

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

drip simultaneously to the ground.

Ellis, the neighbor, on his side of the fence, fills a plastic shopping bag, his branch riding a little higher with each piece of fruit he picks. Clete looks over the fence, catching him red handed. He says, "I'm gonna saw that branch off and haul it back to my side of the fence."

Ellis blushes and says, "Hey, Clete. Guess you caught me."

Clete laughs and says, "Help yourself, Ellis. We got more goddam plums than we know what to do with."

Ellis says, "Yeah, they all come at once, don't they?"

A sparrow's head falls out of the tree and lands silently at the scarecrow's feet. Ellis picks a dark soft plum and drops it in his bag. Clete takes the bowl he's filled into his wife Juanita, who's getting ready to make some jam. Dave licks his paw, then dozes in the tree. The scarecrow sways slightly in the breeze, losing his fedora. The ants come for the sparrow's head, starting on the soft dark eyes.

ELLIS GETS HIS BIRTHDAY SURPRISE

Sheila, the hired dancer, came in really moving: she'd almost frozen to death waiting for her cue out on the patio in her g-string and pasties. They had the birthday boy, Ellis, perched on a bar stool in the middle of the living room. When he saw her cha-cha through the sliding glass door, he started grinning like a possum eating shit.

The men hooted and women frowned and figeted. As Sheila's blood started to circulate, she stepped things up, rolling her shoulders to make her breasts jiggle, then sliding down to the floor, doing the splits on the shag rug. Ruth, Ellis' wife, sat on the folding chair over by the T.V. and gritted her teeth. She saw nothing funny at all about a young woman displaying her body in this manner.

Sheila bounced off the rug and tossed her mane of hair. She smiled at the guest of honor and bent over to give him a look at her ripe, drooping young breasts, licking her lips, beckoning him to come to her.

He started to drool.

Ruth crushed her wine glass in her fist. And Clete, Ellis' buddy and the party's entertainment director, touched his