

## Betty June, Betty June

“Lord it’s hot this far south, Frank!” The perspiration ran down the folds of her neck and dripped into the top of her blouse. “I sure hope Betty June’s house is cool. Maybe she’s got at least a fan by now, got to keep those babies cool, ya know. Remember when Betty June was just little and how she got that high fever? Happened in no time, no time a’tal. Are we almost there? Seems like we been driven’ all day. This is a lot of fuss for one more new granbaby.”

Betty June stared through the heat waves rising off the hard-packed caliche road. The pink and blue curtains she had made, dingy now with Texas dust, framed her view. “I told you to pick up your toys! Gramma and Grandad will be here anytime! Can’t you do anything right!” She heard her voice, brittle, shrill, the way her own mother used to sound. She had hated that sound as a child, and yet now, now it seemed to be the only way she ever spoke to her daughter. And she couldn’t stop. “You’re old enough to do something besides play with your doll! Pick up your things, now, and BE QUIET! You’ll wake the baby. I’m going to hang the clothes out on the line and when I get back everything better be put up!”

She wasn’t unbeautiful, but mis-shapen, with a certain disconnected look in her eyes. It was a sad look, usually mistaken for anger. She moved slowly towards the door in a lumbering way, and by the time she reached the scorched backyard, she had begun to cry. A silent trickling that was hard to distinguish from the little rivers of sweat on her face.

She worked mechanically at the clothesline, bending to pick the wet garments out of the basket, stretching to pin them to the line. Her movements began to slow, then finally stopped, and she stood motionless, staring at the skin-pink shingled house, stark and ugly,

surrounded by a sea of bluebonnets that blended in the distance with the cloudless, still sky.

She began to cry in sobs now, deep choking gulps that broke the silence of the stifling heat. “The same, the same...everyday is the same. Aren’t these the very clothes I hung out yesterday? Or was it the day before? It doesn’t even matter, and, who cares, anyway?” The little girl walked on barefoot toes around the room, seeing every toy in its place, but still clutching her doll. “She’ll be back but it won’t matter! She’s mad at me now and she looks that funny way. It’s because I’m bad, bad, bad, and oh! I wish daddy would come!” A slow stirring and gurgling made her jerk her head nervously towards the baby’s crib, and she felt her own panic begin like a flood with the rising sound of the baby’s tiny cries. “Oh I’m bad, bad, I woke up the baby! Now mommy will be really mad!” She hurried to the infant’s crib and dropped the doll over the bars.

“Here’s a toy, baby. Don’t cry! Don’t cry!” She glanced at her empty doll carriage. “Sssh! Sssh, don’t cry, mommy’s coming!” Standing on the bottom rung of the crib’s side she leaned against the wooden slabs and somehow gathered her sister into her arms. The cries were howls now, and the sound broke through the wrenching sobs and half muttered questions of Betty June.

“Oh damn! Damn! Another feeding, another round of colic, another diaper to change! It doesn’t end! It doesn’t end!” She stumbled over the laundry basket mixing the fresh clothes with the bluebonnets and the stickers. She seemed to move in slow motion towards the house, her face contorted with pain, yet somehow vacant. As she reached the children’s room the pleas of the little girl, the cries of the baby, the slow creaking of the doll carriage and her own sobbing blended into one hideous racket.

“Be quiet! Be quiet! Can’t there be quiet for one minute! I told you not to wake her up! I told you not to cry! I told you...I...I told...” Her voice trailed off into a long wail as the little girl stopped the carriage and

turned to see her mother shaking the doll over the crib. The baby shrieked louder and the girl's eyes followed the slow twists and turns of the doll as it flew across the room. The dull bump of the doll hitting the wall and the slumping figure of her mother falling towards the floor brought sudden, dazzling fear, and her shrill, piercing cries mingled with those of "Betty June? Betty June? We're here, we're here! We're...we're...Betty June?"