TIME, FOR WHAT?

By Mrs. Paul E. King

Millicent Grady sat down stiffly in the rocking chair. Her mind was a turmoil. Looking out the window she watched the sun slowly setting. The bare tree branches were etched against the crimson sky and a shaft of light fell to the ground, making the newly fallen snow glint and glisten in its path.
Sighing, she looked down at her white hands, their blue veins showing dreadfully. Well, their work was about over, she thought bitterly, glancing around the one-bedroom apartment with something akin to hate.

She lifted the brown-wrapped package in her lap and glanced at the beloved name in the upper left hand corner, dreading to open it. 72! She was 72 years old today. Troy, her oldest son, had sent the package from Germany, where he was working. Birthdays hadn't been bad at all so long as she had her home.

Home . . . she closed her eyes and thought of it. She'd hated it at times when she was chained there by isolation and duties. But now, uprooted from it, here in Sunset Towers, a new high-rise apartment complex for Senior Citizens, she longed for the three-bedroom white Cape Cod house with a desperateness and an intensity that bordered upon physical pain. She thought of it now . . . white with black shutters at the windows. Looking out her kitchen window she could see an arm of the bay as it stretched itself to meet the great expanse of the ocean. Clam diggers trudged past her door, their buckets and digging paraphernalia held tightly in their hands and, more often than not, they were whistling a meaningless little tune or ditty. Shell collectors, too. And now, here she was, cooped up in a tiny apartment that reeked with the smell of fresh paint and miles and miles of newly-installed carpeting.

She looked at the package again. Then, slowly, her fingers untied the cord. An old, old habit -- that of preserving everything -- even cord. She wondered what had happened to the ball of cord she'd made over the years. How many packages she'd wrapped with it!

The cord fell away and she smoothed the brown wrapping paper away from the box. A letter was attached to the top.

"Dearest Mother," it began, "Happy birthday! I had Helen buy these bulbs for you, knowing how fond you are of flowers. They'll bloom and brighten your new home. Please let us hear from you when you see them. They're beauties. You'll be receiving another package -these were just meant to be a bit special, for a very special woman. Sure wish we could be there with you. Enjoy your apartment. It's far less work for you to do. Finally, you'll have time for leisure. . . ."
Millicent let the letter fall to her lap. Tears stung her eyes, burning and smarting as they cascaded down her face. Time! For what? Her life had seemed to come to an abrupt end with dividing the beloved and familiar household furnishings and mementos between the children and grandchildren. Except for the things she could use in the apartment -- the living room furniture, her bedroom suite and the small dining room set plus some of her favorite dishes, knick-knacks and lamps -- everything else was gone. Divided. Given away.

Bitterness engulfed her, washing over her like the mighty waves that crashed incessantly upon the rocks near her home. She had been a fool to listen to the children and her friends and sell the old home place. Oh, if only she could undo it all! If only. . . .

A light tap on the door startled her. She wouldn't answer it, she decided, remaining still and quiet.

The knock was repeated, this time more loudly, and a voice called out, "Yoo, hoo in there. Could you please tell me where the laundry room is and how to get to the elevator? I'm lost on my own floor."

Setting the bulbs on the table, Millicent hurried to the door.

"I'm sorry to bother you," the woman apologized. "But I've walked and walked until I can hardly go anymore. Have you ever been lost?" she asked quickly, laughing pleasantly.

Millicent nodded.

"Well, you know how it feels then," the woman continued.

"It's a frightening thing!" Millicent declared. "I'll get used to things around here after awhile. But everything's so different than when we had our home. Oh, by the way, I'm Mrs. Norris. Mary Norris. We live in apartment 294, Horace and I."

"That's just around the corner from me," Millicent remarked. "I'm Mrs. Grady. Do you like apartment living?" she blurted quickly. "I hate it. Hate it!"
"It's different," Mrs. Norris conceded pleasantly. "But it's really the very nicest thing that could have happened to my husband and me. Since his stroke, Horace has been very feeble, managing only a few short walks across the room daily, and that with a sturdy walker. We couldn't take care of the house, yard and garden anymore so our children -- bless them -- suggested that we move into one of these lovely new apartments."

"But they're so small, these apartments. I feel like a prisoner. And that windowless bathroom! Ugh! It's like I've pictured a solitary confinement cell in a correctional institution."

"I doubt that a solitary confinement cell has pretty white daisies with yellow centers growing on its walls," Mrs. Norris said, laughing in her cheery, pleasant way again. "The yellow tile in our bathroom is so pretty," she added quickly. "It's really quite cheerful when the light's turned on."

"The walltext and tile is pretty enough," Millicent said, a bit grudgingly, "but it's just too dark without a window. Forgive me for complaining," she apologized, leading the way to the sparkling clean and adequate laundry room. "I've been spoiled, having such a beautiful home."

"Since moving, I've determined to broaden my horizons, seeing I have more time now," Mary Norris remarked.

"Time for what?" Millicent asked bitterly. "I'd give anything to be back in my home. The view to the bay was beyond any description, and my flower garden was a patchwork of color. What is there to be desired here? Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"Oh, I have many things to do," Mary Norris said brightly. "For one thing, I plan to write to my heart's content now. When the children were growing up--we had nine," she explained, "I didn't have time for this. Now there's all kinds of time. And painting, too. Perhaps, with God's help, I'll be able now to do something I've always wanted to do -- paint each of the children a bit of art, on aged wood, and leave this as another memento and remembrance of me. Then there's my sewing and crocheting. I delight in making the grandchildren their clothes -- delicate, dainty and frilly dresses and slips for the girls, and equally beautiful but boyish outfits for the boys. There's so much to do. The Lord is so very good! It's an exciting time for Horace and me."
"Horace! Why, you said he's . . . he's almost incapacitated."

"Not his hands, Mrs. Grady. They're seldom idle. First and foremost of course, is reading, for Horace. Since the duties of the home are no longer pressing him, he spends hour after hour in his Bible. I declare, He's becoming more and more like the blessed Savior day after day. Horace is quite an artist himself, painting farm scenes, etched deeply on his mind by years of association with the soil and the peace and quiet of pastoral life; his needlepoint is much sought after by discriminating gift shops. You do have a hobby, do you not, Millicent?"

Shaking her head sadly, Millicent said, "No. No, I don't. My flower garden was my hobby at home."

Mrs. Norris' face brightened as a sudden thought struck her. "Since we're living so close together, why not have supper with Horace and me, Millicent!" she exclaimed. "I have a favorite chicken casserole in the oven and I baked two apple pies early this morning and . . . ."

"Perhaps you could teach me how to paint," Millicent said, breaking in upon Mary's conversation. "All my life I've wanted to paint, but felt I wasn't talented enough."

"I'll get you started tonight after supper, the Lord willing. And, if you'd like, Horace can teach you how to work needlepoint. There's quite a demand for this in The Unique Gift Shop in the Seafront Plaza."

"I'd love to learn!" Millicent exclaimed with eager delight and anticipation as she turned and hurried back to her apartment.

Standing in front of the small picture window in her living room, she noticed the tree on the lawn. It looked beautiful, wearing snow on its trunk and in its branches. It would make a beautiful painting. Yes, a very beautiful piece of work.

She fingered the bulbs Troy and Helen had sent. She must plant them immediately. 72! Suddenly, it didn't seem bad at all. She had time now to learn how to be creative. She had a friend, too -- in Mary Norris.
In the laundry room, praying fervently for Millicent as she washed her clothes, Mary Norris rejoiced. She found her field of labor: Sunset Towers -- the high-rise apartment building. And God had led her to the door of her first prospect.