

the family By Rick Hatt

The living room was large. Even so, this afternoon it was crowded with people: women in expensive dresses and men with drinks in their hands. The murmuring voices of conversation mingled with the low volume flow of music from a stereo in the corner. Finally, over these sounds, the authoritative chime of a bell, tolling the hour, reminded many that it was time to leave, and gradually the room began to empty.

Most stopped by the door to speak a few personal words to the grey haired woman standing by the entrance. 'Take care, Mrs. Walton', 'You'll make out', 'Good luck, dear', they were saying. The small, thin Mrs. Walton smiled back, weakly. Beside her, arms folded across his chest, stood a young man, who spoke nothing, but looked disapprovingly at each person as they left.

And then the guests were gone. The room now looked very different. It was empty, except for the furnishings, and except for the dark mass occupying the room's center. There, upon a sturdy oaken table lay a long black coffin. The people had been like a curtain, hiding it from view by their numbers. Mrs. Walton walked to the wooden table and resting one arm on the hand worked casket, began to ponder the day's events.

The jaunty rhythms and sweet rhyming words of the background music from the record player now sounded louder. The young man, still by the door, stood, frowning and irritated. He walked to the stereo and switched off the record.

"Mum! Why did you play a record like that. Are you crazy? Playing the Beatles at your husband's wake!"

"Your brother Xavier always said how it was a good record, you know. He said it was idealistic and original. All about love and everything. I thought they'd like it better than church music. Don't you think they did, Goodwin?"

"Who cares what they think! And cocktails. Mum! This was not supposed to be a party. The man is dead!"

"But I didn't want them to get bored."

Goodwin gave up. "When is X coming home? Has he phoned you yet?"

Yes. Xavier phoned from the airport here in town just a half hour ago. He's taking a taxi. He said he'd be here as soon as he could."

"Good."

Mrs. Walton glanced at a book on the coffee table.

"I think I'll read a little till he gets here. I'm reading a Harlequin Romance."

"Oh. Do you like it?"

"I like it, but I have to keep reading it over again every month or so, because I keep forgetting how it goes."

"Is that a car I hear?" Goodwin hurried to the window. "Yes! It's X."

The front door opened and Xavier stood in the entrance. "Here I am! Mum. Goodwin. I'm home!" he said as he dropped his luggage to the floor. "This house hasn't changed a bit! It is a warm mansion at the end of the street, it is a warm mansion where the family meets," as Fedora Vailld would say."

"Oh, Xavier! You and your quotations." Mrs. Walton giggled.

"It's true. Everything's the same: Dad's portrait over the fire place, the pictures of Goodwin and me when we were in school. And even the bird statuette Angela made in art class. That must have been five years ago at least!"

"Yes," began his mother, "But it hasn't -"

"I bet you don't have as much trouble keeping it clean as you did when Goodwin and I were around."

Mrs. Walton smiled, "Well, we don't -"

"Let's sit down. We don't have to stand in our own house, do we?"

The three seated themselves in the room: Mrs. Walton in her chair, and X and Goodwin on the sofa, with the coffin looming behind them.

An uneasy silence followed as no one talked, each

wondering where they should begin. Finally X spoke up.

"Well. Goodwin, I hear you've been working at the Playhouse. As a prop man. Do you make much money?"

"Well, I make enough to -"

"You wouldn't need much anyway, would you. Living here at home. And Waterloo Row is quite close to the Playhouse, so you wouldn't need a car."

"No, but that doesn't matter. I enjoy the work. I feel I'm creating -"

"Yes! I know what you mean. On the magazine, you know, 'Hits' where I work, I feel like I'm really creating something. Like on that retrospect of Bob Dylan we did last month. It was almost as good as Shakespeare. Rock is an art form, it really is. I think it's the medium of the century. And with lyrics like Fedora's Vailld's, wow, they're so meaningful! She may not be well known, but she's great!"

"And the money. We get paid almost as well as the rock stars we interview. I guess that'd be because 'Hits' sells so well. 'Hits' is really 'my right and left', like Fedora would say."

The room became quiet again, until X once more spoke up.

"Mum, you don't look too good. Have you seen a doctor, lately?"

"No. But I do feel awfully tired. But I thought it was just the funeral. My legs are weak, and my arms hurt and then -"

"Yes, I have pains in my arms too, sometimes. Maybe it's arthritis."

He glanced over at the luggage by the doorway.

"Well, I suppose I better -"

"Oh, the luggage!" Mrs. Walton spoke up, "Let me take it upstairs for you. I'll do it right away. You two talk. I'll be back down in a minute."

"OK, Mum." The two sons remained silent as she left the room. Then, as she neared the stairs, the suitcase fell open and clothing spilled out over the floor.

Mrs. Walton looked dismayed, but Xavier merely laughed, and said, "I don't care if my dirty laundry is aired in public."

He waited for his mother to pick up his clothes and leave the room, finally disappearing up the stairs. Immediately he turned to Goodwin.

"Have you heard the will yet?"

"No. Mum's the only one who's heard it."

"When do we get to hear it?"

"I don't know. What do I know about wills! Maybe she's the only one that's supposed to hear it."

"Don't be a fool. We must get something. There must have been close to half a million in stocks and bonds alone."

"Don't worry. You'll get your share."

"That's why I'm here! To make sure I get what I'm entitled to. The way I've been treated by this family, I deserve something to make up for it. And I'm going to get it!"

"What do you need money for anyway? You just got done telling us how great your job is at 'Hits'. You don't need anything."

"And you do, I suppose?"

"I -"

"Goodwin, I've decided you don't need or deserve anything. And you're not going to get one cent out of the will."

"Now just a minute! I'm entitled to my share, too."

"Goodwin, I know just about enough of what your share has been to put your blood out of circulation for life."

Goodwin looked bewildered.

"And don't give me that pure and innocent look either. I know about Angela. I know why she left."

"What are you talking about? Nothing happened to Angela."

"That's what you'd like people to believe, and most of them do. But you didn't take me into consideration. I know."

"You don't know anything," Goodwin snapped.

"Don't I? There's no sense in pretending." X said

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