Roger Pfingston

GRADY'S GARDEN

His pocket crammed with packets of seeds, Grady reaches for the work gloves that have been in the garage all winter, wondering what hard-shelled or needle-assed creature lurks within, waiting to have its way with thumb or fingertip. He eases into the right glove, then plunges full length. He does the same with the other glove followed by a wriggling of the fingers and a couple of quick claps--the ultimate risk--before removing and jamming them in his back pocket like a tailgate flag. Look out, man at work!

It's Grady at his best, trowel and hoe in hand and god, if he only had the magic, a dozen doves on the power line cooing like tiny muffled bells. He tips his straw hat to the widow next door and walks the backyard, a straight shot between the maples, on out beyond the septic tank, clear to the end of three-quarters of an acre where a square of freshly tilled ground invites his green dream, invites too his bare feet which he slips out of a pair of ragged Mexican sandals. He steps forward and falls to his knees, digging and sifting with hands and toes, wanting to roll in it like a dog, or a horse in high grass, wanting to root down and grow secretly at night as he always imagined all plants must.

Grady regains himself and casually looks back to see if any neighbors are watching, maybe the sweet widow who stares a lot these days. He takes the packets of seeds from his pocket and spreads them out like a deck of cards, trying to decide what to open with, a man familiar with the odds of the game: insects, weather, moles, slugs, disease, rabbits, weeds. With a sigh Grady tears the corner off a packet of lettuce seeds, picks up the trowel and begins.

It is six p.m. on a Friday after a long day's work. He will have the weekend to plant, mulch and fence his garden, evenings free to sit on his deck consuming olives marinated in dirt-dry vodka martinis. On Monday morning, when they ask how his weekend was, Grady will smile and flash two thumbs up, not green but soiled, definitely soiled.

GRADY'S LUNCH

Grady is having tamales for lunch, having slipped a jar into the basket while shopping with his wife who just shook her head and frowned at the check-out counter. As they come to a boil, Grady remembers forty years ago, a slightly dangerous looking man--a kid's notion of an ex-con--who announced himself with a thick, raspy voice in a tent of light under a corner streetlamp, his orange push-wagon packed with steaming ten-cent tamales. He seemed to appear out of nowhere, a devil man selling the Devil's food, hot and spicy, fresh out of hellfire. But if so, how did he get there and back? Jimmy Keys claimed it was down one of the hundreds of manholes in the streets of Evansville. All they had to do was find the iron cover stamped with the Devil's sign. Grady ventured it was a tunnel that actually spiraled deep beneath the wide Ohio, the entrance cleverly constructed in plain sight somewhere along Dress Plaza. Whatever his magic, he always appeared on the same corner, though not each night nor even the same nights--it was his way. And his voice, half human, sang like a giant nighthawk--taMAleeees, HOT taMAleeees--calling to Grady who came running with a couple of dimes or a fistful of pennies and just enough fear to buy and eat on the run as the voice rose over the muffled

traffic of Grady's heart.

GRADY'S FAITH

On a spring afternoon Grady waits in a room charted with bones. Any moment now a white-coated man in his mid-thirties will enter with Grady's file in hand and begin to practice chiropractic on his fused vertebrae, namely bones two and three, a congenital defect not discovered until the age of forty-four when one day in the recent past Grady's neck stiffened, then took over like a coup, dictating pain with every step, with every turn of the neck, pain like pincers clamping nerves, the diagnosis being just that: a pinched nerve.

The good doctor had slipped the x-ray into a light box and pointed out the sandwiched bones, observing with a smile that it was a damn good thing break dancing hadn't been "in" when Grady was a kid or he might be dead--a pile of bones in a dark box--or worse, paralyzed for life.

So Grady waits, having adjusted his life to these regular visits, waits for the doctor's firm probing of back and neck, the gentle turning and raising of the head, chin tilted up, the sudden flesh-muted crunch like knuckles cracking in succession. Unlike his father who lobbies against "the quackery of chiropractic," Grady waits, feeling in his bones the faith of one delivered--not once but weekly--from his pain.