

A quick blur of punches dropped him to the stage. He pushed up onto his hands and knees and got one leg under himself, standing and beating the count. Ellis grabbed his wrists and wiped his fists on his shirt, saying, "You O.K.? You want me to stop it?"

The comedian takes a deep breath, looking across the stage at his opponent. "I'm O.K." he says. "Don't stop it. I can take her."

Ellis steps back and waves Ruth in. She shuffles forward, looking for an opening, and throws a murderous left to the liver. As the comedian crumbles, she hits him with a pile-driving right to the face. He goes down hard, his head bouncing off the stage, and lies on his back, unconscious, his left leg twitching with the confused impulses from his brain.

Ellis grabs Ruth's hand and raises it over her head. The crowd boos, and some of them throw their beer at the stage. Ruth starts for them, ready to take on the house, but Ellis holds her back. A chair flies through the air and lands at their feet, then more beer, and beer mugs. Ruth and Ellis crouch down and exit, stage right.

IN THE GARDEN

Clete lofted his horseshoe. It spun backwards as it arced toward the spike.

"All right, ringer," he yelled.

But it clanked off the metal pole, bouncing high, and sailed away across the lawn. It struck Ginger, his wife's little Chihuahua, and dropped her.

"Uh oh," said Ellis, Clete's next-door neighbor and regular horseshoe partner.

"Uh oh," said Clete. He ran to the dog and kneeled beside her, giving her a shake, saying, "Wake up, girl, wake up."

Ellis stood behind him, looking over his shoulder: "I think she's dead," he said.

Clete rubbed his face. "What'll we tell Juanita?"

"What'll you tell Juanita?" said Ellis, backing away toward the gate.

He decided to bury her in the garden and tell Juanita that he hadn't seen her, maybe she'd run away or something.

Night fell. A sliver of silver moon grinned through the broken clouds. Juanita stood on the patio beating Ginger's dinner plate with a fork, calling, "Ginger Baby, dinner time, dinner time."

But Ginger didn't come.

Juanita slid the door shut and sat down on the couch, a fat tear running down her cheek. Clete set his paper on his lap and said, "I wouldn't worry, Honey. She probably stepped out looking for some action. It's the season, you know."

She threw the plastic dinner plate at his head.

Dave, Clete's cat, thinking he'd found a perfect spot, was out scratching around in the new loose dirt in the garden when his paw hit something that was very undirt-like.

Maybe it was a metabolism-slowness coma that allowed Ginger to survive her shallow grave, or maybe it was a resurrection, but either way, when she came up out of the ground, sneezing and shaking the dirt off her coat, Dave hissed, spat, and took off like he'd seen a ghost, never again to use the garden to relieve himself. It was back to the horseshoe pit for him.

Juanita heard the scratching at the door. "There's my baby," she said. "Where have you been, you bad girl, and look at you. You're all covered with dirt." Clete dropped his newspaper and crawled over the back of the recliner. Juanita opened a can of dog food. Ginger pranced around the empty dinner dish, wanting an aspirin for her head.

THE DROOP

It's late June. The plum tree in Clete and Juanita's yard is heavily laden. A fat branch hangs over the fence into the neighbors' yard, drooping low with the weight of the fruit: deep red, fist-sized globes, shiny and tight skinned, ripe and ready to burst. Birds dive into the foliage, oblivious to the scarecrow that Clete has erected. Clete's cat, Dave, lies on a thick branch and snatches them as they drive their sharp beaks into the succulent fruit. Thin bird blood and nearly transparent fruit juice