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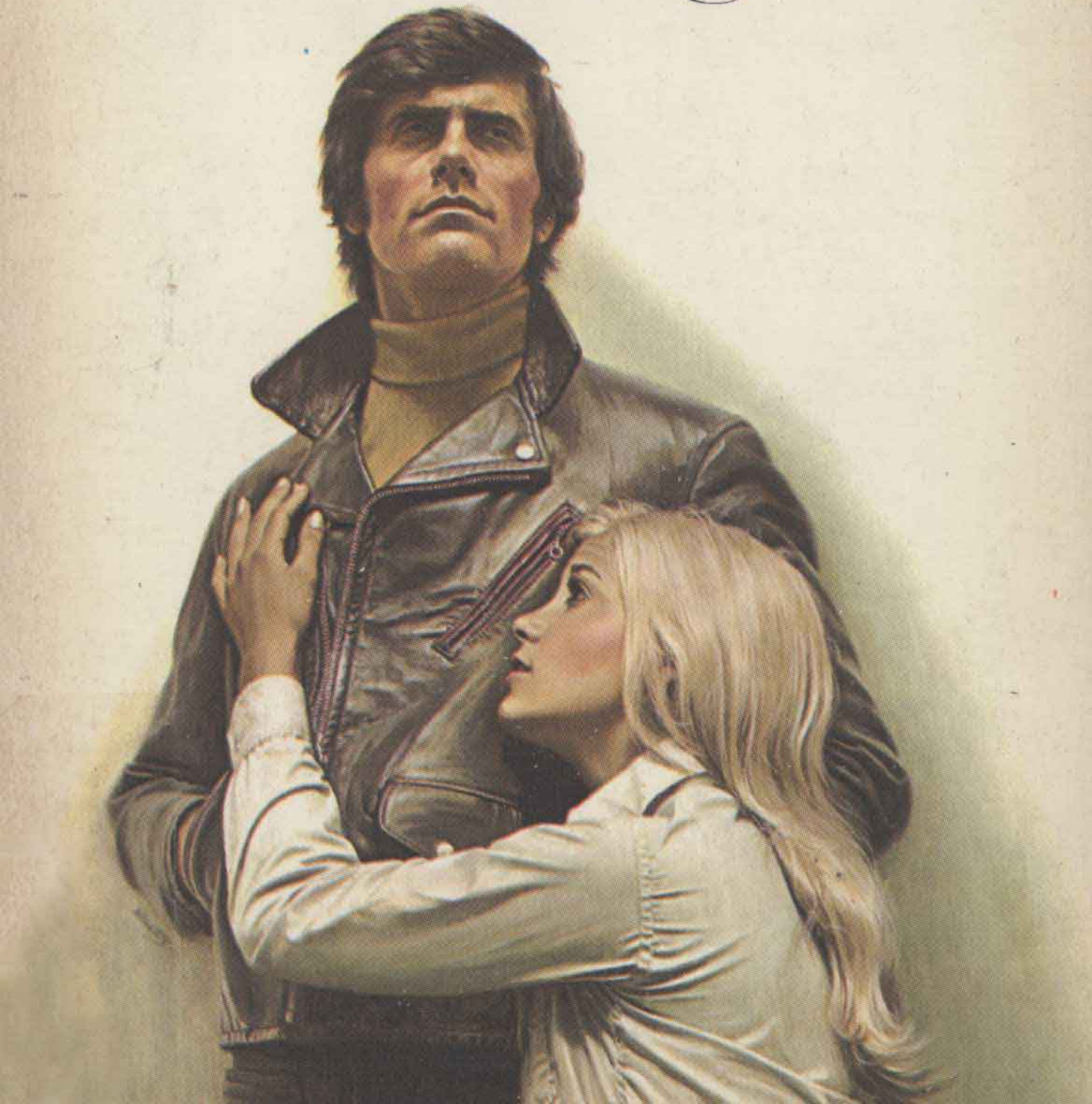
Winner of the National Book Award

JOYCE CAROL OATES

With Shuddering Fall



"I am concerned with only one thing," says Joyce Carol Oates, *"the moral and social conditions of my generation."* These are spelled out with exquisite compassion and compelling detail in her novels and stories.

Miss Oates, born in 1938, teaches English at the University of Windsor in Ontario. She received the National Book Award for Fiction in 1970 for *THEM*, and was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 1967. She has also won several O. Henry prizes for her short stories.

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BY THE NORTH GATE

WITH SHUDDERING FALL

UPON THE SWEEPING FLOOD

A GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS

EXPENSIVE PEOPLE

THEM

THE WHEEL OF LOVE

WONDERLAND

WITH SHUDDERING FALL

by

Joyce Carol Oates

A FAWCETT CREST BOOK
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WITH SHUDDERING FALL

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What is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil.

NIETZSCHE

SPRING

1

One morning in early spring a man and his daughter made their way along the country lane that led back from their house. The man walked ahead, stepping easily over the frozen ruts. The girl, hugging a paper bag, walked clumsily—she wore old shoes of her father's, great cracked shoes hardened with mud but suited well for this trip; she did not want to ruin her own shoes. Karen had not wanted to come with her father to visit the sick man—the crazy hermit, everyone called him—but her older sister, Celine, had gotten out of it somehow, and her father would not go alone carrying food; that was woman's work. Karen muttered silently to herself arguments she might have used. Sickness—she had a stomachache. Fear of the old man—she had been afraid of him all her life. Or she might have simply refused to go. But before her father's words all defenses vanished and there she had stood, sulking, cleaning out a canning jar while the soup warmed on the stove. Celine had rattled pots around, trying to look busy. Finally she cried with vexation: "You needn't look so put upon! He loves you best, you shouldn't mind going back with him!"

Karen had stared around at her sister. Celine was twenty-six now, but looked older. She had always seemed old to Karen, who was nine years younger, but this morning her thin little eyebrows, her small, moist eyes, her flat cheeks seemed those of a woman who had never known youth. I will never look like that, Karen thought clearly. Karen and Celine were the last of the children at home: their three brothers and two sisters had all gone off or married or both. Their closeness in the last several years had never developed into intimacy, but Celine, interpreting Karen's look as a reproach to her

own rudeness, said, "Albert's taking me for a drive this afternoon. Would you like to come along?" Albert was Celine's fiancé of sorts—a teacher at the town high school. "Would you? I know Albert wouldn't mind."

The thought of going for a ride that afternoon ought to have pleased Karen, or at least made her indifferently curious, but in the face of the visit to the old man it was impossible to care about anything. They were nearing his cabin now, having left the lane, and were following a path toward the creek. Karen walked along doggedly. Her eyes were still stale from sleep. Down at the creek swift brown water rushed against the ice, cutting a channel through it. Every day the channel grew wider, the ice was broken away an inch at a time. Thick muddy water in the rapids churned with uprooted bushes, propelling sticks and trunks and parts of boats before it. As they neared old Rule's cabin Karen stared through the dead weeds to the water: it was alive and moving, squirming, the only real movement in this chill morning. Only a few weeks ago she had walked out onto the snow-covered ice, and now the creek had changed entirely—it looked luring and sinister, and the rapids gurgled as if they gloated over its violent metamorphosis. Karen pressed the paper bag against her and felt the vague warmth of the jar of soup.

Then they were at old Rule's cabin. An eyesore, a disgrace: tar-paper shanty with old rusty pieces of tin nailed up any which way. Plyboard hanging out of one broken window like an arm waving them off, and, around the shanty, piles of junk. Scrap metal and parts of crates and soaked, limp cardboard lashed together with twine. Boards with raw nails sticking out of them, short rusted rolls of chicken wire, barrel staves, junk washed up on the creek shore. Karen remembered a time years ago when Rule had tried to sort out his junk, putting boards and wooden material into one pile, metal into another, miscellaneous things like nails and cardboard into another. But apparently he had given up and all piles expanded outward, touched one another and dissolved into one great, insane pile of debris: to look at it was to invite a sensation of madness.

The inside was no different. Junk cluttered the front room, leaving just enough space for a passageway. Things were neater inside, lashed together with twine, but a strong, sweet, sickening odor eased out to Karen and her father and Karen felt again the impulse to refuse to go. "Pa," she whimpered. Her father did not look around. He raised one big hand and

rapped at the door. The shanty seemed to tremble beneath his blow.

No answer. This almost pleased Karen's father. "We're coming in," he announced. He opened the rickety door and went inside. "You awake, Rule?" he said. Karen held her breath. The stench of the cabin, contrasting so with the fresh morning air, made her feel nauseated; but she followed her father inside. "That boy of yours found his way home yet?" Karen's father said chattily, though he could not yet see Rule. He picked his way through the clutter at the doorway to the back room and, turning just a little, motioned for Karen to follow.

The old man lay in the tiny back room. He was in a bed of some kind, with dirty quilts piled up around him. Karen was surprised at how quiet it was—there was no sound except the rushing of the creek; and for an instant she had the foolish thought that dying here, in this little room, might not be so bad. "Well. No boy come back yet, huh?" Karen's father said, putting his hands on his hips in a grand gesture. "How you feeling this morning, Rule?"

The old man lay inside the quilts and looked up at the ceiling as if he had not noticed anyone at all. His eyes were soft and black and his hair, though he was supposed to be old, was also black, not touched with gray like Karen's father's. "I asked how you were this morning," Karen's father said. He took a deep breath. There was no sound except the churning of the water down in the creek. "She made some soup for you to eat," Karen's father said, and the "she" made Karen's heart jump a little. "It's to get your stomach warmed and make the blood move faster. She made it all specially for you."

Karen had eased over to the window. She was hardly able to breathe. A draft of cold air touched her face here and she pretended interest in the scene outside: colorless world, colorless morning sky. Light did not seem to come from the sky but pervaded everything—so sullen, so massive, it certainly gave no hint of spring. "We thought maybe your boy would be here when we come," Karen's father said. "Most likely he'll be here any day now. Maybe today."

She saw that Rule was still staring up at the ceiling stubbornly. His face had hollows and jutting lines and looked like a mask. He licked his lips. He said, "Get out of here."

A smile flickered about Karen's father's face. "I s'posed you'd welcome us like this—always were one to keep folks

away. Never knew a friend when you had one. Here, Karen," he said, "let's have that soup. Here. I brought you a spoon too."

"I don't want it," Rule said sullenly, as if he had been tricked into talking. "You two just get out of here."

Karen's father was opening the jar of soup. "A person must have someone to look after him in his last illness," he said ceremoniously. "A man like you, dying, seems he ought to have more charity toward the world." At this remark the old man's eyes narrowed and Karen thought that he did not look old at all, but as he had always looked when she and her brothers or sisters had come upon him down at the creek, sitting on his rock and fishing. He had always ignored them, even when they hid in the weeds and threw stones in the water to scare the fish away; but none of them had had the courage to sit on his rock, even when he wasn't around. "Your trouble is always been pride," Karen's father said, "but what need is there for pride now? Two neighbors come to help you. Or do you s'pose that son of yours will make it back in time—s'pose he'll have some soup to give you?"

Rule smiled contemptuously. "Do you s'pose so?" Karen's father said, warming to his argument. "A man-grown boy you ain't seen for a lifetime. Ha!" He dragged a wooden box over to the bed and sat on it and crossed his mighty legs. His leather boots gleamed sullenly in the poor light. "Always been the unneighborly kind," he said expansively, as if he were addressing a number of people. "Here you been down by the creek for so long, on the edge of my property, and never come over to see me except once to bring a little kid home—a long time ago—or help us with that fire once—I told her, one of them, it was because you never learned any better."

"Told who?" Rule said. He cleared his throat.

"One of them. They all thought the same, all women."

"Who was it?"

"It was her mother, Karen's," Karen's father said after a moment. He had married and outlived four wives. "The one with the hair like Karen's—almost pure white, hardly any color in it. Do you remember that one? Died ten years or so ago, maybe twelve. Now, a person with proper belief like myself," Karen's father said, changing the subject so easily that Karen was surprised and saw that even Rule looked puzzled, "he don't just let another one lay alone and die. It's against our belief. We got to come and help."

There was a joke in his last words that Rule was supposed

to see, but if he did, he gave no sign of it. "Well, you'll come to us in the end. We got to do something with you—with your body. Do you refuse us the chance to be charitable?" Karen's father said. He sat with the jar of soup in his big hands, about to offer it to Rule. "We'll put you over with our family, the same place I'll be put when I die; how's that? Take care of you. A man gets all in a sweat, thinking there might be nobody to take care of him."

"My son—"

Rule stopped, as if tricked. His words hung in the air around them. Karen's father grinned. "Yes, yes, your son. Coming home, ain't he? Let the children see to their fathers' deaths—their fathers got them into the world, let them get their fathers out of it! Right, Karen?"

Karen lowered her eyes.

"She knows. Women know. My youngest girl there. I can remember her a baby like only yesterday, can't you, Rule? Some of these days now she looks just like her mother—a queer thing to see, at breakfast and such. Gives me a start.... Are you scairt of it, Rule?"

"I'm tired," said the old man.

"Ain't scairt?"

"An' cold too. I'm cold too," Rule said oddly.

"They say it starts in your little toe and spreads up—up your legs and all, till it gets your heart. A cold feeling."

Karen turned suddenly. She fumbled with the buttons of her sweater. "Where are you going?" her father said.

"Back home."

"You stay here."

She hesitated. Her eyes were blurred and stinging.

"You stay here," her father said.

"Pa—"

"I told you."

There was a silence. Karen stared at the doorway, her back to her father and Rule. She was looking at something there without seeing it—a word carved into the doorframe. SHERTON. She blinked back tears, staring at the word as if it would help her. That was the name of Rule's son. Sherton. Shar. "You don't need me here," she said with a courage she had not known she possessed.

"You knew Rule all your life," her father said, "and you ain't leaving him now. And don't you cry about it either."

She could feel when his attention shifted away. The box

on which he sat creaked. "You take some of this warm soup," he said. "Before it gets cold."

Something happened then; there was a scuffling noise, then a crash. Karen turned to see the jar broken on the floor. The coarse dark soup ran hungrily between the floor boards. Karen's father wiped angrily at his legs. "Now look at that! Look what you done!" But when Rule did not reply, when his gaze shifted again to the ceiling, Karen's father relaxed strangely and smiled again. "A hard one to take care of, ain't you? Proud of it too, ain't you?"

He laughed and took out his pipe. It took a while to light. Finally Karen's father blew out a cloud of smoke, spat a little toward the floor, and said, "Think you'll know him when he comes?"

"Maybe," said Rule.

"Time changes them all." The box creaked again. "He looked like you, I thought, the older he got. He had the same look. . . . Remember the baby that got lost? That was Karen, wasn't it? I came back here and her mother with me, a passel of kids following, all excited and scairt. I asked you if you seen her and right then around the corner of the shanty we saw her running, a baby girl, running in the dirt, with that boy of yours, Shar, running slow after her, pretending he couldn't catch her. . . . You remember that? Then he saw us and never changed how he looked and took hold of her and swung her up into the air, her feet going like she was still running, he swung her up into the air and gave her to me. . . . Do you remember that?"

"Yes," said Rule.

"A big boy for his age, always dirty. He run away from home off and on, and the time he was sixteen he never come back. So that was that. . . . What's that underneath your bed there? Part of a trap, ain't it, a rusty trap chain?"

Rule leaned over and looked down. "Looks like," he said. He lay back and smiled a little, tightly and rather cruelly, his gaze spreading to Karen as well.

"Pa," Karen said.

"What?"

"I want to—"

"You want to go home again?" He looked right around at her, as if he could hardly believe it. "What the hell is got into you this morning? Can't you hear what your father says to you? A man here you might never see again—how

can you be so quick to get rid of people that you knew all your life?"

"He isn't going to die!" Karen said angrily.

"What?"

"He isn't. He isn't. You let me go—"

Her father took her arm at the wrist. She began crying softly and passively, like a child. "A big girl like this!" her father said. "What are you crying for? For him or yourself?" He turned to look at Rule, maybe exchange a glance with him. "She's thinking how time fooled her, all along she thought it was a fog a person could walk in and out of, and here it turned into something that runs away from you. It goes on, it runs away from you. Look at Rule there, he doesn't feel sorry for himself. What is there to feel sorry about? It will be Rule first, and then me second, in a few years, and then you too—one thing you can be damn sure of."

Karen tried to pull away. "Please let me go," she said.

"Karen!"

She began to cough. "I can't breathe," she whimpered, "it's the air here, he's got something—some old stale food—something I can't—"

"You stand still, here!"

"I don't want to—Let me go, I don't want to stay here, I hate it here, I hate it! I hate it and I hate him, I hate everything here, I hate everything—I hate him—*him*—"

"Karen, don't you make me mad. Don't make me—"

"I do!" she cried wildly. "I hate him for what's happening, all of this, and you—and you too—"

He must have let her go, for the next instant she was running through the front room, tripping over junk, sobbing with fear and horror at what she had done. Everything seemed to have happened in a dream. And once outside in the cold air, once running back to the house, she could hardly tell the difference between the fresh air and the deathly air of Rule's cabin—it was as if the stench had permeated her and was carried with her, all the way along the path and the lane and into the warm house and up to her room.

2

Karen lay in her rumpled bed, staring at the ceiling, when her sister opened the door. "Karen," she said. Karen looked around. She felt the impulse to cry out at her sister, tell her to get away, not to come to her room any more, but speaking would have demanded too much effort; so she lay still and stared. "Albert just called and I told him you'd be along. He said that was fine and asked if he should bring his cousin along . . . you know . . . and I told him you'd like that. Is it all right?"

"What time is it?" Karen said.

"About twelve-thirty," Celine said. She waited, but Karen had nothing to say. "What's wrong with you? Are you sick?"

"Rule is sick," said Karen. She sat up and rubbed her eyes. Crying had exhausted her and left her oddly hollow and cold. "Is Pa downstairs?"

"No, he's out with the men. They're going to start adding onto the barn."

Karen looked toward her steamy window. If she stood at it she could probably see the men over on the hill where the barns were. "Did Pa say anything about me?"

"What's wrong with you? They were talking about the barn at lunch and Pa asked where you were, I think, but nothing else. Are you sick?"

"No," said Karen. She lay back down and closed her eyes. "You can leave me alone now," she said.

Seeing Albert's cousin Jack again had no effect at all on Karen, though everyone else seemed a little embarrassed. As they left the big house, making their way down the absurd stone steps Karen's great-grandmother had wanted, Jack smiled tightly and told Karen how glad he was to see her again. "Yes," said Karen.

On the opposite hill a few men stood about, talking. Karen could not distinguish her father from the hired men. "So many cows now," she murmured. "He gets up himself to

make them run around at night to keep from freezing." Jack, staring down at the steps, nodded quickly as if he had meant to say something of the kind himself; in reality, Karen supposed, he had no idea of what she was talking about. With other people Jack was charming, bright, sometimes a little loud; he conversed easily and with a certain delight in himself and his words; with Karen he became vague, worried, groping after her meaning while the time for his reply passed. Even his habitual posture with her was stooped, making him look already old, at least tired and uncertain. Everyone remarked about it.

They had met at a church picnic when Karen was sixteen. Rather, they had met again: everyone in Pools Brook knew everyone else. Jack was too old for Karen to remember from school—he was about twenty-seven—though he claimed to remember her. He was tall, with a blond, heavy, handsome head, and that day he had worn a new-looking suit and tie, and the girl he was with was dressed in a soft, shiny, rich white outfit. Later it was the girl's outfit, especially her big straw hat, that Karen remembered. Jack and the girl had drifted by to look at the cattle judging and Jack, whose father was in gypsum, stopped to talk to Karen's father. Karen liked to hear other people talk to her father; she liked their tones of respect, their careful words, their repeated "Mr. Herz." Herz, Herz, Herz: it was like an incantation. It always surprised Karen to remember that it was her name too.

She and her father had only driven over for the judging, and so Karen was dressed in shorts and an old blouse. Oddly enough, the girl's Sunday clothes did not make Karen feel uncomfortable, but rather pleased her; she smiled and talked with the girl, something she ordinarily did not do, since the company of other girls—of most people—bored her. In talking she had noticed Jack's eyes easing from her father to her and back again. She sat beside her father on a bench, her arm through his in a parody of decorum, her bare legs stretched out, not yet tanned, measuring themselves against her father's; and she felt a delicious, curling sensation, as if she were seeing herself through the eyes of the girl Jack was with. Jack and her father talked about the gypsum plant; Mr. Herz, by tradition a farmer, made most of his money out of interests in gypsum mining. In the middle of a conversation about gypsum her father stopped abruptly and laughed: "Ain't my littlest girl here getting big now!" His words surprised Jack and the girl—Karen could tell by their faces. But

Karen laughed, squirming on the bench, squeezing her father's arm. In his company she was never more than eight or nine years old: she sensed rather than knew this, and it pleased her. She was his littlest girl. Afterward the memory of that meeting was so fine, her impression of Jack so good, that she was glad to see him again . . . though none of their dates had ever lived up to what she expected.

She and Jack got into the back of Albert's car. Albert drove carefully, like an old woman. He was a soft, morose man of over thirty, very serious, very quiet. He had been teaching at the town high school as long as Karen could remember and, almost as long as she could remember, he and Celine had been going together. By this time no one except Celine expected anything to come of their courtship. Karen hoped vaguely they would marry, for Celine's sake, but Albert's manner, his treatment of Celine—familiar without being interested, concerned without being warm—promised little.

They stopped at a country tavern, a nameless place set back from the road in a muddy lot. "You oughtn't to let your students see you here," Karen said to Albert, teasing. Albert frowned and did not reply. "I was only joking," Karen said.

Inside, a few men turned to look at them. The others had beer, Karen had a soft drink that she sipped at continuously, as if she were alone. Jack wore a coat Karen had not seen before; he looked coolly handsome, and when he spoke with the others he presented himself as a proud, superior young man. Certainly he was superior—Karen compared him to the country men sitting at the bar: big, coarse, clumsy hands, whiskery faces, muddy feet. But now, as he spoke of his father's plans to help him run for the legislature, Karen, as always, could not sense any vitality in their relationship, any feeling in her for him that went beyond a polite interest. Sometimes when he called her she had told him she was not interested in him, that she "didn't like him much." Just so would a child speak, she had thought coyly; a child would tell the truth. Not for Karen the intricate games of other girls. She would tell the truth.

"I suppose I oughtn't to have come," Karen said suddenly.

They looked at her. Jack said, "What do you mean?"

"I make things awkward for you," she said. What did she mean? She did not know exactly; she thought remotely that she ought to be somewhere else instead of here—that she had something to do. She could not think exactly what it might be. "I'm not much company."