1991

Grotesqueries

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Sims, Sandra, "Grotesqueries" (1991). *Master's Theses*. 165.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.44gb-weab>
https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses/165

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Grotesqueries. [Original short stories]

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San Jose State University, 1991

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GROTESQUERIES

A Project Report

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Sandra Sims

May, 1991

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT
GROTESQUERIES
by Sandra Sims

This Creative Writing Project consists of a collection of short stories written in the grotesque mode. The introduction explores some of the characteristics of grotesque literature, and from this brief discussion, three common characteristics emerge: that the stories often contain a "deformed" character, that they are concerned with the conflicted or the dark side of the human condition, and that they set up a disturbance in the reader. At the hub of each story included in this project is a strange character: a fat and ugly retarded young woman in "Mabel"; a slow, dominated, and homely husband in "The Blaney Bridge Crossover"; a rigid, meticulous, odd-looking old man in "A Daily Walk"; and a neurotically cruel mother in "A Fragile Chick." The tension in each story develops as the surrounding characters react to the grotesque figure, who awakens in them troublesome emotions they must struggle to resolve. The stories do not end with resolution; instead, they end with the conflict at its peak, and the reader is left struggling to form his or her own resolution.

Acknowledgments

With an undergraduate degree in psychology, returning to school after a hiatus of over 20 years to undertake a graduate degree in English has proven quite a challenge. The English Department at San Jose State University has been outstanding both in teaching and in supporting me as I've worked my way through the graduate program. Cathy Blecki, Carolyn Walker, and Lois Rew have personally gone out of their way with their time and support.

My family has patiently withstood my frustrations and hours of secluded time while I struggled through the books and the writing and the tests. They are wonderful, loving, and supportive, and I am grateful for them.

Thank you to Rob Swigert for being my advisor while he was on leave from campus and had to read most of the material for this project through correspondence and work with me over the telephone; and to Virginia De Araujo who has the difficult job of directing the Creative Writing Department for taking the time to be one of my readers. And a special thank you to Lois Rew, my other reader, for all the time and encouragement she has given me as I have struggled to complete this project. She has been my mainstay.

Introduction

This Creative Writing Project consists of four stories written in the grotesque mode. Though such writing is prevalent in modern literature, a succinct definition of the grotesque as a literary mode does not exist. C. Hugh Holman offers a definition in his A Handbook to Literature: "Whenever in modern fiction characters appear who are either physically or spiritually deformed and perform actions that are clearly intended by the author to be abnormal, the work can be called *Grotesque* " (27). This definition appears simple enough until one tries to define what "spiritually" or "physically deformed" means; too general a definition of these terms and all modern fiction could conceivably qualify as grotesque.

Typically, in the critical articles and books attempting to define the grotesque, one finds a discussion concerning the effect of the literature. Unlike Holman, who uses the properties of the story to tell whether a story is grotesque, Wolfgang Kayser, one of the foremost writers on the subject of the grotesque, says: "Even in defining the structural properties of the grotesque we have to refer to its reception" (182), and grappling with the definition, Kayser describes what it evokes in the reader: "The grotesque instills fear of life rather than fear of death" (185). Most attempts to define the grotesque incorporate the feelings aroused in the reader. Thomas Cramer, a German literary critic, writes in his book The Grotesque in E. T. A. Hoffman: ". . . the grotesque is the feeling of anxiety aroused by means of the comic pushed to an extreme, [but conversely], the grotesque is the defeat, by means of the comic, of anxiety in the face of the inexplicable" (qtd. in Steig 256). Philip Thomson says in his book The

Grotesque : ". . . I have outlined as the basic definition of the grotesque: the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response" (27). And Michael Steig, in his journal article "Defining the Grotesque: An attempt at Synthesis," writes: ". . . in both [the threatening and the comic grotesque] a state of unresolved tension is the most common result, because of the intrapsychic conflicts involved" (260). Thus, according to these critics, an important element of the grotesque is that it sets up a disturbance in the reader. In fact, it is part of the very nature of grotesque literature that this dynamic happens between the story and the reader.

Stories that set up an intrapsychic conflict within the reader can be as dramatic as Beloved by Toni Morrison, as humorous as "The Petrified Man" by Eudora Welty, as chillingly funny as Evelyn Waugh's book The Loved One, or as subtle as "The Chrysanthemums" by John Steinbeck. Common to each story is that, instead of coming away from the story with a sense that a problem has been solved or a conflict brought to resolution, the reader finds that something within his or her own psyche has been disturbed, and he or she is searching for resolution.

The elements of the story that create this disturbance are difficult for critics to single out. Sylvie Henning, in her article "La Forme In-Formante: A Reconsideration of the Grotesque," writes that the grotesque "disrupts classical perception of ordered reality by failing to conform to accepted standards of mimesis and decorum," and "it contravenes rationalism and any systematic use of thought" (107). Some propose that grotesque literature reaches the place in the reader where he feels the ambiguity or absurdity of life. Frances Barasch says in her book The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings: "These works employ

the grotesquerie as a facade, behind which there is a backdrop of cosmic pointlessness" (162). And Henning writes that: "The grotesque . . . might . . . be called a play with the very indeterminacy of existence" (107). There are those who feel the disturbance comes from the reader's identification with the dark side of the characters. Henning says, "Sir John Davies, the Calvinist poet, considers the grotesque figures representations of man's fallen state" (111). Flannery O'Connor writes: "The freak in modern fiction is usually disturbing to us because he keeps us from forgetting that we share his state" (qtd. in Shloss 49).

Most critics would agree that the grotesque story deals with the unsaid, unseen, unconscious, non-logical conflicts of the human psyche, the conflicts that cannot be expressed through rationalism and systematic thought. Often, at the center of the story is a grotesque figure who acts as a catalyst for, as well as a manifestation of, these conflicts. In his dissertation titled The Function of the Grotesque in the Works of John Steinbeck, Steven Serota writes: "The grotesque figure takes on its grotesqueness as a result of its relationship to either the environment in which it appears, or its relationship to the author's view of reality" (3). While Gimpel, in "Gimpel the Fool" by Isaac Bashevis Singer, is the story's obvious grotesque character, the actions of his wife and the townspeople enhance his grotesqueness. They abuse him, telling him lies and exploiting him through his simple faith and gullibility, so that he becomes totally confused about reality. To preserve his faith Gimpel chooses to believe his promiscuous wife who tells him that all of their children are his, though they have never consummated their marriage, and though he finds her in bed with other men from time to time. Thus is born in Gimpel the conflict between faith

and reality. In "The Chrysanthemums" by John Steinbeck, the tinker (an itinerant repairman) stirs the conflict. He is grotesque because of his maverick life style and his cunning salesmanship. Through the tinker's pretended interest in her chrysanthemums, Elisa Allen feels a personal validation and a connection to something strong and exciting within herself until she sees that he has carelessly thrown her clump of new shoots away at the side of the road. Through this simple story, Steinbeck captures the tentativeness of self worth. In Toni Morrison's Beloved, the grotesque character is a ghost. First as a raging poltergeist and later as a strange and demanding young woman, the ghost is a manifestation as well as a cause of the inner turmoil of the people living at 124 Bluestone Road. Through the ghost, Morrison successfully brings to life the deep conflict within the psyche of slaves.

One cannot come away from these stories without feeling unsettled. Herein, according to many critics, is the value of the grotesque story, that the disturbance in the reader effects the potential for change. Henning writes: ". . . I will argue for an understanding of the grotesque that maintains its full complexity, for only in this way can it recover its ability to unsettle and disturb, and with it the force to provoke a rethinking of fundamental issues concerning the way we see ourselves and our world" (108). Carol Shloss, who discusses Flannery O'Connor's "Circle of Fire" in her book Flannery O'Connor's Dark Comedies: The Limits of Inference, writes: "The destruction effects enlightenment while being itself reprehensible" (53). She says of O'Connor's work in general: "The unexpected violence in these stories can be easily recognized as grotesque, but we should remember that O'Connor's purpose was not to further her reader's recognition of violence but to make them re-

evaluate realistic behavior" (49). Lauren Berlant proposes something similar in her article "Re-Writing the Medusa: Welty's 'Petrified Man' " when she writes that Eudora Welty's "Petrified Man" was designed by Welty to expose the grotesque, the inelegant level of women's desires" (60). And Kayser, in his book The Grotesque in Art and Literature, says that this type of exposure through grotesque literature is an "attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world" (188).

Implicit in this idea that we must look at the ugly truth is the inference that through this process we may find a better way. Shloss writes: "Thus it can be assumed that the writer of the grotesque has in mind an alternative by which he recognizes and renders distortion. A reader's determination of this unstated standard of measurement allows the grotesque mode to furnish, in addition to explicit criticism, an implicit vision of unexpected potential" (39).

While an explicit criticism may be seen in a grotesque story, the implicit vision of the author may not be clear. Sherwood Anderson, in the beginning of Winesburg, Ohio, says: "The moment one of his people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood" (5). He presents the "deformity" of his characters, without telling the reader what his vision is. Yet implicit in his statement is the idea that there is something better, an unexpected potential that is left to the reader to determine through reading Anderson's various stories. There are times, however, when the author is explicit in his vision. Isaac Bashevis Singer summarizes at the end of "Gimpel the Fool" something of his vision of reality and the afterworld: ". . . [T]he longer I lived the more I understood that there were really no lies. Whatever doesn't really

happen is dreamed at night," and "Whatever may be there [in the afterworld], it will be real, without complication, without ridicule, without deception. God be praised: there even Gimpel cannot be deceived" (502-503).

The view that implicit in grotesque literature is a call to a higher order is taken a step further by others. The world renowned Romanian, Mircea Eliade, a contemporary religious historian, philosopher, and novelist says: "This setting apart [of grotesque figures] sometimes has positive effects. The ugliness and deformity, while marking out those who possess them, at the same time make them sacred" (qtd. in Shloss 40). And according to John Ruskin, the nineteenth century social and art critic: "If the objects of horror, in which the terrible grotesque finds its materials, were contemplated in their true light, and with the entire energy of the soul, they would cease to be grotesque, and become altogether sublime" (qtd. in Henning 115).

From Holman's simple definition of the grotesque at the beginning of this introduction to Ruskin's view that the objects of the "terrible grotesque" are "altogether sublime," one can sense the complex problem of defining the grotesque as a literary mode. However, from this brief discussion, three common characteristics of grotesque stories have emerged: that they contain a "deformed" character; that they are concerned with the conflicted or the dark side of the human condition; and that they set up a disturbance in the reader. The four stories included in this thesis are grotesque because at the hub of each one is a strange character around whom the story revolves: a fat and ugly retarded woman; a slow, ineffectual, dominated, and rather homely husband; a rigid, meticulous, odd looking old man; and a neurotically cruel mother. The tension in each story develops as the surrounding characters react to the

grotesque figure, who awakens in them troublesome emotions they must struggle to resolve. Through this disturbance the characters have a chance for self-awareness. The reader will identify with the intrapsychic conflicts in these stories because they are universal: conscious awareness versus unconscious motivation; vulnerability versus survival; rigidity versus the onslaught of life circumstances; and dependence versus individuation. The stories do not end with the resolution of these conflicts; instead, they end with the conflict at its peak, and the reader is left struggling with the resolution. Perhaps this is part of what Kayser had in mind when he said "The grotesque instills fear of life rather than fear of death" (185).

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The Blaney Bridge Crossover

When George's mama was dying--after George and I was married for one year--she told me to take care of him, which I said I would. He was real upset when she died, and he visited her grave every day for three months, so's I think he knew every blade of grass covering her plot. I told him I would take care of him and that his mama was in heaven, and God was taking care of her. Ever since then, I have kept my promise to him and his mama, though there have been things I've had to teach him, table manners and wiping his shoes before coming into the house and all, and how he should spit in the bushes instead of on the walk-way, things he did not learn from her. I make sure he eats good and that he has clean clothes. We have even started attending church regular.

After all I have done for him, I was shocked and embarrassed the way he turned on me last Saturday.

The day started out fine with George polishing his Ford pickup like he does every Saturday. And he was real helpful to carry out the picnic basket, which is a laundry basket that I use for picnics. Only he lifted it over the side of the pickup like he always does, which is against what I tell him. I tell him he will not strain himself if he puts the gate down, to where he won't have to lift so high. But that is one thing he will not listen to.

I checked the seat for orange cat hair before I settled into the pickup. You'd think Melvin was a dog the way George takes him out for rides and the way he fusses over him. But I make him keep that cat outside. I tell him cats was meant for catching rats and mice, not for laying around the house. I wish George

would not take him out in the pickup. Imagine what my new navy blue pants would look like with orange hairs clinging all over them.

It took a considerable while for me to decide to wear them last Saturday because I always wear dresses, but I am trying to modernize myself a little, and I knew Nel Farmington would be wearing pants. I tried on a size 16 at the store, but since I do not like my clothes tight, I had to buy an 18. I wore my blue cardigan sweater instead of my white one because it doesn't show the dirt. I have a hard time keeping clean out at Blaney Grove.

The Farmingtons live across town, so we said we'd meet them at Blaney Grove at one o'clock. I said I would bring the food to pay them back for all the kindness they showed me while I was sick.

George was real nice when we left and drove slow out the driveway. He knows how upset I get when the dust settles in on my clean, fresh-painted, white porch. I sweep the pathway that leads up to the porch, so the dirt looks neat with my little pansies running up each side.

We drove out on to Sycamore Valley Drive and made a left turn; that's our address, 1541 Sycamore Valley Drive. Tall sycamore trees line up on both sides of the road, which makes it shaded and friendly--not like Highway 31, which is open and sun-baked and rut-filled, and I hate the way it jiggles us in the truck.

For spring it was hot, but the breeze coming through the windows cooled us down some. What is really good about George is that he does not sweat much, and I thank God every day in the summer for that blessing. I am real careful myself to wear plenty of deodorant and antiperspirant combined so as not to be offensive to others, not like some people in our town who walk around dripping

and smelling like hogs and fanning themselves, so's the smell spreads around.

While we were riding along, George's arm was resting on the window, and he looked happy. I could see George was smiling. His front teeth barely show under that top lip of his. They separate in front and fan over his lower lip, just enough to give him a kind of little boy look. When he smiles or strains himself, that top lip of his pulls way up so's his gums show. I couldn't help but give him a pat on the knee.

George and me, our life is simple. We never had kids. We tried for a long time, nine or ten years, but it never took. I quit with that physical stuff. Never did really like it, George getting all crazy and disgusting while I laid there. Sometimes his upper lip would pull back so far I could see his gums. I couldn't wait for him to get off of me. We had a long talk about it, and I said since we couldn't have children and all, it was an unnecessary duty for me. Sometimes George gets that look in his eye where I know what he is thinking, but I cut it off fast. Usually I just say, "George, we are through with that." He knows exactly what I am saying, and he leaves me alone.

We turned off Sycamore Valley Drive onto Highway 31 until we came to where the foothills start. Then we turned right onto Old McDermott Road and followed alongside the river for the two miles it takes to get up to Blaney Grove, and that is where we had to cross the wooden bridge, which is just wide enough for a truck, and about 25 feet across. George has to pay attention to keep his wheels on that bridge. Just a little mistake and he could have a wheel slip off of the side. So I got out--like I always do--and walked across the bridge to the other side to where I could direct. We have been doing it this way for so long that I don't think George could get across that bridge without me.

I held my arms a way up over my head to where I could use my fingers to point while I yelled. "It's okay." "A little to the left." The reason I use my arms is because, even though the river is shallow, it makes a lot of noise going over the rocks. There are little waterfalls and all that pile up the sound. There are also a couple of old oak trees right there that are full of birds, and you wouldn't believe the racket they can make.

When George was all the way across the bridge, I held my hands straight up the way they do in football when they make a touchdown, and George smiled his lip up after his rear wheels rolled off the bridge.

"That was a fine job, George," I said when I got back into the truck.

"It was a close call to going into the drink," he said just like he always does.

It was very unusual, but there was no one else around, so we had our pick of tables. My favorite sits under a big sycamore tree. I like that one because the birds do not stay in it, and I do not have to worry about some blue jay adding his special ingredients to my food.

We pulled our truck right up next to the tree, and George lifted the laundry basket over the side of the truck. I said, "George, that thing is heavy. Why don't you push it down to the end and let the gate down?" But he just lifted it over as free as you please with his lip pulling back and all. I am afraid he is going to get a hernia. It isn't just the picnic basket; he does that with his tool chest and everything. Sometimes his face gets all red, and I can see the veins stick out on his neck. It gets me all riled up because that is exactly what my pa did just before he had his heart attack and died when I was only seventeen.

After I gave him my disgusted look, I got my blue and white checked oil cloth out of the laundry basket, and I smoothed it out real nice over the table. I took a

napkin and brushed off the benches. I always sit on one too because you never know what or who has been on those seats. I took out my four blue plastic glasses, the plastic knives, forks and spoons, and my blue plastic plates that I save for picnics. I put all the food in the middle of the table: the fried chicken, which I like to brown and then roast in the oven for 45 minutes; my homemade dill pickles that won third prize at the fair last summer; potato salad, which I like to add chopped-up black olives to and just a little pimento for color; some homemade peanut butter cookies--Frank Farmington's favorite; he has told me so at least one hundred times. I also had a bag of Ruffle's potato chips and green onion dip mixed up from a package and sour cream; and my special lemonade, which I add a little cherry juice to, to make it pink. Then, like my Aunt Thea taught me, I put a little pinch of sugar--which I had brought in a plastic bag--at each end of the table to keep the flies away from the food.

George walked on down to the river to watch for Frank's truck. He kept brushing his hair back off of his forehead. I cut his hair once a month, but no matter how hard I try, he comes out with bangs straight across the front, which does not look right for a man in his fifties. So he's taken to using hair gel and greases it to the side, except that within one half hour it goes back down across his forehead. I tell him to have it cut by the barber in town, which he won't. He says he likes the feel of my tummy against him when I'm cutting his hair. And when he says that, he grins so's his upper lip pulls back tight and turns white making his teeth look even more buck than they are.

Time was short before I heard the sound of an engine coming, and I could see the blue pickup turn to head over the bridge.

Frank is real proud of his pickup. He just got brand new corduroy seat covers

in it about two months ago, and he brushes them off all the time just to raise up the nap for plushness. He paid a real high price for those covers, and sometimes, when he is hauling and doing dirty work, he covers them up with an old sheet. "He likes them seatcovers more'n he likes me." That's what Nel says. "If ever I was to wet myself on those seat covers, I think Frank would divorce me," she said one night during canasta. Why would a woman say a thing like that unless she was thinking of it. She says she suffers from a weak bladder, but I don't believe it for one minute. I've seen that woman go a whole day without relieving herself even once. Seems to me like she just wants to get Frank's goat by making him stop at the different restrooms.

Nel never does get out to help Frank. She just sets there like a queen, while he leans out the window looking at the front wheels and then the back and then back to the front, like that. George stood watching from where he was, and then I noticed he started to agitating. His elbows started flapping a little, and from as far back as I was, I could see him pulling his lip back. I thought to myself, "George, why don't you go and direct Frank?" But all he did was watch. There's times when a woman likes to see her man take hold of a situation, without being told.

Then Frank's front wheel slipped right off the side of the bridge. I thought the whole truck was going to go right over. George stood there for a time, like he was lame brained. So I yelled, "George, go and help him." He finally moved and ran over to the bridge. I quick like brushed the sugar off the oil cloth and pulled up the corners to cover the food and ran over to the bridge.

By the time I got there, I was out of breath. Nel was sitting in the truck yelling at Frank. Her dyed-black hair did not move one tiny bit from its french-roll-with-

bangs style as she bobbed her head around on top of that scrawny neck of hers. I pride myself on my natural relaxed style, where my hair can be washed at any time and set at home with my own curlers, and I do not cover up the grey.

Nel said real loud, "Frank, you are a fool for not paying attention. Why did you buy an oversized pickup, which you never have need of anyway?"

Frank barked back to her, "Please, Nel."

Then Nel humphed and turned her head to stare out the window.

The truck looked a little tipsy to me, like it would fall off the bridge if there was much movement. So I said, "Frank, will that truck fall off the bridge if someone moves?"

Frank said, "No, it would not."

George said, "Howdy Frank, how ya doing?" Now, would you believe he would say that then?

Frank said, "Oh, I'm in kind of a mess here." As if George could not see for himself.

I wanted to tell Frank that if he would just get the queen out there to direct him, this would never have happened. But naturally, I kept my mouth shut.

George said, "Would you like me to help you, Frank? What can I do?"

Frank said, "I don't know, George. Let me try backing her up."

Nel rolled her window down from its half up place and leaned out. "You don't think this thing'll fall over? Do you, Elsie?"

I yelled back. "No, Nel, I think it is okay. Just be patient, Dear."

But I sure did not know how they were going to move that truck. The part of the truck under Frank's door rested right on the bridge itself. Nel could get out if she wanted to, but she would have to open the door and climb around and over

the hood to the bridge unless she wanted to go the other way and climb over the truck bed. Of course, she could jump down the four feet into the river and walk out. But that is one woman too high fallutin to try any of those things. She just sat there fanning herself with that plastic, lace-looking white fan she keeps in her purse just to impress.

Frank put the truck in reverse and let the clutch out slow. The motor gunned, and the back wheels spun around going no place. All it did was make a racket that sent birds flying every which way.

He turned off the engine and looked at George. I figured it would be a long wait. Those two men can take forever to decide on anything, like when we play canasta partners--which we do once a week, trading houses each week--and they consult and consult and sit and grunt before they ever make a move. Sometimes I want to pull the hairs on George's arm just to get him going. But I do not. I just bite my tongue, which is more than I can say for Nel.

That woman always speaks her mind. She told George once that his teeth were bucked, and I almost fell off my chair. I mean, you do not say a thing like that to someone. And George cannot help having buck teeth. I never told her anything last summer when it was hot, and she had great big sweat stains under her arms. I mean, it was even hard not to look at them all the time, but never would I show such unkindness to a fellow human being.

Don't get me all wrong. Nel did come out this winter and help when I was sick with pneumonia. I appreciated her trying to help, even though her cooking was worse than any I ever tasted, and even though the only cleaning she did was the dishes. I was so sick that the doctor had me down to bed rest, and he said if I didn't follow his orders, he would put me in the hospital. George got

riled up and did not want to go to work, so Frank told Nel she should help out. She came during the day until George got home from his job. Thing is, she talked so much I wanted to stuff my pillow down her throat. I mean, I was exhausted from watching her mouth flap up and down almost continuous. After one week, I told George I was much better, and that I would promise to stay in bed except for going to the bathroom and eating, and he could go to work. I told him that if she came back, I might die.

"Why don't you walk down to McGaffey's station and get a tow, Frank?" I heard Nel yell over the noise of the engine. Frank ignored her, which he has to because she barks at him all the time. But this time, I was in agreement with her.

Frank leaned out the window. "It won't work, George. Those wheels won't grab on. We got to get them down hard on the bridge." Frank stared at George. Then he said, "Why don't you get in the back of the truck, George, and see if that weights it down enough."

George grinned his lip up at Frank. "Okay, Frank," he said, and then he walked right into the river just as free as you please without taking off his shoes. He waded over past the truck and climbed onto the bridge and then up into the truck bed.

Well, I wanted to yell at him right then about getting his shoes wet, but I did not want to give Nel the satisfaction of hearing it. She is always accusing me of treating George like a child.

George's 225 pounds did lower the truck so's it was noticeable, and Frank started her up again and let the clutch out slow. But them back wheels still spun around, even though George tried jumping up and down. You can imagine

what a spectacle he was making of himself. He was bent over holding on to the side and jumping on his legs.

Nel's plastic fan just moved faster, and I was thinking that her hand must be getting tired. My hand ached just watching her fan like that.

"Frank, I am never coming out to Blaney Grove again." I could hear her yell over the top of the gunning engine.

"Fine, Nel. Just fine." Frank was showing his teeth when he said it. Frank almost never gets mad, but you know it when he does. He doesn't usually say much, just shoves his hands in his pockets and kicks rocks. But he could not do that in the truck. Instead, he hit his hand hard on the dash.

I got a little nervous, so I yelled out, "You okay, Nel?"

"Why, Elsie, if this thing don't move real soon, I am sure I will die of a heart attack, or Frank here will do something real hurtful."

I could not believe my ears because it was always Nel who was mean to Frank. I think she felt trapped in there, and like he could do anything he wanted to her.

Then Nel let out a very high screech, and I could have sworn it looked like Frank just leaned over and pinched her.

I yelled back, "Just calm your nerves, and everything will be all right." Even if she deserved it, I do not think it is right for a man to treat his wife mean.

"I've got an idea," George said in a medium voice while he was climbing back down into the water. I mean he didn't yell it loud, but it sounded strong, like it might be a good one. Seemed like even the birds got quiet to listen.

"Frank, let's you and me pick up some of these boulders from the river and keep loading them in the back of the truck till it weights down enough."

"Why, George, I think that's a real good idea." Frank smiled out of the window. George's arm did some flapping, and he smiled so big back at Frank that he raised up his lip like a horse does when it whinnies. You would have thought Jesus Christ told him his idea was good.

Frank jumped right into the water and gave George a banging on the shoulder. "Why, George, I didn't know you was so smart. We'll be able to get this done in no time." Frank turned from mad to happy real quick.

"Now, Frank," Nel screeched out, "you gonna get these seat covers all wet. Why don't you and George walk on down to McCaffey's station and get his tow truck? It can't be more'n five miles. This won't never work, Frank."

I could see just how dirty they were going to get unless I was willing to wade myself out in that water and make a fool of myself by pulling George out by his ear, which I was not. So I folded my arms and looked hard at George. I could tell he was pretending not to see me.

It was like them two was enjoying themselves, like they did not have to consider our feelings or what we thought at all. George knew I would not come into that water. He knows I am terrible afraid of drowning, even though that water was only knee high.

Nel leaned out of the window. "Are you sure this truck will not fall over, Elsie? I mean, I could get killed, and I have got to go to the bathroom." Her voice sounded small this time, and I even had to strain to hear her over the river noise.

I said, "Nel, you could come out if you don't mind climbing some or getting wet."

She said, "I think I will hold it a little longer."

The two of them big-shot men found some big boulders. First they would lift them up on the bridge and then climb up and lift them over the tailgate into the truck. George's lip kept getting whiter and whiter, and I could see some sweat coming off of his forehead, which is very unusual for him. They was whistling and acting happy about something. I think they was feeling strong with Nel stuck up in that truck and me afraid of the water.

"Why don't you put the tail gate down and make it easy," I yelled.

George turned and looked at me real hard, and then he talked to me like he never did before.

He said, "Elsie, I want you to shut your mouth for awhile."

I don't mind saying I was shocked. It dumbfounded me. I think it was his coming up with that idea that made him uppity like that. I just stood there for a time staring at him, but he did not look at me again. I saw a smile on Frank's face. I could not bring myself to look at Nel; it would have been too humiliating.

"Elsie," she called to me. Well, of course, then I had to look at her.

"They are just not themselves today," she said to me, which I thought was a very comforting thing for her to say. That woman can be kind when she wants to.

I decided I should keep my mouth shut up tight; otherwise, I might say something real unbecoming right there, like the time Nona Willis did on New Year's Eve in 1960. That was twenty-some-odd years ago. She told her husband, Chad--that is short for Chadwin--that if he did not shut up and watch the way he talked to her, then she would tell about how his mama came to have him four months before she was married to his daddy nine months and who his daddy really was. The town has never forgot that. So I decided to sit down and

watch.

After awhile, you could see the truck lowering in the back so's the wheels were down hard on the bridge.

"Let's give it a try, George," Frank called out loud so's Nel and I could hear him. Then George climbed his wet filthy self into the back of the truck to give it some more weight.

Frank pulled himself up into the cab, and the water run off of him like a faucet. He was dirty too, and I knew that he hated to set on those seat covers like that. George looked just like him, and his new blue and green plaid shirt was filthy.

Frank gave Nel a hard glaring look, and she didn't say nothing to him. She leaned out of the window and said in a louder voice than before, "If this don't work, I will have to wet myself right here on these new seat covers.

I said, "You hold it, Nel." She started fanning again.

Frank started up the truck, put it in gear and let out the clutch. The back wheels started grabbing and spinning. But the truck moved backward a couple of inches. You could see the side of the truck dragging on the bridge. Frank kept on edging it back about an inch at a time by letting the clutch in and out. George had to sit down and hold on from all the jerking that was going on. The noise was terrible. The engine was gunning; the truck was scraping; the back wheels were grabbing and spinning; and Frank kept yelling, "Come on, baby, come on!"

Finally, when they got that front wheel to the bank of the river, the truck moved right on out on to the road.

Nel leaned out the window and yelled to me. "That is very fine, but I have already wet myself all over the seat." And then she sat herself more upright,

and her head bobbed a little.

Frank jumped out of the truck and slammed the door; then he went back to the back of the truck to talk to George. I decided to cross over the bridge and see what was going to happen. Plus, I wanted to give George a hard look.

Nel said, "We'll have to go on home now. I can't stay here in these clothes, and Frank will have to clean up the truck." I could see Frank was mad because he had his hands jammed into his pockets, and he was kicking at stones.

Frank and George took the boulders out of the truck and piled them right next to the road. They lifted those boulders back out over the side without letting down the gate. Some of them were the size of big watermelons. George's neck veins were sticking way out. Now, if it were me, I would have lowered that tailgate and rolled them to the edge of it and then lifted them off. I do not know what is wrong with those men.

When they were done, Frank climbed into the truck. Nel leaned out of the window. "See you Tuesday for canasta," she hollered to me. Frank backed up onto the road so fast that his wheels squealed, and then he took off like he was being chased by fire.

"Now drive careful over them ruts on Highway 31," I called out. But I do not think he heard me.

"Lets eat some food, Maw. I'm hungry." George said to me, but he did not look at me. He knew he had made a spectacle of me.

"You are a filthy mess, George. I do not think I can sit with you all wet and dirty like that," I told him. I was disgusted, and I wanted to go home.

"I gotta dry off some first," he said, without even discussing it with me.

"Well, that's fine," I said. "Since you have no consideration for my feelings, I

am going to sit in the truck and wait." I was not going to allow him to talk to me that way, after all I had done for him. So I went and got into the truck.

He sat there and started in on my fried chicken right in front of me. I was hot and hungry, and I just wanted to lie down on the seat and go to sleep. I could not do that though because then George might get too relaxed. I stared at him full on the whole time he ate. I never took my eyes off of him. You would think that man would get the idea to go home, but I think he was enjoying making me wait there.

First he pulled a leg out of the Tupperware container I use to keep it fresh; then he pulled out a breast and ate that up real fast. I watched him eat four more pieces. He dished up some potato salad on to one of my blue plates, not just a large spoonful like I would give him, but he covered the whole plate with a mountain of it. I could swear he ate slow too just to rile me.

I try to teach him manners, but if I am not right on top of him, he does as he pleases. Why, if the Farmingtons had stayed, there would not have been enough food. He drank four glasses of lemonade straight down, and when he was all finished stuffing his face, he laid himself down full length on the bench with his legs hanging off the end.

By then I wanted to wring his neck, chop him up into little pieces and feed him to the hogs. I mean, he had no regard for me sitting there in the truck. I do not remember him ever acting like this before; he always did what I asked him to.

I have not talked to him for one whole week now, and I will not until he apologizes. The thing that gets my goat is that he does not seem one bit upset. He just keeps company with that dumb cat. He is polishing up the truck and

talking to him now. I can see them out the window. Melvin keeps brushing back and forth against George's leg, and George is talking to him like that cat is a person. Look there. He's smiling like to himself with that lip of his is a way back from his teeth. I'd like to punch those buck teeth right out of his head.

Mabel

It's tough being around someone who's not at home much in the head. There's always that feeling that it should be different, and you know it can't. Like there's this mismatch, a place where things just don't come together. Maybe the women were trying to bring things together with the birthday party. I'll give 'em that. But it's women fooling with things that causes problems. Always wantin' to make things better when they should leave well enough alone. I mean, Mabel didn't expect life to be the same for her like it is for other women; she knows she's different.

Us men don't talk to her much, except to say "Hi, Mabel." We keep on doing whatever it is we are doing at the time, mostly because we don't know what to say to her. She can't talk back except in simple ways, and her eyes never look at you for long, just a quick look, sometimes meeting your own eyes, and for that moment it looks like she sees through your soul, and you shudder and feel ever more guilty, like there is something to do, or you feel like she has been fooling everyone, stringing us along, making us feel bad for nothing. The rest of the time her eyes are back and forth or she's looking at the ground. She looks ashamed, like she's nothing and ashamed of it.

She never stands still, rocks on her feet, like she's got to go to the bathroom. Her hands are always together in front, but they barely meet around her belly because she's fat. Her legs are like tree stumps, so she looks like an elephant with two legs, and when she walks, she rocks from side to side.

I don't think she ever washes her hair because it looks greasy most of the time. Sometimes Marge White--she's the town beautician--cleans her up some.

After that, Mabel struts like a just-bathed dog. Keeps stroking her hair like it's silk or something.

She gets excited like a child when Pie Abraham, our mailman, meets her with her welfare check once a month or when Sid teases her. Sid is the only one of us men who talks to her. He always gives her a hard time at Nancy's place. Nancy's is where Mabel goes to dinner every day at five o'clock.

It's a small cafe in the middle of town, just nine tables and a small counter and bright lights so's you can see what you're eating. It's where I eat most of my dinners. A bachelor like me needs the company and the good cooking too. It's where everyone goes at different times. Our visiting place. Food's good; the usual stuff--plate-sized pancakes with boysenberry syrup, eggs with hashbrowns and bacon, grilled cheese sandwiches, hamburgers with the works, fried chicken or porkchops--that's what Mabel likes--with mashed potatoes and gravy.

Mabel always sits at the place where the counter meets the wall. She looks lonely there. Even when the place is full, she looks lonely. We all say hi to her, but Sid Fallow kids her when he comes in with his wife on Tuesdays.

"Hi, Mabel. What you eating tonight?" he says--he knows what she's eating because she always eats the same thing. Everyone is looking by then, and Mabel turns red. She smiles at him, and shows that big hole where her tooth got busted out. Sometimes she likes to suck her lip in and out of that hole, especially when she gets nervous. That together with her pig-shaped nose and small eyes is not too beautiful a sight.

You can tell she likes Sid's attention though. On Tuesdays, she stares at the door, waiting for him to come in, smiles big when he walks in the door, then she

watches him till he asks her what she's eating.

"I'm eating pork chops and apple sauce," she says with a lisp because of the that missing tooth. Then her tongue kind of hangs out a little while she waits for him to say his part back to her.

He says, "You be careful, girl; you gonna get fat." And she grins like a baby, and then turns and looks right at the yellow wall next to her as if there was someone there.

Our town is small--population 476 if you count the whole county, 150 if you just count the ones in town--so we all look out for Mabel. She lives right in town where her folks, Bill and Regina, homesteaded and built a little one bedroom house years ago. Bill used to work for Cecil Omstead who owns the Circle K quick stop store just on the edge of town. It's where I work. Nowadays, Cecil's gone fishing most of the time, so I pretty much run the store. It's where everyone comes in at one time or other because it's the only place in town for groceries. I give Mabel our throw away food sometimes. Don't get the wrong idea; that food is good, just not sellable.

The women say we owe it to Regina to keep Mabel in town because Regina delivered most of the babies around here for years. She even delivered me forty seven years ago. She was 50 when she had Mabel. Some say that's why Mabel is the way she is, and she was their only one. Regina and Bill died when Mabel was 20, both in a space of six months and left everything they owned to her.

The way I see it, Regina was just doing her thing, and we don't owe her nothin'. I have said right along Mabel should be living over in Hickory Hill where Sally Cunningham runs a boarding home. Sally has about four people

now--two old chinamen, and one man shakes a lot from Parkinson's, and one woman like Mabel, except worse.

The kids around here are downright mean to her, and the thing is, she never hurt nobody. They even have a game called "Mabel Ate the Stable" that they made up because she's fat. It's a game of tag where whoever loses has to go to the barn or garage or something and make loud eating sounds. They even make fun of her to her face. "Mabel, was your mama a cow and your daddy a gorilla?" They say it, and they laugh. Of course, she smiles at them, which just kills me. I mean, it's bad enough her being different, without them making fun of it, without making her feel more different, like she is a target for meanness. Then you feel like you gotta say something to build her up a little, and I don't know what to say except to tell them kids to go on home.

Mabel really doesn't ask for much or really bother anybody. But she bothers us all because we all feel like we should be doing more. But I swear doing more makes for more problems. It mostly complicates things. Just like the birthday party did.

Nancy got the idea to have the birthday party. It was Mabel's twenty-third, and Nancy thought we would all just be tickled pink to do something for her. But this time the other women got in on it--Elsie Carlton, Marge White, Nel Farmington, and Betsy Kebrecht and some of the others. I felt sick because I knew they would start this thing rolling, and it would snowball. It would take over the women, and us men would be pulled into helping. It always happens that way.

"Let's make it a surprise party," Betsy cawed out one day when there was a bunch of them women gabbing at the Circle K. And them women thought that

was the best idea ever. They drug us to a planning meeting at Nancy's one night, after Mabel had gone on home. We made jokes while we were planning. "Let's play Mabel Ate the Stable," said Pie Abraham, and his wife laughed so hard I thought she would have a stroke. We all laughed, except Elsie Carlton and Nancy. Elsie kept nudging her husband George to be quiet.

Nancy gave us a lecture about the children. "We have to tell all the children to be nice to her, and not to say nothing mean. Everyone will have to be tough with the kids. Okay?" We all said yes, but I didn't think it would make a bit of difference, no matter what we said to those kids. They're mean. Especially them Kebrecht kids. The older boy skinned a cat here not too long ago and let it go on living. I know some said "boys will be boys," but I don't truck with hurting animals. The other kids, they follow that older Kebrecht one around like a squad of mean ducks.

Then we talked about presents. Someone, I think it was Nel, said we should give her a dog collar or a bottle of shampoo or a wig. It was funny. But then Betsy Kebrecht said, "She's got to be a virgin. Wouldn't it be nice to give her something to remember?" That brought down the house, but it was mostly the women laughed. Personally, I think that Kebrecht woman is mental.

I couldn't get the idea out of my mind of what it would be like to have sex with Mabel. And my mind just couldn't stand the thought. I know for a fact that some of the men have joked about using her that way. And some of us have wondered about George Carlton. His wife, Elsie, brags about cutting him off of sex for the rest of his life.

There were two--Sid Fallow and Joe Kebrecht--who were right out against the whole party thing. They said it was foolish, that she would be embarrassed,

and who was going to dance with the birthday girl anyway? We all laughed, but us men looked at each other wondering who was going to do it. I said that I wasn't, and why did we have to? Sid and Joe did not get into this thing at all. They kept shaking their heads and saying it wasn't gonna work. They said Mabel wouldn't understand much of it anyway.

"She ain't never been to a party," Sid said, "and all that attention's gonna scare her." I said I agreed with that, that it might scare her, that things should be left alone, that weren't one of us men who would dance with her anyway.

Nancy told us that was foolishness. "The attention would be good for Mabel. Poor thing. You men can do this for just one night, can't you?"

I thought about it. I thought maybe I could, but then I got sick just trying it on in my mind. I have even noticed that Mabel smells. Old George said that he might dance with her. He said it just like a boy who says he will do what his mama says. The women all nodded at him and smiled--like mother hens approving their "good" little chick. "That would be nice, George," his wife said. I don't mind saying that his wife is fat too. Maybe he's used to it. He's henpecked to death anyway.

The night of the party, the women was to go get Mabel and bring her back to the post office. Then we would all be waiting outside and surprise her and then walk over to the Miller's barn. It's an old barn in town we fixed up some years ago for dances and the Fourth of July and other big events.

I noticed that the stars were crowded in the sky that night, and the moon was full, so's it was like daylight. But it was cold enough to wear a jacket, though some of the men didn't. It's funny how that is, because you can tell those men are cold the way they hold their arms close in to their sides, hands in pockets

and the way they keep their feet moving, usually kicking at little rocks here and there, and they don't talk regular. They seem to listen more and nod.

Kebrecht's like that. He doesn't wear his coat; he doesn't talk; he just holds in tight and kicks rocks. Betsy, his wife, is the talker. That woman talks more than all the men, women, and children in this town put together. You can always hear her voice somewhere, like she was a crow, flying here and there. I hear them crows all the time, and most of the time, I can't see them. That's how she is, everywhere, even if you can't see her.

When the girls got back to the Post Office with Mabel, we could see they had fixed her up some. She had lipstick on, and that day Marge White had cleaned up her hair. It didn't hang in strings like usual, and the blond of it, which I didn't notice before--or maybe it was the moonlight--shown some on top of the darker brown. They put a daisy just over her ear, and she kept touching it like she was afraid it would fall out. In fact, she leaned her head toward it, like that daisy was made of lead and heavy to hold up. She kept stroking her clean hair, and Elsie Carlton kept pulling down her hand. The lipstick helped her face a lot until she smiled and you could see the black hole. She lost that tooth about four years ago when she fell and bumped her mouth on old McCaffy's gate post. The gate was a mess for a week with blood dried on it.

She had on the same kind of dress that she always wears--real plain, straight down, no shape except for the huge useless boobs that hang down to her waist. You can tell she doesn't wear a bra or nothin' by the way they move when she walks, like loose sacks of sand. You can't help but notice.

It is strange that someone so ugly like Mabel can get your attention. I mean she still is a woman, I guess, even if she is ugly and retarded.

I know George watches her sometimes, and I can see right where he is looking. It was at the town picnic I heard Elsie, his wife, telling the ladies that she won't let George come near her that way no more. She sounded like she thought she was the blessed virgin or something, like she had a halo back of her head. She closed her eyes when she said it, even bowed her head some. Myself, I think she is a little off the road, but then George's no prize winning stud himself.

Mabel wore new red tennis shoes that one of the ladies gave her. She kept giving her left foot a shake now and then like she had something stuck on it, and she was trying to get it off.

She kept her hands clasped in front of her, making her arms into a V that pushed those boobs close in together. It was comical, her being so fat and all. It was like she was real shy, the way a young girl is, but she was an elephant, and when she smiled, I thought of the freak house at the county fair.

Everyone yelled "Happy Birthday" to her, and after she let out a scream from being shocked, she smiled out that missing tooth to us. In the night like that--even though the moon was bright and there was light from the street lamp--the shadows were darker. The black hole in her mouth looked even blacker. Shadows danced all over her, the ones from the people and the ones from her own self--like her eyelashes onto her cheeks or her chin onto her chest. It gave me an eerie feeling like nothin' was real.

We all walked over to the barn, the women fussing around Mabel, and us men bringing up the rear. There was about twenty of us plus a few kids. They were dancing around the outside, running away and coming back. They giggled and skipped and kept watching us talk to Mabel. I think they were glad

we were nice to her. I felt like it made them happy, the way they were jumping and all. Maybe they were just excited about the party; maybe we were all feeling good about doing something nice for Mabel.

I was nervous though because I was afraid one of those damn women would make me dance with her. I can be real strong when I want to. I stood up to Joe when he was drunk and threatening me with a tire iron because he said I cheated him out of money at the Circle K. I pinned him and got him down and got that iron away. He apologized the next day. But when a woman pushes me into doing something that would be thoughtful, I get to thinking I should do it, and then I hate it because I hate doing something I don't want to do just because someone thinks I should do it. I mean, there was no real reason to dance with Mabel except for them women, and if it made me sick, then I don't see any sense to that. I could just feel what that fat would be like under my hand and what it would be like to have those jugs in close to me like that. I didn't want no part of it. Some of the men think she doesn't wear underwear. Frank said he could tell one time when she sat down the way she keeps those legs open. They stay open because they are too fat for her knees to come together. The whole thing just got me all stirred up, and I wanted to leave that party.

The stereo was set up at the south end of the barn where the plug is. Frank and Nel Farmington were in charge of the music.

Mabel stood by the ladies, her head tilted from that daisy, sucking her lip in and out, looking mostly at the floor, sometimes moving her head from side to side like she was checking everything out, but her eyes weren't. They just looked down. Every once in a while she would look up fast to take it all in.

Me, Joe, and Pie stood by the food table shoving down chips and onion dip, salami, little sausages and punch. We were across the barn from the stereo. Some of the men stood outside the barn door smoking cigars. I could see them looking in once in a while. They were the ones with no jacket, and they were kicking at the rocks.

Why is it women do these things? I mean this whole damn thing was their idea, and we got roped into it. It involved us men doing something we really didn't want to do.

George and Elsie Carlton were across the room, and I could see her talking to him. I knew she was working on him. He wasn't saying nothing. Poor George, we all knew he would be the one. Not because he wanted to, but because she would make him do it. She would tell him it is the right thing for a man to do, and mostly she wouldn't shut up till he did.

I could hear Betsy Kebrecht over by the hay stacks at the back of the barn where Mabel was. All the women were clucking around Mabel, telling her how pretty and all she looked, and Nancy kept looking over at us by the table. We knew she wanted us to dance with Mabel. That woman cannot mind her own business.

"Shit!" Joe cursed. "I'm not gonna do it. Are you, Leo?"

"No! I'm not either," I told him.

It wasn't long before Elsie and George were sidling over to Mabel. Elsie was holding on to George by the elbow on the way over. We were all watching. Even the men at the door quit kicking and watched.

"Mabel, George would like to dance with you." We could all hear Elsie. "Go on, George," she said--which sounded to me like "This won't hurt much." He

didn't say one word, just obeyed while Betsy, the crow, pushed Mabel to the center of the barn, and Elsie pushed George. Elsie put Mabel's arm up on George's shoulder and, Betsy got the right arm out there with George's.

George smiled his bucked tooth smile for the ladies, and Frank started up the new Kenny Rogers song. I couldn't believe George would really go through with it. But there they were out there, his hand resting on her hip while it moved up and down, her lookin' down at the floor and him looking everywhere but at her. Neither one of them could dance. You figure Mabel's never been to a party before, maybe never saw dancing before. They just rocked from foot to foot, like two upright elephants. George's face was red, and he didn't look at us men.

The women lined up to watch, and they glowed at the pitiful sight before them.

Then Frank left his place at the stereo and walked up to George. I wouldn't have believed it if I didn't see it, but he tapped George on the shoulder.

"Jesus, he's cutting in," Joe whispered to me.

George stood there for a moment watching Frank and Mabel dance, like he didn't know what to do. Then he looked relieved and walked over by Elsie. She smiled at him and gave him a "good boy" pat on the arm. Joe said he could throw up at that, and I said I could too.

In about fifteen seconds, Pie cut in on Farmington. Joe said, "Jesus" about five times. Then our town drunk, Travis Roundy, cut in, and by God, it was like a light going on in all the men's heads. We could save each other. We were out-smarting them damn women. I got right in line for my turn. Even the men at the door quit kicking and got in line. We were moving so fast and headed for the

purpose of saving each other that the women didn't get a dance. Not a one of them. We had really figured out a way so's no one got the worst of it. We started having some fun, acting young, like we was courting, like Mabel was some kind of a beautiful woman, her no more'n rocking from side to side. But us men, it was like we was at a big hoedown or some damn thing.

Even Joe got into it. He was cutting up for the rest of us. He held her arm out like he was doing a waltz, and he tried to turn her around. She stumbled, but we were laughing. Poor Mabel laughed too.

I think there was the part of it where we all got to touch her, feel the fat and all. Funny how you can be revolted by someone and want to touch them too. Cecil Omstead even held her up close so's her head was up under his chin, and them boobs were smashed up against him. He was clowning, but I think he was feeling what it was like. Pie danced around her while she stood still and giggled. She kept her head down except once in a while when he whooped; her hands flapped just a little to the music.

I noticed there was a V of sweat in the middle of her chest. We were all laughing, and she didn't know why it was funny. That part kills me. That's what I mean by things not meeting. We were all having our party, and Mabel was having hers. Difference is, she had no idea what was going on, and we did.

George Carlton, when it came time for his second round, got her up close, his arms as far round her back as he could get. He was trying to be funny by pulling her so close. No one laughed. There was something about it wasn't funny, and it was a little longer before anyone cut in on them.

Sid was the funniest. He went dance steppin' out to cut in, like he was doing ballet. We howled. Then he put Mabel's hand up on his head while he twirled.

Sid isn't very tall, so Mabel could keep her hand up there. Then he took her in his arms and, believe it or not, he dipped her. She damn near fell over, and you could tell he was struggling not to drop her. She looked scared too. I could tell because when she got her balance, she was sucking that lip in real fast, and her eyes were a little wild. She felt for the daisy, and we all got quiet.

When it was my second turn, I couldn't think of anything funny, so I just danced out like Sid and then went slow. I didn't want to scare her again. My feelings were jumbled up too, with everyone watching. They were clapping so loud it was thundering in my head. I could see Mabel was a little scared, and I felt bad for her. She looked quick in my face and smiled that black hole at me. Then she closed up her mouth and kept sucking in her lip. She stared at my chest; her head tilted a little for the weight of the daisy.

We kept going till all the men had danced with Mabel three times. We were tired then, and Frank called the end. We were quiet when the dancing stopped, and Frank turned off his stereo. I swear the clapping and laughing echoed in that barn, and Mabel stood alone for a time until Nancy came up to her.

She said, "You must be tired, huh, Mabel? What a night."

"Yea," she said. "Yea--tired. Go home."

That daisy was hanging almost out of Mabel's hair by then, so Nancy pulled it out and handed it to her and then led her out of the barn.

I couldn't help wondering what poor Mabel would expect after a night like that. She must have got the idea in her head that we all were excited about dancing with her. What else could she think?

We all went home quiet. I was trying to figure out why I felt sad. It was just that things didn't meet, that it couldn't be different, like it was all in fun, but I

didn't feel like I'd had a good time.

The next day when Pie told me what happened, it was as if I knew it before he told me. Like an old nightmare come true. But just as soon as he told me, I went into the bathroom and threw up. He told me that that morning Nancy went to see Mabel. The front door was wide open, so she went on in when Mabel didn't answer. Said she found Mabel on the living room floor. Said her clothes had been torn off of her, and she was curled up in a ball sucking her thumb. Said no one knew who done it, and she couldn't get Mabel to talk about it. Said she was keeping Mabel at her house till she recovered.

If things was bad before, they're worse now, now that them women got in there to fix things. Except for Nancy, the women are staying away from Mabel. Men hiding out. I ain't seen one man in the Circle K for four days. No one talking about it either. Nancy is going to move Mabel to Hickory Hill as soon as Sally Cunningham has a bed for her. It's gonna be better when Mabel's gone from here.

A Fragile Chick

Carrie's small seven-year-old body lay stretched out in front of the television. Blond lashes flanked her green eyes, blinking quickly at loud noises or sometimes slowly from the rush of affection she felt for the characters living before her on Doodyville. She watched Buffalo Bob sit sideways at the piano while he played and crooned, and Howdy Doody's small wooden body danced lightly on the piano's closed lid, the visible strings jerking his arms and legs up and down spasmodically. If Carrie's own arms stiffened from holding up her blond head, she changed to her side or sometimes sat up for a while, returning eventually to her stomach with her chin cupped in her hands.

A liquid summer breeze blew through the screen door and over the back of her legs, raising goose bumps and bringing with it the sweet smell of the jasmine that grew in a plot along the front porch. Two lazy boy chairs, one green brocade fabric, the other brown leather, waited empty on either side of the picture window for later when the three of them would watch television, when she would cuddle in her grandfather's lap, sitting quietly so she wouldn't disturb him and could remain there for a long time.

Carrie liked living with her grandparents, her grandfather coming home every night at the same time, her grandmother starting to cook just before he came home, the rooster's morning call, the early sun crawling across her bed to wake her, the smell of bacon, the hatchery with the soft, dancing baby chicks, the stacks of folded clean clothes on the dining room table, the clean dishes, the way the neighbor's black and white cat slept on the top of the fence, her grandfather's belly laugh and his Buffalo Bob smile, her grandmother's purple-

flowered apron, the big white flowers on the magnolia tree and the cone-like pods with red seeds that dropped from it, the finger-staining pomegranates she ate from the tree at the very back of the yard where she sometimes found solitude hiding behind the old dog house, the smell of the new puppies' breath at Mrs. Melon's house next door, the way there were no sidewalks, just sloping asphalt and the shallow gutter that guided the water into a storm drain, the way she rode in the middle next to Grandpa when they drove to the feed store that smelled of grains and hay, leather and saw dust, the way she was tucked in at night, and the way the soft down of her very own baby chick felt against her cheek.

Buffalo Bob swayed and bounced through the song, while the fringe on his sleeves danced with the movement of his arms. His face was friendly, and he flashed smiles and concerned looks with the words of his song.

"Okay, Peanuts." He turned to the boys and girls in the peanut gallery. "I want you to call Clara Bell. I have something to tell that clown." He shot a confidential wink Carrie's way.

Carrie's eyes traveled to the mahogany clock on top of the television at exactly 5:15. Every night at this time she would hear her grandfather's old white pick up pull into the driveway, the faint squeal of the brakes whispering to her that he was home, and she would turn her attention back to her show, comforted by the background sounds of the screen door scratching open and slamming shut and the play of the hangers as he hung his U. S. Post Office jacket in the closet behind the front door, and finally his warm raspy "Hello, little chicky. What's cooking?"

She would turn to see his ruddy complexion and black-grey beard spread

wide with a white smile. "Dinner," she'd return to him with a giggle, kicking her feet against the gold carpet, and pushing herself up for her hug. It was a nightly thing. He lowered his head so she could entwine her fingers behind his neck. His skin was warm, and it was rough from the short clipped hairs just above his collar. He folded his arms under her to make a seat, lifting her up. She lay her head against his chest feeling more warmth from the skin behind his shirt, hearing his muffled voice resonate inside him; she listened for his heart beat while he rocked her from side to side, her arms tucked inside of his, and she felt small, fragile, and protected. He let her stay like this until she was done, and she let him know by raising her head up and tugging at his beard. "I love you, Grandpa," she would whisper and give him a squeeze when he laughed back a warm "I love you too, Carrie." Then, as she lay back down to watch her show, she would watch him stroll toward the kitchen and disappear into the light that fell through the door. She would hear the sounds of her grandparents' voices exchanging stories, his belly laugh a deep explosion of joy warming the house and the evening for her. Her days were of waiting for him--the house quiet, hollow, during the hours when the sun travelled from the back where the chickens were shaded in their coops to the front where the magnolia tree was blooming, and the sign "EGGS FOR SALE" hung crooked on its trunk.

Tonight was different; she heard only her grandmother humming quietly in the kitchen to the orchestra of pots and pans and dishes, and the hoot of an owl in the magnolia tree.

"They are separated," Carrie had heard her grandmother say over the fence to Mrs. Melon a week ago. "Carrie will be with us awhile, till her mother gets a place and a job." Carrie wasn't sure what "separated" meant, but her

grandmother had been talking in a soft whispery voice, and she had seen the two women suddenly stop talking when they caught sight of her on the back patio. She knew they were talking about her mother and Grady, and she heard the words "stay with us awhile" as if the volume had been turned up. She felt a spring of hope well up in her but hurried to push it down for fear she was mistaken.

She had listened from behind the dog house on another cool morning while her grandmother tearfully explained to Mrs. Melon how her son--Carrie's father--had been such a good, bright boy, and how it was too bad he had to marry her because she had driven him to drink. "He wouldn't be dead now if it weren't for her."

Carrie had shuddered at the her who was her mother. "She will come and get me if she hears you," Carrie wanted to say; instead, she kept very quiet, though her knees ached from being squeezed to her chest by her arms. She knew her mother was always close by--just behind a tree, in the closet, behind a closed door, in the basement, at the front door, maybe even under the bed--and that she was listening to everything Carrie said or to things said by other people. Carrie would never give words to anything against her mother, and when she heard them from others, she worked very hard to think of something good to say to ward off the bad things said. For Carrie this was survival.

She carefully picked her words when speaking to her mother, watching eyes and shoulders for a reaction or for the quick, almost inaudible intake of breath that would indicate her mother was upset. Then her mother's grey eyes would widen, and whatever she said would leave Carrie feeling weak, alone, and ashamed--like the time Carrie told her mother that the garbage man had waved

to her. "Now isn't that nice," her mother had said, her eyes widening and flashing. "Only bad little girls wave to strange men." And there were worse things like the time Carrie walked in the living room and her mother and Grady were lying naked on the couch. "Get out of here, you little bitch, and don't you sneak up on me like that again." There were the times when her mother staggered into Carrie's room in the middle of the night, Carrie pretending to be asleep, pretending with her fingers crossed and every muscle in her body tight, wishing that her mother would go away. Her mother's glazed eyes would be filled with tears as they spilled into Carrie's night.

"I want you to know how much I love you." Her mother's thick tongue slurred over each word. She would hug Carrie too tight, the buttons of her coat digging into Carrie's ear, and kiss her too long while Grady stood watching. Carrie knew not to push her mother away; instead, she would bury her head in her mother's shoulder to hide her face. "I love you too, Mommy," she would push out of her mouth, dried words to hurry her mother along as much as possible.

Carrie had felt relieved when she heard her grandmother and Mrs. Melon saying "Good-bye," and "Have a good day," and when they had left their meeting at the fence that day. Her mother hadn't come shrieking through the yard to take her away because of what her grandmother had said, even though it had been Saturday, a day her mother sometimes showed up unexpectedly for a short visit.

"Okay, Boys and Girls, real loud," said Howdy Doody, his nasal voice sounding excited. His wooden face was splashed with freckles and an eternal gapped-tooth smile, and his cheeks were pushed up as if they were clay and someone had taken his thumbs and pushed them up.

"Clara Bell," the Peanuts' small voices chimed, and they chimed again, "Clara Bell." Some were so excited they were bouncing on their seats. Birthday children had balloons tied to their wrists, and when Clara Bell came skipping out, the balloons rocked and bobbed with the laughter and screams of the children. The clown honked his horn once, then held a hand to his ear. The children laughed and pointed to his other hand kept rigid against his thigh, a bottle of seltzer water hanging from it. Carrie jumped up on her knees, bouncing against her heels. "Buffalo Bob, look," she whispered. "What is it, Peanuts?" he asked, his forehead wrinkled with questioning lines. The children were leaning forward, almost falling out of their seats, pointing and screaming. Clarabell pulled the bottle out and aimed, letting loose a heavy spray that slammed into Buffalo Bob's face and left a dark bib of water around the neck of his shirt. Carrie giggled and then lay back down on the floor. She looked back at the clock. It was 5:25. A weight settled in her chest, and she found it difficult to hear the television because a hissing sound filled her head. She thought of her little chick out in the hatchery and wanted to feel its soft down against her cheek.

"Come on, Carrie," her grandmother had said two days ago, and she had led Carrie out to the hatchery. It was a square flat cage with a light in it to keep the eggs warm enough to hatch. They had squatted down to look through the thick plastic on the sides, and one of the eggs was moving. The beak of the chick was sticking out of the large hole he had pecked through the shell. Carrie could see his wet head and eye through the hole. Cracks jutted along the sides of the brown shell. The hole got bigger as he poked at it, until the egg was pushed apart, and he sat there wet and dazed. He wobbled at first, trying to get around.

"He's yours, Carrie. He's the first one of this batch." Carrie had listened without believing as if she were in a dream. "He'll have to stay in here for awhile till he's strong. These little chicks are easy to break, Honey. You'll be able to hold him later," her grandmother had promised.

Carrie had breathed in and held the breath for a long time while she watched the little chick struggle. She had watched her grandmother paint a little blue dot on his head with a Q-tip and blue food coloring, so Carrie would know which one he was after the others had hatched.

And that same night when her grandfather had come home at his usual time, she met him at the door and wouldn't let him take off his jacket. She had grabbed his hand and pulled him out to the hatchery. She had hopped in quick little steps while he looked at her new chick.

His face reddened as he bent over to look in the side. "Carrie, I think this is the best one I have ever seen. Look at him jumping around in there."

"Can I hold him, Grandpa?" She looked up with her hands clasped together, still jumping. "Please?" She looked at her grandfather's tanned, deeply lined face. His sharp blue eyes studied her for a moment, and then the lines of his face broke into a smile. Everything she did was to please him. She dragged the garbage cans in from the street to surprise him, so that he would think her good; she counted baby chicks in the hatchery so he would think her smart, and she let her grandmother comb her hair into two pigtails so he would think her beautiful.

"Yes, you can hold your chick, Carrie."

He lifted the flat piece of plywood that was the roof of the hatchery, just enough to reach in. The chick jumped around quickly trying to get away from

the hand, but one quick motion and he was captured.

"Just for a few moments, Carrie. He needs to grow strong."

He placed the chick into both of Carrie's hands. She had to hold him next to her chest to contain him, and after he settled down, she held him up to her face and brushed his soft down against her cheek. He peeped and bobbed his head up and down. "I love him, Grandpa. His name is Howdy Doody."

"Okay, Carrie, it's time to put him back now."

Carrie had spent the last two days watching her chick and his little blue dot jumping around the hatchery. She had begged her grandmother to let her hold him several times. And each time her grandmother said yes but reminded Carrie to be gentle.

"Well, that's it, kids. See ya tomorrow, and remember to be good to your mother. Help her whenever you can." Buffalo Bob smiled out to Carrie. The light and shadows from the screen played on her face.

"That's right boys and girls; be good to your mother," Howdy Doody echoed, and the strings jerked his arm up to wave good by. "See you next time."

The show ended, and her grandfather hadn't come home yet, the first time since Carrie had been there. She lay on the floor for awhile after the show "Get home, Grandpa," she said inside of herself. She said it again and again because the firm feel of the order would, for a short while, make the heavy feeling in her chest go away. She wanted her hug.

She could smell onions frying and thought they might be having liver and onions, her grandfather's favorite. She got up and wandered into the kitchen where her grandmother was dipping pieces of liver into flour and dripping them into the hot oil. Each one sizzled loudly for awhile and then settled into the

quieter frying sounds with the rest.

"He's probably held up with a piece of mail. It happens from time to time. Carrie, would you hand me that spatula?" Her grandmother pointed a hand coated with flour toward the sink. Carrie lifted the spatula off of its hook next to the window and handed it to her.

The onions were piled in a metal bowl at the side of the stove to be dumped back in at the last minute for a warm up and to be mixed with the rest of the leavings in the pan. Potatoes boiled fiercely in a pot on the back burner, and her grandmother poked them with a fork occasionally while leaning away from the steam.

Carrie sat down at the table. Her elbows rested on the brown flowered oil cloth, and her hands cupped her chin. "I wish Grandpa would come home," she whispered to her grandmother. The night sky looked flat against the window to Carrie, as if it had been painted on, as if the outside had closed in the kitchen like a box with a light in it. It felt to Carrie like she and her grandmother were the only two people in the world. "Please, Grandpa, come home," she pleaded inside her head.

The phone rang, and Carrie jumped. Her grandmother put her fork down and went to the black wall phone. "It's probably Grandpa." She pulled the skirt of her apron up to hold the phone with because of her floured hands. "Hello. Yes, this is Mrs. Crocket."

Her grandmother listened for a long time, and as she listened, she began to slowly pull open the strings of her apron. "Oh my God! No!" She choked. "It can't be him! No! No! No!"

Carrie's could feel her heart pump wildly. She watched her grandmother

hang up the receiver and turn toward her, shaking her head as if to get control, tears slipping down her cheeks, but her eyes looking straight ahead.

Carrie did not wait for the words. She got up and ran, spilling out of the back door into the night. She stood for a moment on the step and saw the yellow light in the hatchery against the black night. It was always on to keep the chicks warm. She stumbled toward it. She pulled up the plywood cover, and all the chicks began peeping and jumping and falling over each other. She saw the blue dot and reached for her chick and was able to grab him at the first try. She pulled him out with one hand and laid the plywood carefully back into place. She felt the warm down and heard him peeping. She didn't hold him to her chest to quiet him. Tears formed in her eyes as she held him away from her. His cries became frantic as she squeezed until she felt him become completely still, until there was no sound, and the chick lay motionless in her hands.

The screen door slammed, and her grandmother came out of the house.
"Carrie, are you there?"

Carrie's outline was a shadow next to the hatchery, and her grandmother headed toward her. Carrie held out her hands to her grandmother with the dead chick still in them. "He's dead, Grandma. He's dead. I killed him, Grandma. I killed him."

Her grandmother took the chick. She laid it on the ground and pulled the little girl into her arms. Then the grandmother cried while the child patted her on the back to comfort her. "It's okay, Grandma. It's okay."

A Daily Walk

Phoebus Brown tries to give the idea that he doesn't need his bamboo cane. He swings it casual, like a dancer would when he's walking across the stage, and he leans on it quick so's you'd hardly notice. But I can see it real clear when I'm watching him. I used to get a kick out of saying hello to him. I'd say "Good morning, Mr. Brown," and every time he'd stub his cane against the sidewalk. He would tip his head to me, not saying a word, and then fight till past the next house to get his swing going again. I think it's his knees that's bad because Effie, my neighbor on the left--and my good friend--says she saw him fall straight down when he was just standing out front of his house one day.

Effie and me, we don't watch for him like we did a while back. But he still goes out for a walk at ten. He started this up right after his wife died; in fact, it was the day after her funeral when he went out the first time. Before she died, he never walked. They always kept to themselves, them two. About all they did was say hello. Never talked to anyone. In fact it used to burn me up on Halloween because they would turn the lights out and pretend not to be home. The kids threw raw eggs at the house because they knew the Browns were in there. I think the kids were wrong, but at the same time, Effie and me thought the least the Browns could do was be neighborly enough to have candy for the kids on Halloween. Funny thing was, the day after Halloween, Mr. Brown would hose the mess off his house and not say a word to anyone. It seemed like nothing could get to him then, and like all he cared about was that neat-as-a-pin house of his. It's small, painted perfect, grey with black shutters. His lawn is the same green all over, and it's cut perfect by a gardener.

He reminds me of an elf, short and thin and all dressed up in his plaid shirt and bow tie. He wears a tan sweater with brown pants, and saddle shoes, and one of them Irish caps on his head

But his nose is real big. It reminds me of the beak of a toucan; so when he walks, he looks like his nose is pulling him forward, like it's throwing him off balance, and he has to adjust his head back a little to make up for it.

After his wife died, we all brought food to his house. Everyone wanted to be neighborly, and everyone wanted to see inside his house. The only other person who paid respects--besides the neighbors--was his son; looked to be in his fifties. We haven't seen him or anyone else since then come to visit the poor man, him living alone and all.

He's five houses up from me, almost where the street ends, and he goes by my house everyday on his walk, and comes back with a newspaper tucked under his arm.

The only part of him that seemed real when we used to watch him every day was when he struggled with his cane. I felt like protecting him and shaking up his balance at the same time. Effie says his knees could go out at any time. She's a nurse, or was before she retired, so she thinks she should be out there to help him if anything happens. She parades that nurse thing around every chance she gets.

Mrs. Tortelli used to watch Mr. Brown too. She sat in her big picture window every day--right across the street from me--so she could watch him go by. Poor old thing. She's been tied to a walker since that stroke she had two years ago, and that was right after her husband died.

About five months ago, when Mr. Brown came down the street, Mrs. Tortelli

stood up from her seat at the window and went to the door. I saw her out of the corner of my eye because I was standing at my window.

She hobbled her fat self out the front entrance, banging at the screen door with her walker. Then she held the walker up and scooted right to the sidewalk in her flapping blue slippers and put the walker down. Then she raised up her arm and called across the street so loud I could hear right through the window. "Yoo hoo. Mr. Brown. Yoo hoo," she kept calling, and her old faded pink robe hung wide open, so's everyone could see her white flannel night gown. I was glad when she pulled the robe together.

Mr. Brown stopped dead in front of my house and barely turned his nose toward her. He put the cane between his feet and both hands on the top of it to get his balance. He stood raising and lowering his nose like a dog smelling the air and looking over to her. She kept yelling "Mr. Brown. Mr. Brown," and waving her right arm. She looked like a silly girl to me, dropping her arm from time to time to cover her mouth back handed, while she watched for an answer from him. Her robe would open every time that arm went up. I thought she should at least tie up her robe if she was going to be on the street like that, and Mr. Brown being a man and all.

I could see Effie next door hosing down her potted blue marguerite. I could tell she was looking sideways at Mrs. Tortelli. My phone rang, and I hate to say, but I ignored it. Effie moved to water her jade, so she could face the street. I ran to get the window cleaner and paper towels.

Mr. Brown stood like a statue; only his eyes moved in Mrs. Tortelli's direction. I could see his face clearly if I stood far to the right side of my window and up against the wall. Then he wavered a little from side to side before he started to

turn toward Mrs. Tortelli. He raised up his shoulders and threw them back, like he was in the army; then he headed out in her direction. He could not get his step back even though he swung his cane out in front the way he does. Instead of a dancer, he looked more like a drunkard trying to keep his balance.

Mrs. Tortelli stopped flailing herself around and stood leaning stiff armed on her walker. I saw her lift one hand to pull her robe together and to dab at her wispy hair. The back of it was flat like she had just gotten out of bed, and the rest of it stood out from her head like so much gray dead weed. I never cease to wonder at the way some people will go out in public.

There was a pot hole in the middle of the street, and I was sure Mr. Brown was headed right for it. He just missed it, and then he jerked like a turkey across the rest of the street. I wanted to run over and hold him up, but I just kept washing my windows.

Effie was watering the hedge that runs along the front of her yard--the one she planted because it didn't need watering. In fact, most of her water was running down the little gully that runs along the edge of our street.

When Mr. Brown finally made it to the other side, he stood in front of Mrs. Tortelli with the cane at his side. She dabbed at her hair again, and the raising of her arm pulled her robe open some more. I saw Mr. Brown look down at his shoes and then look back up at her face. Even though I came out to wash the outside of the windows, I could not make out words. All I could hear was the sound of Mrs. Tortelli's quivering old voice spraying over him. She was at least 70, a lot older than me, but she stood a head taller than him, even after the stroke and all had withered her down some.

She did all of the talking. Pulled her robe closed now and then.

Mr. Brown just stood there, straight and facing her. He hardly moved except once to edge his cane forward a little. I saw her point to her house a couple of times. I thought she was pointing to her flowers, but I wasn't sure--until a few days later when his gardener came to work for her.

She stopped after awhile, picked up her walker and stepped back a few steps to move out of his way. He nodded to her a good day kind of nod and walked on down that side of the street. She turned herself and her walker around and banged back into the house.

The next day, for his morning walk, Mr. Brown went back down that side of the street and nodded his nose to Mrs. Tortelli in the window when he passed her house.

For a week he continued like this until Mrs. Tortelli came out again, and they visited, with her talking and him listening. She had combed her hair down a little and wore a plum colored robe that she kept tied up at the waist. Then she went back inside, and he walked on.

A week and a half later, Mr. Brown actually walked himself right up to Mrs. Tortelli's entrance. I could see her get up from her chair as soon as she saw him turn up her walk. He tapped on her screen door with his free hand. This time he went into her house, and they must have gone into the kitchen for coffee or tea because neither Effie or I could see them in the living room.

I got my gardening gloves on and decided to dig the dead leaves out of the leather fern under the magnolia. I hate that job, but I was inspired. Effie was washing her front windows.

It was at least 45 minutes before Mr. Brown came out of the house. By that time, I was trimming back the podocarpus along the side of my front porch. Al,

my poor husband--God Bless his soul--used to do most of the outside work after he was retired. I think of selling my house to get rid of all this work, but I don't know where I would go.

When Mr. Brown came out of the house, he went on home. Didn't get his newspaper that day, but I noticed a little more lift in his walk. Effie came on over to talk, and we figured he had to get home to go to the bathroom or something.

I invited Effie over for dinner that night. We get together at meals since her Herb died last year. Sometimes we go to the movies. After dinner she said she was going to bake a batch of cookies, and she asked if I thought it would be nice to take some to poor Mrs. Tortelli. I thought it was real nice, and I said I would go with her. We decided it would be best to take them over in the late morning, so she could enjoy them at lunch.

Mr. Brown paid Mrs. Tortelli a visit the next day, and after he had gone, Effie came by my house. I rolled up my hose, and we crossed over together.

We really didn't know Mrs. Tortelli that well. Seems like she was a little uppity, her daughter a big attorney in New York and all. I think Mrs. Tortelli had money. She paid for a woman to come in three or four times a week to help with housecleaning, shopping and all. For awhile, after she had the stroke, the Meals On Wheels truck came around. That had to cost a pretty penny.

I could tell she was surprised to see us at the door because she stammered some. "H-Hello. My, my," she said, "what a surprise."

Effie said that she had baked an extra large batch of cookies--chocolate chip--and thought Mrs. Tortelli might like some, might like to have something to serve her guests. Effie held the cookies out to her; they lay there in two neat circles around the green plate. Mrs. Tortelli was leaning on her walker, which

made it difficult for her to carry the dish. Her face was getting a little red, and she kept lifting her walker up and then slamming it back down again, while we stood there at the door.

"May I put them in the kitchen for you?" Effie asked very politely. She pushed her way around Mrs. Tortelli and carried the plate like a waitress--over her head--to the kitchen. Mrs. Tortelli looked at me puzzled. Her breath smelled of dentures. She clenched her jaws together, I think to push her teeth back in place.

I could also smell roses, and I think it was her perfume. I noticed she was dressed in a lavender housedress and lavender slippers to match. In fact her grey hair was not flat in the back, but it was combed with a part in the middle and fluffed out at the sides, a little like a poodle. It was the plum lipstick and rouge that surprised me the most.

"How are you?" I asked, to make conversation.

"Oh, I've been a little under the weather," she stammered. Her teeth were clicking and her eyes kept going away from me nervous like. She was leaning heavy on her walker, like she was tired.

"Your lawn is lovely," I said. "Your gardener does such a nice job. Is he the same one that does Mr. Brown's yard?" Sometimes compliments help get a conversation going, but she never did answer the question.

"I must take a nap. I am so tired." She closed her eyes and let the air out of her lungs slowly. I thought that was a little rude.

Finally, Effie came out of the kitchen.

"I'll come by another day for my plate, but there's no hurry." She smiled pitifully at Mrs. Tortelli. I hate when she gets that look. She looks real

sympathetic and nurse-like.

"Thank you very much. I'm sure I will enjoy them." Mrs. Tortelli did not smile back and did not really seem grateful at all. As we left, she closed the door quickly. She didn't bother to stand and wave.

"That was kind of you, Effie," I said. "The poor woman needs some attention. That daughter only comes once a year." Then I nudged her. "Maybe Mr. Brown will enjoy them too." We giggled like two teenagers.

For the next three weeks, Mr. Brown stopped at Mrs. Tortelli's house every second or third day, and on those days he returned home without finishing his walk.

We watched Mrs. Tortelli get more and more dressed up. When she sat in the window, we could see the shine of silver earrings and colored necklaces draped across her chest. But after a time, she stopped sitting in the window to wait for him. He stopped taking his long walks--just went back and forth from his house to hers once a day. He brought flowers now and then from his garden, and that made him look dapper. He took to tipping his hat across the street to Effie and me, and we waved back to him. I spent most mornings working in the front yard or over helping Effie with hers.

Then one day Mrs. Tortelli didn't answer the door, and Mr. Brown waited a long time. He knocked again and waited a long time again. He looked like a kid waiting for his friend to come out and play. Then he went up the drive way to the door at the side of the house. He knocked, but there was no answer. He walked back home as fast as he could; he was limping bad and leaning hard on his cane. Effie started over to my yard. She was having a conniption fit.

"I'd better go over there. I'm a nurse."

"I know," I said.

"What if she's dead or hurt in there? I might be able to help her."

"Let's just wait a couple of minutes," I said. "I'm sure he's calling the fire department now."

So we stood there and waited. Effie went home to water her poor marguerite, and I pulled the dead flowers off of my rose bush at the side of the garage.

It wasn't long before Mr. Brown was limping back to her house. He went up to the front door.

Effie came back. "I'm going over there," she said. "I think he needs help, poor man."

"Okay, I'll go with you," I told her, and we started across the street.

Mr. Brown turned and looked right at us and didn't nod or say a word. Then he turned his back to us.

I felt a little hesitant, a little like an intruder.

"Hello, Mr. Brown," I shouted. "Everything okay?"

"Just fine."

"Is she all right? I'm a nurse," Effie yelled from where we were, half across the street. We stopped.

"I've called the fire department. They'll take care of it. Thank you." He actually barked back at us. I think that was only the second or third time I heard his voice, and it surprised me because it was high and nasal sounding.

"Ladies, I can take care of this," he said. "You go on home now."

Imagine him talking to two elderly women like we were children. And we just wanted to help.

"If you need anything, just call," I yelled back.

"I'm fine, thank you." He sounded very final and turned his back to us.

We turned around and walked back. I went into my house, and Effie went into hers. The phone rang, and I knew who it was.

"I'm a nurse, for God's sake; I should go over there."

"Look, Effie," I said, "he's called the fire department. They'll be here in less than three minutes. He doesn't want our help. Okay?" She wasn't satisfied, but she didn't go over there.

Just as we hung up, we heard the siren. A big green fire engine pulled up in front of Mrs. Tortelli's house. It completely blocked my view, so I went over to Effie's. She could see everything. The firemen found an open window at the side of the house and got in quickly, and then an ambulance came screaming down the street. By then, Effie and me were standing outside on her lawn staring across the street. The other neighbors came out to watch too. Mr. and Mrs. Meinke, the retired couple next to Mrs. Tortelli; Shirley Mitchel, the night nurse at Valley Medical; and Sally Dunne, another widow. They were in a group across the street.

We started across to join them when the ambulance attendants showed up in the door with the gurney. Mrs. Tortelli was completely covered up by a sheet, head and all. Mr. Brown limped behind them out to the ambulance.

Effie and me moved together across the street. The attendants didn't noticed us. They grunted a little, and when the gurney was placed just right to ease in to the ambulance, the tall blond one with a scar on his cheek said, "Okay, push." The curly brunette kid pushed, and in a very short time, Mrs. Tortelli was in.

Mr. Brown stood behind the ambulance and watched, and when they closed

the doors, he tipped his hat to her and then put both of his hands on his cane and stood there. The blond young man turned to Mr. Brown, "You gonna call the daughter?"

"Yes," he said, "I'll call her." Then both attendants loped around, as casual as if they had just loaded up some bread for delivery, and they got into the ambulance and drove off.

There was a tear sitting on the inside of Mr. Brown's eye, and it did not move. He looked at me, sniffed, and drew his finger across his nose. He leaned carefully on his cane. "Ladies," he said, and he tipped his hat with his free hand. He lifted his shoulders up and headed out for his walk. We watched as he turned away from the direction of his house. I knew he would come back with a paper under his arm.

He returned later, hesitating for one moment as he passed her house. His head turned toward it, only enough to glance in that direction. We watched him pass by, and he did not look in our direction at all.

For some reason I'm not sure of, I no longer wait for him, and I started tending to my back yard. It had gone to weeds. I've planted vegetables, and my tomatoes are just now getting red. Effie is volunteering at the hospital, and she keeps trying to get me to join her down there. We hardly mention Mr. Brown any more, but he still walks. I see him from time to time. Yesterday was Halloween, and last night he handed out candy.