

Dominion

—*Joci Harvey*
English, Sr.

AT LEAST it wasn't her bed I was sleeping in—she had slept in the twin bed across the room, Mom was sure of that, but this bed matched that one, and they were both painted black. The sheets were smooth, and cold. The blanket was cold, too—a cold, slippery, purple comforter.

“Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake. . .,” Oh, why did they ever teach me that prayer? I suppose everyone has rich aunts who die, but everyone doesn't have to travel 700 miles to put in an appearance at the reading of the will, and I bet no one else's rich aunt lived above a funeral home.

Actually, the trip part had been all right—I was missing school, and it was that suddenly turning Fall, when the whole outside is intensely green, sparkled with red-orange and sun yellow, and the air only smells cool, and the bridge across the Mississippi was wonderfully long. We'd even stopped at General Grant's home in Galena—most of the rooms were roped off, but they let us touch things in the ones that weren't, and there were real sugar cookies in the kitchen.

I didn't even think about Aunt Amanda until we got to Sterling. Then it started to rain, and there were factories pouring out smoke that disappeared ten feet above the chimney tops because it blended so well with the sky. Aunt Amanda's apartment was only a block from the downtown, and the funeral home below it had a pinkish-orange neon sign to announce its business.

"You kids had better be quiet when we go in, um, I, uh, that is, I don't think there's anything in. . .well, we'd better just be quiet."

No need for Mom to say that—my voice box froze when I stepped through the door, and I wanted to stop breathing because the air was so sick and sweet.

The stairs leading up were dark and narrow, and the apartment was just like a dead person's place should be—icy and empty. They must have turned the heat off a week before, then moved everything out of the rooms and let the cold settle in. Somebody, the lawyers, I guess, had put a little white tag with a price on it on every piece of everything she had owned, and then arranged all the stuff in the living room. Everything but her beds—they left those so we'd have a place to sleep.

Funny how I didn't want to touch anything in this room. At General Grant's home my fingers had itched to inspect everything, and they wouldn't even let me touch it all. Here I could touch anything, even take it home if I wanted to, but my fingers only wanted to touch the insides of my pockets.

"Do you want to go with me to check in at the hotel, honey? There's only room for two to sleep here, so Jimmy and I are going to stay at the hotel across the street. Or you could stay there and Jimmy here—I think he's a little too young to care." Daddy understood.

I didn't think people died in hotels, but someone must have in that one. The lights seemed to be shadows in the darkness, the carpet mused up the sound of our footsteps, and the purple velvet curtains inhaled our voices. The lady at the desk had a fire-engine red type smile, and her fingernails were long and curved, like cat's claws, and matched her mouth.

If I was going to sleep at all, it had to be at Aunt Amanda's. At least there wouldn't be strangers next door.

"Yes, honey I *am* positive she slept in the other bed. Now you just go to sleep. I'll be right here. It'll probably be sunny tomorrow, and we only have to go to the lawyer's office to hear the will. Then we can go home."

"Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die. . ."