

Someplace Better

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MAUDE sat in the back row of the courtroom. She was wearing her one good dress, a blue cotton print. It clung to her plump body in the heat. Her short mousy-brown hair hung around her face in wet little clumps. She wiped the perspiration from her face with her handkerchief and brushed away a fly that was buzzing around her head. The giant fan hanging from the ceiling was turning slowly, but it did little more than circulate the already stuffy air. The humming noise it made blended with the droning voices of the lawyer and judge.

Maude sat between the lawyer and her mother, who had agreed to pay the lawyer's fee since Maude had no money of her own. Gee, it's hot today, Maude thought. They sure picked a bad day to hold court . . . This must be the hottest day we've had all summer . . . Henry isn't here . . . I suppose he doesn't even care about the divorce . . . I wonder how much longer this is going to take? . . . I'd like to get this over with! Maude leaned over to her mother. "Mother," she whispered, "how much longer will it be?"

"Not too long, Maude. About ten or fifteen minutes. Now don't worry, dear. Everything will be all right."

Maude leaned back in her seat and wiped the perspiration from her face again. It sure is hot today, she thought.

It had been hot that day, too, as Maude sat on the top step of the front porch. There was no breeze and it was oppressively hot and humid. Maude fanned herself with the paper she had just brought back from the mailbox. It's too hot to do anything but just sit here, she thought. She opened the paper and started reading it. Fair and warmer the rest of this week with highs mostly in the ninety's. . . Oh, dear, I wish it would get cooler . . . There sure is a lot in the

papers these days about Spain and Germany . . . I wonder what those countries are like? . . . I'd do anything just to get away from here . . . Nothing exciting ever happens on this horrible old farm.

Just then Maude's mother yelled out from the kitchen, "Maude, would you go get some water?"

Maude looked up from the paper. I don't want to do anything . . . It's too hot . . . "I'm busy," she shouted.

"Okay," her mother answered. "I'll get it."

Maude heard the back door slam as her mother went outside. The pump handle squeaked as the water gushed into the bucket.

Mother always makes me do everything . . . I'm not a slave around here! . . . She treats me like a baby . . . For goodness sake, I'm a grown woman . . . I'm glad I'm finally going to get away from her . . . Maude went back to reading her paper. In a few minutes her mother came out onto the porch.

"Hi, Maude," she said. "What are you doing?"

"Not too much."

"Oh." She paused and looked around for a few moments. It sure is hot today, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Maude did not look up. She continued reading. Her mother sat down on the step beside her.

"Henry was here pretty late last night, wasn't he?" she asked.

"He left at ten o'clock. I don't think that's so late." I wonder if I should just go ahead and tell her? . . . Yeah, I guess so . . . Maude paused for a moment. She closed the paper and started fanning herself with it again. "Mother," she said. "Henry and I are going to get married."

Her mother's mouth fell open. You're what?" she asked.

"Henry Anderson asked me to marry him and I said 'Yes'."

"But . . . but, Maude . . . He's a widower and he's at least ten years older than you are."

"So what? I'm a grown woman, Mother. I'm thirty years old and I've been on this farm that whole time except to go to church and down to Four Corners and to go into town a few times. I'm going to marry Henry and there's nothing you can do to stop me!"

"But, Maude! I've been good to you all those years and I've taken care of you, haven't I? Who's going to take care of me when I get older? My whole family has left me. First your brother got killed in the war and then your father died and now you're leaving . . ." She looked as if she were going to cry but suddenly her expression became very stern. She turned and looked angrily at Maude. "You'll regret this, just wait and see." She turned and walked into the house. The door slammed behind her.

Never, Maude thought. I'll do anything to get away from here . . . Henry's a nice man . . . This is probably my last chance to get married. Maude picked up the paper and started to fan herself again. Just think, I'll be Mrs. Maude Anderson.

"Case of Mrs. Maude Anderson versus Mr. Henry Anderson."

Maude shook her head as she heard her name called. The lawyer leaned over to her.

"Okay," he said. "This won't take long."

Maude rose and walked behind him to the front of the room. She sat down in one of the chairs and looked around. I wonder who all these people are? . . . I suppose they live in town . . . Goodness knows I don't get to town very often . . . Henry must of only brought me to town about three times in the five years we were married . . . He certainly isn't a very sociable person . . . He wouldn't even let me have the girls over for coffee. . .

"My client is seeking a divorce on the grounds of physical cruelty, your honor. It seems that three weeks ago, my client's husband, Henry Anderson struck my client without reason."

"Without reason is right, Maude thought. I was just sitting on the couch listening to the radio when he came in from the field . . . He washed his hands in the basin and came in and sat down.

"Do you have dinner ready, Maude? I'm hungry."

"No, I've been busy all day."

"What have you been doing? The house looks just like it did when I left."

"I can't work all the time. You expect me to wait on you hand and foot."

"I just expect you to act like a wife." He got up and started pacing the floor.

"You don't care what happens to me! All you care about is those stupid cows!" Maude got up and walked over to the window. "We never do anything. I get tired of staying at home and cooking and cleaning the house. And there isn't anything else to do." She paused and turned, facing Henry. "It isn't my fault we couldn't have any children."

Henry stood completely still for a second. Then he reached out and slapped her hard across the face. She fell down on the couch and started to cry. Henry didn't say a word, but turned and walked out the door, letting it slam behind him. Maude could hear the pickup start and move down the lane.

I'm not going to stay here anymore . . . Anything would be better than this . . . I'm going to get a divorce . . . I don't suppose Henry will even care . . . I don't suppose he'll even come to the trial. . .

"And is Mr. Anderson here?" the judge asked.

"No," replied the lawyer. "He will not contest the divorce." "He has already agreed to a settlement."

"Are there any children?"

"No, none."

"Well, in that case, divorce granted."

The lawyer turned to Maude. "Well, congratulations, Mrs. Anderson. Everything is all settled. That didn't take long, did it? If you'll just drop by my office before you go home, there are a few papers you'll have to sign."

"Yes. Thank you."

Maude walked to the back of the courtroom. Hmm. . . None of the people are looking at me . . . In fact, they seem to be looking away . . . Well, they just don't know how miserable I was . . . They don't care about anyone but themselves . . .

Just then Maude noticed her mother coming toward her. She had a big grin on her face.

"Well, Maude," she said, "aren't you glad that's over with? Now you can come home."