

Mrs. Bassett
3 pages

ALMA. Mrs. Bassett says it's a widow's philosophy to skip the minutes. And so we are skipping the minutes—ha, ha, ha! I hope everybody is comfortable?

ROSEMARY. I'm just as cold as Greenland's icy mountains!

ALMA. Rosemary, you always are chilly, even in warm weather. I think you must be thin-blooded! —Here. Take this shawl.

ROSEMARY. No thank you, not a shawl! —at least not a gray woolen shawl, I'm not *that* old yet, that I have to be wrapped in a gray shawl.

ALMA. *Excuse me, do forgive me!* —John, I'll put you on this love seat, next to me. —Well, now we are completely assembled!

MRS. BASSETT. Vernon has his verse play with him tonight!

ALMA. (*Uneasily.*) Is that right, Vernon? (*He has a huge manuscript in his lap which he solemnly elevates.*) Oh, I see that you have.

ROSEMARY. I thought that I was supposed to read my paper on William Blake at the meeting.

ALMA. Well, obviously we can't have both at once. That would be an embarrassment of riches! —Now why don't we save the verse play, which appears to be rather long, till some more comfortable evening. I think it's too important to hear under any but ideal circumstances, in warmer weather, with—with *music!* —planned to go with it . . .

ROGER. Yes, let's hear Rosemary's paper on William Blake!

MRS. BASSETT. No, no, no, those dead poets can keep! —Vernon's alive and he's got his verse play with him; he's brought it three times! And each time been disappointed.

VERNON. I am not disappointed not to read my verse play, *that* isn't the point at all, *but—*

ALMA. Shall we take a standing vote on the question?

ROGER. Yes, let's do.

ALMA. Good, good, perfect, let's do! A standing vote. All in favor of postponing the verse play till the next meeting, stand up! (*Rosemary is late in rising.*)

ROSEMARY. Is this a vote? (*As she starts to rise Mrs. Bassett jerks her arm.*)

ROGER. Now, Mrs. Bassett, no rough tactics, please!

ALMA. So we'll save the verse play and begin the New Year with it! (*Rosemary puts on her glasses and rises portentously.*)

ROSEMARY. The poet—William Blake!

Start

MRS. BASSETT. Insane, insane, that man was a mad fanatic!
(*She squints her eyes tight shut and thrusts her thumbs into her ears. The reactions range from indignant to conciliatory.*)

ROGER. Now, Mrs. Bassett!

MRS. BASSETT. This is a free country. I can speak my opinion. And I have *read up* on him. Go on, Rosemary. I wasn't criticizing your paper. (*But Rosemary sits down, hurt.*)

ALMA. Mrs. Bassett is only joking, Rosemary.

ROSEMARY. No, I don't want to read it if she feels that strongly about it.

MRS. BASSETT. Not a bit, don't be silly! I just don't see why we should encourage the writings of people like that who have already gone into a drunkard's grave!

VARIOUS VOICES. (*Exclaiming.*) Did he? I never heard that about him. Is that true?

ALMA. Mrs. Bassett is mistaken about that. Mrs. Bassett, you have confused Blake with someone else.

MRS. BASSETT. (*Positively.*) Oh, no, don't tell me. I've read up on him and know what I'm talking about. He traveled around with that Frenchman who took a shot at him and landed them both in jail. Brussels, Brussels!

ROGER. (*Gaily.*) Brussels sprouts!

MRS. BASSETT. That's where it happened, fired a gun at him in a drunken stupor, and later one of them died of t.b. in the gutter! All right, I'm finished. I won't say anything more. Go on with your paper, Rosemary. There's nothing like contact with culture! (*Alma gets up.*)

ALMA. Before Rosemary reads her paper on Blake, I think it would be a good idea, since some of us aren't acquainted with his work, to preface the critical and biographical comments with a reading of one of his loveliest lyric poems.

ROSEMARY. I'm not going to read anything at all! Not I!

ALMA. Then let me read it then. (*She takes a paper from Rosemary.*) . . . This is called "Love's Secret." (*She clears her throat and waits for a hush to settle. Rosemary looks stonily at the carpet. Mrs. Bassett looks at the ceiling. John coughs.*)

Never seek to tell thy love,
Love that never told can be;
For the gentle wind doth move
Silently, invisibly.

I told my love, I told my love,
I told him all my heart.
Trembling, cold, in ghastly fear
Did my love depart.

No sooner had he gone from me
Than a stranger passing by,
Silently, invisibly,
Took him with a sigh!

(There are various effusions and enthusiastic applause.)

MRS. BASSETT. Honey, you're right. That isn't the man I meant. I was thinking about the one who wrote about the "bought red lips." Who was it that wrote about the "bought red lips?"

ALMA. You're thinking about a poem by Ernest Dowson. *(The bell rings.)*

MRS. BASSETT. Ohhhhh, the doorbell again!

MRS. WINEMILLER. *(Above.)* Alma, Alma! *(Alma crosses the stage and goes out.)*

ROSEMARY. Aren't you all cold? I'm just freezing to death! I've never been in a house as cold as this!

ALMA. *(In the hall.)* Why, Mrs. Buchanan! How sweet of you to—drop over . . .

MRS. BUCHANAN. I can't stay, Alma. I just came to fetch my Little John home.

ALMA. Fetch—John!?

MRS. BUCHANAN. His father's just received an urgent call from old Mrs. Arbuckle's home. The poor woman is in a dreadful pain. John? John, darling? I hate to drag you away but your father can't budge from the house!

ALMA. Mrs. Buchanan, do you know everybody?

MRS. BUCHANAN. Why, yes, I think so. —John? Come, dear! I'm so sorry . . . *(It is obvious that she is delivering a cool snub to the gathering. There are various embarrassed murmurs as John makes his departure. Miss Alma appears quite stricken.)*

ALMA. *(After the departure.)* Shall we go on with the reading?

ROSEMARY. "The Poet, William Blake, was born in the year of our Lord, 1757 . . ." *(Mrs. Winemiller cries out and bursts into the room half in and out of her clothes.)*

MRS. WINEMILLER. Alma, Alma, I've got to go to New Orleans right away, immediately, Alma, by the midnight train. They've