

**The Library of America • Story of the Week**

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## ALICE ELEANOR JONES

### *Created He Them*



**A**NN Crothers looked at the clock and frowned and turned the fire lower under the bacon. She had already poured his coffee; he liked it cooled to a certain degree; but if he did not get up soon it would be too cool and the bacon too crisp and he would be angry and sulk the rest of the day. She had better call him.

She walked to the foot of the stairs, a blond woman nearing thirty, big but not fat, and rather plain, with a tired sad face. She called, “Henry! Are you up?” She had calculated to a decibel how loud her voice must be. If it were too soft he did not hear and maintained that she had not called him, and was angry later; if it were too loud he was angry immediately and stayed in bed longer, to punish her, and then he grew angrier because breakfast was spoiled.

“All *right!* Pipe down, can’t you?”

She listened a minute. She thought it was a normal response, but perhaps her voice had been a shade too loud. No, he was getting up. She heard the thump of his feet on the floor. She went back to the kitchen and took his orange juice and his prunes out of the icebox, and got out his bread but did not begin to toast it yet, and opened a glass of jelly.

She frowned. Grape. He did not like grape, but the co-op had been out of apple, and she had been lucky to get anything. He would not be pleased.

She sat down briefly at the table to wait for him and glanced at the clock. Ten five. Wearily, she leaned forward and rested her

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forehead on the back of her hand. She was not feeling well this morning and had eaten no breakfast. She was almost sure she was pregnant again.

She thought of the children. There were only two at home, and they had been bathed and fed long ago and put down in the basement playpen so that the noise they made would not disturb their father. She would have time for a quick look at them before Henry came down. And the house was chilly; she would have to look at the heater.

They were playing quietly with the rag doll she had made, and the battered rubber ball. Lennie, who was two and a half, was far too big for a playpen, but he was a good child, considerate, and allowed himself to be put there for short periods and did not climb out. He seemed to feel a responsibility for his brother. Robbie was fourteen months old and a small terror, but he loved Lennie, and even, Ann thought, tried to mind him.

As Ann poked her head over the bannister, both children turned and gave her radiant smiles. Lennie said, "Hi, Mommy," and Robbie said experimentally, "Ma?"

She went down quickly and gave each of them a hug and said, "You're good boys. You can come upstairs and play soon." She felt their hands. The basement was damp, but the small mended sweaters were warm enough.

She looked at the feeble fire and rattled the grate hopefully and put on more coal. There was plenty of coal in the bin, but it was inferior grade, filled with slate, and did not burn well. It was not an efficient heater, either. It was old, second-hand, but they had been lucky to get it. The useless oil heater stood in the corner.

The children chuckled at the fire, and Robbie reached out his hands toward it. Lennie said gravely, "No, no, bad."

Ann heard Henry coming downstairs, and she raced up the cellar steps and beat him to the kitchen by two seconds. When he came in she was draining the bacon. She put a slice of bread on the long fork and began to toast it over the gas flame. The gas, at least, was fairly dependable, and the water. The electricity was not working again. It seemed such a long time since the electricity had always worked. Well, it was a long time. Ten years.

Henry sat down at the table and looked peevishly at his orange juice. He was not a tall man, not quite so tall as his wife, but he walked and sat tall, making the most of every inch. He was inclined to be chubby, and he had a roll of fat under his chin and at the back of his neck, and a little bulge at the waist. His face might have been handsome, but the expression spoiled it—discontented, bad-tempered. He said, “You didn’t strain the orange juice.”

“Yes, I strained it.” She was intent on the toast.

He drank the orange juice without enjoyment and said, “I have a touch of liver this morning. Can’t think what it could be.” His face brightened. “I told you that sauce was too greasy. That was it.”

She did not answer. She brought over his plate with the bacon on it and the toast, nicely browned, and put margarine on the toast for him.

He was eating the prunes. He stopped and looked at the bacon. “No eggs?”

“They were all out.”

His face flushed a little. “Then why’d you cook bacon? You know I can’t eat bacon without eggs.” He was working himself up into a passion. “If I weren’t such an easygoing man—! And the prunes are hard—you didn’t cook them long enough—and the coffee’s cold, and the toast’s burnt, and where’s the apple jelly?”

“They didn’t have any.”

He laughed scornfully. "I bet they didn't. I bet you fooled around the house and didn't even get there till everything was gone." He flung down his fork. "This garbage!—why should you care, you don't have to eat it!"

She looked at him. "Shall I make you something else?"

He laughed again. "You'd ruin it. Never mind." He slammed out of the kitchen and went upstairs to sulk in the bathroom for an hour.

Ann sat down at the table. All that bacon, and it was hard to get. Well, the children would like it. She ought to clear the table and wash the dishes, but she sat still and took out a cigarette. She ought to save it, her ration was only three a day, but she lit it.

The children were getting a little noisier. Perhaps she could take them out for a while, till Henry went to work. It was cold but clear; she could bundle them up.

The cigarette was making her lightheaded, and she stubbed it out and put the butt in the box she kept over the sink. She said softly, "I hate him. I wish he would die."

She dressed the children—their snowsuits were faded and patched from much use, but they were clean and warm—and put them in the battered carriage, looping her old string shopping bag over the handle, and took them out. They were delighted with themselves and with her. They loved the outdoors. Robbie bounced and drooled and made noises, and Lennie sat quiet, his little face smiling and content.

Ann wheeled them slowly down the walk, detouring around the broken places. It was a fine day, crisp, much too cold for September, but the seasons were not entirely reliable any more. There were no other baby carriages out; there were no children at all; the street was very quiet. There were no cars. Only the highest officials had cars, and no high officials lived in this neighborhood.

The children were enchanted by the street. Shabby as it was, with the broken houses as neatly mended as they could be, and the broken paving that the patches never caught up with, it was beautiful to them. Lennie said, "Hi, Mommy," and Robbie bounced.

The women were beginning to come, as they always came, timidly out of the drab houses, to look at the children, and Ann walked straighter and tried not to smile. It was not kind to smile, but sometimes she could not help it. Suddenly she was not tired any more, and her clothes were not shabby, and her face was not plain.

The first woman said, "Please stop a minute," and Ann stopped, and the women gathered around the carriage silently and looked. Their faces were hungry and seeking, and a few had tears in their eyes.

The first woman asked, "Do they stay well?"

Ann said, "Pretty well. They both had colds last week," and murmurs of commiseration went around the circle.

Another woman said, "I noticed you didn't come out, and I wondered. I almost knocked at your door to inquire, but then—" She stopped and blushed violently, and the others considerably looked away from her, ignoring her blunder. One did not call on one's neighbors; one lived to oneself.

The first woman said wistfully, "If I could hold them—either of them—I have dates; my cousin sent them all the way from California."

Ann blushed, too. She disliked this part of it very much, but things were so hard to get now, and Henry was difficult about what he liked to eat, though he denied that. He would say, "I'd eat anything, if you could only learn to cook it right, but you can't." Henry liked dates. Ann said, "Well . . ."

Another woman said eagerly, "I have eggs. I could spare you three." One for each of the boys and one for Henry.

"Oranges—for the children."

"And I have butter—imagine, butter!"

"Sugar—all children like sugar. Best grade—no sand in it."

"And I have tea." Henry does not like tea. But you shall hold the children anyway.

Somebody said, "Cigarettes," and somebody else whispered, "I even have *sleeping pills!*"

The children were passed around and fondled and caressed. Robbie enjoyed it and flirted with everybody, under his long eyelashes, but Lennie regarded the entire transaction with distaste.

When the children began to grow restless Ann put them back into the carriage and walked on. Her shopping bag was full.

The women went slowly back into their houses, all but one, a stranger. She must have moved into the neighborhood recently, perhaps from one of the spreading waste places. They were coming in, the people, as if they had been called, moving in closer, a little closer every year.

The woman was tall and older than Ann, with a worn plain face. She kept pace with the carriage and looked at the children and said, "Forgive me, I know it is bad form, but are they—do you have more?"

Ann said proudly, "I have had seven."

The woman looked at her and whispered, "Seven! And were they all—surely they were not *all*—"

Ann said more proudly still, "All. Every one."

The woman looked as if she might cry and said, "But seven! And the rest, are they—"

Ann's face clouded. "Yes, at the Center. One of my boys and all

my girls. When Lennie goes, Robbie will miss him. Lennie missed Kate so, until he forgot her.”

The woman said in a broken voice, “I had three, and none of them was—*none!*” She thrust something into Ann’s shopping bag and said, “For the children,” and walked quickly away.

Ann looked, and it was a Hershey bar. The co-op had not had chocolate for over two years. Neither of the boys had ever tasted it.

She brought the children home after a while and gave them their lunch—Henry’s bacon crumbled into two scrambled eggs, and bread and butter and milk. She had been lucky at the co-op yesterday; they had had milk. She made herself a cup of coffee, feeling extravagant, and ate a piece of toast, and smoked the butt of this morning’s cigarette.

For dessert she gave them each an orange; the rest she saved for Henry. She got out the Hershey bar and gave them all of it; Henry should not have their chocolate! The Hershey bar was hard and pale, as stale chocolate gets, and she had to make sawing motions with the knife to divide it evenly. The boys were enchanted. Robbie chewed his half and swallowed it quickly, but Lennie sucked blissfully and made it last, and then took pity on his brother and let Robbie suck, too. Ann did not interfere. Germs, little hearts, are the least of what I fear for you.

While the children took their naps she straightened the house a little and tinkered with the heater and cleaned all the kerosene lamps. She had time to take a bath, and enjoyed it, though the laundry soap she had to use was harsh against her skin. She even washed her hair, pretty hair, long and fine, and put on one of the few dresses that was not mended.

The children slept longer than usual. The fresh air had done

them good. Just at dusk the electric lights came on for the first time in three days, and she woke them up to see them—they loved the electric lights. She gave them each a piece of bread and butter and took them with her to the basement and put them in the playpen. She was able to run a full load of clothes through the old washing machine before the current went off again. The children loved the washing machine and watched it, fascinated by the whirling clothes in the little window.

Afterward she took them upstairs again and tried to use the vacuum cleaner, but the machine was old and balky and by the time she had coaxed it to work the current was gone.

She gave the children their supper and played with them a while and put them to bed. Henry was still at the laboratory. He left late in the morning, but sometimes he had to stay late at night. The children were asleep before he came home, and Ann was glad. Sometimes they got on his nerves and he swore at them.

She turned the oven low to keep dinner hot and went into the living room. She sat beside the lamp and mended Robbie's shirt and Lennie's overalls. She turned on the battery radio to the one station that was broadcasting these days, the one at the Center. The news report was the usual thing. The Director was in good health and bearing the burden of his duties with fortitude. Conditions throughout the country were normal. Crops had not been quite so good as hoped, but there was no cause for alarm. Quotas in light and heavy industry were good—Ann smiled wryly—but could be improved if every worker did his duty. Road repairs were picking up—Ann wondered when they would get around to the street again—and electrical service was normal, except for a few scattered areas where there might be small temporary difficulties. The lamp

had begun to smoke again, and Ann turned it lower. The stock market had closed irregular, with rails down an average of two points and stocks off three.

And now—the newscaster’s voice grew solemn—there was news of grave import. The Director had asked him to talk seriously to all citizens about the dangers of rumor-mongering. Did they not realize what harm could be done by it? For example, the rumor that the Western Reservoir was contaminated. That was entirely false, of course, and the malicious and irresponsible persons who had started it would be severely dealt with.

The wastelands were not spreading, either. Some other malicious and irresponsible persons had started that rumor, and would be dealt with. The wastelands were under control. They were *not* spreading, repeat, *not*. Certain areas were being evacuated, it was true, but the measure was only temporary.

*Calling them in, are you, calling them in!*

The weather was normal. The seasons were definitely not changing, and here were the statistics to prove it. In 1961 . . . and in ’62 . . . and that was *before*, so you see . . .

The newscaster’s voice changed, growing less grave. And now for news of the children. Ann put down her mending and listened, not breathing. They always closed with news of the children, and it was always reassuring. If any child were ever unhappy, or were taken ill, or died, nobody knew it. One was never told anything, and of course one never saw the children again. It would upset them, one quite understood that.

The children, the newscaster said, were all well and happy. They had good beds and warm clothes and the best food and plenty of it. They even had cod-liver oil twice a week whether they needed it or not. They had toys and games, carefully supervised according to

their age groups, and they were being educated by the best teachers. The children were all well and happy, repeat, *well and happy*. Ann hoped it was true.

They played the national anthem and went off the air, and just then Henry came in. He looked pale and tired—he did work hard—and his greeting was, “I suppose dinner’s spoiled.”

She looked up. “No, I don’t think so.”

She served it and they ate silently except for Henry’s complaints about the food and his liver. He looked at the dates and said, “They’re small. You let them stick you with anything,” but she thought he enjoyed them because he ate them all.

Afterward he grew almost mellow. He lit a cigarette and told her about his day, while she washed the dishes. Henry’s job at the laboratory was a responsible one, and Ann was sure he did it well. Henry was not stupid. But Henry could not get along with anybody. He said that he himself was very easy to get along with, but they were all against him. Today he had had a dispute with one of his superiors and reported that he had told the old — where to go.

He said with gloomy relish, “They’ll probably fire me, and we’ll all be out in the street. Then you’ll find out what it’s like to live on Subsistence. You won’t be able to throw my money around the way you do now.”

Ann rinsed out the dish towel and hung it over the rack to dry. She said, “They won’t fire you. They never do.”

He laughed. “I’m good and they know it. I do twice as much work as anybody else.”

Ann thought that was probably true. She turned away from the sink and said, “Henry, I think I’m pregnant.”

He looked at her and frowned. “Are you sure?”

“I said I *think*. But I’m practically sure.”

He said, “Oh, God, now you’ll be sick all the time, and there’s no living with you when you’re sick.”

Ann sat down at the table and lit a cigarette. “Maybe I won’t be sick.”

He said darkly, “You always are. Sweet prospect!”

Ann said, “We’ll get another bonus, Henry.”

He brightened a little. “Say, we will, at that. I’ll buy some more stock.”

Ann said, “Henry, we need so many things—”

He was immediately angry. “I said I’ll buy stock! Somebody in this house has to think of the future. We can’t all hide our heads in the sand and hope for the best.”

She stood up, trembling. It was not a new argument. “What future? Our children—children like ours are taken away from us when they’re three years old and given to the state to rear. When we’re old the state will take care of us. Nobody lives well any more, except—but nobody starves. And that stock—it all goes down. Don’t talk to me about the future, Henry Crothers! I want my future now.”

He laughed unpleasantly. “What do you want? A car?”

She said, “I want a new washing machine and a vacuum cleaner, when the quotas come—the electricity isn’t so bad. I want a new chair for the living room. I want to fix up the boys’ room, paint and—”

He said brutally, “They’re too little to notice. By the time they get old enough—”

She sat down again, sobbing a little. Her cigarette burned forgotten in the ashtray, and Henry thriftily stubbed it out. She said, “I know, the Center takes them. The Center takes children like ours.”

“And the Center’s good to them. They give them more than we could. Don’t you go talking against the Center.” Though a malcontent in his personal life, Henry was a staunch government man.

Ann said, “I’m not, Henry, I’m—”

He said disgustedly, “Being a woman again. Tears! Oh, God, why do women always turn them on?”

She made herself stop crying. Anger was beginning to rise in her, and that helped a good deal. “I didn’t mean to start an argument. I was just telling you what we need. We do need things, Henry. Clothes—”

He looked at her. “You mean for you? Clothes would do you a lot of good, wouldn’t they?”

She was stung. “I don’t mean maternity clothes. I won’t be needing them for—”

He laughed. “I don’t mean maternity clothes either. Have you looked at yourself in a mirror lately? God, you’re a big horse! I always liked little women.”

She said tightly, “And I always liked tall men.”

He half rose, and she thought he was going to hit her. She sat still, trembling with a fierce exhilaration, her eyes bright, color in her cheeks, a little smile on her mouth. She said softly, “I’ll hit you back, I’m bigger than you are. I’ll kill you!”

Suddenly Henry sat down and began to laugh. When he laughed he was quite handsome. He said in a deep chuckling voice, “You’re almost pretty when you get mad enough. Your hair’s pretty tonight, you must have washed it.” His eyes were beginning to shine, and he reached across the table and put his hand on hers. “Ann . . . old girl . . .”

She drew her hand away. “I’m tired. I’m going to bed.”

He said good-humoredly, “Sure. I’ll be right up.”

She looked at him. “I said I’m tired.”

“And I said I’d be right up.”

If I had something in my hands I’d kill you. “I don’t want to.”

He scowled, and his mouth grew petulant again, and he was no longer handsome. “But *I* want to.”

She stood up. All at once she felt as tired as she had told Henry she was, as tired as she had been for ten years.

I cannot kill you, Henry, or myself. I cannot even wish us dead. In this desolate, dying, bombed-out world, with its creeping wastelands and its freakish seasons, with its limping economy and its arrogant Center in the country that takes our children—children like ours; the others it destroys—we have to live, and we have to live together.

Because by some twist of providence, or radiation, or genes, we are among the tiny percentage of the people in this world who can have normal children. We hate each other, but we breed true.

She said, “Come up, Henry.” I can take a sleeping pill afterward.

Come up, Henry, we have to live. Till we are all called in, or our children, or our children’s children. Till there is nowhere else to go.