

profusely and tried to help the woman up before she realized that she was dead

With the willies making her arms writhe like snakes, Carmen ran from the restaurant, her face an ugly, horror-induced contortion, her urine staining a dark hand on her jeans.

#### ELLIS WINDS DOWN AFTER THE NIGHT SHIFT

Ellis pulled into his driveway and trudged into the house with his shirttail hanging out. He fixed himself a cup of decaf; it was six-thirty in the morning and in an hour or two he was going to sack out; he didn't need any caffeine tickling the back of his brainstem. He took his steaming cup out into the back yard. He was going to sit down at the picnic table and enjoy the sunrise, but when he heard rustling on the other side of the fence he went to check it out. It was Clete, pattering in his flip-flops in his garden, pulling snails off his pepper plants and dropping them into a bucket. "What are you doin', partner?" Ellis said. Clete pointed to the soup he was making in his plastic bucket: "Salt water," he said grinning. "It's eating those nasty motherfuckers up." Ellis laughed and said, "What a sadistic bastard." Clete said, "Yeah? Well you ought to see what those little fuckers'll do to a baby pepper plant." Clete was close to his jalapenos.

Ellis invited Clete over for coffee, fortified with Ten High bourbon. They sat at the picnic table, talking. "I gotta get off this midnight shift, Clete," Ellis signed. Clete blew some steam off the top of his coffee and said, "I wish I could get off the damned disability. Doin' nothin' every day, I'm startin' to feel like a damned slug."

Next door, in the bucket sitting on the lawn at the edge of the garden, the salty water bubbled. The little pepper plants stretched their leaves out to the rising sun.

#### CLETE'S NEW DANCE STEP

A few years back, when Clete was recovering from his stroke, he got very involved in his garden, limping around his twenty square foot of bare dirt in the back yard with a quad cane in one hand and a hoe or hand spade clasped in the other, involved in the pastime of raising dry and deformed zucchinis and mealy tomatoes, stunted bell peppers and potatoes the size of golf balls. His one unqualified success, though, was his little plot of twelve plants — laid out in a grid pattern configuration in the garden's southeast corner — that produced a prodigious supply of big glossy jalapeno

peppers, bright green and shiny fruits possessing an internal heat so intense that — taken alone rather than mixed in one of Juanita's famous salsas — might very accurately be described as crunchy elongated nuggets on loan from the fires of hell.

Not that that bothered Clete. He'd married Juanita Diaz, now Juanita Johnson, thirty-six years back, and had suffered, initially, the fiery chili-laced concoctions she (and her mother and sisters) whipped up, until he became accustomed (and eventually began to love and crave) them. After all those years he could now chow down on the hottest of burritos, the tangiest salsas, the most explosive tamales on God's green earth, and wash them down with but a bare minimum (only a pint, or perhaps two) of beer — and that employed not as a coolant but only as a flavor-enhancing beverage.

But we're talking here — in terms of sensitivity to the effects of the jalapeno — of the oral cavity and the digestive system in all its convoluted and acidic looping glory. Any other part of Clete's anatomy (excepting, of course, his age-gnarled and calloused hands) was not immune, and a moment's thoughtlessness — a trip to the bathroom before a thorough washing of fingers tainted by essence of jalapeno after a stint of sunny harvesting — proved, one afternoon, painful ....

Clete urinated, gave his thing a shake and a brief and absent-minded fondle, zipped up, washed up (too late) and exited the bathroom, and by the time he had emerged from the hallway and into the family room where Juanita and her friend Ruth sat chatting over their coffee, he began to experience the burn.

And his eyes went wide and he said, "Whoa!" And then he began to dance, an arm-writhing, head-rolling, white-of-the-eye affair, accompanied by yips and howls and rubbery facial contortions, and then a one-legged hop in a counterclockwise direction twice around before he instituted a leg and direction change for two more revolutions before he went into a headstand and then a series of back flips that took him out the sliding glass door, across the patio and into the pool.

At the sound of the splash, Ruth got up from the table and got the coffee pot and brought it back to the table and, as she refilled her and Juanita's cup, she said, "That husband of yours is a dancing fool." And Juanita stabbed the teaspoon into the sugar bowl, scooping up a gleaming white mound, and said, "That he is, Ruthie, that he is, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to rein him in on that little step he's come up with, cause it looks a little too energetic." She stirred the sugar into her coffee and continued,

"I don't think I'd ever on my best day be able to follow his damned lead on that." Ruth poured a dollup of milk into her coffee and added a little packet of artificial sweetener, and replied, "It did look a little on the vigorous side, Nita, but I was you, I'd give it a try; you don't, he might just go out and find himself a young chicken that will." Juanita rubbed an aching knee and said, "Well, I don't know...."

And out in the pool, Clete pushed off the bottom, kicking his trousers and underwear off his legs as he rose toward the surface.

### THE LAWN KING

Clete has gotten involved with his lawn. It started out as therapy, using the lawn mower as a sort of roaring walker on wheels during the later stages of his recovery from the stroke. As his recovery progressed, the therapy was transformed into an obsession. Three shelves in his garage are now crammed with boxes and bottles and bags of various lawn care products — fertilizers and insecticides and weed control agents. He owns a two-gallon pump-action spray bottle, a red Twirl-O-Feeder that spews white nitrogen nuggets in a wide, even pattern. He has a nine-horse-power Mega-Mower that can — if its operator is swift enough or his prey slow or stupid enough — puree a cat or a small dog in two seconds flat, then shoot the molecular feline or canine bits into the grass catcher to moisten the otherwise powdery mulch. He has a turbo-powered Weed Wacker that can reduce a redwood fence to kindling, or gouge out a trench in the dirt deep enough for sprinkler pipe. Clete's obsession has paid off. His lawn glows with green health, and he has started, with his chiding of his less-green-thumbish neighbors, a good-natured competition to see who can maintain the most perfect front lawn.

Ellis Leahy, next door, suffers dandelions. He and his wife Ruth were out one Saturday with the weed pluckers pulling them up one by one (the only way to really get rid of them according to Clete) when Chuck wandered down from up the street and asked Ellis to come on up for a beer if he had the time, and to "... take a look at my damned lawn. I don't know what the hell is wrong with it; it just seems to be crumbling apart on me." Ellis stood up and brushed his knees off and said, "A beer sounds good, Chuck, but you want advice about your lawn, I suggest you go an' ask old Clete. He's the neighborhood expert." Chuck gazed over at the putting green that was Clete's lawn and said, "Yeah, I know, but he's gettin' to be such an asshole — pardon my French, Ruth — when it comes to this lawn shit." Ellis glanced