

The Moth in the Flame, Truman Capote

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Part I

All afternoon Em had lain on the steel-framed bed. She had a scrap quilt pulled over her legs. She was just lying there and thinking. The weather had turned cold, even for Alabama.

George and all the other men from over the countryside were out looking for crazy old Sadie Hopkins. She had escaped from the jail. Poor old Sadie, thought Em, runnin' all over in those swamps and fields. She used to be such a pretty girl—just got mixed up with the wrong folks, I guess. Gone plumb crazy.

Em looked out the window of her cabin; the sky was dark and slate gray and the fields looked as if they had been frozen into furrows. She pulled the quilt closer about her. It certainly was lonesome out in this country, not another farm for four miles, fields on one side, swamp and woods on the other. She felt that maybe she had been born to be lonesome just as some people are born blind or deaf.

She stared around the small room, the four walls closing in around her. She sat silent, listening to the cheap alarm clock, tick-tock, tick-tock. Suddenly the strangest feeling crept up her back, a feeling of fear and horror. She felt her scalp tingle. She knew, like a flash of blinding light, that there was someone watching her, someone standing very near and watching her with cold, calculating, insane eyes.

For a moment she lay so still that she could hear the pounding of her heart, and the clock sounded like a sledge hammer beating against a hollow stump. Em knew that she wasn't imagining things; she knew there was some cause for this fright; she knew by instinct, an instinct so clear and vital that it filled her whole body. Slowly she got up and gazed about the room. She saw nothing; yet she felt that there was someone staring at her, following her every move. She picked up the first thing that she touched, a stick of lighting wood. Then she called in a bold voice, "Who is it? What do you want?" Only cold silence met her questions. Despite the actual physical cold she grew hot all over; she felt her cheeks burning.

"I know you're here," she screamed hysterically. "What do you want? Why don't you show yourself? Come out, you sneakin'—" Then she heard a voice, tired and frightened, behind her. "It's only me, Em—Sadie, you know, Sadie Hopkins."

Em whirled around. The woman who stood in front of her was half naked, her hair hanging wildly about her scratched and bruised face. Her legs were all marked with blood.

"Em," she pleaded, "please help me. I'm tired and hungry. Hide me someplace. Don't let them catch me, please don't. They'll lynch me; they think I'm crazy. I'm not crazy; you know that, Em. Please, Em." She was crying.

Em was too shocked and dazed to reply. She stumbled and sat down on the edge of the bed. "What are you doin' in here, Sadie? How did you get in?" "I came through the back door," the crazy woman answered. "I've got to hide someplace. They're headin' this way through the swamps and they'll find him soon. Oh, I didn't mean to do it; I didn't mean it, Em. The Lord knows I didn't mean it."

Em looked at her blankly. "What are you talkin' about?" she asked. "That Henderson boy," cried Sadie. "He caught up with me in the woods. He was holdin' me and clawin' me and screamin' for the others. I didn't know what to do; I was scared. I tripped him; he fell over backwards, and I jumped on him and hit him in the head with a big rock. I just couldn't seem to stop hittin' him. I only meant to knock him out, but when I looked—OH, GOD!"

Sadie leaned back against the door, and began to chuckle and then to laugh. Soon the whole room was filled with wild, hysterical laughter. The dusk had fallen, and the bright flames from the limestone fireplace played weird shadows around the room. They danced in the blackness of the insane woman's eyes; they seemed to lash her hysteria into a wilder frenzy.

Em sat on the bed, horrified and dazed, her eyes filled with bewilderment and terror. She was hypnotized by Sadie, and her dark, evil laughter. "But you'll let me stay, won't you, Em?" the woman shrieked. Then she looked into Em's eyes. She stopped laughing. "Please, Em," she begged. "I don't want them to catch me. I don't want to die; I want to live. They've done this to me; they've made me the way I am."

She looked into the fire. She knew that she would have to go. Then presently she asked, "Em, what part of the swamp aren't they going to cover today?"

Deliberately Em sat up, her eyes burning with hysterical tears. "They aren't goin' to cover the Hawkins' section till tomorrow." When she had told the lie, she felt her stomach sink; she felt as if she were falling through a thousand years.

"Goodbye, Em."

"Goodbye, Sadie."

Sadie walked out of the front door and Em watched her until she reached the edge of the swamp and disappeared into its dark jungle-like depths.

Part II

Em collapsed onto the bed and began to cry. She cried until she fell into a feverish sleep. She was awakened by the sound of men talking. She looked out into the dark yard and saw George and Hank Simmons and Bony Yarber coming toward the house.

Quickly she jumped up, got a wet cloth, and wiped her face. She turned up a lamp in the kitchen and was sitting reading when the men came in.

"Hello, honey," said George, depositing a kiss on her cheek. "Gosh, but you're hot. Are you feelin' all right?"

She nodded her head.

"Hello, Em," said the other two men.

She didn't bother to return their salutation. She sat reading. They each took a drink of water from the dipper.

"Boy, that sure tastes good," said George, "but how about somethin' with a little more punch to it, eh, boys?" He nudged Bony.

Suddenly Em laid down her magazine. Cautiously she looked around at them.

"Did—did," her voice quavered a little bit, "did you find Sadie?"

"Yes," answered George, "we found her in one of those whirlpools over in Hawkins' mirey part of the swamp. She'd drowned, committed suicide, I guess. But let's don't talk about it; it was God-awful. It was—"

But he didn't finish. Em jumped up from the table, knocked the lamp over, and ran into the bedroom.

"Now, what the hell do you suppose is eatin' her, I wonder," said George.

The End