

Accommodations For The Summer

by Sally Wright

After seventeen consecutive days, she wasn't surprised when the cardinal smashed into the glass, but it was irritating. She liked to drift into the morning surrounded by dreams and he was trying to kill his own reflection. Norah wondered if this was the result or the cause of brain damage, as she squinted through the haze her eyelashes made in the dawn light, and tucked a pillow over her head in self-defense.

His next attack landed like a blow on her own brain, although he disappeared then temporarily. And Norah floated in-and-out between sleep and the desire to do something about the day, until she felt the sun on her neck as she listened to David breathe. She kissed him on the shoulder and stuck a foot out from under the sheet. And before the cardinal hit the window again, she'd fastened her hair up on the back of her head and picked her books up from the bedside table.

She stopped by Ellen's door then and looked in on her, sucking her thumb in her trundle bed, with her own hand on top of the banister. The stairs were cool and smooth and comforting on her bare feet.

And she could hear the kitchen clock working against the one in their bedroom as she slipped past David's parents' door and froze by the china cupboard when someone moved. But silence settled on the house, and if the porch door didn't wake anyone, she'd have almost an hour to herself.

The tall Victorian brick walls were behind her in another minute and she was walking through the herb garden on moss covered stones. A silver beaded spider web broke against her face as she wandered among the cooking herbs and the artemesias, and she brushed it off her forehead with the back of her hand as she filled the hollow rock with water for the birds. She sat down on the bench by the back fence, and the chipmunk stopped rushing around and went off to hide in his downspout, while the goldfinches and the sparrows and the tiny wrens fluttered back as soon as Norah was still.

She ate a sprig of peppermint and read the first three chapters of John that morning, before turning to Shakespeare's third sonnet. It was the last six lines - "Thou art they mother's glass, and she in thee/ Calls back the lovely April of her prime:/ So thou through windows of thine age shalt see, /Despite of wrinkles, this thy golden time. /But if thou live, remember'd not to be,/ Die single, and thine image dies with thee" - that made her realize how differently she'd reacted to the world since Ellen was born.

She used to think it was self-centered to want children, as a reflection of oneself. But now she understood that it was more a matter of wonder and curiosity and humility, because of the differences as much as the similarities. And it was also a chance to re-think childhood, the universal experience as much as one's own.

She was turning to his fifteenth sonnet, thinking about the timelessness of Shakespeare's mind and the brilliance of his expression, when she heard the kitchen door open as Mother Nelson took-up her life's work.

It had to be after six, which came as a surprise, because when Norah read, the world went-on without her. She listened to the rattling drawers and the slamming cupboards; and then the dream she was having when the cardinal woke her up, came back by association. She couldn't remember how it had started, but it had changed with the logic of the night until Mother Mary Nelson was standing at her Tappan range like Admiral Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar, one sleeve empty and pinned-up like his, flipping pancakes on the back burner.

Norah laughed quietly to herself and rubbed the place on her nose where her small gold glasses sat, contemplating the treachery of the subconscious brain. She wasn't ready to give up her solitude; not the silence and the delicate light and the purple clematis trailing along the porch. (Not when the silverware drawer shot-open like a gun bolt.)

She stretched her arms above her head and wondered what her mother-in-law had planned for the day. Rhubarb, probably, since they'd finished the strawberry jam.

It wasn't easy living with her in-laws, but then she didn't expect life to be effortless. She and David were fortunate to be able to teach anywhere in the middle of the Depression, especially at a university. And even if they couldn't afford room and board in the summer, they got along better than a lot of people. David helped his father at the hardware store in return for a place to stay, while Norah and his mother put-up canned goods for the winter, and it worked out well for all of them.

Of course, David was easy to be with anywhere. He wanted her to be the way she was. He read and laughed and played with Ellen in his own inimitable fashion. And when Norah needed serious adult conversation, the two of them went for long walks in the country while his parents babysat with Ellen.

The Ferguson's porch door slapped open-and-shut behind her (as she sat barefoot on her bench in a thin batiste gown, in someone else's yard, in a small Ohio farming town that was waking-up). And then she heard Calvin talking to himself the way he always did, slow and gurgling and sadly methodical like a muddy meandering river.

"Poor Calvin." Norah picked up her books and tried to catch the pale brown wisps of curl that were gathering at the nape of her neck. "It must be heartbreaking for his parents. Even after all these years."

If Mary Nelson thought it odd that her daughter-in-law had been out in the back yard in her nightgown before breakfast, she was too polite to say so. She was not the kind of mother-in-law who's critical of her son's wife on principle and looks for a chance to feel hurt. She liked her daughter-in-law. She respected her. Norah had been raised on a farm too and she met the demands of life - the butchering and rendering, the growing and canning and storing, the sewing and knitting and mending and ironing that made the difference for Mary between living with dignity and getting-by like the shiftless of the earth. She worried that Norah had more education than she needed, than was strictly good for her as things were in 1933, when Mary was afraid a hunger for learning was dangerous. Longing and disappointment can make the hardships of life harder to bear; for Mary Nelson knew a great deal about hardship, and she had no need of poetry.

"Mother Nelson, how old is Calvin?" Norah was wiping out the sink after finishing the breakfast dishes and Mary was organizing the kitchen work table.

"Now let me think." She was a large woman inside elaborate corsets that stood her up like a stalk of asparagus. Her features were strongly boned and her thick grey hair was pulled straight back in a bun, and she made Norah, with her pale freckled skin and her green eyes look like a pre-Raphaelite aristocrat.

Mary stood with her legs spread apart and wiped her wet hands on the bib apron she wore like a uniform (hands that could wring-out rag rugs until they were practically dry, aprons that were handmade as carefully as Sunday clothes). "Calvin was born right before his father went off to France, and that was the spring of 1917, so he must've turned sixteen. You know it's wonderful the way he's so cheerful and good-natured. I don't think I've heard Calvin complain once, in all these years."

"It is hard to get used to him, in a way." Norah was smoothing the dish rag on the wooden bar and looking out the window at her own daughter who was teaching the McGuffey Eclectic Primer to rows of corn and tomatoes. "He seems so young and yet physically he's so adult. He is rather observant, though, don't you think? I mean more than you'd expect?"

"Oh my dear! Nothing worth mentioning escapes Calvin Ferguson. He knows every inch of Chamberlainsville, Ohio like the palm of his own hand." Mrs. Nelson chuckled as demonstrably as she ever did, while looking to see how much sugar was left and counting the Ball lids. "We ought to be able to cut enough rhubarb today to finish the quart jars. Remind me to ask Walter to bring home another case."

"Do you think it's a good idea for me to let Ellen play with Calvin as much as I do though? Carrie's a sweet little girl, and I like Calvin very much, and he seems harmless. But Ellen is only seven and you do hear . . ."

"Calvin may be simpleminded, Norah, but he's good-hearted. The way he wants to watch over Carrie, and takes in stray dogs. No, I wouldn't give it a moment's thought. A person can worry too much about protecting little folks.

But then when you've got eight of 'em like I did, you don't have time to fret much. Not beforehand." Mary hesitated, after she'd put the copper jam kettle on the stove, and watched Norah quietly for a minute as though assessing the wisdom of her own inclinations. "Now I know I probably have my say sometimes when I shouldn't, but I don't want to interfere. Really I don't. I just thought maybe I'd ask you again if you've changed your mind about tomorrow."

David's father's sister, Joy Delight (a name which Norah still wondered at), had died down in Arcanum, and Norah had announced as delicately as she could that she thought she'd keep Ellen home with her.

One of Norah's earliest and strongest and most gruesome memories had been of her grandfather's funeral. She still dreamed of it sometimes. The grandfather she'd loved, lying there like a leg of lamb; a sickly pallid waxy yellow with a vicious leer on his face he'd never worn in life, because the undertaker, who was a notorious drunk, had decided to play a practical joke on the doctor who'd lectured him and died first. When Norah's small face had been shoved-up against his bloated corpse, and she'd heard grown-ups tell each other in apparent seriousness that her grandfather "looked just like he had in life," her confidence in the wisdom of adults had been seriously shaken. She'd sworn solemnly to herself that when she grew-up, she would never take a child of hers to such a spectacle. And nothing had happened since to make her change her mind.

Norah was spending the summer in Mother Nelson's house, and she was a remarkable woman - calm, self-reliant, unself-pitying. She was opinionated and sometimes over-bearing, but you always knew where you stood with her, and Norah liked that. She was also willing to let her days be filled with pickling and peeling and boiling and paraffin; first because it was sensible, and secondly because it gave Mary pleasure.

But Norah would not take Ellen to the funeral; even if it meant David's relatives in Arcanum thought that that was very strange indeed.

David didn't care. All he'd said was that Joy Delight wouldn't be there either and Norah ought to do what she thought was right.

"No, I don't think I will go, thank you. I had a very unpleasant experience with open caskets when I was little, and I don't want to subject Ellen to that kind of emotional shock."

"Then don't you pay Walter any mind if he starts acting huffy. It wouldn't do at all for him to see you feeling bad about it, if you know what I mean."

"No, I won't. I promise."

"Course I did find myself, that with my own children, it worked better when I prepared them than when I tried to protect them. You know what I mean, when I explained what was about to happen ahead of time. But, times were different then too, I guess. I'll just get the baskets and the pruning shears. You prefer stewed rhubarb, or sauce?"

"How long does it take?"

"To Arcanum? At least four hours, even if they don't have a puncture." Norah had one hand on Ellen's head, and Ellen's arm was around Norah's hips, and they were watching the old black Ford raise dust on its way out of town. "I have a surprise for you, little fish, and I want you to put on your shoes while I finish getting ready."

"What?! Will I like it?"

"We're going on an adventure, and yes, you will. I think."

Half an hour later, Ellen still wasn't downstairs and Norah went up to get her. "Didn't you hear me call you?"

She was sitting on the floor putting a hat on her doll. Norah had never played with dolls herself and she secretly thought it was a waste of time, but she tried not to say anything and she usually succeeded. "Put your shoes on and use the bathroom before we go."

"I want to stay home and play with Mintie."

"You can play with her anytime. This is our day to be alone and do exciting things! Now hurry and get ready."

"Do I have to?!"

"Yes! You can always play with your doll, but you can't always go on a picnic."

They went out the front door and turned left away from town. They admired the flowers in the neighbors' yards, and the way the fences were made, and wondered who was moving into the empty house across the street.

A black and white dog rushed out from under a porch and barked at them, but then he decided they weren't anything to worry about, and he liked it when they rubbed his ears.

Six blocks later they were in the country, walking through farmland planted in wheat and corn, with trees along a narrow strip beside the road and a line of gentle hills half a mile away on their right, where the river cut a green wake through dry land.

"How long does it take to get there?"

"A few more minutes. See straight ahead of us, where the land and the sky meet?"

"Yes." Ellen's dark shiny hair hung hot around her shoulders and Norah stooped and brushed it back from her flushed face.

"Want me to braid your hair? It must be awfully hot."

"Not right now."

"Not right now, thank you. That line is called the horizon."

"How long does it take to get there?"

"You can't, really. It's as though we're walking around an enormous ball, and no matter how long we walk, we'll see that line because we're seeing the sky behind the earth."

"How long do we have to walk? My feet hurt."

"Not very long. Look over there on the right. See how the land gets hilly by the river?"

"What river?"

"They call it the Little Turtle. You can't see it right now, but it's on the other side of those trees. It's more like a large creek, really."

"Why did Daddy start calling me little fish?"

"He looked at you in your first crib, the one he made out of a nail keg, and he said, 'She's just a little fish!' as though he had no idea how small you'd be. Anyway, they say that when the glacier came through, it stopped where that river is, and all the things it carried when it started to melt, were dumped there. That's why it's hilly there and flat here. Here the ice was so heavy, it cut off the high ground."

"I'm hot."

"I know, Ellen, I'm hot too. What do you like best about being at Grandma and Grandpa's? I probably would've pretended there were secret passages in the attic."

"I like playing with Calvin."

"That's good. Now here's the path. Would you like to go barefoot?"

"Yes!"

"I think I will too."

"Will you carry my shoes, Mommy?"

"Yep. You run on ahead if you want to, but don't go in the water until I get there." Norah watched Ellen rush toward the creek, stepping on stones and hopping painfully, then gathering speed again, kicking up small pale clouds around her tan legs.

It was a cool quiet glade. The trees hung over the creek, shading the big flat stones on the edge of the rushing water, making a secret green cave in a hot dry world.

Norah set the shoes and the picnic lunch down on a stone ledge, and walked to the edge of the water. She sat on a cool rock and slid her feet into the icy stream. There must have been deep underground springs to make the water that cold. It made her ankles ache, and yet she loved it. "You know, I think it's a very good thing that life has so many contrasts. It's when you're hot and dusty that cold wet water feels this good. And spring is as nice as it is, partly because of winter."

"I'm thirsty."

"Well, have some lemonade."

"It's not cold anymore."

"It's cold enough. But I wish we'd brought our bathing suits, even if it isn't deep enough to really swim."

"Can't we get wet anyway?"

"I don't see why not." Norah slipped off her rock into the clean fast flowing river. It looked like English ale foaming across smooth round pebbles, and she lay back for a minute and floated, letting her fingers bobble in the

rushing bubbles. "Why don't you lie down on your stomach and put your hands on the bottom and practice kicking?"

"Do I have to?!"

"What's the matter with you?!"

"It's hot, and I wanted to stay home!"

"All you've done is complain since you got up this morning! You're going to be miserable your whole life if you don't learn to enjoy what you've got, instead of wanting whatever you don't have."

"Look at the fish! Will they bite?"

"No. They'll try to stay out of our way."

Norah's dress stuck to her like wet skin as she lay down on the cool rock and looked up at the leaves laced across the sky, turning the light green, like the inside of a bottle.

"I'm hungry."

"The peanut butter sandwich is yours, and there's fruit and cheese and some sugar cookies."

"Will Daddy be home tonight?"

"No, not till late tomorrow."

"Can I sleep in your bed?"

"I thought we could sleep on the screened-in porch. You can see the stars, and it's cool, and you can smell all the plants in the garden."

"Shhhhh. Hear the nuthatch?" Ellen glanced casually in Norah's direction and said she listened to them at Grandma's all the time.

"Good for you! I hardly recognize any bird calls." Norah watched Ellen in the water, playing with her hands, sweeping them in an arc on either side of her, and thought, "It's funny how children are. She never seems to be listening when I'm trying to teach her something, and yet ever so often, some isolated piece of information I told her long ago, or something she's learned on her own pops-out and takes me by surprise. But then I never do really know what she's thinking. And it's probably a very good thing."

The summer passed on the pantry shelves. You could see its progression and its sunny days (which Norah counted off in books read and poems memorized), as asparagus and pickles and summer squash and pole beans joined the rhubarb and the strawberry jam.

Then came tomato season, which produced a state of battle fatigue in Norah, with the juice and the sauce and the stewed tomatoes. And she promised herself that someday, if she could ever afford it, she'd grow them to eat fresh and watch the rest rot on the vine.

It was the morning Ellen came in all dressed up in her best clothes, that they started making juice. Ellen (who according to David, usually looked like the Wreck of the Hesperus, if not the Little Match Girl) appeared in the kitchen

doorway wearing the yellow pinafore she wore to church, with her hair pulled back in a ribbon. "Mommy?"

"My goodness! Why are you all dressed-up?!"

"Carrie and Dee Dee and Calvin asked me to play store with them, and I want to sell dry goods like you used to. If they let me, when I don't have to be the silly old housewife who comes in to buy everything."

"I see! So where were you planning to do this?"

"In the shed in the alley behind their house."

"Excuse me a moment, but may your poor, old, elderly grandmother ask what's wrong with being a housewife?!"

"Well. They talk about cleaning all the time, and they dust the furniture just because it's Tuesday, and then they make you stop and help when you'd rather read a book."

"Ah." Said Mary Nelson, looking slightly disconcerted.

"It's fine with me, sweetie, but you have to be back by twelve o'clock, and you may not go anywhere else without asking. You understand what I mean by that?"

"Yes."

"When I used to play store, I picked leaves from a hydrangea bush and then pretended they were dollar bills."

Ellen looked at Norah, but she didn't say anything except "Good-bye" as she slammed the screen door.

"Mother Nelson? Did your children ever take your advice when they were little?"

Mary looked-up from clamping the food mill to the table, and said, "No. Did you?"

By noon, fourteen quarts of tomato juice were stacked on the pantry shelves, and the kitchen was so hot they both sat down gratefully with a glass of iced tea, the ice for which had been wrestled with a great deal of difficulty from the G.E. ice box with the monitor top they both still considered a marvel.

"What shall we fix for Ellen's lunch?" Mary suffered from varicose veins and though she rarely gave-in to them, she'd put her feet up on one of the kitchen chairs and rolled her stockings down below her knees.

"Isn't there some left-over chicken? We could make her a sandwich, and I think there's some tapioca."

The front door slammed so hard the glass rattled, and Ellen's heels slashed at the wood floors. And then she was standing in the doorway - her socks hanging loose around her ankles, her dress smeared with cobwebs and dirt, her face streaked and red with crying, and the ribbon torn from her hair.

"I'm never going to let anybody do that to me! Never!!"

"What's the matter sweetie?! What happened?!"

"I don't care what he says! I won't!"

"Calm down now, Ok? Now take a big breath . . ."

"Calvin told me what they do to you after you die and I didn't believe him, and he took me down the alley to his uncle's garage, and this dead man was lying on this table and he was all naked everywhere, and there was a tube stuck in a hole in his stomach, and tubes in his arms, and they were stuffing cotton in his mouth, and his nose, and the inside of his ears, and it stunk funny and I threw-up!"

"My word, Norah, Calvin's uncle's the mortician!"

Ellen's hands were clenched at her sides, and her eyes were outraged, and the panic in her voice was like a knife in Norah's throat.

But Norah stood and stared at her. She couldn't take it in for a minute. She couldn't think, or breathe, or comfort her. She just said silently inside her soul, "Please help her . . . and help me too . . . because I don't know what to do!" - as Mary knelt down and wrapped Ellen in her arms.