The Man of the House

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As she heard the noise of his rinsing the china, Joy Thompson knew that her husband was finished with his breakfast. Hearing him treading softly, setting places for four at the table, she smiled, knowing that she would find the forks on the right, the milk glasses on the left. His next action she cannot hear distinctly, but it must be the salting of the water for the oatmeal she will prepare.

She never hears continuous action; she hears different parts of her husband’s ritual on different mornings. Her precious naps intervene.

She hears him out at the pump, filling the two large kettles with the squealing water. Being shaken out of sleep every few seconds, Joy finds, really isn’t bad at all; she gets twenty, maybe a hundred little extra naps, and every time she can say: “Joy Barrington, you don’t have to get up until he comes into the room and says, among other things, ‘I think I’ll sell the ranch today; good-by, dear.’”

Sometimes these dozes have the effect of lasting for hours. Once there was a long dream that took place between the period that Fred pushed the pump handle down and the primed water came rushing out in a big lump. In a full-length dream, she was again a little girl laughing and playing with her father. He looked exactly as he had before he was murdered by the escaped convict. In this wonderful dream she succeeded in chasing the convict away.

Now she heard Fred bringing in the wood and kindling, and the two boys coming into the kitchen from the bunkhouse just opposite the kitchen door.
"Dad," asked Freddie, the eldest boy, "is it all right to blow out
the lamp now? It's light outside."
"You done it yesterday," said Philip.
"Did," said the older brother. "Don't they teach you anything in
the fifth grade at this hick school?"
"Don't they learn you in the seventh grade to take turns?"
"You boys stop your quarreling, or neither of you will get to turn
the lamp down," said the father. "You're waking your mother."
"Barry's mother, you mean," said Freddie, and Joy heard the boy
receive a box on the ear. She took hold of the hand of Barry, sleeping
beside her, and slipped her fingers into his curls, which tightened
around each finger.
"I'm sorry, Dad," said Freddie. Then, "All right, Philpot, blow
the lamp, but I get to start the car, don't I, Dad?"
Dad must have given permission to the seventh grader, because
on her next waking Joy heard from through her bedroom window
the sound of the laboring self-starter and Philip's voice consoling itself
in defeat.
"Look, I get to swing the cattle gate open. Watch me get a free
ride!"
Fred came into the bedroom to kiss Joy good-by and she said: "I
hate to think how much longer you're going to have to travel seventy
miles a day in the old car."
"That part's all right; but, damn it all, leaving you all alone out
here. Fred, the bank clerk farmer, that's me!"
"You said you'd found somebody who will buy the place, so it
won't be much longer." But her voice was clogged with doubt.
"It won't be, dear." He touched her forehead. "Darling—I for­
got to tell you—they've closed the road out of town temporarily. The
detour on the prison road takes longer. But I can make it back not
long after dusk, I think."
"Do you have to pass the prison, Fred?"
"Don't worry, that place is like the Rock of Gibraltar."
"The one back home was supposed to be, too, but—."
"Joy, I do wish you wouldn't talk about that any more." To change
the subject Fred gently shook the child sleeping beside her. "Wake up,
lazy bones; you want to get co-moted from the first grade, don't you?"
Barry awoke, yawned, and returned his father's kiss. Fred picked
him up and tossed him into the air several times, while Joy stretched, threw her legs out of bed, and fingered the floor trying to locate a slipper. Her wide audible yawn developed into a bright but sheepish smile. “Freddie, sometimes I wonder if I’m good for you. You know I think you’re wonderful.”

“Don’t talk silly,” he said. “You’re the best in the world.”

“When you go,” she said, “don’t take the kids too far down the road.”

“I won’t. Just as far as the highway. Want to come along, Barry boy?”

“No, they’ll squeeze me. They’re mean to me.”

The car made its way down the road, slipping occasionally in the dust, not always missing the deep ruts. Breakfast was ready when Joy set the two boys down to table on their return from the ride.

With Barry standing beside her, Joy finished the lunch sandwiches and was putting them into brown paper bags.

“Is the 'itta man of the house helping muzzer put up the g'eat big lunches?” asked Freddie.

Barry gripped Joy’s thigh as though for protection. “They tease me all the time,” he complained.

“Please don’t pick on your little brother,” begged Joy; “he doesn’t do anything to you.”

“Oh, he ain’t so nice,” said Philip. “He sat on my face yesterday with his bare hynie while I was asleep.”

Barry changed his position to Joy’s other thigh, farther away from the breakfast table. “Mama, Philip said he’s going to throw me in the 'rigation ditch.”

“What we ought to do is take you out to the Hoodoo house and let the Bofump get you,” said Fred.

Joy at this became angry. “Father has warned you time and again about saying scarey things. Don’t you ever do that again.”

Her tone quieted the boys down, the breakfast was eaten in relative peace.

Later Fred asked a question: “Mother, does a guard have to be braver than a districk attorney?”

“Why are you asking that question?”

“Oh, it’s just that Joe Scranton is always saying that districk attorneys are sissies.”
"Who's Joe Scranton?"

"His old man's a guard out at the prison, and he's always bragging."

"Oh, boys," Joy said pleadingly, "can't you ever find other things to talk about? Come on now; let's finish eating. You've got to help me with the kettles before you run off to school. Let's stop talking."

After breakfast Fred and Philip did their Monday morning chore of setting the washtub on its stand outside the corner of the bunkhouse. While the older boys were busy, Joy checked Barry's ears for dirt and brushed his curls. "Don't forget to come right straight home again today, and don't stop to look or talk to anybody on the way home."

"I never do, Mama."

"Our secret tea party is going to be very special today."

"And we'll get all through before Fred and Philip get home, huh? We won't never tell'm, huh?"

"No, it's our big secret."

"And I won't play with the other boys and girls at recess, either. They always tease me, too."

"Yes, they're naughty—they're all naughty. When we move to the city, then you will meet some nice boys and girls."

As she went out to remind the boys to hurry, she overheard the end of Fred's conversation with Philip; "I don't care what Joe Scranton says; Mom's dad wouldn't have been killed if his job wasn't dangerous. Uncle Bert told me all about grandpa being killed. I wish Joy would tell us about it."

"Pipe down, here she comes," said Philip.

Soon Joy kissed the three and they ran over the hill. They were always out of sight quickly because of the small forest of trees on the hill that blocked the view. Barry, running fast to keep up with his brothers, was last out of sight.

It was not yet nine o'clock. It takes the boys eighteen minutes to get to school she thought. It will be eighteen minutes after one before Barry will be home. The older boys don't get home until after it gets too dark for them to play marbles or spin tops. It's better they don't come home early, anyway; they only make Barry frightened, and it's important that Barry is not frightened. He's never afraid when he's with me alone. When he says, "Mama, Philip says there's a bofump in the closet; there isn't, is there?", my word will convince him: "No there isn't; come in the closet with me. I'll show you. See, Barry?"

And the child will say, "Gee, Mama, you ain't a-scared of anything."
There were almost five hours to go before she would hear the child coming over the hill and see him appear from behind the clump of oaks and manzanitas. At one-eighteen she could run past the barn into his protective arms. Today he had been promised a very special party. What is it that would prove extra special? Let's think, she pondered. Then — "'Really' tea; that's it. Today he won't have to pretend his milk is tea, not today."

Joy called to her neighbor, Mrs. Goggins, who lived on the other side of the hill, north of the Thompson house: "Yoo hoo, Mrs. Goggins!"

The expected nasal voice replied: "Hello, Birdie, I'm just getting the old man's overalls ready to wrench in plain water. I'll be over in a few shakes."

"Good to hear your voice. Don't rush."

"What did you say, dearie?"

"I said there's plenty of time. Don't rush. The water's too hot, anyway."

When the day comes that she will need Mrs. Goggins' aid and will need it quickly, Joy often wondered, will it be one of the days that the strong, rugged woman spends in town? And if she is at home, will she hear my call for help, or will the cry be only the dry, asthmatic sob such as one wheezes in bad dreams?

Assured that Mrs. Goggins would be over to do the week's washing and that in the meantime she was within hailing distance, Joy, before going into the house to wash the breakfast dishes and tidy herself, mentally charted her position to check her relative safety in the event there should be an escaped convict on the loose. The Goggins' shack at her back was to her advantage; it was a place to run to and a place from which to expect help — that is, when one of the Gogginses was at home. Ahead of her across the road in front of the house was the meadow of mustard greens, buttercups, and bluebells, which sloped into a hill and became one of many hills. She reasoned that a fugitive was not likely to come from that direction. The direction that Joy kept her ear and eye on was the west, which Fred took to go to work down the scarcely traveled road, and which the children took to go to school, cutting their way over the hill, past the clump of manzanitas and oaks — the small forest out of which rustling sounds so often came that froze her into a stillness where she feared to hear her own breathing.
Joy finished the dishes. Mrs. Goggins, ready to do the washing, arrived and called to Joy that she was there. She was putting the first clothes in the tub when Joy appeared. With admiration Mrs. Goggins said: “Well, child, you are sweet to look at, with your pinafore and short stockings on. I do like to look at you. I don’t know how you do it. Three children and no stomach.”

“You’re sweet to say so. You really must think me lazy, but I’ve never washed clothes without an electric washer.”

“Shucks, you pay me for it, and believe me, I’d do it for nothin’, thout pay, just to keep you the way you are. You, and your husband, too.”

“You’ve been a wonderful neighbor,” said Joy. “Mr. Thompson feels very badly about not paying Mr. Goggins yet for the help he gave us when we came here. But he will soon — when he sells the place.”

“Now don’t worry your pretty little head about that; what’s humans for if they can’t help a neighbor once in a while? You know if we was really kind and honest we wouldn’t a led you on by giving you a hand. When you come here we shoulda told you right off. We knew you wasn’t farmers the second you landed. Why, the first thing your husband did was look at the buildings on the place. He give no mind to the water. He didn’t reach down and feel the dirt. First off he shoulda took a clod and broke it apart; then he shoulda smelled it; then he shoulda took a bite out of it.”

“All his life Mr. Thompson dreamed of cows and chickens and working for himself.”

“And them chicken runs, all built, looked mighty good, didn’t they? But they ain’t no account at all. The hill faces north. And them pretty brooder houses. That nice barn. Cheap price — it looked like.”

“It’s taken every cent we had, and more, too.”

“How you was talked into comin’ out here in the first place, I can’t figure. No plumbin’, no lights, no gas. You got city life written all over you.”

“Maybe it sounds silly,” explained Joy, “but Fred said on a farm you can make a living at home, and we could be together all the time.”

“That’s it!” said Mrs. Goggins, and she sounded almost triumphant. “That’s what I told Otie. I told him, ‘Mrs. Thompson is one of them people that has to have somebody with them every minute,’ I said.”

“Don’t you miss Mr. Goggins when he’s away at work?”
"Shucks, no. There's no worse sight than a man layin' around the house. Ruins my disposition to have somebody under my feet all day."

As the washing progressed, Joy helped, now by getting more soap, now by chasing clothes pins. She did not at all resent that Mrs. Goggins' talk and queries were quite personal, for Mrs. Goggins was providing her with company, and even boredom was a cheap price to pay for having somebody close by — especially this woman who was so strong and apparently fearless. Occasionally, however, Joy was shaken from placidity. Once a whistle blew shrilly from the direction of town. Joy shuddered:

"What was that?"
"What was what?"
"That whistle?"
"Oh — the ten-fifteen train, I guess."
"Why is it blowing so long?"
"Don't seem unusual long. What's the matter with you? — You look peak-ed."
"Oh, do I? I didn't know it."

Joy in a few seconds in a tone that she tried to make casual said:
"You know, Mrs. Goggins, you promised to show me how to make a quilt. I have a lot of scraps. Could you work on one with me today?"

"Not today, honey. Today I've got to wash the filthy woodwork for the warden's wife. You should see the inside of that house some time. It'd get up and walk if I didn't go through it once a month."

"I do wish you could stay."
"Much as I'd like to, I can't."

The washing, rinsing, and hanging of the clothes went on, and Joy was again occupied by conversation and offering aid to the washerwoman; but her peace of mind was broken again when gun shots rang out. Mrs. Goggins, too, was startled at the sudden report, but almost immediately she said:

"Them damn Jarret boys again! Think they can't break in hosses without they've got to scare 'em with a gun."

"Are you sure that's what it is, Mrs. Goggins?"
"Of course. Say, child, I've never seen you so jumpy before."

To some extent Joy became satisfied that the shots were not unusual, but she was less easy in her mind, and less easy later as she realized that Mrs. Goggins had reached the bottom of the clothes basket. After peering intently into the trees beyond which lay the prison, and careful
not to call Mrs. Goggins' attention to her scrutiny, Joy, summoning up a casual tone, said: "Mrs. Goggins, you've been at that pretty steadily. Why don't we leave those last things to soak, and we'll have some tea?"

"I do want to get finished here as soon as I can," said Mrs. Goggins, but, after near pleading by Joy, she gave in. "I guess a soaking won't hurt 'em, and I am a bit hungry." She dried her hands and followed Joy into the kitchen.

"Anything you'd like in particular?" asked Joy, placing the tea kettle where it would heat faster.

"If it wouldn't put you to too much bother, I feel like an onion sandwich right this minute."

"No trouble at all," said Joy. "We have some dried onions in the storeroom under the house."

Mrs. Goggins followed Joy outside again and helped her through the entrance to the basement.

"This makes a pretty good cellar, I guess," said Mrs. Goggins. "Pretty easy to bump your head coming in and out, though, ain't it? Pretty low."

"Things keep pretty nicely." She looked about the shelves, calling out names of things that might strike Mrs. Goggins' fancy. "Would you like a nice crisp apple? My brother sent us some from up home." Mrs. Goggins said she would like one, and Joy carried a dry onion and several apples to the opening and started handing them to the waiting woman. Mrs. Goggins said: "My, you've got a nice stock of provisions there; a person could hide out in here for weeks without starving to death." Joy dropped the last apple which she was handing to the woman.

"My goodness, you are jumpy today," said Mrs. Goggins. Taking the damp hand of the girl, she helped her out of the basement. Again back in the house, Joy kept asking questions and making conversation calculated to hold the neighbor with her as long as she could. She was successful to some degree, but Mrs. Goggins managed to get back to finishing the washing, determined to get to the warden's house at a decent hour. Before she broke away after the washing, Joy wheedled her into starting her on a quilt. Still she got away too soon for Joy, who watched her disappear over the hill, feeling that much of her composure was going over the hill, too. Joy had avoided looking at the clock all morning; she didn't want to know exactly how far away one-eighteen was.

She had often on other bad days found playing the piano helpful;
sometimes she could get so engrossed in the music that she could forget
where she was for several minutes at a time. She went into the front
room and sat down at her upright piano. She had not been playing very
long when she was startled by a racket outside. The noise was caused
by quail beating their bodies and wings against twigs, branches, and
leaves in a desperate rush into the open air, away from the trees and
brush in which they had been hidden. This sudden flight meant only
one thing: an intruder of some sort had disturbed the birds. When the
birds had at times shown this panic before, Joy had usually been re­
lieved to find that a stray cow or sheep had been the invader, but today
she didn’t hear the movement of anything in the small forest after the
birds left — no cow bell, no noise of any kind. Today there was a silence
deeper than the silence that comes from another room when one of the
children has broken something he wasn’t supposed even to touch — the
kind of silence that is eloquent in expressing that something is very
wrong. Joy held her pose at the piano, feeling herself perspire, and
didn’t move. Her ears became sensitive to sounds usually unobserved
— ashes falling through the grate at intervals — the joints in different
parts of the house making a creaking noise — a bird lighting on the roof
— the drip from the clothes hanging on the line.

After some time Joy felt that it was better to know than to be held
in ignorant suspense, and forced herself to look through the window.
She was almost certain that a shadow raced from the trees into the barn­
yard and in through the barn door, that it had just finished its furtive
beeline as she turned to look.

The alarm clock ticked loudly in the kitchen. She dared not go
in and look at the time; it might be hours yet till one-eighteen. But,
before she could summon the courage to do anything at all, even to
hide, she heard the familiar clatter of Barry’s feet hurrying home.

On hearing the boy coming she ran to the kitchen, rekindled the
stove and placed the tea kettle on the hottest part. The boy came run­
ing in: “Mama, you didn’t come to meet me at the barn!”

She squeezed the child, nearly stopping his breathing, and held
him for so long a time that he felt it necessary to wriggle himself loose.
“I — I didn’t know how late it was,” she explained. She kneeled and
buttoned the next to the top button on his shirt and smoothed his col­
lar. “There, now, you look much better.” Then, assuming an offhand,
casual tone: “Oh, Barry, would you take a look out back and see if the
barn door is closed? It makes such a racket if it isn’t.”
Barry went out to look. Returning, he said: "Yes, I can see it from the clothesline. It's bolted."
"You're sure it's bolted, aren't you?"
"Uh, huh." Then he said, "Gee, we're going to have a special party today, aren't we?"
"And I'm not going to tell you what it is, either. Barry — are you sure I don't hear the barn door banging. Look again." And the boy obliged.

With the child close by her, following her about in curiosity, trying to discover the day's surprise ahead of time, Joy went about the kitchen with a sense of security that she could not have explained if she had tried. When Barry was home, to her it was like having a man in the house. As she poured water for the tea, she observed that she was calm; her hand wasn't shaking — not even a little bit. "Barry passed by those trees which the birds flew out of; he passed by the barn; he checked the barn door twice," she repeated to herself; "I guess there's nothing wrong."

She opened the cupboard, and discovering that the jam pot was empty, automatically, scarcely thinking, she took Barry's hand, opened the back door and started for the basement. As she turned the corner she stopped with a jolt, squeezing the child's hand so hard that he cried out. The basement door was open! She was sure, she was positive, that she hadn't left it open. Closing doors was one thing she was always careful about.

"You hurt my hand, Mama," complained Barry.
She kept her eye on the open door. She was sure of one thing: she must find out for certain. The child was concerned only about his hand. "Barry," she said slowly, "how would you like to go in and get the jam?"
Barry was enthusiastic about the idea. But when he neared the cellar door, he shouted: "You come in with me."
"Mama's right here."
"Mama, it's dark in there."
"You aren't afraid with Mama out here, are you? Go on in. Get the kind of jam you want and surprise me."
When Barry still hesitated, Joy said, with a tone of irritation: "All right, you go back in the kitchen, and there won't be any big surprise."
At these words Barry scuffled into the basement, and Joy waited through slowly passing minutes. When Barry came out with the jam, she was staring hard at the entrance to the basement.
"Mama, I really wasn't a-scared at all."
"Of course not," said Joy; "what is there to be afraid of?"
"But," admitted Barry, "I think I would have been scared if you weren't close by. You aren't scared, so I ain't scared."

INDIAN DESERT

grey desert floor
rubbing centuries across its palms
like cloud shadows
or in fiery touch of animal pads
giving restless feet the incessant
wander
affection from fall of moccasin
a secret hidden in the grey of a
dawn rug
but whose ecstasy blooms white in
fruit trees.

ELMER GORMAN