

SOMEONE'S ALWAYS DYING

"I GIVE my life for you," she said.

He was nearing the end of his liver and bacon, but he didn't look up.

"I give my life for you," she said again, "and what do I get? Nothing but cheek."

He carefully cut a little white tube out of the last piece of liver. A vein or something. Considering what a hard little character he was in other respects he was a proper fusspot with his food.

Presently his jaws ground to a standstill. Food finished, he was prepared to admit other thoughts. And he stayed in his last eating position, knife and fork up-raised, as if he had been suddenly caught by a tremendous realisation.

"Mum," he said, "I've got to have two bob."

"I wonder if you realise—" she began.

"But I need it," he broke in desperately. "You're the one who doesn't realise."

"Then promise me one thing."

He waited. She had played this trick on him before. She was a cow, Mum. If she ever gave you money she always wanted terrifying value for it.

"Promise?"

"You tell me what first."

"Promise me you'll wear your overcoat today."

The knife and fork clattered into the plate.

"I knew it! I knew it!"

"But, dear, it's spotting already."

"The others don't wear overcoats. Why should I always be the one?"

"Thirteen is terribly young to die," she said. "What if you caught pneumonia?"

"Aw, poo," he commented. That remote thing at the end of his life called death didn't interest him a speck.

So she tried the other tack.

"Tell me. Why do you want two shillings?"

"Well," he said introductorily, "it's like this." But he took so long to add what it was like she prompted him.

"Comics, I bet."

His face underwent the second big change in the minute.

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

They stayed looking at each other, she thinking, "You little liar, but I do love you," and he thinking, "I might buy one good comic with the one-and-threepence that's left over after I buy something useful like a meat pie."

"Wear your coat?"

"I'll carry it."

"You've just asked me for two shillings, remember."

His face crinkled up into misery. "Mum, I'm going away. I'll never come back. I know you don't want me. You only do these things to get one on to me."

"Some day," she said, "you'll realise. But I'll be dead and gone then."

Death was always Mum's trump card. She played it regardless of what anyone else did. Someone was always going to die. Half the time it was herself. When



"Thirteen is terribly young to die," she said

the time came for her really to die she would have had so many rehearsals she would expire beautifully.

Inconsolably he took the coat down from the peg behind the kitchen door. But he hung it over his arm first, making certain of his reward. She was scratching for it in the milk-tokens where she tossed odd coins against the moment when she would suddenly find herself out of tokens. A florin had worked its way to the bottom of the low heap of coins. When she handed it to him he turned it over suspiciously to check that it wasn't an Australian. Then he kissed her on the nearest bare part, the side of the neck, with a great clinging kiss that broke off with a loud musical snap.

The last she saw of him was moving sideways out the back door holding a school-bag in one hand and trying to don the coat with the other.

The spotting stopped after he had gone. But it was bound to get colder, she thought. She would have the fire ready earlier today. So she took the tomahawk off the meat-board and moved out to the woodpile. She was leaning over the pile pulling out a short piece when she suddenly stopped and peered deeply among the wood. She couldn't believe it at first. But when she pulled it out and held it in her hands there was no doubting it whatsoever. It was a neatly folded overcoat, hidden so cunningly.

"A criminal," she muttered, "that's what he's going to be. Now I know it. I gave him the two shillings, I gave him the two shillings, and look. Is it worth it to have children?"

This was the start of it. She could see the rest of it so plainly. The boy was hell-bent for damnation. She had seen the pattern of it all too plainly in other families to fail to recognise the beginnings of it in her own. She saw him, a little older, going out with

rude girls. His merry, mocking laughter floated back to her ears. Now he was among the young mobsters and his laugh was no longer merry but hard and defiant. Suddenly she heard the pounding at the door. The detectives.

"Where's your son?"

"My son?"

"Don't waste our time, woman—he's wanted for murder."

Just like that. She was walking towards the house now, carrying the coat instead of the firewood. No, they wouldn't get him for murder. They'd get her. She'd murder him first. She'd wait by the hole in the back fence for him tonight as he sneaked through to recover the coat, thinking he would stroll into the house wearing it so unconcernedly.

She would reach out and lay hands on him and shake him and hiss, "You stole! You stole, didn't you!" Then she would strangle him.

As she trod up the kitchen steps a big drop of rain splashed her eyelid. One of those here-quick-help-me-get-the-washing-in drops the size of three-pence that warn you it's going to rain like the very devil inside the minute.

He was going to get wet. This suddenly was worse than stealing or lies or murder or rude girls. He had no coat.

She was inside now and her fury was changing to desperate anxiety. She considered taking his coat down to school, but the echo of a boy's voice stopped her.

"Mum, if you ever brought my coat down to school and there was a knock at the door and Mr Simmons opened it and the whole class saw you standing there with my overcoat I'd die. That's what I'd do. I'd die. You dare!"

He would be sitting there doing square root with wet feet, wet shoulders. Presently, no one would notice it, but he would gasp the first little dry cough of galloping consumption. He would be gone in no time. The oddly relevant

thought flitted through her mind wondering whether he would be too old for a white coffin. Maybe. At 13 he might have to have a varnished one like the rest of the heavy sinners.

But galloping consumption was too slow a death for deliberately getting wet. She would murder him. With her own hands. Take him by the throat and as his body sank at her feet she would breathe through her teeth, "I've put up with it too long! Too long, do you hear?" No, she couldn't put up with it any longer. He'd have to be murdered. All the other mothers were so strong, she so weak. All they needed to say was "Your overcoat, please," but she had to say, "Please, please, your overcoat," then pay him, and still no overcoat. Oh, she'd put up with it far too long.

But tonight it would be different. She would stand by the hole in the back fence. She would hear his footsteps coming cautiously up the back lane. Then his head would appear in the gap of the tin fence. That would be the end of it. They'd find her there waiting beside his wet body.

By five o'clock it was beginning to get dark. She couldn't remember whether she put salt in the potatoes or not. She grimly set the table and was putting out soup spoons until she remembered there was no soup. The boy was late, but he always was after footy practice on Thursdays. She knew the tram. Footy practice, she thought. That made it worse. There would be cold perspiration under his damp clothes, and in the tram the chill winter draught wrapping its icy arms about him. She couldn't stand it. He'd have to die.

This would be his tram now. She watched it, brightly lit, through the sink window. He was on it, all right. Yes, and dangling from the step ready to leap off yards before it stopped. How many times had she told him not to do that? Honestly, was there any use keeping the boy alive?

She was out in the dark at the hole in the back fence when the first sound of his creeping footsteps reached her ears. She heard him pause on the other side of the tin. Then his head came through like a mouse's before it ventures from its hole . . . a quick reconnoitre, a dart back, then all clear, then a cautious emergence, millimetre by millimetre.

"You wretch!"

He darted back, mouse-fast.

"Come here!"

Naturally he didn't. No one in full possession of his faculties goes there when someone menacing says "Come here."

"Hang, Mum, was there any need to frighten me?"

"Inside!" she called, and there was a terrifying sound in her voice that he had never heard before, mingled chords of fury and fear. "Get inside and get those wet clothes off before your father sees you or he'll murder you. Do you hear? He'll murder you."

He was past her now, as neatly as any 13-year-old centre three-quarter would nip past a 40-year-old woman, and they were both running up the yard, the gap widening.

"What did you do with the two shillings?" she gasped.

"I spent it," he called back, wondering what else a person could possibly do with two shillings.

They were inside now behind the slammed door. The light was on in his bedroom and on the curtain you could see the shadow play of a woman hauling garments off a boy. And you could hear a woman's voice crying protectively, "Quick, quick, if your father comes in he'll kill you."

By THOMAS HINDMARSH