

AVRAM DAVIDSON

SACRIFICE

They started to gather at six o'clock. Sonya, who always got there first, at once went into the kitchen and made coffee, so there was a hot cup ready for Slauson's elderly cousin Willis when she arrived with the cakes and cookies. Ava came by and by and of course told them that she wanted nothing to eat or drink, but she was already contentedly eating and drinking when Arno drove up with, "my dears, the most succulent roast turkey (already sliced) which I have ever made and you. Have ever tasted! -- and where is our dear old Slauson, may I ask," he demanded, setting down the vast plate.

"Where should he be?" asked Heimberger, striding in with wine and whiskey and filling the place with his vast bulk. "Upstairs, inserting semicolons in this year's epic opus: can a publisher sell semicolons. I have probably lost a thousand dollars for his every semicolon over the past twenty years! But I still have faith." His huge hairy fingers reached out and captured a glazed turkey-wing.

So they were all there when Farmer came in, pretending to shield his eyes and scout around. "And where is this year's or shall I say this month's Slauson's new friend? Hello Heimberger, Sonya, Ava, Arno, Willis. . . . This time I drove five hundred miles to the reading, so it better be good, although," he lowered his voice, "I'm afraid it won't."

Willis, her voice by now almost quavering so old she was, "Oh shame on you, Farmer. Shame on you."

"If he didn't waste his time and your money, Willie, on those so-called new friends of his," Ava began.

Arno didn't wait for her to finish. "Well, Slauson will just want to live in a house by the side of the road and be a friend to man and woman. They leech onto him, they drain him, they are off, one never sees them again, and then poor Slauson tries to write. And tries aannd tries. . . . "He sighed, said, "A teeny taste of that cake, Willis. Oh. OH. It, is, so, good! Willis, where do you buy--"

Slauson came in just at that moment.

"Are you all right, dear?" asked Ada. "You seem a trifle --"

"It is nothing," said Slauson. "I was in the cellar burying a body."

"Of your dead past, no doubt?"

Everybody chuckled empathetically and when the chuckles had quite died away Slauson cleared his throat and began to read.

He read for half an hour. He read for an hour. He read for an hour and a half. No one coughed. No one lit a cigarette. No one did anything connected with water. Slauson read for one hour and fifty-seven minutes. When he had done, the silence still went on.

Then Sonya began to scream and when the scream was understood to be "Bravo!" others joined her. Willie clapped her splayed arthritic paws. Ava kissed him repeatedly. Arno murmured passionate impossible murmurs in his ears; and Helmberger, mustache wet with tears, could only mutter, brokenly, ". . . morrow . . . contract . . . advance . . . greatest . . . escalator clause third hundred thousand. . . . "

Finally Farmer's dry, critic's voice, slightly husky now, was heard to say, "-- worth any sacrifice: For having written that, an entire life is not too much to have given!"

Hear, hear! they all cried, Willis thumping her cane on the floor.

Hear, hear!