pa did, and shut her up in a dark room. Not there, please."

"Well, carry the tea things in, and I'll think."

As they sat drinking the tea, they were interrupted by a slight knock, and when Frank opened the door he found Caroline Parker standing on the roofless porch. Her babyish face was puckered in a frown, and her hand rested on her side just above the hip. Her foot tapped nervously upon the loose floor boards, and she swished her dangling curls back and forth for the attention she knew they would get. The strawberry-blond hair, hanging to her plump waist, was caught in the waning rays of the sun as it slowly dipped behind the hills, and the hair seemed like the red-gold of the sky itself.

Aunt May loved the girl's baby beauty, admiring the china-like features that would have blended well with the ornaments on the shelves. Her forehead shone like a mirror, and her model's chin and cheeks were as smooth as glass yet to the touch as soft as the petals of a flower.

"Come in, Caroline. What are you doing here now? No lesson to do. Ah! You've brought me a letter. From your daddy?"

"Yes."

The girl stepped into the room, careful not to dirty her purple dress upon the dusty door. She walked past Frank, nose in the air, straight to Aunt May sitting before the tea table. Immediately she caught sight of Susan and backed away, nearly tripping over the cat who was humped upon the floor licking his paws.

"My daddy, the Mayor, sent me," she said emphasizing the Mayor. "I've a letter for you. Want to know what's in it?" she teased. "I know. I'll tell," she said spying the red, plump strawberries in the bowl, "if you let me have some jam and toast."

"Of course you can, child. But the letter is mine whether you get jam or not."

"It's about me," she said lifting her head high and patting daintily at the curls by her small ears. "It's about me and Susan."

"They're always about you," Frank said angrily.

She twitched her shoulder at the girl in the rocker, and swished around to face Frank who had retired to the sofa at Caroline's entrance to the parlor. "You'll be sorry for being so smarty with me, an' lettin' your sister tear my sash."

"But she only wanted to touch the silk," he said. "She used to have one like it."

"May I have the letter?" asked Aunt May reaching out for the envelope, eyeing the child coldly.

"I suppose so, but I know what's in it. Daddy's mad. I got a new dress though, even prettier'n the other one. Mother said I looked so cute she could eat me."

"I wish she had," Frank said.

Caroline turned her back to the boy. "Daddy said that Susan oughtta be put in a bug house, and that Frank needed a good horse whipping."

"Oh!" exclaimed Aunt May not caring for Caroline's chatter.

"That's the very words he said, too. Susan oughtta go away to the *nut* house, and Frank should be horsewhipped," she repeated.

The girl in the rocker began to play with the glass globe of the oil lamp on the table near her. She stared through the window at the brilliant sky, not knowing she was being spoken of.

"Did he now?" Aunt May asked.

"Oh! yes," the girl replied. Her eyes enlarged with excitement.

"It should be you," Frank remarked.

"Is Susan really and truly batty?" she asked, turning to stare at Susan as she tittered in the rocker. "Mother said she saw her eating dirty ol' grass one day," she said, handing the envelope to Aunt May.

"She never did," Frank snapped.

"Don't be silly, Caroline," Aunt May answered opening the fat letter. One-dollar bills slipped from the paper and fell into the woman's lap. She counted them twice; there were twenty-five. Aunt May thought much more of the Mayor's money than she did of him or his daughter; after all, it was more or less the roof over her head. Finally she got to reading the letter, and as she read her face flushed with anger.

July 16, 1951

Riverton City Hall

Dear Miss Graves,

This letter is to notify you that my daughter Caroline shall not be attending your morning sessions henceforth.

The notorious actions of your niece, Susan, has so frightened my child that she could not eat her dessert at dinner the night before last, or last night either. Your niece, it seems, snatched at my daughter's red sash, and yanked it savagely from around her delicate waist, causing a red burn on her skin. She was badly hurt. When she begged your nephew, Franklyn Tanner, to retrieve the said sash he ill-manneredly refused, stating that his sister wanted the cloth. It was not her's, and she had absolutely no right to it.

My wife and I have both agreed that your niece should be placed away in the safekeeping of the proper attendants so that she may not frighten or harm other little girls or boys. Also, we have agreed that Franklyn deserves a sound thrashing. If you are not capable of doing the deed then send him to me and I shall have my gardner do it for you.

Enclosed you shall find twenty-five (\$25.00) dollars. That should well pay us up. I am sorry that our relationship should end so abruptly and under such mean circumstances; but you, learned as you are, shall understand the position of a father whose only desire is to protect his innocent daughter.

Yours truly,  
J. W. Parker  
The Honorable Mayor of Riverton

"What's he said?" Frank asked his Aunt.

"Well!" she exclaimed, dropping the envelope to the floor. The cat nonchalantly walked to it and perched upon it. "Of all the nerve," she thought to herself. "All the nerve of that fat stuffed shirt." She could see him sitting on his tub-like bottom dictating the disgraceful letter. She could see him pushing his cigar with his lecherous tongue from one brown corner of his mouth to the other, and patting the dear child's head, sympathizing, spoiling her, and verbalizing for revenge. Aunt May's heavy eyes fell to her apron and glanced at the money. The last. The crispy new bills seemed like the end of the world, the end of her life. What would she do with no more coming from the Mayor? The councilmen would take their two lanky boys away too, and then nothing, nothing at all would be coming in to put the bread and meat in their mouths.

"Is he really mad?" Frank asked.

"Of course he is. I told you so," Caroline said.

Aunt May glanced at Caroline, saw her sticking a finger into the bowl of jam, and longed to strangle the little tattler. She wanted the red sash to slowly squeeze the breath from the saucy girl's body. Throwing the money and letter to the floor, she walked toward Susan.

"Oh! Susan, you fool, you idiot," she said gently. "You've done it good now. Done it good. What am I to do with you?"



I can't trust you a second, not even with Frank watching." The tears ran slowly, one at a time, and they shone like a dribble of yellow dew on her powdered cheeks. "There's only one thing to do, even though your Mother did beg me to take you. She said to love you, and I did, like a girl-child I've never had. She said to do for you, and I have. She said to . . . she said too much. I can't do anymore. You poor miserable thing. Miserable thing," she repeated and bent to brush back a strand of the girl's black hair.

"You aren't going to send her away, are you?" Frank asked, remaining on the couch.

The woman evaded the question.

"Where'll she go?" inquired Caroline.

Feeling the light touch upon her head, Susan smiled childishly at her aunt. "Dance," she said. "Dance, dance, dance," she laughed idiotically. "Ha ha ha ha ha. Dance."

"Yes, child, you'll dance, but not to the tune you think."

"She is batty, isn't she," shrilled Caroline, jumping with glee and clapping her jam-sticky hands. "She's batty as a loon. Look at her, Frank. Ain't she funny! Wait 'til I tell Mother. Ha ha ha ha."

"Stop laughing. Stop laughing, I said. Stop it. She isn't funny," he hollered, running to his sister's side.

The girl continued to laugh, highly amused by Susan.

"You may go now, Caroline." Aunt May's voice was harsh. "You won't have to come back anymore for school. I'll send Frank around to pick up your books."

"Mayn't I stay and play with batty Susan? She's a scream, really."

"She isn't," Frank shouted while holding his sister's hand.

"That's not necessary. You've played your last game together. Now run along home and tell your father thank you for the money and instructions," Aunt May said.

The girl started to leave but first walked to Susan, who sat laughing, believing she was waltzing. Caroline stuck out her tongue at the laughing girl. "Good-bye, you crazy loon," she said.

"Stop it. Stop talking to my sister like that. She's not crazy. She's not."

"She is so. Look at her. Making believe she's dancing. She's crazy as a cooty."

The boy sprang from the floor, tears streaking his white face, and grasped the girl in his hands. He shook her, and the girl's dangling curls fell loose.

"Let me go. Let me go, I say."

"I won't."

"I'll tell my daddy how you're hurting me. Let me go," she said, her own eyes clouding with tears.

He shook her once more and then turned her loose and walked to the sofa where he fell flat on the coarse cloth, and sobbed with his back throbbing.

"I'll tell. I'll tell what you did, Frank Tanner. I'll tell daddy and the whole world," she cried, running from the room and slamming the door behind her which did not catch, but opened once more.

Aunt May had stood by, not speaking, enwrapt with her own thoughts, not caring whether Caroline told her father or not. "What difference would it make anyway, it's all over now," she thought. She glanced at the boy's bobbing head, heard his cries, and looked toward Susan, who still remained in the chair enchanted with her imaginary dance.

"Don't cry, Frank."

Slowly he sat up and looked at his aunt without saying a word.

For a moment they stared deep into each other's eyes, and the old woman saw his pleading face, agonized, tear-streaked, and her heart skipped a beat and then began again to pound ever faster. She thought she would either die or faint and wished she would.

"I have to tell him," she thought to herself. "It's meant to be. He'll be brave. As he is with everything. I know it. That's what makes it so difficult. It'll hurt, and he'll cry, and beg. Finally give in. But he won't forget. He won't forget that I did it. He might understand, in time, but he'll always remember that it was me who sent Susan away."

The cat hopped from the floor into the old woman's lap and began to purr softly, rubbing its head against the white apron. Aunt May stroked its face and fingered the cat's long, grey whiskers until it fell asleep.

"Do I have the heart to do it?" she asked herself silently. "Can I shut her away from the world, and a brother who loves her?" She glanced down at her lap at the cat. "Could I do it to you, ol' cat. Tell me, pussy. What should I do? Keep her or eat? Or send her away and break his heart? We like to eat—no, we've got to eat." She knew Frank would ask if God approved, and she would be forced to lie and say, "Yes, lad. He'd approve."

"Frank," she said softly, "take Susan upstairs."

He sat upon the sofa waiting silently, biting back the tears that were forming over and over again in his red eyes.

"Help her pack her box." The boy stared deep into the old woman's eyes. "Don't look at me, boy. Not like that," she said dabbing at her own eyes with the apron's hem. "We've got to eat, haven't we?"