

## The Chance

Toni Aberson

THERE were the folks, in the back yard, arguing about the grapevines. Other things might come and go, but they'd always have grapevines. A smile tripped around the corners of Carrie's mouth as she heard the old routine. "Baby the plants. Go on. Waste your time. You're sweating all over and you'll get sick. Does that bother you? No. Go on . . ." Charlie didn't answer. But, for that matter, as far back as Carrie could remember he never had answered, or changed his ways either. During the hard years when they'd lived in the shack he'd had his few sickly plants wrapped around the outside shower and now, in the new back yard, he had healthily sprouting vines everywhere. "The good kind," as he would proudly say, "the thick ones." With quick snips of his fingers Charlie was shaping the plants, urging them to grow. He was around sixty, scrawnlily built, with a balding head and awkward hands and feet. He moved slowly, usually stepping on his pants' cuffs, but sure of his work. Carrie knew that if he helped her tonight everything would be all right—but he probably wouldn't.

Her mother crouched on the edge of the beach chair, peeling potatoes onto a newspaper while she chided Charlie about the vines. She was younger and more solid than Charlie, with heaps of coarse, black hair tumbling around her face. Both of them were true Armenians: big noses and shaggy eyebrows and good workers. They'd worked endlessly, repairing houses and doing washings, working toward a home for themselves and their children. Arthur had left before the dream was accomplished but Carrie was there, in the new house, and it was good.

Carrie was twenty, with close-cropped, curling hair and a large nose which usually disappeared in the laugh lines of her face. Her mother always complained because of the many hours she spent in the bathroom, plucking her eyebrows. She crossed the yard now, in her slightly bowlegged swing, with "Hi, Charlie; hi, Mrs. De, how are the gods treating the cabbages?"

"Hello, Carrie. You talk sense to your father about those plants. The mosquitoes bite and he stays out here, this for the vines, that for the vines. He'll stay out here all night with those vines."

Her father slowly looked up to smile and nod his head, and Carrie winked at him. "Now, Mrs. De," she said as she waltzed with the potato pail, "we'll go fix these just right and then lock him out of the kitchen. We'll fix you, Charlie."

"Stop that silly talk, Carrie. College is putting nonsense in your head. Charlie, mind what I said and be ready when your dinner's hot."

There were just three for the evening meal since Arthur was out in Illinois, learning business and hunting a girl, but every night was

an occasion. During the day Charlie fixed roofs, Mrs. Dedarian kept the house shining and grouched at the doctor for making her take it easy, and Carrie sketched still lifes with lavender crayons; but every night there they were, sharing the feeling of family.

Tonight, because of her uneasiness, Carrie jabbered away. "I saw you sneak in the back door, Charlie." And then, "How about a pony tail for you, Mrs. De?" She knew what she was doing. She knew too well she was breaking the unwritten rule that a good meal needed silence. Nothing but the pat "Did I get any mail today?" and "How's your art work, Carrie?" were okay for the dinner table. Yet here she was, talking a mile a minute. Well, go to it. You've gone too far to stop now. All day long you've been hoping to catch them in good moods, planning how you'd settle Charlie with the paper and treat your mother to a Good Humor, play along real cool and natural and then casually mention that talk. That was the way to do it. Now Mother's shooting darts this way and Charlie's scraping his chair on the floor. Oh, nice play. I sure did mess everything up. It could have worked so nicely, darn it. Better start now before Mother explodes. Straighten yourself in the chair, smile around brightly, and pour Charlie some more coffee. Paying attention to Charlie was the quickest way to get around her mother. The now-or-never feeling hit completely, so quickly and a little loudly Carrie said, "I talked to my adviser, Mr. Southerland, today."

"Carrie, must you talk so? Let your father eat."

"We talked about something I thought you might like to know, Mother."

"All right, Carrie, all right."

This was permission to say what was on her mind, but Carrie hesitated. Maybe it would still be best to wait until later. Her mother would object to anything brought up now. Better wait until the dishes are cleared. Everyone will be calmer then. She looked to Charlie for some sign, but his head remained bent over his plate. He'd decide it. The two women could rage for hours, but where Charlie sided, that was the side that won.

"Well, Carrie? What's so important to bother the meal?"

There was no getting around it now. "I just wanted to tell you, Mother. He was awfully nice. He said, Mr. Southerland that is, that he thought I was good enough to get a full scholarship to go somewhere else. I could go to Indiana for my last two years if I wanted to."

"So? We're glad he's pleased with you. It's good for your teachers to like you. Thank him and tell him you're happy here. Girls can't go running around the country, and even boys, like Arthur, shouldn't be away so much. Now let your father eat."

It was as simple as that. Two years had been decided in a few short sentences. Just tell Mr. Southerland that she'd spoken with her family and they'd all decided staying home was best. Oh, he'd frown a little, but he'd concede that she must know best if she was sure.



Then he'd talk a little more about I. U. and color training there, and finish with a smile and "But, of course, we're always glad to keep you here at Brooklyn." I can't let it slip so easy though, she thought. Let's at least try a little more.

"They've got a great art department out at I. U. Just the kind of stuff he says I need. It sure would be great."

Her mother moved very deliberately to the stove for more food for the table and Carrie felt the silence. Charlie still seemed completely intent on his meal.

"It's a great deal, Mother. All my bills will be paid and I'd be studying where they'd really help me. It sure would be nice if I could go."

"Nice? Maybe so. But a good girl like you can't go that far from home. You tell him that tomorrow and say your mother thanks him. It's nice for him to try and help you, but we just can't have it. Now eat your dinner."

"Mr. Southerland and I talked it over for a long time, Mother. I told him I'd explain it to you and we'd talk it over tonight."

"Well, we've talked it over and it's settled. You tell him what I said."

Carrie saw her father look up at her and smile as if to say, "You be a good girl and do what your mother says. This is the best way." She wanted to please him, she wanted to please both of them, but did they know what it meant? Since Arthur had left she'd fooled herself with a "maybe, someday," but this was someday and there seemed to be no maybe about it. It sure would have been nice, though, to have close friends like in high school that you could be with all the time. Dates and gab-fests, you sure could go for that again. It's been a long time since you saw the old gang, and everyone at school is rushing around to catch a subway. No time for chats in that machine shop. I could do it all myself, too, that's the real pay-off. It could be so blasted simple. Always before there'd been the money problem, so what was the sense of mentioning it to the folks? Arthur used the G. I. Bill, but a lot of good that did me. And then too, there'd always be Mother saying, "He is a boy, you are a girl. He is older, you are younger. And anyway, his being out there is a reason for you being here. Home is here. We've all wanted this home and now both our children are going to leave? Oh no, you stay here." So Carrie had shoved the dream away and had her fun by surprising Charlie with pastry and working hard at her art. But now, now she had a real chance to go, and she couldn't bring herself to relinquish it so easily.

"Mother, you know that in those dormitories they keep regular track of the girls. They sign a book to tell where they're going, and they have to be in at a certain time. Each dorm has a house mother and the meals are good and regular. It's all proper, Mother. Lots of girls, good girls like you say, go away to college. I'd room with another girl or two and Arthur could keep tabs on me. We could

easily work it out, Mother."

Carrie saw her mother's face color and her hands clutch for her apron. Mrs. Dedarian looked at Charlie but his head remained lowered. He was looking wearily at his thumbs. The time for Charlie to interfere and guide had passed. Both women felt it; he was merely there.

"Get the fruit from the icebox, Carrie, and shut up this crazy talk. You stay here with Charlie and me. I'm your house mother. And you take art classes in Brooklyn like you want to, or if you're not happy, take some other kind of classes, but you stay here where you belong. Your brother pulled himself away. All right. But it's better now and you stay here. Bring your girl friends here to stay. We've fixed up a nice place now, bring all your friends, all the time. Invite your Mr. Southerland if you want to and he'll see how a good girl lives with her family. But you're not going. There's no sense in that kind of talk, so stop it."

"Please, Mother, let's not start shouting. I just wanted to talk it over with you. Mr. Southerland says—"

"I don't care what Mr. Southerland says, and neither does Charlie. All you do is talk about your Mr. Southerland. Well, now we know what Mr. Southerland says. He doesn't say where to find you a hard-working boy. He doesn't say why Arthur left and why he won't come home. He doesn't say about the doctor and why I'm sick now. He doesn't teach you good things about loving your parents and staying with them. Just keep quiet about Mr. Southerland."

"All right. Then I'll say it. We'll forget about what he says and I'll say it. I want to go. I like the house and I love you. And I'm sorry that Arthur doesn't write. But I want to go. For twenty years we've never had a vacation, never gone anywhere. I've never been anyplace except back and forth on that God-awful subway. Arthur just picked up and left, but I stayed here. I've been here and I've done my share and now I want to go and live my life. I'm tied here, Mama, can't you see? I want to go there. I've always wanted to. And now I have the chance. This is my only chance. Oh please, see my side, Mama, this is my chance to go. I'm—"

"Shut up your mouth! You're my daughter and you're staying here. You think Charlie and I wouldn't want a vacation? You think we've liked working for other people all these years? You think we can't dream too about how it was at home and how we'd like it to be? But it's not. We're here. And we've worked and made something good for you and Arthur, something you couldn't have had in the old country. You think we work for us? Our friends aren't here. We have no friends here. Only us, the family, and Arthur is gone and you want to leave. The doctor makes me soft like a lazy woman and you want to leave and go away. What about Charlie? You stay here with us and thank God for what you have. And tell Mr. Southerland to mind his own business and stop putting crazy ideas into your head. You're a good girl and a good



daughter. Now act it. Going away isn't going to change you. You tell Mr. Southerland that. Tell him you'll be the same girl, only you won't have a home. You're going to act like a daughter, not like a boarder who comes and goes and acts as she pleases."

"Please, Mama, I didn't mean to make you so upset. The doctor—"

"Oh, so now it's the doctor. Why didn't you think of the doctor when you wanted to go live where girls do God knows what? Did you think about staying and caring for your mother's health? Or about helping Charlie? He's getting old too, and needs help. No, you don't think about that. Call up the doctor. Go call the doctor. Tell him you don't think about anyone but yourself. Tell him you don't care."

"Okay, Mama, okay, I've had enough. I'm sorry I ever mentioned it, I'm really sorry. But I had the right—"

"A right? Maybe, but first you have a duty. Now get your father's fruit from the icebox and act decent."

Carrie again became aware of her father's presence. She looked at Charlie across the table. He seemed very relieved, so she smiled at him and got up to get his fruit. Charlie had always said you had to take a vine gently from the ground, little by little, after soaking it with water and waiting for the proper time. The grapes turned sour when the plant was torn from the earth too soon. Maybe it was so.

"Shall we have some soggy oranges or fat apples for dessert, Mrs. Dedarian?" She did see, she really did see, and she was going to try, very hard.

## FEBRUARY RAIN

Fall quickly, rain!

fall quickly—

oh, melt the frost

of winter wind,

sweep the air

in a silver rush!

Fall swiftly, rain!

fall swiftly—

and touch my heart

with liquid laughter.

Fall gently, rain,

fall gently—

and when you've gone,

leave quiet pools

of clear reflection.

—SUE WINGER