

BEFORE YOU LEAVE, LET ME ASK YOU . . .

EDWARD L. WILLIAMS

"Maude, let's be sensible, now. You're just not giving me a chance. Why, some day in the future, some day when we're both old and grey, beside that old fireplace you've always wanted, Maude, we'll think back about this little spat—"

"It's not just a little spat, Charley. And there's no need to talk anymore, either. You've said all that you can to change—"

"Well, for Christ's sake! Just be sensible! Maude, you're tired. Just stop a minute and let yourself relax."

"I'll relax as soon as I'm packed and gone. I'll relax then, but I'm not about—"

"Now that's not fair, Maude. That's not fair at all. I'll be the first to admit that I don't understand you all the time. God knows a man never understands a woman all the time, not each and every day; but let me remind you right now of something, Maude. I've always made it policy to listen to you, even when I didn't understand you, to listen to what you had to say."

"Come on Charley. JESUS!"

"It's true. Yes, it's true, and you can't deny it. You have to admit I've always let you get your say in. Never turned my back once like you're doing now to me."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, I'll keep saying it too. If there's one thing ole Charles Kneadmoore has got going for him, it's an open mind and an ear for the customer! I've heard 'em say so. Heard 'em with my own ears."

"But I'm NOT one of your customers! Not anymore, anyway. And if I hear that DAMNED WORD AGAIN—"

"ALL RIGHT! ALL RIGHT! There's no need for you to yell. I can hear just fine without you raising your voice. But like I was saying, before you cut me off, I think you're making a big mistake. A mighty big mistake. And take it for what it's worth, Maude, it's advice, professional advice I'm offering you. I think you'd do well to think it all over. For both our sakes. It's something you may live to regret."

"Then I'll just learn to live with regret. And you! You talk of REGRET? You keep that tramp of yours—"

"Now that's something I've offered to discuss with you over and again. God knows I've paid for that. I've lost sleep over it. Plenty of sleep. And I'm not strong like I used to be. That's why the job's down, now. You can't sell when you don't feel right, Maude. Now I know you don't like me always taking about the job, but without it, where'd we be now?"

"We'd be together, that's where! In a HOME! I wouldn't be sitting her in this damned place while you roamed the country for every little—"

"But we ARE together! Man and wife; and you can't deny that! But I guess you will soon, the road you're traveling."

"I guess I will too."

"Well, before you do, I think it'd be important you consider a few things first. And I want to tell you again, because it's important, important to me, anyway: I never—never, and I mean this sincerely, ever intended to hurt you or your children at any—"

"Oh, for GOD'S SAKE! Don't you you mention my children to me!"

"No. It's true. And I've a right to. It's time I said it; and even though you don't believe me, I never once considered how this would affect us. You know what I'm referring to, and I apologize. I'm really sorry that any of it had to happen. But it did and we can't change things now. Now don't look away like that. I know you don't believe me; but I've said it before, and I'll say it again until you do. And as for that girl upstairs, Maude, I can't just turn her out, ruin her life, her career, because *I* was too weak. She doesn't have a home, a family—"

"She soon will have."

"That's not at all funny, Maude. Don't you think that I suffer from this? Don't you think that every time I look her in the face I hurt inside? Why, an innocent—"

"INNOCENT? LIKE HELL! INNOCENT! I suppose she was innocent with Rob and with John? That was even before you came along, Charley! Was she innocent then too?"

"She's young! Yes, she is. And she's weak too! You wouldn't understand because you're strong and you've never been weak. The answer to your question is yes. But you won't understand it. You don't know what it's like to be a victim. You simply never got out in the world to find out—"

"That's because you were always gone!"

"I had to support a family. I was the provider, Maude! The bread winner. Was I supposed to leave you home to starve. And the child?"

"Daddy offered you a job in the store! You could have taken that."

"Sure he offered me a job. But there was no future in it. No way to the top!"

"He would have helped you if you'd tried."

"No. I couldn't have worked there. I'd be too old too soon. It'd have killed me. I know what you think, now, though. You think that I'm not getting any younger and that we haven't got the things I said we'd have yet. Well, that's true. It's all true and I'm the first to admit it. But things go in cycles. You're going good one day, then things slump and you go bad awhile. But they'll work out. All we need is time. And despite your bitterness, Maude, I want you to know that I still respect you as a person. I'll tell you one thing I'm grateful for. I'm grateful for the way you've raised the kids and that because of it, your raising of them, that they still love their father."

"HOW can you say that?"

"Because right now it's all you've left me! That's how! They're my children too, and I've a right to them. Through better or worse. You agreed to that, remember?"

"I SWORE to it! I didn't AGREE to it!"

"Exactly! You took an oath. And now, now when hard times come and I make one little slip—"

"ONE SLIP! Oh, that's funny. That's really funny, Charley! You swore to me, you swore when you struck Johnny that'd you stop drinking! And what about Cheryl's prom? Do you remember that you swore—"

"You're right. Absolutely right—"

"LET ME TALK! YOU NEVER LET ME TALK!"

"All right, then. Talk! I always listen."

"Then you brought home that goddamned girl and you didn't even tell me it was your child she was carrying!"

"Now, I'll be goddamned if I'm going to take that, Maude! We've discussed that so many times and it doesn't do any good to bring it up anymore."

"Well, I'm leaving because of it."

"But you just can't leave me! Not when I'm at the bottom. It's not right! Even if you don't love me, and I don't believe you do anymore, even if you don't love me, you should stay for comfort's sake. You just don't walk out on someone you've been married to for sixteen years! Stop and think of the kids. They've had more than most kids their age, haven't they? Think of good times with the bad. This affair, it's just that the job's down and all. I've simply tried too hard to support us, and it's been too demanding on—"

"YOU SHIT TOO!"

"Well, you don't have to believe me. Nobody seems to anyway. Go ahead if you like. Call me a liar. Go on! Tell me I'm a liar!"

"LIAR! LIAR! LIAR!"

"I just hope it makes you feel good. Watch somebody sweat their health out, burn their youth out, go to rags when business slows. Now you call me a liar. I just don't understand you. I only hope that it makes you happy. I hope you're a happy woman, now."

"Charley, I don't think I'll ever be a happy woman. Not now. Now when I've lost my daughter. Not when I've heard my own son swear to—"

"Swear to what? Tell me! Go on! Say it! It won't break me, Maude. You've done that yourself!"

"Yes, I suppose I have, Charley. When I carried your child, that was the beginning, wasn't it? That was when it started, wasn't it?"

"We said we wouldn't discuss that. That was seventeen years ago. That's too long to carry a grudge, Maude!"

"No it's not, Charley! It's not too long to carry a scar! Not too long to raise a child that wasn't wanted!"

"That's a lie, Maude! That's a flagrant lie and I resent it! When I married you it was because I loved you. It had nothing to do with Johnny, nothing to do with your father or his money."

"No! But you **TOOK** the money, didn't you? I just wonder what would have happened if he hadn't have loaned it to you?"

"I'd have married you anyway. I'd have married you, and we would have worked something out."

"Why couldn't you have taken the job in the store then? Why couldn't you just have been happy with **THAT**?"

"Because it wasn't enough! We couldn't have existed, that's why!"

"It would have been enough for me!"

"Well, as things turned out, nothing was, was it?"

"As things turned out—no."

"I see. I see it's over. I'm just sorry we couldn't have worked it all out. But before you leave, before you go, let me ask one favor of you. I've never asked before; you know that's true. Everything your father gave, he gave it without my asking. But I'm down, Maude. I've got not place to go! No money! Business has been—"

"Charley. Don't."

"But I'm not going to stay down. No, I won't be here long. Not Charles Kneadmoore! All I need is something to get me going again. A small loan—"

"Oh, Charley, stop it! STOP IT! STOP IT! STOP IT!"

"No, Maude. I can't! Listen, Maude, it's important! It's best for both of us. I won't even bother you again!"

"STOP SAYING MY NAME, CHARLEY!"

"No Maude!"

"CHARLEEEEEEEY! Please!"

"Maude, I've plans! Listen to them, Maude! Listen!"

A POEM

MARTHA MOLDT

Put away your love,
As toys from childhood gone;
Piece by piece—but not
So slowly, lingering
By each one.

And smile a little,
Remembering how each
Was precious, penny-bright.
Love, like childhood, grows
Out of reach.

Hide all the pieces.
They don't belong to you.
Wrap each one in gay
Paper, and carefully
Hide from view.