
AN ELEGY FOR ALMA'S AUNT AMY

WALNUT GROVE WAS THE PLACE WHERE I DID MY FIRST AND ONLY teaching. Ever since then a miniature of the town has stayed fixed in my mind, sober and primitive in line, touched with sunset color—it is always winter, and the frame houses are standing straight and plain, the steeple of the Congregational Church is pointing, and the teachers are going down the long straight sidewalk toward a cold red sky that lies behind the upraised branches of the bare black trees.

After my year of teaching, I had gone to Chicago and then to other places. That short time in Walnut Grove seemed very distant.

But one summer when I was at home I went with my mother on a visit to Pleasant City. Almost the first person I saw when we entered the bus was Marian Burke, who used to teach in high school with me.

Marian said, "Oh! Are you going to stop off at Walnut Grove?"

I had forgotten that Walnut Grove was on the way to Pleasant City.

Mother let Marian and me sit together, and we told each other the news about ourselves; and then Marian told me what had become of the other teachers, what our old pupils were doing, who had married whom. But she lived at Creston, only a few stations beyond my home, and she had to leave the bus before I had asked her half the questions I wanted to ask. But I did remember and called out the window to her:

"Oh! What about Alma?"

Alma Root and I still conscientiously exchanged Christmas cards, but it was a good while since we had written to each other.

Marian said, "I don't know about Alma. Same as always, I guess. But I wonder if you've heard that Miss Ramsey is dead?"

I hadn't known that. Miss Ramsey didn't exactly belong in my miniature of the town with the cold sky and the bare trees. Alma's house was always something separate. Alma was the one who was supposed to be my friend. But it would not have been the same kind of a loss—although in a way more shocking, since Alma was younger—if I had heard it was she who was dead.

Mother asked me, "Who was this lady?"

"Alma Root's Aunt Amy," I said.

We drove on down the long paved road. Mother had got to talking with another woman, and so I had a seat to myself, in rocking comfort, and I could think about what I pleased.

That house—Alma Root's home—was the place where all of us teachers liked to go best. It was a haven for us, a second home. The house seemed quite grand in Walnut Grove. It stood back from the street, on a wide lawn, with a clump of evergreens where the slope was lowest; and its frame tower, trimmed with fancy shingles, had been

imposing in its day. No new house had been built in Walnut Grove to surpass it. The town's days of hopefulness, if it had ever had any, were gone. Mr. Root had been the lawyer. He had left Mrs. Root and Alma fairly well to do. Inside the house there was a substratum of 1890 furniture, but mixed with new colonial mahogany, and very up-to-date trimmings in the way of draperies, cushions, and little do-dads. Alma kept up with such things. There were the everyday American comforts that some of us girls had missed in our rooms at Mrs. Farmer's and that we reveled in when Alma invited us. Walnut Grove, which didn't have even a railroad except the little station stop two miles away, was distinctly a rural town. In some of the houses where we were invited for supper they still had their hard-coal burners that kept the sitting room cosy as a winter picture on a calendar, with the red-glowing deep bed of coals, but that sent their warmth only halfway through the chill of the dining room. I fear it may have been because we liked to go to her house so well that we teachers so assiduously kept up our friendship with Alma. When we talked about her among ourselves we were apt to criticize her.

Oh, well, we liked Alma too. We more or less counted her as one of the crowd—so that when we had a spread or took a walk on Sunday afternoon one of us would say with contrition, "We ought to have asked Alma." She was about thirty or thirty-one the year I was in Walnut Grove, a large, soft-faced, babyish girl with a skin like an infant's and a small, half-pouted mouth. At home she was treated like a girl by her mother and her Aunt Amy, and we teachers treated her that way too. But in Walnut Grove thirty still meant an old maid. All the girls of her own crowd were long ago married or scattered, and Alma was left. She was a strange mixture of too young and too old. It seemed that she had been a delicate child (the teachers privately scoffed at that, Alma looked so obviously blooming with her soft, baby-skinned face) and so she had always stayed home with Mama and Papa. One year in boarding school had put her forever out of the class of the other girls in Walnut. She held little sporadic jobs—taught the primary for a

week when Jessie Davis was ill, and took tickets occasionally at this or that. But she still wasn't considered, and didn't think of herself, as strong enough to do anything beyond that. And what could Alma do by this time? She had stayed too long under her parents' warm sheltering wings; and now she had both her mother and her Aunt Amy to spend all their care upon her. Mrs. Root was anxiously pleased to have the teachers come to the house, because "it made company for Alma."

They liked to have us come no better than we liked to go there! Poor innocent ladies, they didn't know how, going there for supper, arms linked, we smacked our lips and giggled at our shameful, shameless ravenousness. Mrs. Root and Miss Ramsey were full of anxiety to have everything nice for Alma's friends. They spent as much care and planning upon these meals as if we had been more distinguished guests than were ever likely to visit Walnut Grove. They were busy in the kitchen when we arrived, but Mrs. Root always stepped into the living room to say, "I'm so glad you could come, girls," and to ask if Alma had taken our wraps and shown us the way to the bathroom. Then she would smilingly excuse herself. Miss Ramsey came in with her, just as kind and welcoming, but quieter, since the house was not hers but her sister's; and when Mrs. Root went back to the kitchen, she would go too. Once in a while one of us would drift out there to ask if there was something we could do to help. But Mrs. Root always sent us straight back to the other room, saying, "No, thank you, dear; Aunt Amy and I can manage everything. You girls just rest and have a good time." Miss Ramsey smiled in corroboration; and as we left we could hear her asking "sister" if she was ready to have the potatoes mashed now or wanted her to make the coffee. Once when I tried to insist on helping, because it seemed as if those two ladies had done so much for us, Miss Ramsey, who was setting the table in the dining room, gently squeezed my hand in her little delicate fingers and confided, "Oh, no, my dear, it's lovely of you, but my sister would rather that Alma just enjoyed herself with her friends. She doesn't have anyone else here but you girls."

It was always a great moment for us when Miss Ramsey came into

the living room, smiling and not wanting to interrupt us, and then when she had the chance, saying:

"Well, girls, you can come into the dining room, now."

Mrs. Root was standing there waiting for us. She showed us to our places. "Now, Marian, I think you sat right there before, so you can just have your old place. Vivian, you can sit next to Aunt Amy again, to keep her out of mischief." She remembered what kind of jelly we liked best, and always had it on the table, clear amber-rose apple jelly trembling in the shining cut-glass dish. Because we were Alma's friends, we were all her children—and Miss Ramsey was our Aunt Amy. We were petted little girls in that house. Lil Patterson, who taught the eighth grade, was a wild kind of raw-boned big creature, loud-mouthed, with a crude sense of humor. But you ought to have seen the way she tamed herself down when she entered that house! It was really pathetic. The two older ladies didn't talk much except to give us advice about our colds and commiserate with us over our teaching troubles and urge the delicious food upon us. They kept their eyes upon the dishes; and Miss Ramsey would rise softly, with a gentle air of duty, and carry the platter out to the kitchen to be refilled with chicken. Sometimes they came into the parlor with us later, where we turned on the victrola or played cards; but often they sat just beyond the large open doorway, in the living room, doing some sewing (usually for Alma) and seeming to take pleasure in hearing us talk. Miss Ramsey did come in with us sometimes, but I don't think Alma exactly liked that. We were *her* friends, and she wanted her mother and her Aunt Amy to keep out of it—just as a child is impatient if the grownups try to join in its games.

But those meals! We teachers boarded at the hotel. We had good hearty fare and gained on it—Lil Patterson gained twenty pounds; but we didn't mind getting a change from the beefsteak and fried potatoes. Mrs. Root was spoken of with awe as one of the best cooks in Walnut Grove, "and I guess Miss Ramsey isn't far behind her." When the ladies of the church held a bake sale, people hurried down town as soon

as the hardware store opened, so they wouldn't be too late for Mrs. Root's angel-food cake and Miss Ramsey's chocolate cookies. Whatever they cooked was glorified. The mashed potatoes were like whipped cream, the little biscuits were melting bits of hot deliciousness into which the butter soaked golden, the jelly had a bouquet like some exquisite wine. That dining room, ordinary enough in its furnishings, seemed heavenly to us after the long table at the hotel, with its faded gravy spots and raspberry-juice stains and thick coffee cups that were enough to break your teeth. I loved the very cups, with their slightly worn rims of gold, the little spoons that had been given Alma when she was a child, their tiny gilded bowls in which the fragrant first sip of coffee lay so amber-bright. A pleasant warmth came from the radiator, and during the evening we would hear the comforting sound of Jim Curburne downstairs tending the furnace. When the swinging kitchen door was opened lovely warm smells came out.

"Won't you have some more of the chicken, Marian? I'm afraid you didn't have a very good piece. Lillian . . ." (That wasn't Lil's name. She had actually been named Lily! But she accepted the "Lillian" with gratitude.) "Let me give you a piece, too"—gracefully overlooking the fact that Lil already had a large-sized boneyard on her plate. "Vivian, you must eat all you can, I want your mother to think we've been good to you in Walnut Grove. Amy, won't you see if they all have gravy?"

Once when we were going home after a supper, Lil had been tramping along lost in thought. Then she came out with this, gruffly:

"Those two women are my idea of ladies, if you want to know it."

I always thought of them in that way, too. They were Middle-Western ladies. They were workers. Idleness—such an idea of ladyhood—filled them with disdain. They had known some early hardships. Although Mrs. Root was well-to-do—and Mr. Root, according to a description given me by Mrs. Farmer, interspersed with deep sighs (aimed at Mr. Farmer), had been "an awful good husband"—her fingers were a little knotted, and her figure was spread, and she had

an ample, motherly bosom. Even Miss Ramsey's tiny, spinster fingers were worn. Mrs. Root was getting elderly, but still there was not much in the town that went on without her. She baked her marvelous angel cakes for the church suppers, and helped make the coffee for the high school banquet; and people came to her for roses for the graduation exercises and for snowballs on Decoration Day. No kind of domestic crisis daunted her. She could "get up a meal in no time." She would have been ashamed not to be found capable in any purely human emergency.

Both Mrs. Root and Miss Ramsey were of the older generation of self-effacing women, like my own mother. Of course they had their clubs and they prided themselves on their papers. But Mrs. Root had sunk her own desires in those of her children, until I doubt if she knew they even existed; now that only Alma was at home, everything was naturally for Alma; and Miss Ramsey took this attitude for granted. Youth had all the claims. They did not think of talking much on general topics. When anything was said about people in town, however, when Alma got a little petulant, or Lil too free-spoken, Mrs. Root would put in a mild, dignified, compassionate word of apology or explanation. Her heart, opened up to love and sacrifice through her children, could bear to hold only tenderness and understanding for the rest of the world. "Well, she doesn't mean it, she doesn't know how it looks to people" was the worst she would say. There was a certainty about her hands as she sewed, and a promise of sustainment in her ample breast. Miss Ramsey wouldn't talk about people either. But that was from a delicate sense of fitness. Walnut Grove was not her home. She had no real place there. She had no call to speak.

And they were such pretty ladies. No, you couldn't say pretty. Mrs. Root wasn't pretty. But there was a matronly loveliness about her silvered hair. She had a quiet, and yet slightly troubled dignity. She felt, I know, that perhaps they had not done their best for Alma, and she took her child's futureless future to her heart. That atmosphere of a Middle-Western lady, ample and unassuming and comfortable,

emanated from the thin figured voiles she wore in the spring, and from the worn smoothness of her wedding ring. Her figure was slightly massive; and a younger person looking at her felt an instant sense of protection and ease. If anything happened, if there was an accident, if anyone was taken sick, if a child was naughty or crying—go to Mrs. Root, she would know what to do. The last time I saw them was just before I went home, at the beginning of June. We all stood outside the house, Miss Ramsey in a summer silk, and Mrs. Root in her figured voile, one so dainty and one so matronly, both so quietly and exquisitely aging; and Miss Ramsey had just picked a very choice rose for me, a smooth white, faintly flushed with a golden pink.

"I don't know what my sister will say to this," she said, slightly arch, delicately determined; "but I wanted my little friend to have this as a gift from me."

Mrs. Root had given me a glass, very neatly, nicely wrapped—they did everything so nicely!—of apple jelly to take home with me. The rose was Miss Ramsey's gift.

But although one always thought of them now together, "Mrs. Root and Miss Ramsey," there was that difference between them. Beside the ample, sure presence of Mrs. Root, the matron, who had fulfilled her household cares and reared her family, who had received and richly returned the love of a good man, Miss Ramsey was a little shadowy. Mrs. Root had her own unassailable place in Walnut Grove. Miss Ramsey was "Mrs. Root's sister." There was a pretty distinction about her that was not wholly appreciated there. Before she came to take up her home with Mrs. Root and Alma, she had spent some time in California, living in an apartment with a wealthy widowed friend. Walnut Grove was an inland town, and people were much more provincial in the old fashioned way than in the larger type of Middle-Western town. Their traveling consisted mostly of drives around to visit relatives: "Ed's folks," and "John's folks," and "Lib's folks." There were only the teachers to whom Miss Ramsey could talk about the things she liked. She was not cultured in any high sense, but she had

a feeling for the little art and literature she knew. She had been to visit the Huntington Library, near Pasadena, and seen Gainsborough's "Blue Boy"—she always called him "Boy Blue." That meant nothing to most of these people. There were no ladies of her age who affected the kind of clothes she liked to wear. She showed me once some of the pretty things her wealthy friend had given her in California. She handled them delicately but then shut them back in her wardrobe. "The ladies in my sister's club don't care much for dress. I should feel out of place in these things. I suppose I ought to give them to Alma." Her figure was still slender and dainty, and I always noticed with delight the pretty arch and curve of her foot. Her hair was frosted with gray, and there was a faded bloom of pink upon her cheeks, especially when she came in heated from the kitchen. Although a lady in late middle age, her girlish attractions were not all gone. She was aware of that. But what chance was there for them to be appreciated? Also, she had, I think, just a very tiny personal income. She was now living at her sister's home, and she did not like to appear to dress more elaborately than her sister. I liked to picture some wealthy widower, some fine, portly, handsome, dignified man, who could appreciate her little lovely faded princess quality, and would want to rescue her and install her as mistress of his spacious, lonely home. But there were no widowers like that in Walnut Grove! I fear there weren't many anywhere. There was only Bert Grady, the rural mail carrier, who was bereaved for the second time and was trying to shine up to all the teachers.

It was a household of ladies. Alma, no matter how spoiled she might be, had that ladylike quality, too. Her hands had a beautiful softness and she wore around her neck a very fragile golden chain, on which hung a locket, an heirloom, a tiny pool of old gold, upon the exquisite white grain of her skin between the swells of the breasts. The three women lived in that house with the frame tower, not like sleeping beauties waiting to be awakened, but in the dim and changeless after-enchantment of stillness when the prince has gone from their lives. Mr. Root was the hero of all three. Alma would never find any

man who would be as good to her as her father. A photograph of him, with a kindly, manly, responsible face, hung framed beside the piano.

But of the three Miss Ramsey stood at the side. The other two stood together. They had their little grievances against a third in the house. They talked together about some of Aunt Amy's ways, and Alma complained how Aunt Amy always had to bring in California. "If I've heard once about the way Mrs. Richmond served grapefruit juice, I've heard a thousand times. Well, my goodness, what does she think? We can't get the fruit here they can in California. Aunt Amy never will finish talking about that movie star she met. Well, they ought to be beautiful. They've got everything to make them beautiful. Other people could probably be just as beautiful if they spent all their time on it." Miss Ramsey doubtless had her grievances too. But there was no one to whom she could talk. Her sense of what was right would not let her seek a confidante outside her sister's household.

She did talk to me once, however. Much as I loved and admired Mrs. Root, there was always a little sense of special intimacy with Miss Ramsey. She knew that I was interested in hearing about "Boy Blue" and the speakers and singers she and Mrs. Richmond had heard.

One Saturday afternoon I went to the house when Alma didn't happen to be there. It was one of those dull, wintry, tedious Saturdays, neither one thing nor the other in regard to the weather. The houses showed their dingy, soot-streaked, winter aspect. I had a longing for the steam-heated warmth of Alma's house. As I turned at the Roots' corner I saw the somber, dull darkness of their clump of evergreens against the colorless winter sky.

I rang the bell. Miss Ramsey came to the door.

"Oh, Vivian, my dear! How nice! No, Alma and my sister aren't here. But come in, anyway. Do. I believe I was just waiting for you!"

She had been doing a little sewing, she said. "I took the notion to recover an old cushion filled with milkweed floss I gathered years ago when I was a girl. We had such nice country around Fairview. Isn't that

an old fashioned Saturday afternoon occupation? Well, I'm knitting a sweater for Alma, like one she saw in Pleasant City, and I have to wait until I can get more yarn. You know they don't have things here." Alma and her mother had gone down to the church to help get things ready for the Washington bazaar. "I didn't want to go. Don't you sometimes want to do something that suits yourself and nobody else?" Her frosty-fine hair was mussed, and she had on a little organdy apron with pink roses faded in many washings, worn stiff and sheer.

"You look sweet!"

She laughed. "In this? Oh, my goodness!" She had had this little apron, she said, since she was a girl. She had dug it out of her chest along with the milkweed cushion. It was made out of an old summer dress she used to wear and had always liked.

"But come in, Vivian. Visit me."

The large house, with its high ceilings and its passages and pantries, seemed strangely, warmly empty on this winter afternoon. There was a slight pounding in the radiator. Jim Coburne had just been there to look after the heat. Miss Ramsey and I felt like usurpers, as if we had to lower our voices. Oh, no, I wouldn't keep her from her work. There was nothing she had wanted more than a visitor.

"But why don't you come upstairs with me? I don't believe you've ever seen my room. Have you, Vivian?"

I knew Alma's room, the embroidered spread upon which we girls always laid our wraps when we came to dinner, and the big dresser with the satin pincushion doll, where we stood to powder our noses. But I had never seen Miss Ramsey's.

"Oh, it's one of those tower rooms! I always wanted to live in one of those. I used to think I would feel like Juliet or someone. Can you step out on this little balcony?"

Miss Ramsey laughed. She surely could, she answered. But the only Romeo around here was Jim Coburne, who had been fixing the flooring of the balcony. The rounded alcove of the tower was filled with the clear brightness of windows. We heard Jim Coburne working

and hammering away somewhere. This room carried out my secret romantic picture of Miss Ramsey as a fading princess.

"It's a nice room, isn't it, Vivian? My sister insisted on my taking it. She's been so lovely to me. Of course I have all my things here."

Her fancywork lay scattered over the chest, and down on the floor the milkweed floss lay in a silvery heap on a paper, spotted with the seeds of dark, dry brown. There was a daintiness and precision about any work Miss Ramsey had to do. Her little pair of scissors had a bright gleam.

"Now, Vivian, I'm going to put you in this old chair. It's one I re-covered. No, you can't help me. You can sit and talk to me. We'll have a good afternoon's visit and then we'll go downstairs and see if we can't find some refreshments of some kind. We'll do just exactly as we please."

Here in her own room that slight shadowiness I had always felt about Miss Ramsey was gone. She was a hostess—not warm and comforting and ample like Mrs. Root, but gaily hospitable, with a pretty natural sprightliness like that of a girl. There was a special atmosphere in her room. She took delight in making someone she cared for welcome to its delicately personal revelations.

What it was exactly, it is hard to say. Yet I felt that atmosphere all about me, as I sat in the cretonne-covered chair and watched her sewing. We used to have at home an old music book with dark-green covers. There were pictures opposite the songs; and I remember that I used to lie flat on the floor on my stomach, looking and looking at those pictures and trying to handle the heavy old book, feeling as if the scenes were something I knew and didn't know, that if I could get back into some old dream I could enter the pictures and be a part of them. That was just the kind of feeling I had about Miss Ramsey's room. Almost it let me go back to a time of girlhood I could never have known. But I had dreamed of it and knew it. The faded flower of her girlhood was here. It breathed out from the dry scent of the little reed rocker with the fancy back and from the satin sachet upon the dresser with small

pink roses painted on blue. I knew it, as I knew the broad-ribbed hat, and the puffed sleeves, and the flowered gown, of the fair-haired girl who forever was wandering, in the picture, to the music of "Oh! that we two were Maying," beside her lover across the grass beneath those tall, full trees, "down the stream of the soft spring breeze." The girl had flowers in her hands. "Like children, with violets playing." The melody, reminiscent, with a faint fragrance of sentiment, sang somewhere in my mind as I sat talking there with Miss Ramsey, watching the glint of her scissors in the winter light.

After a while I began to look about and to ask her what this and that was.

"Well, I haven't much, Vivian. All I have is here."

The furniture was what she had saved from her old home. "I had much more modern furniture in my room in California, but I didn't bring any of it with me. Something had to be done with the old place. So I thought now was the time to pick out and save the things I really cared for and let the rest go."

I suppose there was nothing of much value. But about everything—the reed rocker, the ornaments here and there, the two old fashioned glass perfume bottles with the blue ribbons tied around their necks—there was that faded, fragrant atmosphere. Miss Ramsey's sewing basket was of sweet grass, a little dry. She had brought some things from her sojourn in California, abalone shells of glittery iridescence, some Indian baskets, and a framed colored print of "Boy Blue." She seemed to think, of course, that I would be more interested in the California experience. She brought out a kodak album, in which I could see herself and Mrs. Richmond—a plump lady quite fashionably dressed—standing beside the Spanish whiteness of the wall of the apartment house where they had lived.

"What pretty clothes you're wearing in all these pictures!"

"Oh, yes, you could get nice things there. And then Mrs. Richmond went a good deal, and I went with her. We met a movie actress

one day! Oh, I was very gay there, Vivian! You wouldn't have known me."

She turned the pages, with their glimpses of the homes of Ramona, and of roses blooming in winter, and the silvery spread of the Pacific Ocean.

"Mrs. Richmond thought I would want to stay out there with her. Well, I did like it! But there comes a time, Vivian, when you want to get back to what is your own, whatever it may be. You're a long way from that yet, but someday you may feel it. I loved California, but it wasn't my place. I didn't want to stay there. Here, I could do quite a bit to help my sister and Alma. They've been lonely since Mr. Root passed on. Alma is the closest I can come to one of my own. I can have the things from my own home here. It doesn't seem right, somehow, to have your mother's and father's old cherished belongings just scattered—or even your own. Vivian, you're in my home."

She closed the kodak book.

"Let's see! Would you like to look at some old pictures? I believe these are all we had taken out there. This old box," she said, bringing it out and unlocking it, "has been set away so long, I scarcely know myself what's in it. But a winter afternoon is a good time to look at old keepsakes. Now you can see what I looked like when I was a girl. I expect I looked pretty funny!"

But she didn't—as she very well knew. Perhaps she wanted me—she wanted someone—to recognize again the never quite answered claims of her pretty girlhood.

"This was our home in Fairview, Vivian. My brother sold it when I came here to live with my sister, but my friends tell me that people still call it the Ramsey place. You know how that goes. When people have lived a long while somewhere. You wouldn't believe how many years I spent in that old house! I stayed there with Father after Mother died. Well—I guess it had to be one of us, didn't it?"

I asked her how many there had been in her family, and she said

seven children—five of them girls. "All the others married. I'm the only old maid, Vivian. But you know every large family has to have one!"

She let me look over the glossy old pictures as I pleased. There were a few square ones with prinked edges touched with gilt. In some, Miss Ramsey was a child, and in some, a girl. But after she was older, there were only kodak pictures—as if she no longer cared to record the slow fading of her bloom. We teachers had often wondered about the story of Miss Ramsey's life. The girls thought "she was so sweet, they wondered if she didn't have some story." But all the story contained in the old family pictures was open to me now. There was no face that seemed to mean more than another. There was no faded, framed photograph hanging on the wall. I looked at the picture of her high school graduating class, but no one of the eight boys with their tall stiff collars and their fresh young mouths fitted into the song that was still singing in my mind.

I used to wonder about Miss Ramsey's story, too—if ever her life had come to that moment of bloom that all women feel they must have before they can really start living. She had an air of delicate pride in herself. But in the droop of her faded pink lips and the innocence of her eyes there was still some sense of disappointment held and cherished. I saw now that she was virginal. That was the charm that still hung about her. It had faded, but it had never grown bitter or tart. As she had said—there were five girls in the family and somehow one of them had been left, just as one very pretty flower on a blossoming bush may fail to be gathered. She was a princess in a tower of innocence, whose door had never been opened. I felt now, as we looked over the dim pictures, the few mementos, that Miss Ramsey's story had been only—that there was no story. She had other kinds of wisdom. She had delicate, reticent judgment. Occasionally she counseled Alma's friends. But when we spoke of love or marriage, when we made fun of the attentions of Bert Grady, Miss Ramsey said nothing. As she put back the pictures and keepsakes in her box, I felt that she was quietly closing

up her life. There was a slight, fine humility in her. The most cherished thing of all had passed her while she stood aside. But I think she liked showing me these things. She summoned up her gaiety again.

"Come, Vivian, we've had enough of old things, haven't we? Now suppose we go downstairs and see if we can't have a tea party together. Alma will be sorry she didn't stay at home."

She let me go into the kitchen with her this time. "Alma has entertained you girls; now it's going to be my entertainment this afternoon." She got out some little cakes from under a cloth. "I baked these earlier in the day. Alma always likes to have these little cakes for Sunday night supper. Now we'll make the tea. Do you like Chinese tea, Vivian? I have some that Mrs. Richmond sent me. She got it in the Chinese section in Los Angeles. I think it's so much fun to hunt out those foreign places." And she said we would use some of her own cups. These purple cups, striped with flower pink, had belonged to her grandmother. "I do own some nice china, Vivian. It's all here in my sister's cupboard, except a few things I have packed away. I want Alma to have them." This tea, eaten in the warm dining room, was as delicious as every meal those two sisters served. I had noticed before that Miss Ramsey never offered us girls, when we dropped in unexpectedly, anything except what she had made herself. She would not overstep certain fine boundaries she had set.

"You know it's very nice," she confided, "to have company of my own once in a while like this. Someone whom I like to entertain, like you, Vivian. My sister and Alma don't care for the Chinese tea. They think it doesn't have much taste. Of course, I am at home with my sister. I should have been too lonesome, I'm afraid, in the old place at Fairview. I'm afraid I haven't the courage for solitude. You know, Alma has always been a care to my sister. I've always tried to share that with her. Alma is the only one either of us has left. . . . Well, we can't always have things as we choose them, Vivian."

2

And now Miss Ramsey was dead.

I said to Mother, "I believe I will get off at Walnut Grove, after all."

"Do," she said. "You can stop and see your friends there, then you can join me tomorrow."

But just what friends did I expect to see? I got off the bus at the edge of town, at the oil station, and walked up Main Street. I had a lost feeling. I wished I hadn't tried to go back. Alma and Mrs. Root might easily be away somewhere. And Miss Ramsey was gone.

But the house looked lived in. It looked almost the same. A bird fluttered out of the evergreens as I went up the walk. They were rich and dark against the summer blue. Both Mrs. Root and Alma were at home. When I heard that Miss Ramsey had died it had seemed as if, in an instant, all the old life of that household had vanished. Yet I did not find it very different from before. Its enchantment of feminine quietness still held; but now there were two, instead of three, ladies moving within it. I resented that the change was so slight.

But as we talked to each other I could feel that Alma was just the same—and yet a change had come subtly over her. The baby pout of her lips had become a middle-aged droop. Her soft fullness had a heavy look. Her eyes were bewildered. Mrs. Root was as kind and welcoming as ever. Yet she was older, too. The spareness of age was beginning to sharpen her motherliness. She and Alma here in this big house were more set apart from the town than they used to be.

They wouldn't hear of my leaving. I must spend the night with Alma. We would have supper here, like old times. Alma accepted me jealously as her friend. She had never liked any other teachers so well as those that were here that year, she said. They hadn't had any attractive ones since.

"Oh, Alma. You don't know these girls so well, that's all."

"Well, I don't care to know them."

We ate supper in that same dining room, drank the delicious coffee from the gold-rimmed cups. Mrs. Root had remembered to have the apple jelly. It trembled in the cut-glass dish. We had creamy mashed potatoes, and the little biscuits, and chops that Mrs. Root had telephoned Jim Coburne to get at the meat market. Mrs. Root looked after me and refilled the dishes herself, clinging to what youth she could keep for Alma in this meeting with a friend.

Yet that subtle dimming of change had come over the household, too. We talked of Aunt Amy. She had gone for an operation and died. Mrs. Root had asked sadly, "You heard of Sister's death?" She told me later, when we sat for a little while together, that she couldn't get used to it. She had never thought Amy would go first.

"Yet perhaps it's because I'm needed here with Alma. I often think that mothers do keep themselves alive."

But in spite of this, it was not what it would have been if either Alma or her mother were gone. These two were so close together, they could only miss the third in a shadowy way. I think that was the very thing that hurt me most. Somewhere, by someone, Miss Ramsey should have been deeply missed.

Mrs. Root gave us some of her wild-grape juice, and her cookies—"I can't make cookies as well as Aunt Amy did," she said—and then told us we must go to bed. She was anxious to make sure we had towels and bedding, and she had laid out for me Alma's best silk nightdress. She left us saying:

"Now, don't you two girls talk all night!"

We slept in the bed where the teachers used to put their winter wraps, and in the morning we dressed before that same glass that mirrored new trinkets and a new little silk-gowned doll.

Alma was going to drive me to the bus stop. Mrs. Root suggested that we start early, and drive about town a bit. "Let Vivian see the changes." Alma pouted her lips at that. She asked Alma if she would

remember to stop first at the cemetery with a bouquet. "My gladiolas are just at their best now. In a few days they won't be so pretty."

Going to the cemetery with flowers was a rite in Walnut Grove that I remembered. I had gone there once or twice with Mrs. Farmer "to see how the lot looked." The Root lot was far more imposing. It had a tall stone. The cemetery was sunny and quiet at this hour of the day. The sky was blue above it and above the low hills beyond. Alma and I went along the black cinder path.

Now I asked Alma about Miss Ramsey.

"Oh!" she said. "Aunt Amy isn't buried here." And she explained, "No, this is just the Root lot. The old Ramsey lot is in Fairview, you know. Aunt Amy was taken there. Oh, no, this is just ours."

I had always noticed—all the girls had noticed, and it was one of our reasons for criticism—how Alma had always sounded a little unpleasant when she talked about her Aunt Amy. That tinge of petulance had come into her voice even now. She had always felt that bit of spite toward her mother's younger sister. Her two uncles, also, took pains to look after Miss Ramsey. There was a touch of fond protection toward her sister in Mrs. Root's manner—or would have been, except that it was checked by the knowledge that Alma couldn't bear it. When Alma was a child, Miss Ramsey must still have been a young woman; and even when she was older and lived there with them her claims to feminine admiration were not all gone. Alma didn't like any suggestion that her Aunt Amy was not thoroughly relegated and old. The girls had been talking once about Miss Ramsey, and Lil Patterson had freely marveled and said, "I don't see how anyone so sweet could have helped getting snapped up by some man." Alma had said, with that touch of spitefulness, "Oh, I don't think Aunt Amy ever had any attention." Mrs. Root had exclaimed at once with indignation, "Why Alma Root, you know nothing about it. Aunt Amy had plenty of attention. I can remember very well when she was the prettiest girl in Fairview." Alma said, "I always thought it was Aunt Vina who was supposed to be so

handsome!" Mrs. Root said, "She was more striking, but I always thought Aunt Amy was the prettiest." Alma said, shrugging her shoulders, "Well, why didn't she get snapped up, then?"

Perhaps it was better to think of Miss Ramsey lying in the family lot in Fairview. Yes, it was. She was beside her own parents. From them she must have had her due. Still, when there were seven in the family, and four other girls . . . and it didn't always happen that the parents cared most for the one who stayed with them. Often the least. They felt greater instinctive respect for the children who had built homes of their own.

I dropped the flower I had been carrying, one of those from the bouquet of summer flowers Mrs. Root had picked for me. I had wanted, all by myself, to lay it down on Miss Ramsey's grave. Since that afternoon I had spent with her it seemed as if I were closer to her in a way than even Mrs. Root. Someone should have gone especially with an offering of flowers. Now at Decoration Day her grave would get only the flowers left over from the graves of Father and Mother Ramsey.

I stood and waited for Alma, while she carefully arranged her bouquets in the tall glass vases on Mr. Root's well-kept grave. The quietness of the country sunshine spread over the low hills. What was there to say? Miss Ramsey's life was no great tragedy. She had lived well, in the common meaning of that phrase. She had always been well cared for. Many, many minor pleasures, at least, had come her way. She had known less actual sorrow than Mrs. Root. I can see that Alma's history may be more bitter. This world held so many more terrible things. A world where thousands of people knew the grinding bitterness of poverty, War and hunger. What was there to say? There seemed no way to assert a claim for this lady. She had suffered what countless women had suffered. It was only that she had missed what should have been hers. It had fallen out that way. If she had been born a few years later she might not have submitted. But she had been born into her own day and generation. Now she must be forever at the side, and

shadowy, even in people's memory. Her life was an air that sounded muted and interwoven with others, with no one ever to play and to make audible its separate music.

But from someone she may have this much tribute.