

ALONE*

By Helen Olson

Weekends were the worst she suspected, especially Friday afternoons when one had the prospect of three nights, and two whole days before Monday morning and work. It was strange not having to do anything. That wasn't true exactly, but it felt that way. Here she was for the first time since she was seventeen with no schedule but her own, no one's needs but her own.

She hadn't faced it until now. Her oldest daughter, Ann, and her family had been with her the first week. Bill had been such a support, getting her affairs in order, even putting locks on doors which had never been locked before, "Just to make us feel better, Mom. I know you think it's silly, but do it for us." She had to admit that it made her feel better too, though she'd lived all those early years of their marriage when Mike was at sea without locks or phones. But she hadn't known as much then. Youth is a great protector. Ann had a good man. She was happy for her. Then Elizabeth had come home from Europe with her new husband. He seemed to be a nice guy. Poor kid, what a way to be introduced to the family. Last weekend she'd driven down to see Dan and Jane and their brood. So when Andy had called from school to say he had too much work to make up and wouldn't be able to come as planned, she had rejected his suggestion that she drive down to see him and decided to stay home.

She had to face it sometime, so it might as well be now. The children were wonderful, but they had their own lives to lead and she was happy about that. Wasn't that exactly what she and Mike had wanted for them? She would have to find a way to live productively without leaning too much on them, even though she knew they wouldn't object. Besides, it had never been her way to be dependent and she wasn't about to start now.

She made her dinner, slightly amused at her conscientious fussing as she carefully prepared the proper number of courses--broiled lamb chop, two vegetables and a salad. Frankly, none of it looked very appetizing to her, but she was determined to continue to live a civilized life, which in her estimation included a proper dinner and beds made in the morning. She was not going to fall into that widow syndrome of sandwiches and self-pity. Still, she felt a bit silly and wondered if she weren't carrying things a little too far.

She set a place for herself at the little round kitchen table that Mike had insisted they buy when the kids left home. It was too far from his end of the big table to hers, he said, when there were no noisy, chattering kids in between. Well, he'd been right and she was glad she didn't have to adjust to an empty space opposite her. She propped *Gone with the Wind* up in front of her. It wasn't the most profound thing in the world, but she seemed to get more comfort in re-reading these old familiar things than in tackling new stuff. That would come in time.

Still her mind wandered toward the long evening ahead. How would she entertain herself until a reasonable hour to go to bed? Now wasn't that nutty? She, who always resented sleep as a necessary evil that stole time from her too busy day, anticipating the approach of bedtime! She and Mike were always "incompatible" on that matter. He loved to retire early, sinking into a deep Morphean sleep, then bounded out of bed wide awake and ravenously hungry at the crack of dawn. She loved the quiet night hours and would poke around until she was ridiculously tired before finally giving in. Then in the morning she fought wakefulness with equal intensity and functioned in low gear until nearly noon. Funny how different it felt to be prowling around alone when you're really alone, than when someone is sleeping in the next room or snoozing in his big platform rocker in the living room.

* I wrote this as a fiction piece, but it shouldn't be too hard to figure out that it is about my mother, Isabel Piper Olson. She told me about this incident first in a letter and later when I had returned to Michigan.

Television had already proven itself to be no company at all. There was the record player and she would put a fire in the fireplace. That was always comforting. Wonder what primeval force makes us love fire and water? She could read, of course, but her concentration could be better. She'd write to Elizabeth. That should take some time and she hadn't written in about a week. Not much to report really. Then maybe she could start those new throw pillows for the couch. She was also not going to be caught in either the "preserve everything as it was" or the "change everything at once" syndromes. She was simply going to go on. Why did she have to analyze her every move? She always had. When her brother had died, she had been so involved in watching her own reaction to it, that the only "honest" reaction she seemed to have was crying in her sleep. She'd even found that "interesting." Sometimes she thought she had always stood outside of herself and watched herself react: "Oh, that's how I act when....." Crazy. Well, that's what she'd do. Sewing was therapeutic for her--always had been.

She was just finished drying the dishes when the doorbell rang. Who on earth could that be?

"Hi, Molly, wanna go on a date to the Northwoods Bar?"

Good grief, she hadn't counted on this--Claude Peron, Sunday suit on and slightly "reinforced" for the occasion.

"Oh.... I don't think I'm quite up to that Claude. Thanks for thinking of me."

"You wouldn't have to drink beer with me, Molly. I could get ya one of them fancy drinks like you and Mike always drank."

"Oh, Claude, you know it's not that. I'm just not up to going out at all and especially not there."

"Well, we could go to the Lookout or someplace. I just thought seein' as how you and Mike use ta drop in ta the Northwoods now and again, ya might like it there. Besides, yer brother Will and Peggy usually go there on Friday nights."

"I'm not up to going anywhere, Claude. Come on in for a few minutes. I'll make a pot of coffee."

So there he was, in the living room, ensconced in Mike's chair next to the fireplace. She hoped he'd gotten the message "for a few minutes," but feared he hadn't. Still, he'd looked so pathetic standing there, she couldn't humiliate him turning him away at the door. She went to the kitchen to make the coffee. This was silly. Why was she shaking so? It was exactly one month since Mike was gone. She supposed that, by local standards, the mourning period was over and she was fair game. She hadn't even completely comprehended what had happened to her yet.

"Really nice place, Molly. Real purdy. You and Mike always did keep this place up real nice."

They were drinking coffee now. Poor guy, he really was nervous. He's not used to being served coffee in the living room--doesn't know what to do with his napkin; finally manages to get it balanced on his knee.

"Yes, Claude. We've always enjoyed this place."

"Did it all yourselves, too, huh? Mike even make the fireplace?"

"Yes, we did it. It was fun. Mike finished the fireplace two days before Christmas one year. About ten years ago, I think. We always were getting ourselves into those wild deadlines. It took us about twice as long as we planned. Typical, I guess. You never count on the hitches."

"Hmmm. Well, it's nice. Cozy like, comfortable. Ya know what I mean, Molly? Ya musta enjoyed it."

"Yes, we did."

"Ya.... Well..... I suppose it's all yours now. Free 'n clear 'n all. I hear ya had some sort a special insurance on it."

"Well... Yes, we did. Not that it makes much difference. There was less than a year left on the mortgage." Where did he hear that? Oh well, she supposed that kind of thing was common knowledge. You can't have secrets in a place the size of Hutchkins, and nearly everyone was insured. Still....

"What ya gonna do with it now, Molly? It's kinda big to be rattlin' around in alone. Lonely, too. I know how that feels."

"Well, of course I'm lonely. But I think I'll manage. We all do, don't we?"

"It's no fun, Molly. It's no fun bein' alone."

"I know you miss Sarah."

"I sure do. I sure do. I just don't like rattlin' around in that old house alone. Probably should sell it. Get a trailer or sumthin'. Sumthin' little. Probably couldn't get much for it though. It's not fixed up or nuthin'. Nuthin' nice like this place."

"I'm not sure how wise it is to give up the place that's been your home for years."

"Ya, I guess so...."

Well, now what? How long was he going to sit there staring into the fire, nervously jiggling his coffee cup? He's hardly tasted it. Poor guy, he really is suffering. Still, what good did it do either of them to sit here thinking of their mutual loneliness. She couldn't even think of anything else to talk about.

"Well what are ya gonna do, Molly? This is a big place, ya know. Too big for a woman ta run alone, 'specially a woman like you, who's used ta lookin' nice, havin' things nice 'n all."

"I could run it alone. I did for all those years Mike was on the boats. But we haven't farmed it ourselves for years. Adam Casey takes the hay off the front fields and Ben Hansen takes a little pulp out--enough to keep the woods thinned out."

"Oh, ya rent the place out. I didn't know that. Must make sumthin' outta that."

"It pays the taxes."

"Ya? Well, that's sumthin' anyways. The way they're goin' up. Mike musta left you OK anyways. Those factories usually have pretty good insurance."

"Enough to pay the funeral expenses. And a little, not much, for emergencies. I work, you know, Claude. I can take care of myself."

"Oh yeah. I forgot about that. Not too many women around here do. Seems like they got enough to do at home."

"I started when the kids started college. We needed the extra money then and I liked doing something on my own. It's a good thing now...."

"Never did understand why you and Mike sent yer kids ta college. I hear they're purdy smart, tho. Still 'n all, it don't make much sense to put all that money in ta girls. They jest git married and don't do nuthin' with it."

"We thought the two girls deserved as much as the boys. They're all pretty independent. I think they've appreciated it, and they've all used their education."

"Ya?... Well, I gotta say you and Mike did OK. Him and me went to the old Swede school together ya know. We was friends since we was kids."

"I know, Claude."

"We really miss him, Molly, ya know. Everybody does. He was such a friendly guy. Always had time to drink a cup of coffee and shoot a little bull."

"I know, Claude. Mike liked people."

"Ya...it's a cryin' shame, a cryin' shame, Molly. I suppose yer gonna get the guy that hit 'em?"

"What do you mean?"

"Sue 'em. Ya got a clear case. Middle a the day; stinkin' drunk. The guy deserves to be taken for everything he's got."

Oh, that's it!

"He hasn't got anything to be taken for."

"Still, Molly, yer gonna sue the son-of-a-gun ain't ya? Ya deserve what you can get. They can always garnishee his pay."

"What good would that do? He's a chronic alcoholic; he's never kept a job in his life; and he's got a sweet wife and four little kids. They've got it rough enough as it is. His wife came to the funeral home and cried her eyes out." She could hear her own voice rising in pitch. No sense getting mad, but that was what was happening. Take it easy.

"Ya, I heard. You and Mike was always easy on people."

"We thought that was the best way. I still do."

Well, her case seemed to be pretty well discussed. Wonder what else was being said. She knew people meant well, but it had been so difficulty these last weeks knowing that people were watching her. They didn't mean to stare, but the eyes shifted, heads nodded in her direction. "There's the woman whose husband was killed by that drunk on 23. You know, the one in the *News*." It had been pretty rough those first few days. Apparently the talk wasn't over yet.

"Nice little car ya got out there. That what ya got ta replace the other one?"

"That's my car, Claude. I had it before the accident."

"Oh yeah? What happened to Mike's little black one? That sure was a snappy little number--all fancied up 'n all. Red seats. Mike sure did love that car."

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose the insurance company got rid of it. I'm not really up to seeing it."

"Yeah, I suppose so, Molly. I know. It's purdy rough. I suppose you'll be gettin' quite a settlement from the car insurance?"

"There won't be much left after the medical expenses are paid for the other four men."

"That's right. A car pool. I hear a couple of 'em were hurt purdy bad."

"All of them were hurt--two of them badly."

"Ya went to see 'em, I hear -- even that S.O.B. that hit 'em. Boy, you sure are a tough woman, Molly."

Everybody seems to be saying everything. Wonder what else was being said. My gosh, here she was the local eligible widow whose affairs seemed to have been all settled in advance. How strange to be so acutely aware of one's self. She simply must put an end to this.

"I don't mean to be keeping you, Claude. You must be anxious to get on down to the Northwoods."

There was a certain advantage to dealing with someone trained in the "old" ways. She'd gotten him to his feet simply by standing up. Now to maneuver him to the door.

"Don't worry, Molly. I really enjoyed it. Really did. This is such a nice homey place ya got here."

"Thanks, Claude. Have a good time."

"Sure wish you wus comin' along."

"Well, I know you understand. I must write to Elizabeth tonight, anyway."

"Say, I hear she finally got married. Some foreigner. You musta been relieved."

"Twenty-five is hardly over the hill. Rich is from New York."

"Oh yeah? I heard he was some foreigner. They live overseas, though, huh?"

"In Spain."

"Too bad yer kids can't be nearer. Havin' yer kids around helps. Hear he was a Catholic, too. Hard to imagine Will MacKenzie's granddaughter married to a Catholic."

Wonder how long we're going to stand here with the door open?

"My dad was always pretty open minded. I think he'd be pleased with the new efforts to get the churches closer together."

"Yeah, I guess so. Nice old man, yer dad was. We always got along purdy well here--between us and youse, I mean--except when some priest or minister got on his high horse."

"I think we tried. I don't like to keep you waiting."

"Yeah..... Well, thanks for the coffee, Molly. Sure ya don't want ta come along?"

"No. Good night, Claude."

Well, he was finally gone! She sank back down in her chair. She was actually a little weak in the knees. He was finally gone. She felt like a commodity--one widow, nice lookin' 'n all, together with a purdy place, a new car, and possibly some insurance money. How could she be mad? Well, she was--kind of-- at all the talk, but not really, she guessed. She loved it here, and all the people she'd known so many years. She wouldn't think of leaving, but sometimes she longed for a little anonymity.

She supposed all this poor guy was thinking was that she had made his old school friend Mike a good wife. That his old friend Mike had long since become very different from him had probably never really entered his mind.

Still, what an uncomfortable feeling. She was accustomed to thinking of herself as attractive enough, but to feel "looked over" was a sensation she had nearly forgotten. She supposed the nice place did look like a good catch to him. He probably just wanted to get an early bid in. Wonder how much more of this will go on?

Well, there was no sense sitting here upset. She knew, had known, she would have to deal with this and with her own shaky feeling about it all. Enough self-analysis for tonight. She would write to Elizabeth.

Dear Elizabeth and Richard,

Glad to hear you've settled into the school year. The whole adventure sounds exciting. I'm sure you'll always be glad you decided to do it.

I'm home alone this weekend, but doing fine. Andy had too much homework to come home.

Aunt Alice....

Then followed a recital of family and neighborhood news. She hope her new son-in-law wouldn't think her a gossip, but she knew Elizabeth liked to keep up.

Finally, toward the end:

Well, I had a new experience tonight. Who should show up at my door in his best Sunday-go-to-mass suit, all set to take me on a "date," but Claude Peron. He even offered to buy me one of "them fancy drinks" he knew Mike and I liked to drink. When he finally left, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Guess I'd better be prepared to laugh.