

Temperature Days on Hawthorne Street

by Charles L. Grant

The half-moon porch was partially masked by untrimmed arms of fully green forsythia and juniper dying at the tips. What breeze there was in pressing heat only caused to quaver the languid drone of hunting bees. A spider, working steadily in the shaded corner of a peeling post and sloping roof, ambushed a fly while a mantis lurking on the lattice flanking the step watched, praying. There were ants, marching, but the man on the bottom step ignored their parade, waiting instead for the sounds of anger to drain from the house. He rubbed his face, tugged at his chin, blaming the summer-long heat for the pots he heard slamming onto the street, the crack of cabinet doors, the thud and hollow roll of an empty can on the linoleum floor. He hunched at the sharp noises and glanced up the block, wondering why none of the houses to the top of the gentle hill had emptied at the aftermath of the fight.

Sounds carried on a street like this, he thought, like the night the week before when Cass Waters had ordered his wife to pack and leave just before the late evening news. By the time she had limped with a suitcase to her car and had driven around the corner, not a porch was deserted, not a lawn with flickering flashlights carried by men ostensibly searching for lost tools. So now where are they, he wondered at the blank facades of Hawthorne Street. They are no better than I am. Why the hell don't they come out?

The milkman, he answered himself. They've figured the bogeyman milkman has done it again, and some of them believe it, and they're as afraid as I am.

A robin landed silently beneath one of the front yard's two ancient willows and cocked its brown eye toward the lawn.

"Gerry?"

It pecked twice and fluttered, hopping rapidly across the slate walk to the other side, where it pecked twice again and flew off.

"Gerry?"

He leaned backward, feeling the ragged edge of the step pressing against his spine, and tilted his head until his neck stretched close to choking. Ruth, her night-soft hair twisted back in a ponytail and wisping around her temples, looked down at him, trying to manipulate muscles that once made her smile. One softly tanned hand lay flat against her stomach, and he suddenly wished the baby would hurry up and show itself; his first daughter had kept Ruth slim, and died before birth. He closed his eyes briefly, then stretched up a palm, holding it open until it covered it and came down beside him.

"They must be tired of men beating their wives," he said quietly, waving his free hand

toward the street. "Not even old lady Greene's left her precious garden."

Nearly four years ago he would have been a father for the second time.

"Gerry, I'm sorry."

"Don't be silly, lover," he said. "You've nothing to be sorry for. I'm the one who started this. I guess I'm not used to such heat in September."

Smiling then, she rested her cheek against his damp shoulder, and they watched for an hour as the shadows of the willows glide away from the house. A lawn mower sputtered; a gaggle of small girls shrieked by in pursuit of a dream; there were birds and clustering gnats, and a Siamese cat that disdained Gerry's enticements for the stalking of a jay. Then, explosive, a group of boys sped past on bicycles, shouting and gesturing to one another before separating at the block's center, one to swerve widely and thump over the curb, mischievous bravado in the air, that came to a halt inches from the juncture of step and walk.

"Hi," he said, with Ruth's thin lips and Gerry's heavy jaw.

"I'm too young for a heart attack," Gerry said, noticing absently the clotted mud on the bottom of his jeans. "Put the bike away and wash up. We're going to eat; your mother's tired."

"She asleep?" his son whispered loudly.

"No," Ruth said, keeping her eyes shut. "I'm recovering from shock. One of these days you're going to hit these steps and wind up in pieces all over the porch." It should have been a joke, but the boy knew it wasn't. "Your father," she added, aware of the strained silence. "Your father just painted it last summer."

"It'll never happen," he said, laughing as he walked the bicycle around to the side of the house. "How much time?"

"Not enough time for you to call that girl," Gerry said. "Just wash up and get on out here. And change those pants."

"Maybe the milkman will bring me a new pair. I've sure messed this one up."

Ruth immediately sat up, preparing to stand, when Gerry grabbed her firmly by the wrist. "Relax," he said. "Sandy didn't mean anything by it. He doesn't know for sure. None of the boys do."

A joke, Gerry had thought in a long-ago May when the grass was new and the smell of it filled the neighborhood like meadowed incense. In addition to the family's usual order for milk, eggs, and butter, he had added at the bottom of the note a mocking request for a clean shirt when Ruth had forgotten to do one up for him the evening before. They had laughed and gone to bed, and the following morning a package lay beside the milkbox. Inside was a shirt the perfect size and perfect color for the suit he had been planning to wear.

"Now this is the kind of milkman I like," he said, but Ruth, though laughing, was uneasy. "Oh, come on, woman," he said. "This guy obviously appreciates a joke. I'll just leave the shirt if it'll make you feel better, and I'll bet it will be gone the next time he comes. Okay?"

He did, and when the plain-wrapped package remained, he only shrugged and shoved the shirt to the bottom of his dresser drawer. Ruth asked him to get up early enough to give it to her personally; she was wary of gifts from a man they'd never seen.

"Now you're being silly," he said, more stubbornly than he had intended. "I'll be damned if I'm going to get up before dawn just to give a stupid milkman back his shirt. Besides, it's a pretty nice one, you said so yourself. I'll just wait for the bill and see how much he nails me for it."

There was a week before the payment notice arrived, itemizing nothing more than the dairy products they'd consumed. Gerry shrugged again and decided the shirt was a present. He assumed it was a clever bit of maneuvering for a whopping Christmas gift but did not mind since he had planned after the first delivery to do it anyway. The Sweet Milk Dairy Farm was a firm he'd never heard of and decided was an independent farmer. Since he was willing to patronize the little guy over the big guy, especially one whose service provided unexpected benefits and the best-tasting buttermilk he'd had since he was a kid, he ignored Ruth's misgivings.

Shortly afterward, he needled Ruth into asking for something, and when she proved as intransigent in her refusals as he was in his insistence, he petulantly added a request for a tie to match the shirt. And when it came, in a plain-wrapped box, he laughed all day, shaking his head and telling his friends at the office what a tailor he had. Bolder then, he decided to ask for a suit to go with the shirt and tie; and this time, when the hand-tailored-to-fit-no-one-else sharkskin garment hung on a nail over the mailbox, he stopped laughing and began wondering what kind of racket he was getting himself into. Ruth, he noticed with some relief, had not said a word but placed the suit at the back of the closet, still wrapped in its clear plastic bag.

"You got to admit," he said at dinner one evening when Fritz Foster and the Yorks had joined them, "the man's a go-getter. I just wish he'd send me a bill or something. Ruth here thinks he might be peddling stolen goods. I've been thinking about asking around the police myself, to tell the truth."

Syd York, puff-cheeked and portly, glanced at his wife, who nodded, and Gerry's eyes were raised in question. "Yeah, yeah," Syd admitted. "We've been picking up a few things here and there ourselves. Like you, we figured it was some kind of joke but ... what the hell, right? I don't ask questions, and I get what I want. There was a set of golf clubs, a pair of shoes and what else, dear?"

Aggie, her husband's twin, pointed at her mouth with her fork apologetically. Syd snapped his fingers. "Of course, how could I forget. Silverware! Aggie was complaining about the silver we use in the kitchen, and when I got my clubs, she snuck in a note for the knives and forks. Damn, but didn't we get real silver."

Aggie grinned, and Ruth only stared at her coffee.

Fritz placed his utensils on his empty plate and leaned back, his fingers tucking inside of his belt. "I asked for money."

The women looked at him. Syd laughed, and Gerry only shook his head, not surprised that the block's resident investment broker would be the one to get practical with their dawn get-

"How much?" he asked. "That is, if you don't mind me getting personal."

"Let's just say substantial, and I received every dime."

"Well, didn't you ask him where he got it?"

Fritz grinned at Ruth and shook his head. "I don't ask, my dear, I just take. The money was in large bills, and when I took it to the bank, it was good. As long as I don't see his face in the post office, what do I care how he operates, as long as he keeps up the good work."

"Besides," Syd added, "how could you know him? None of us have ever seen him."

It had been like moving into another country, Gerry recalled thinking when he and Ruth deserted the city and the routine of the neighborhood settled over them like a worn and welcome sweater. The mailman knocked at every door and knew all the streets by name; a policeman walked the beat three times daily and was covered by a patrol car whose brass blue was as familiar as the century-old maple on the corner. Through traffic was negligible and the street was covered with markings for baseball and hopscotch and spur-of-the-moment games comprehensible only to the young. And the milkman, who might have used a fly-bitten horse for all the inhabitants knew, passed each dawn, and only the early-risers and insomniacs heard the clatter of empty bottles as he left each back door more silent than shadow.

No one tried to wake early enough to see him; an unspoken warning about breaking their charm.

As June released summer, children, and, sporadically, husbands, Gerry thought he noticed an increasing reluctance to try their luck again. Indeed, they all seemed rather guilty about suspecting their good fortune and began ordering more dairy products than most of them could use. Then Syd, after drinking himself into melancholy on Gerry's porch, asked for a raise, and two days later he was promoted.

"Now that was definitely a coincidence," Gerry said. "I can understand a guy trying to pick up an extra buck peddling goods from God knows where, but there's no way a stupid milkman can get a guy a raise like that."

Ruth immediately agreed, but her face was drawn, and he didn't learn until it was too late that she had finally contributed her own request. It was a Saturday morning when he backed into the driveway and saw the sleek and gleaming automobile parked in front of the house. In the kitchen, Ruth was crying at the table. Confused, since there didn't seem to be any compa-

in the house, he cradled her softly while she explained that she could no longer stand the day and night wait for the call from the police saying he and their twelve-year-old car had died in the traffic.

"I thought about Syd, Gerry, and I was scared, but I put a note in, and this morning this note comes up with a receipt saying we won this car, and we have to pay the taxes but we have a week from this Monday, and I wish it was gone because I'm frightened."

Ridiculous, Gerry thought, coincidence. But nevertheless, he went to bed early and set an alarm for an hour before dawn, thinking the hell with the charm if it was going to do this to his wife.

In not entirely unpleasant contrast to the daylight's enervating heat, the morning was cool and a residue wind from an evening thunderstorm hunted through the neighborhood for wood and a creak and leaves to sail. Silently dressing in the clothes he'd left in the kitchen, Gerry sipped on hot coffee and rubbed his arms briskly. A groan from Sandy's sleep made him motionless, then he slipped a blanket over his shoulders and carefully opened the front door, picking out a chair on the far end of the porch where he could watch the walk that wound round the house from the back. He lighted a cigarette when he was settled, and he was startled by the flare of the match and shook it out quickly. He listened and heard nothing, watched and saw only the darkness. The air was still damp, and he hugged himself tightly but would not walk, knowing the floorboards made near as much noise as the children playing in the afternoon. Finally, he tried to count gorillas to pass the time, and when he awakened, the sun was full in his eyes, and it was blinding.

Ruth was standing over him, smiling sadly. "Big brave watchdog," she said, offering him a steaming cup. "What were you going to do, sprinkle garlic over his horns or tackle him like a football star you thought you were?"

"Knock it off," Gerry said, feeling bad enough that his soap opera plan had failed without his wife telling him how foolish he looked wrapped in a blanket in the middle of August. "Did I leave anything?"

"Nothing."

"Well, damnit, he must have magicked me to sleep, or something. And I asked for a hundred dollars."

"Maybe he figures you were testing him," she said, leaning against the railing and huddling her arms under her breasts. "Maybe he doesn't like testing."

Gerry, suddenly angry because he was more than afraid, stood abruptly and started pacing. "You know, I should have listened to you, because you were right from the beginning. This is up to no good. I think I'll cancel the contract, and we can get our milk from the store from now on." Then he glared because his wife was laughing. "Well, what's so funny, damnit? I spent a miserable time out here, I could have maybe even caught double pneumonia, and you think that's funny?"

Shaking her head, Ruth pressed into his arms and quieted. "No, dear, I don't think it's fun. In fact, I think it's kind of sad. Things are just so different out here, I can't really explain it. The city was bad, but at least we knew where we stood. Here, we get a little boost from an invisible milkman and we go into melodramatic hysterics. Maybe country rules are different. I don't know, but there's something wrong with us."

"What?" Gerry said.

"I'm not sure," she said. "But this isn't right."

A short exclamation from Ruth and a dry flurry dragged him reluctantly back to the present where the world appeared to be turning black at the edges of his vision. Feeling a shudder, he looked down and saw a praying mantis disappearing over the side of the steps with what looked like the remains of a spider in its jaws.

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"Do you want to change before we go out?" he asked quietly, wondering what was taking her so long. Ruth shook her head slowly, and he was dismayed at the ridges of darkened skin beneath her eyes, cursing himself for not noticing her condition sooner. To adjust from the city's frantic years had been difficult enough when she was the proliferation of little girls Hawthorne Street had spawned, but the addition of the pregnancy in the century's worst sun was draining her of laughter; she had been claiming since the beginning that the baby hadn't been right, and no amount of persuasion from husband or doctor could change her mind. And if I told her about the milkman, Gerry thought, she might literally kill me. Finally he eased a solicitous arm about her shoulders and drew from her a melancholy smile.

"I spoke with Syd on the golf course this morning," he said after calling for Sandy to get the car to move on. "We've decided to confront the dairy company—"

"Please, Gerry, I don't want to hear it."

"Oh, come on, Ruth, let's not start again, please? This milkman business is getting all out of hand. I don't see why you're letting it get to you like this. I mean, no one else is all that bothered."

"Well, maybe nobody else cares whether or not they're doing the morally right thing by letting this farce continue the way it has," she said angrily, shrugging away his arm. "I told you before, I don't want that man, beast, whatever the hell he is, coming to my house anymore. Suppose Sandy starts sneaking notes to him? Suppose the other kids find out this isn't a game? Suppose ..." She turned to him, and he flinched at the hardened lines destroying her mouth. "Suppose one of you big brave men gets tired of his wife and asks for a new one? What

happens then?" Her hands went protectively across her stomach, accusing him with their barrier, and he realized that she suspected what he had done.

Suddenly angry to camouflage his fear, he paced to the sidewalk and back, his hands fished in his pockets. "What the hell are you talking about," he demanded as slowly and flatly as he could. "A few ties, a few shirts, one lousy set of golf clubs, and everyone—no, you go flying off the goddamned handle. Tell me, do you see anyone else on this block worried? Do you see the place crumbling in moral decay just because a milkman runs a shoddy little business on the side?"

"What about Syd's promotion and the new car?"

Gerry spun around, frustration at his wife's persistence threatening to erupt in shouting. "Syd has been with that firm for fifteen years, and a promotion was just plain due. I won that bloody car in a raffle at the office, and what the hell more explanation do you want anyway, Ruth?"

"The hundred dollars."

"For crying out loud, I didn't get it."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, you did."

Gerry stopped just as Sandy ran out the front door and flopped next to his mother, grinning. "Well?" he said. "We going or not?"

"In a minute," Gerry said to him before turning back to Ruth. "What are you talking about, Ruth? What hundred dollars?"

Ruth obviously did not want to continue the argument in front of their son, but Gerry's frown in an uncontrollable sneer, forced her to ignore him. "In the mail, while you were out with your precious friends on that precious golf course. A check from the insurance company. Overpayment."

Gerry froze, the sun suddenly chilling as he loosened and began waving his hands impotently in the air. "Nonsense," he said. "Pure nonsense."

"Then what about this baby?" she said, throwing the question like scalding water into his face. She stood then, swaying, crying silently, her head shaking away what answers he might have had. Sandy gaped before reaching up to her, but she only cried out and ran into the house.

"Dad?"

Gerry fumbled in his hip pocket, pulling out his wallet from which he yanked the first bill his fingers could grip. "Here," he said hoarsely, extending the money blindly, "take the bike and grab some hamburgers or something. I ..." He looked helplessly at his son, who nodded and left without a word. When he returned with his bike, Gerry looked at him. "Your sister," he started but could not finish.

"I know, Dad," he said. "Today should have been her birthday, right?"

Gerry nodded mutely and stared as his son wheeled into the street and vanished around the corner; the boy seemed so old. He watched the empty sidewalks until his legs began to tremble, then he shuffled to the porch and sought out his chair in the far corner, remembering the night he had waited and slept, and the morning when Ruth had smiled and laughed at him. Though he didn't see how it was possible, he was positive Ruth knew he had asked the milkman for a daughter to replace a daughter. He had done it, he told himself every evening in freeflowing nightmares, because she needed it, because the two of them had been too afraid to try again, only to renew the pain.

"Insane," he muttered to a hovering bee.

And did she know, he wondered, that Casper Waters had asked for his freedom and had found his wife naked in bed with Fritz Foster?

"Insane."

"I'll tell you," Syd had whispered confidentially at the course that morning, "If I had the nerve, I'd dump Aggie in a minute for a twenty-year-old girl without ten tons of fat."

Perversely, the temperature climbed as the sun fell, and perspiration on his neck trickled warmly to his chest and back. Cicadas passed him a childhood warning of the next day's heat and he dozed, fitfully, swiping flies in his sleep, flicking a spider from his shoulder. Up the street there was music, and Sandy drifted back for permission to accept a last-minute invitation to a block party over the hill. Inside, the house was dark though he had heard Ruth stumble once in the living room.

Embryos floating through ink and white blood, their faces not his, not hers, blank and unfilled and waiting for a wish from unarmed despair.

There was a rattling far back in his dreams that twisted his head until he snapped awake and heard the footsteps on the walk.

"Hey," he said sleepily, and the footsteps halted. "I, uh, was just kidding about the daughter bit, you know." He shook his head but remained groggy and nodding, his speech slurred though he heard himself clearly. "I mean, let's face it, shirts are one thing, a kid's another, you know what I mean? Hey, you know what I mean?"

There was a silence before the clinking resumed and Gerry slept on, dreaming pink and white lace, until he awakened, the sun barely rising, to Sandy's shouts for help and Ruth's hysterical screaming.

The End