

Afterthought

by S. Y. RAY

THE three elder Somerset girls were capped together, because Andrea—it was just what she would do—had caught up with the twins and had gone through without failing once. That week they were all quick-tempered and anxious and happy. The phone rang, rang, rang all day. There were paper-patterns and pins all over the floor, and filmy yards of nylon—flame for Connie and Muriel, blue for Andrea. The girls sang love-songs and swore as they whirled the machine, and thumped down the iron and spread three-minute masks on each others faces. The smell of shampoo and setting-lotion seeped out from the bathroom and pervaded the house like a premature, personal spring, and young Alison, the messenger of the gods, went speeding into town for sylko or a zip-fastener or bobby-pins, half a dozen times a day. Connie made a dress for her too.

"Connie, I look like . . ."

"Who? Audrey Hepburn? Look. Tuppence, just for one more year, or a week—just till I go—keep on looking, you know, like you, eh? After that . . ."

"I look—like you."

When the night, the night, came, all confusion resolved itself into an ordered pattern, and they went off quietly, Connie and Muriel and Andrea, in a taxi, like brides to the altar. Later, as they filed one by one on to the dais, they were serious and quite lovely—even Andrea—and the clapping was especially loud because they were sisters. Down in the hall, their father grinned and grinned like a plaster figurine, and Mrs Somerset, her eyes hot, thought, "If only time could stop for them now! Oh no, it can't be—not Muriel's petticoat dipping again!" Between them little Alison felt her heart thumping with shame and pride and was sure this time she would really die.

About midnight, the girls came back with their friends to the dark house. Their parents lay awake in the front room hearing the noise—the high voices, the percussion of laughter—rising and falling like an unmelodious symphony. When it rose, Mrs Somerset worried about the neighbours, and when it fell she listened fearfully for the clink of glasses and wondered whether she should go out and make sure they had the light on, and then worried again in case Dad came to the boil and did.

She heard someone, Connie of course, go through to the room where Alison slept, and whispering, and then two pairs of feet down the passage.

"Oh it's too bad! That child, only thirteen! Still they must have the light on!" Much later she woke to a car door slamming and a blurred male voice singing, and almost immediately after, it was morning.

Four days later they went away, Connie and Muriel to Auckland, Andrea to Rotorua. They had had enough of it after twenty years, of borrowing blouses and boy-friends, of getting in each other's hair, each other's bathwater, of noise and bickering and slamming doors and the radio blaring at top.

At first the house was still and flat as though it had had the breath knocked out of it. Then it began to come to life again in a different way. Small autumnal moods crept in, took possession, like a tribe of quiet mice. The clock ticked with a mild hollow note, like a fairy

drum. It was no coincidence that it ceased then its erratic gaining. Mr Somerset had cleaned and oiled the works on a singularly uncluttered kitchen table.

Mrs Somerset put a ruby vase on each end of the mantelpiece.

"Look Dad, don't you remember, we packed them away when the twins started crawling. They've been in the top of the wardrobe all that time and I never gave them a thought." She shifted them a little forward, a little to the right, till the afternoon sun caught one and a pool of ruby light fell on the placid carpet. The parents listened to the gardening session and when it was finished turned the radio off and made a cup of tea the way they liked it, weak and very hot, just faintly golden. The tea the girls had made had always been strong and dark like bitter medicine.

Every evening as they sat down to dinner, Mr Somerset would say, "Well, we're a small family now, eh Tuppence?" and Alison would look at him with Muriel's eyes, then turn her head away to reveal Connie's line of cheek, in a gesture that was entirely Andrea's. She was like a souvenir to them of all their daughters, and, like a souvenir, reflected in miniature and quietness a remembered turmoil. The mother and father were very gentle with her in case she should think they regretted this small last tie.

Mrs Somerset worried a little about the girls, about Connie's underclothes and Muriel's asthma and whether Andrea was wearing her glasses, but after all, surely now—they were not children. Over the sink she found herself humming a hymn and stopped guiltily as the words leapt to her mind. "Peace, perfect peace, with loved ones far away . . ."

The loved ones far away were doing very nicely. Connie never wore her woollen singlet and caught cold after cold, and Muriel had three attacks of asthma, but their life was so disorganised and happy that these minor inconveniences were barely noticed.

Andrea was so homesick for the first week that she couldn't see out of her her eyes, glasses or no. But she liked being herself and not just one of the Somerset girls—not the twins, not the baby, the other one—and the bizarre little town with its many invalids and Maori waitresses and its soupy hell's kitchen smell began to appeal to her in a perverse and irritating way. She took long walks, and looking into the welling nastiness of boiling mud, thought that that was very like life itself, and the geysers with their futile and unpunctual vehemence seemed to her a fair reflection of humanity. These thoughts pleased her so much that—she was not wearing her glasses—she smiled brilliantly at a passing young man under the impression that he was the chief clerk in her office. He, in his turn, was so charmed by a gratuitous display of human warmth amongst the surly natural ones, that he made it his business to find out

who she was and where she worked. Soon after that she stopped feeling homesick altogether.

So there was only Alison, the baby, the afterthought, thirteen with an empty house to fill. The nights were the worst. She woke and listened for quiet breathing and heard only the winter wind moaning round the house, the town, out and away round lonely farms and mountains, round islands lost in an enormous sea. Andrea's bed was next to hers, its emptiness formalised under a cretonne cover, and through the wall were Muriel's and Connie's, oh Connie!

In the evening she deserted Pythagoras and *Contes et Légendes* to wander helplessly round the bedrooms. She pulled their books, the forlorn leftovers, off almost empty shelves. "Andrea Somerset IVa," "Muriel Somerset 6b," and in ink already fading, "Constance Somerset, Form II. If this book should chance to roam, box its ears and send it home." Tears from Muriel's eyes ran past Andrea's nose.

"Wouldn't you like to bring a little friend home sometimes?" said her mother. "The girls always felt free to bring their friends. I've sat fifteen down at that table."

"What on earth would anyone find to do here?" said Alison.

Once or twice Connie wrote to her. "Dear Tuppence, this burg isn't too bad, but I miss you something dreadful . . ."

In the middle of a chemistry experiment at school, Alison detached a leaf from her science notebook and wrote carefully, "Dear Connie, I miss you too . . ." But it looked pathetic, so she tore it up and never answered at all.

Spring came, plum trees flowered in the garden, the lawn sprouted daisies. Once, on that lawn, six big girls had rolled her over and over, till she was sick and giddy with all the blood she had gathered and pulsing in her head. Her laughter had passed into a hiccupping choke that wouldn't stop and her mother had come out and told the girls off. Had told them off! When the plums had formed on the trees and ripened, the twins would be home.

But when summer came, the twins took jobs as waitresses at Franz Josef. "Dear Tuppence," wrote Connie, "This

is a fantastic place, unbelievable. But when I think about you, I wonder why we're not at home . . ." Alison did not answer that letter either.

When the plums were ripe, her mother came to her with the basket.

"It's your turn now, Chick. You'll have to climb the tree this year." Alison took the basket and climbed the tree, straddling her feet to where Connie's and Muriel's and Andrea's had rested before. It was perfectly easy. When the basket was full, she passed it down.

"There now," said her mother, "you're the best of the lot."

"Oh yes," Alison thought furiously, "it's all all right now, isn't it? Everything in the garden is lovely, because I can climb a ruddy plum tree."

When her mother had gone, she climbed further to the thin high branches where the girls had never ventured. Quite deliberately she straightened, putting all her weight on the branch. Then she climbed higher and tried again. The branch snapped and she fell to the ground.

She was dead at first and quite happy. Then she was not dead, but dying very slowly and painfully. So she summoned them all home and sat them round the bedside, their faces ennobled with suffering and racked with remorse. They sat there and wept for her. Suddenly, without Alison willing her to, Connie sprang up, looking old and ugly with tears, and screamed at her mother, "You don't care, you wanted this to happen," just as she had when old Rover died at last. Alison screwed up her eyes very tight and opened them to the overcast sky, pearl inlaid. The ground pressed solidly into her back and a scratch on her thigh was smarting. She lay for a long time, feeling hard and reckless and relieved. Then she got up and walked back to the house.

Through the kitchen window, her mother saw her coming, her hair tumbled and plum juice on her mouth.

"How lovely they are," she thought, seeing Connie and Muriel and Andrea walking along inside Alison. "Did I ever really look like that?" She turned her head and looked at her own face in the mirror above the sink. "Why do they have to grow old? If only I could stop time for her now!"