Miss Vera Brown, she wrote on the blackboard, letter by letter in flawlessly oval Palmer method. Our teacher for the fifth grade. The name might as well have been graven in stone.

As she called the roll, her voice was as gentle as the expression in her beautiful dark brown eyes. She reminded me of pansies. When she called on Alvin Ahrens to recite and he said, “I know but I can’t say,” the class snickered, but she said, “Try,” encouragingly, and waited, to be sure that he didn’t know the answer, and then said, to one of the hands waving in the air, “Tell Alvin what one fifth of three eighths is.” If we arrived late to school, red-faced and out of breath and bursting with the excuse we had thought up on the way, before we could speak she said, “I’m sure you couldn’t help it. Close the door, please, and take your seat.” If she kept us after school it was not to scold us but to help us past the hard part.

Somebody left a big red apple on her desk for her to find when she came into the classroom, and she smiled and put it into her desk, out of sight. Somebody else left some purple asters, which she put in her drinking glass. After that the presents kept coming. She was the only pretty teacher in the school. She never had to ask us to be quiet or to stop throwing erasers. We would not have dreamed of doing anything that would displease her.

Somebody wormed it out of her when her birthday was. While she was out of the room, the class voted to present her with flowers from the greenhouse. Then they took another vote and sweet peas won. When she saw the florist’s box waiting on her desk, she said, “Oh?”

“Look inside,” we all said.

Her delicate fingers seemed to take forever to remove the ribbon. In the end, she raised the lid of the box and exclaimed.

“Read the card!” we shouted.

Many Happy Returns to Miss Vera Brown, from the Fifth Grade, it said.

She put her nose in the flowers and said, “Thank you all very, very much,” and then turned our minds to the spelling lesson of the day.

After school we escorted her downtown in a body to a special matinee of D.W. Griffith’s Hearts of the World. We paid for everything.

We meant to have her for our teacher forever. We intended to pass right up through the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades and on to high school taking her with us. But that isn’t what happened. One day there was a substitute teacher. We expected our real teacher to be back the next day, but she wasn’t. Week after week passed, and the substitute continued to sit at Miss Brown’s desk, calling on us to recite and giving out tests and handing them back with grades on them, and we went on acting the way we had when Miss Brown was there because we didn’t want her to come back and find we hadn’t been nice to the substitute. One Monday morning she cleared her throat and said that Miss Brown was sick and not coming back for the rest of the term.

In the fall we had passed on into the sixth grade, and she was still not back. Benny Irish’s mother found out that she was living with an aunt and uncle on a farm a mile or so beyond the edge of town, and told my mother, who told somebody in my hearing. One afternoon after school Benny and I got on our bikes and rode out to see her. At the place where the road turns off to go to the cemetery and the Chautauqua grounds, there was a red barn with a huge circus poster on it, showing the entire inside of the Sells-Floto Circus tent and everything that was going on in the three rings. In the summertime, riding in the backseat of my father’s open Chalmers, I used to crane my neck as we passed the turn, hoping to see every last tiger and flying-trapeze artist, but it was never possible. The poster was weather-beaten now, with loose strips of paper hanging down.

It was getting dark as we wheeled our bikes up the land of the farmhouse where Miss Brown lived.
“You knock,” Benny said as we started up the porch.
“No, you do it,” I said.

We hadn’t thought ahead of what it would be like to see her. We wouldn’t have been surprised if she had come to the door herself and thrown up her hands in astonishment when she saw who it was, but instead a much older woman opened the door and said, “What do you want?”

“We came to see Miss Brown,” I said.
“We’re in her class at school,” Benny explained.

I could see that the woman was trying to decide whether she should tell us to go away, but she said, “I’ll find out if she wants to see you,” and left us standing on the porch for what seemed like a long time. Then she appeared again and said, “You can come in now.”

As we followed her through the front parlor I could make out in the dim light that there was an old-fashioned organ like the kind you used to see in the country churches, and linoleum on the floor, and stiff uncomfortable chairs, and family portraits behind curved glass in big oval frames.

The room beyond it was lighted by a coal-oil lamp but seemed ever so much darker than the unlighted room we had just passed through. Propped up on pillows on a big double bed was our teacher, but so changed. Her arms were like sticks, and all the life in her seemed concentrated in her eyes, which had dark circles around them and were enormous. She managed a flicker of recognition but I was struck dumb by the fact that she didn’t seem glad to see us. She didn’t belong to us anymore. She belonged to her illness.

Benny said, “I hope you get well soon.”

The angel who watches over little boys, who know but can’t say it, saw to it that we didn’t touch anything. And in a minute we were outside, on our bicycles, riding through the dusk toward the turn in the road and town.

A few weeks later I read in the Lincoln Evening Courier, that Miss Vera Brown, who taught the fifth grade at Central School, had died of tuberculosis, aged twenty-three years and seven months.

Sometimes I went with my mother when she put flowers on the graves of my grandparents. The cinder roads wound through the cemetery in ways she understood and I didn’t, and I would read the names on the monuments: Brower, Cadwallader, Andrews, Bates, Mitchell. In loving memory of. Infant daughter of. Beloved wife of. The cemetery was so large and so many people were buried there, it would have taken a long time to locate a particular grave if you didn’t know where it was already. But I know, the way I sometimes know what is in wrapped packages, that the elderly woman who let us in and who took care of Miss Brown during her last illness went to the cemetery regularly and poured the rancid water out of the tin receptacle that was sunk below the level of the grass at the foot of her grave, and filled it with fresh water from a nearby faucet and arranged the flowers she had brought in such a way as to please the eye of the living and the closed eyes of the dead.