audacity to sit on the bank of my pond without asking?"

"I'm looking for the meaning of life," Henrik said, "Can you help me?"

"Of course I can't." The frog rolled his eyes in indignation.
"That's up to you, you silly duck."

"But I've searched and searched." Henrik was feeling rather sad. He soon found he was telling the story of his journey to the frog.

"Humph," commented the frog. "You've seen the answer to your questions."

"But I don't understand," wailed Henrik.

"Exactly. You lack one very important thing. Few ducks ever find it," the frog grumbled and disappeared beneath a lily pad.

Henrik sat on the edge of the pond and thought. A gold butterfly skimmed over his head and landed on a tall cattail.

"Do you...?" began Henrik and then stopped.

She was being pursued by a large blackbird who swooped and dived.

"Stop!" shouted Henrik to the bird. "Let her fly."

But the bird swallowed the gold butterfly and flew off, and only the slender cattail and Henrik knew what had happened.

Two large tears formed in Henrik's eyes, but he brushed them away with a wing—a grey, bedraggled wing by this time.

"It must be so. The frog was right." He started back down the path, a little slower this time, for he had found what he was looking for.

The Brass Key
Ron Schaffner

MILDRED WINSLOW slowly and with great effort trudged up the creaking stairway toward her third floor flat. The staircase was dimly lit, but the poor light did not hide the exposed lathe and bits of plaster that lay scattered about. The maroon stair carpet was frayed and showed worn threads over its entire length.

She reached her floor and paused to catch her breath. A few more steps, and she slipped the little brass key into the lock and entered. A flood of light from the bare windows seared her eyes, and she turned away quickly. Slipping out of a well-worn mink, she dropped into an old over-stuffed chair that freely displayed its insides.

"Is this me?" she thought. "I detested giving up the place on Sheridan Road... nothing else I could do." She closed her eyes to her, now, immodest surroundings and let her mind trickle back to that beautiful, lavishly furnished lake-front apartment. A life of wealth and luxury had slipped away and been replaced in its closing hours by one of strife and financial hardship. Bitterly, she remembered her husband's suicide and then the creditors and court
proceedings and legal fees and finally waking one morning to find herself nearly penniless. Dependent on a relief check, she had no choice but to rent a small, cheap apartment.

She shuddered when she thought of this dependency, but what disturbed her even more was the association with people whom she had so long considered her inferiors. She recalled the old days when she would have shied away from such people in downtown stores for fear of catching some malady from contact with them. She had always ignored them; and when they couldn’t be ignored, she dismissed them, feeling herself as a song thrush in a world of squabbling wrens.

She looked around at her newly acquired wren house and tears appeared in her eyes. The bare windows, the shabby furniture, the thread-bare rug, the lamps with ragged shades, all seemed like another world. The rumble of the El passing outside rattled the dishes in the cabinets and set the little glass chandelier overhead into tingling, oscillating motion.

At last her pensive meditation was interrupted by a light knocking on the door.

She called, “Who’s there?” Then, without waiting for an answer, she got to her feet and opened the door.

Before her, stood a small gray-haired woman in her fifties. She appeared a bit coarse. Her face was flushed yet healthy looking. She wore a cheap print dress, a pair of scuffed low-heeled shoes, no hose, and no make-up.

She smiled broadly and said, “Afternoon. I’m Dottie Wainwright. I live upstairs.”

“Oh,” Mildred replied, a little disturbed at this intrusion.

“You’re new here, ain’t ya?” she said with a slight accent. “Well, I think it’s nice to have friendly neighbors. I always stop in to see everybody what’s new in the building . . . I like to be a good neighbor . . . That’s what I always tell Irene . . . She’s my daughter . . . Irene is . . . ‘Irene,’ I say, ‘Always be a good neighbor.’ Don’t you think it’s nice if neighbors are good friends? Livin’ close like this . . . I always figure people might as well be friends. Ain’t that right?”

“Why, yes,” she answered, repelled at the familiarity, but, nevertheless, intrigued by such audacity.

“Your name is Winslow, ain’t it?” the intruder said.

“Yes, I’m Mildred Winslow. Won’t you step in?” she finally asked reluctantly.

“No. Can’t right now. Just wondered if you might like to come up to supper tonight. Won’t be fancy, but you’re welcome. You’ll meet the family and we can start bein’ good neighbors right away.”

Trying to hide her surprise, she said, “Well—.”

“You don’t have any plans—I mean you’re not doin’ anything else, are you?”

“Oh, no,” she answered and pondered a moment. “Why I’d love

“Goodbye,” she said and slowly pushed the door shut.

Deep down she still abhorred the idea of associating with these people, but she felt a compelling attraction toward the woman.

She finished tidying herself up and decided to go upstairs for the feeble hospitality. In front of apartment 4 B she paused and then rapped lightly on the door, half hoping that there would be no answer.

The door opened quickly and there stood the flushed, cheerful face of Mrs. Wainwright. “Come in,” she said, “You're just in time. Supper'll be ready in just a couple minutes.”

“Thank you,” she replied and stepped into the room.

“Come in and meet the clan.”

She saw a very clean and neat room. It wasn't fancy, and scarcely a single ornament adorned the room. The necessities were there—modest as they were, they were there. Then she noticed a dozen or so oil paintings scattered about the walls. She could not help feeling the incongruity of this and wondering if there might not be some surreptitious explanation. She became concerned and nervous about it, but just then her hostess broke in.

“This is my son Robert and my daughter Irene. Kids, this is Mrs. Winslow. She just moved in downstairs.”

As they exchanged greetings, Mildred's eyes wandered to an easel and a set of oil paints in one corner, and there was Robert in a wheelchair. She felt a little relieved at this explanation of the paintings. What a grand pastime for an invalid, she thought.

Examining one of them more closely, she said, “Robert, is this work yours? It's really quite good.”

“Thank you,” he replied. “That and reading are about all I can do . . . like this.” His gaze dropped to his legs, but he was smiling.

Mrs. Wainwright called them all to dinner, and they sat down at a small table placed between the living room and the kitchen. It was covered with oil cloth. The dishes and silverware were of the Woolworth variety, but the food smelled good and looked delectable.

“It ain't fancy,” she said, “but I hope you like it. Robert and Irene always liked this recipe . . . so did Frank. I fix it all the time.”

“Oh, if it's as good as it smells, I'll have to give up my diet,” Mildred said pleasantly.

They all laughed; and at Mrs. Wainwright's insistence, Mildred served herself first. The meal proceeded with some small talk and was topped off finally by orange jello dessert.

Her offer to help with the dishes was refused, so Mildred and Robert sat in the living room while Mrs. Wainwright and her daughter washed the dishes and cleaned up the kitchen.

“Your work is really very fine, Robert. Have you been paint-
ing long?"

"About seven years, I guess . . . Since I was sixteen and got laid up."

"Have you tried to sell any of your paintings?" she asked.

"Oh, no. Without these to look at, I would feel sorta lost . . . like all this time was wasted. The money doesn't mean anything. I love paintings. Even when I was little, Mom says I liked to color and draw. We can't afford anything like that so I just make my own enjoyment, I guess. I'd like to do a portrait of you sometime."

"I'd like that very much. You said you read a lot, too."

"Yes, sometimes I get tired of painting, and it's kind of a strain to sit here and work. I read books that Mom and Irene bring from the library."

"That's fine. You must have quite an education on your own."

"Oh," he said, "I don't look at it that way. I just try to enjoy myself and make life mean a little something."

Mrs. Wainwright had finished the dishes now, and she and Irene joined them. "I can't stay too long," she said, "I have to go to work pretty soon."

"Oh, do you work nights?" Mildred questioned.

"Yes," she replied, "I clean up the offices in a building down in the Loop. Between that and Irene's job after school, we get by pretty good. I been workin' there near fifteen years now."

They talked for a little while longer, and Mildred learned that Mr. Wainwright had been dead nearly sixteen years. He had died in an accident at work soon after Irene was born. They talked, but Mildred always steered the conversation away from herself as much as possible. For the first time in her life, she began to feel a little ashamed of her opulent background.

Mrs. Wainwright finally excused herself and left for work, but at the children's request Mildred stayed on and talked to them.

A knock came at the door, and Irene answered it. She admitted a sharp-featured, good looking Italian boy about her own age.

"Mrs. Winslow, this is Tony."

"Hi . . . er . . . ah . . . pleased to meet ya, ma'am," he said causing a smile to come to Mildred's face.

After a few minutes, Irene asked her brother and Mrs. Winslow if they would mind if she and Tony left them and took a short walk.

"Of course not," she answered noticing the elation on the girl's face in the presence of her young suitor.

When they had gone, Robert said, "Irene is quite in love with him or so she thinks."

"Oh, I'm sure she really is. That look in her eyes when he's here could be for no other reason."

It was nearly eleven o'clock when she finally said that she must be leaving and left Robert and Irene and Tony. She thanked them and asked them to thank their mother. They exchanged "Good nights," and she pulled the door shut behind her.
Descending the stairs, she thought of the young girl in love, the invalid boy devoted to his painting, and the mother who loved her children and worked hard to provide for them.

She glanced around her. The stairway no longer seemed gloomy and dismal. Everything smelled fresh and clean. Before the door to her flat, she paused. Her bitterness had subsided, and she no longer feared herself and the emptiness of the room beyond. She looked down, and the key in her hand had become pure gold.

**Abdication**  
Lucia Walton

"You let me alone!" Susie whispered angrily, rubbing the stinging spot behind one ear where a long, glossy braid began.

Hurling a venomous glare at the fat, freckled boy behind her, she tossed her head and bent it over her arithmetic book. The boy pulled hard on her other braid; she drew them both over her shoulders and retied the blue bows at the ends.

"Teacher's pet's got pigtails! Teacher's pet's got pigtails!" Her face burned at the low singsong taunt. They're just jealous, she thought. Mother said so. I can't help it if they're dumb and don't get good report cards.

A gong sounded in the hall. Susie automatically reached inside her desk for her spelling book, then stopped as she remembered what day it was. Thursday! On Thursday there was always a spelling bee, and Susie always won. The unpleasant memory of the previous Thursday came back to her. She had spelled "encyclopedia" and won, and all the way home from school at noon they had pulled her hair and yelled "Teacher's pet" at her, and the fat boy had shouted words which sounded nasty, though she didn't know what they meant. She had wanted to ask her mother, but her mother would have wanted to know where she had heard them. Susie never told her mother how the other children teased her.

"Line up for the spelling bee, children," called Miss Phillips. Susie went to her place, thankful that the fat boy was on the opposite side of the room. She spelled steadily, mechanically, when her turns came, trying not to giggle or look scornful when other children missed words like "their." One by one the others misspelled and took their seats until only Susie and a boy across the room were left standing. The boy was nice. He didn't tease her, and he was always second in the spelling bees. Looking hard at the boy, Susie felt the resentful eyes of the other children staring at her.

"Beggar," said Miss Phillips. Susie spelled it quickly, and the teacher turned to the boy.

"Beggar," he pronounced. "B—e—g—" he stopped, confused. Susie held her breath as he began again, then released it in a long sigh when he finished it correctly.

"Encyclopedia." Susie did not hesitate. "E-n-c-y-c-l-o-p-e-d-i-a."