Seven people returned to the small house after Janet’s funeral. Two of the people, Janet’s parents, excused themselves, went into their bedroom, and shut the door. They did not know what to do after spending so much time with relatives and friends. Words echoed in their heads, “Such a surprise,” “she just turned sixteen,” “heartbreaking.” The only person Elaine wanted to spend time with and talk to was her daughter, and that wasn’t possible anymore. She couldn’t talk with Janet, and she didn’t want to talk about Janet, so she and her husband went to the bedroom to escape with their grief for a few hours.

Three of the people were Janet’s siblings. The two youngest, a boy named David and a girl named Laura, came home briefly to collect their things. The girl, who was ten and very pretty, was taken across the street to Mrs. Hanson’s house where it was planned she would stay for a few days. Mrs. Hanson was looking forward to baking bread and sweet rolls and sewing doll clothes with Laura. Laura reminded her of her two beloved daughters who weren’t living at home any more and the granddaughters she hoped to have. David, who was six years old, was going to stay with his friend, who was also named David, for two days. They would run and yell and pretend to shoot at each other with their toy pistols. After two days, David’s father would insist his son and daughter return. He would miss looking at his daughter’s delicate face and hands. He would miss his son’s exuberance; he liked having the boy around.

The third child, Ann, was only a year and half younger than her sister who had died. It was assumed by everyone that she would stay home to help her family.
Ann wanted desperately to cry when she walked into the house. There were three rocking chairs in the family room, one for each of the girls who lived in the house.

Janet’s chair was white and had violet roses painted along the back. Laura’s chair was tiny, so obviously for the youngest sister. Her chair was a deep, dark wood. It had always seemed to Ann that Janet’s chair was the most beautiful chair of the three. She remembered the tight knot of longing she felt when her parents unloaded the chairs from the truck her father used to transport luggage to his customers. More than anything she had wanted the white chair with the violet flowers to be for her. She had been disappointed when she realized the brown chair was hers. That night she had hidden Janet’s cashmere sweater in the back of the linen closet.

The other people who came to the house were Janet’s aunts. One of the aunts headed straight for the kitchen. It wasn’t a large house and Aunt Ethel pretended not to hear what everyone was doing. Aunt Ethel began to sort the food that had been dropped off during the last few days. What are we going to do with all of this food, Ethel thought. She was reminded of other funerals she had helped to organize. She pictured Janet’s face in her mind and thought about the funeral for her own mother. Janet looked a lot like the grandmother she had never met. Elaine, Janet’s mother, was just sixteen when our mother died, she thought. The same age as Janet was when she died. This seemed significant in some way, but she was too weary to think further on the significance, so she mindlessly began putting macaroni salad in smaller containers.

The second aunt had traveled to California from Saint Louis. Aunt Ruth was a tall woman with a large bosom and white hair. She had baked boxes of cookies for the funeral, packing them carefully in popped corn so that they would not break.
down in the brown rocking chair, her face was taut and expressionless, like the sky before a storm. She intended to wait for her sister to wake up so that she could tell her what to do. Janet was her favorite niece, her first niece. Ruth remembered the way Janet followed her mother around like a gosling. If Elaine folded clothes, Janet come in and folded clothes with her mother. Elaine was always working: weeding rose beds, rearranging merchandise in the store, chopping vegetables. Janet was often found near her mother, working with her.

Aunt Ruth rocked and remembered other people who were important, who had left her. She thought about the people who attempted to replace the dead. Everyone had wonderful stories to tell about her mother, Minnie. She worked tirelessly in the family store. Everyone bought shoes because she was so pretty and laughed so often. People stopped into the store or by the house all the time to see Minnie. After she died, her father remarried quickly. Her new mother had several daughters she brought to live in their home. Her mother’s family talked often about how hard Minnie had worked to create a lovely home. It was not right that another woman had come in to wear her mother’s jewelry and set her mother’s table and entertain in her mother’s parlor.

Aunt Ruth was rocking in Ann’s chair when she walked into the family room. Ann slipped into the white rocking chair, sitting next to Aunt Ruth.

They rocked silently for a while. The clock chimed three o’clock, and they heard the water running in the kitchen. “You must be happy now that Janet is dead,” said Aunt Ruth. “You always were jealous of your sister. You always wanted what was hers.”
Ann continued to rock, looking around the house at the clock, table, chairs, and the carpet that was the color of the ocean, witnesses to the words that declared what a horrible child she was. No one noticed that Ann hadn’t talked since the day before.

Three days later all of Janet’s younger siblings were brought home. Their aunts had left and their parents cooked breakfast and dressed for work and did not speak of Janet for many years.

Four years later, Ann met the man she would marry. She would leave the small house to create her own home. Every evening her husband would come home and tell her she was beautiful, and funny, and say how lucky he was. She would smile and kiss him, but she never believed him.