Sadness croons its native songs
as the dust clamors over the high
cliff rocks. A high-pitched
glorified wind sings down the
protruding ledges and leaves its
careless ways to rest. Each falls
quiet as the storybook slams in the
faces of the "cultured," and, laughing-
eyed, stillness sings its crude
satire on existence.

THE GIFT

Nita Ellis

A chubby-faced boy rushed in front of the car as the woman
driving pulled up to the curb across from the First Methodist Church.
"That's Rodney. He's in my class," said the woman's small daughter
seated beside her.

While the little girl was crawling out of the car, her mother
uttered her usual warning, "Careful now when you cross the street,"
adding "I'll be waiting down at the corner when you get out, so
don't start walking home alone this time. All right?"
The girl nodded her agreement as she shut the car door with a hefty shove. The woman smiled as she watched her daughter cross the street and catch up with Rodney, dropping and retrieving her tattered Sunday school book in the process.

The classroom the two children entered was far less crowded than usual. Summer vacation had started, and that seemed to also mean a vacation from church and Sunday school. Their teacher that week was Mrs. Howarth, a woman with an incessant ear-to-ear grin. After the usual morning prayer, the grinning face led them in a new song. “Well children, that was wonderful,” she cooed. “You certainly have ‘lovely’ voices. Now, do you all know what today is?”

“It’s Sunday!”

“Yes, but what else?”

There was a silence that Rodney finally interrupted, “It’s Father’s Day.”

“Yes, that’s right, and do you know what we’re all going to do today?” Each trusting little face shook, not realizing Mrs. Howarth was depending on exactly that response.

“Well,” she said slowly, “we’re going to make ashtrays for each of our fathers as a Father’s Day present. Now children, doesn’t that sound like a nice thing for us to do?” Again the little heads nodded the expected reaction.

Mrs. Howarth began handing out the “magic clay” as she called it, “because children, you must work very fast or it will dry before you finish. Isn’t that exciting?”

The little girl sitting beside Rodney was reddening in the face, and as their teacher neared with her box of “magic clay,” she finally raised her hand and murmured, ‘Um, teacher? I, ah, don’t have a father to give a present to.”

The persistant grin came down to the little ear and whispered, “Well dear, make one for your grandfather then.”

This time two little tears bubbled up in the girl’s eyes. “I haven’t got one,” she choked.

“Well now, that’s all right,” said the grin. “You have a brother don’t you? I think he’d like it, don’t you?”

The little girl shrugged her shoulders and wiped the ‘would-be’ tears away with the back of her hand, as the woman placed a chunk of clay on the paper towel in front of the puckered red face.
As the time passed, and the child thought more about making a present for her brother, she became more enthusiastic. Soon she had finished her gift and had carefully chosen the paints she wanted to use. Her excitement continued to increase as she waited for the pigments to dry.

By the time class was over, the little girl was totally consumed by the thought of how grateful her brother would feel to be remembered on such a special day as Father’s Day. She floated to the corner appointed by her mother, the ashtray clutched between her fingers. Into the car she clambered to begin the excruciatingly long ride home.

When the car pulled into their driveway, the girl could no longer suppress herself, and she burst into the house, anxiously looking for her older brother. Finding him in front of the television, she eagerly offered the ashtray to him, exclaiming, “Happy Father’s Day!”

Following a long silence, the boy said shyly, “I don’t smoke,” and was quiet again.

The little girl dejectedly walked out to the front porch and sat down with her chin resting on her knees and played forlornly with her patent leather shoes, not realizing that it was her brother, this time, who was wiping away the ‘would-be’ tears with the back of his hand.