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Short Story

Patio

^{GROOPER}
He looked back once as he swaggered across the road, seeing Eulalie smile for the first time since the porch roof of the shanty had collapsed.

Not that she had smiled much before, or had reason to smile. He thought he heard her laugh. But it could have been Pappy's plump new wife, fanning regularly with her palmetto fan, clipped of tips.

Pappy reared back on the heels of the white metal chair, allowing the morning sun to bathe his black face. A dead coon stretched at his brogan toes for the flies to buzz over. Pappy's nose was as flat as a quarter placed on the railroad track running east to west through Seymour, Georgia.

Shirley's girl baby shimmied up the umbrella pole, like a possum up a pine; Eulalie spanked her smartly on her sagging drawers, and she scampered off the table to the edge of the porch, dropping to the dirt in a squat.

Baa Baa black sheeps
Has you any wool?
Yawsuh, yawsuh,
Four bag full

One for the master,
one for the dame,
and one for the ole lady
what live down the lane.

Shirley's other mishap, a wormy-looking boy, rode past on the mangy back of the visiting dog. The little boy's knobby knees pumped as though he peddled a tricycle, while the dog patiently struggled on, eyeing Grooter headed for the Low Spot.

Summer grass, forked with seeding heads, switched Grooter's green turpentine twills at the knees as he jaunted on towards the intersection. With a heedless left-right snap of his head, he crossed over to the dirt road, hearing a car hissing up the other side of the railroad overpass.

Best trade I ever made, he thought - thinking slower than he talked; his speech sounded like pop bottles rolling together in a croker bag.

"Lalie got herself a shed, and I ain't out've nothing but a little pocket change."

He stopped, looking back again at the maimed shack where the red umbrella swayed.

Eulalie's gold tooth flashed in her wizened face.

For a fact, he'd been tormented by her ever since the March wind had robbed her of her porch. She had sat there twenty-odd years of evenings in the dusk of fried fatback and hoecake waiting for him to mope home. And she hadn't complained. Oh, her sad walleyes had roved from shack to shack edging the road, up to the turpentine commissary bordering the railroad tracks, down to the road that led from the Low Spot - expecting him to happen up from

one direction or the other. Her tough hands would hang limply to the sides of the straight chair rocked back to the wall where her head reposed. Her bony legs stretched toes to the floor, twitching on the splintery planks. Modestly, her floursack apron covered her knees, like a child's oversized skirt.

Shirley would scamper perilously around the legs of the chair, tweaking Eulalie's calloused toes, looking up with a gleeful expression. Eulalie's swollen lips would part, half stuck, efetely saying, "Leave my feets be, Honey chile."

Wouldn't smile for nothing! But at least she wasn't one to mess around at the Low Spot as some had from the now departed shanties connecting them.

Grooter's shanty had survived the bulldozing out of the goodness-of-the-heart of the defunct Seymour Turpentine Company. Pleading with doleful eyes and exaggerated pressed palms, Grooter had convinced the bulldozer operator to allow him to stay while the others were ~~rout~~ed out to the Low Spot.

"Ain't bothering nothing where I is; ain't messing in nobody's business; ain't got nary nother place to go; Shirley June's babies yonder'll wind up drinking shine and showing theyselves, like them folks ^{DOWN}~~UP~~ there, if I has to move out. And Lalie be plum mad and upset if her house get pushed down. She ain't the kind to be messing around down yonder, I say. Pleasir, pleasir don't push

down my house!

"Look yonder at them lil ole babies playing with they Santy Claus under that old chinyberry tree, right along. And my ole lady, propped up on the front porch, she liable to set right there in her chair and makes you have to push her off with your bulldozer. Ain't never had no place to call home but right here. See, she ain't making no signs of getting herself up, and your big tractor runned right up to her doorsteps.

"Ask Miss Wanna Mae yonder in the big house if my ole lady ain't as fine a hand to 'orn as she ever seed. Go ask Mr. Bo, yonder at the commissary, if he don't mean for you to pass on by. Yonder he be, setting on the store porch. See him giving you the mean eye. He aimed for you to go on.

"I tell you, sir, a ole lady like Lalie ain't got no business down yonder. That's for folks likes to have a good time. Lalie don't set no store in carrying on. Some buck come up amessing with her, I be obliged to stob him. Then what'd it be? Shurf come and lock me up. What's them chirren gonna do for supper then?

"Get down off the porch, Lalie! He coming on!

"I say, she ain't the kind've woman to make it down yonder, Mister. She too bashful. I ain't just jealous, neither; ain't never beat up on her but oncet, and that be a accident.

"Pick your feets up, Lalie! He coming anyhow!

"Nawsuh, she ain't nothing to loók at, but she all I got. Shirley June got herself stobbed back yonder and left my olé lady

to look out for the chirren. Now, do you blame me for not taking no liking to packing up and moving down there? I goes there, my ownself, totjoke, but ain't no place to take my woman. Ever back be coming along'd be trying to mess her up. And her just as happy as can be setting up yonder on that porch. She liable to get over yonder and get to having herself a big time. Then what I do?

"Yawsuh, I sho' be obliged if you spare my house. Shò' would now.

"He be going on now, Ialie!"

Satisfied now, seeing the sun glinting off the tin roof of his house, Grooter ambled on, hearing ahead the Fourth of July party moving toward him, in force, along the dirt road.

Like crows babbling in a pecan tree, the party came, belting song, intermittently:

Don't mess with my tutu,
don't mess with my tutu.
If you mess with my woman,
I'm gonna break your face.

² Grooter clamored toward them, at first, as they came round the curve at the cemetery.

In lines three deep from ditch to ditch, they swept around the curve, eyes pealed ahead with fierce determination.

Buckeye, who could chip twenty turpentine boxes to Grooter's one, cradled a tremendous block of glassy ice to his brawny chest,

his white teeth gritted fiendishly.

Ducking out from between the lines, a chain of children whipped ahead, whipping back around two effeminate men embracing near the rear.

Ring around the roses
pocket full of posies
Upstairs, downstairs
ginny, ginny squat.

As they chanted, their liquid eyes, black to the core, focussed on the mute, ashy faces of the men. Then dropping to a squat, they sniggered without joy. They stood, skipping on as they continued circling the two men.

A jug of blue-white fizzing moonshine passed from hand to hand, line to line, to the end, then reversed.

Six young girls, with chests plump as duck breasts, snapped their fingers and hips to the rhythm of their song, scattering to laugh as a juvenile boy, lean and pitch black, dared to pinch one on the backside.

Don't mess with my tutu,
don't mess with my tutu.
If you mess with my woman,
I'm gonna bust your face.

Impotently, Grooter darted out behind a fringed Mimosa tree to observe. Feeling the dampness of the grove of graves at his back, he watched them pass, growing weak with realization: red umbrella, Eulalie, the safe nook of his home growing bawdy with song. He grew weaker still with the realization of Lalie's awakening to his other life - the pure joy of it. She would know now; they would

know, going there to the red umbrella which he had erected to keep her in place. What if she followed them back: the hoard with the hearty boy bearing a wet green watermelon on his glistening brown shoulder? The protracted song swelling in the hot air. The laughter riding on the crest of noon. The bare feet padding, scuffling, making tracks that led back. And talking - all of them jabbering at once, moving the parade along on monosyllables that crowded out the crickets.

As they rumbled on by in their magical merriment, he felt Eulalie's loneliness, thick as the deathscents of cedar, and wished that he had never gone to the Low Spot, or that he had moved her there so that the spectacle would be common to her - common as a washboard on washday.

Alarmingly he recalled how fetching she had looked smiling under the new umbrella, the artificial blush radiating to her usually dusky face.

Hadn't he protected her from them? Hadn't he walked her to church on Sunday mornings at the fork of the path to the Low Spot, bidding her wait till he came back along to fetch her, knowing she would obey? How proud he had felt coming back from the Juke and finding her submissively gazing in the other direction, stoic and still, in her little black hat with her black bag that snapped loudly, peevishly, hung on her arms. Eulalie was a lady, never once looking back on the Sodom below.

Now she would know, and he would never more know peace.

Leola, an old neighbor, dazzling in a red sequined turban and matching tube top and shorts, dashed to the ditch on the fringe of the sunken graves, retrieved a rolling tamberine and set off again behind the parade, tapping it on her jiggling buttocks.

Grooter fell in behind, swallowing hard as he saw the red umbrella, blazon in the sun.