

# Shades

by Philip H. Schneider

**T**he old man sat straight up in the chair with his hands folded over one another on the head of his cane and with his face tilted fully into the sun as it climbed toward noon. The lids of his eyes were almost down, like the shades in the windows of the house across the dirt road. The shades were almost down and the windows were closed. A gray and louvered box stood on a concrete pedestal at the side of the house and a trickle of water ran from the box and into the dirt around it. The water made a small circle of the dirt darker than the rest. Those who lived in the house said that the box kept the air cool and that it kept the pollen out and that it was good for the children.

The old man could only hear the trickle of water from the machine. A doctor had come from the town and said that his eyes were no good anymore because he was old and that among other things it was to be expected.

“You ought to have some glasses made up,” the doctor said, and then he said, “In fact, you ought to be thinking about some place where they could look after that kind of thing for you.”

But he did not want to think about some place and now he had the infection in his leg. It did not hurt him very much, it was not serious the doctor said when he came again from the town, but it was hard for him to walk too much on it and he did not walk as much up and down the dirt road and through the fields in back of his house. The doctor said that he should keep it clean and told him slowly, two or three times, how it should all be done with a very small amount of hot water and two tablespoons of the powder from the packet that he left.

On Thursday mornings a girl in a white uniform came to represent the County and to smile and to put on a new clean bandage. He could not make out her features, even when she was close to him, but he knew that she smiled and that she was very young and very serious about what she did because she scolded him about walking too much on the leg and she was very careful about doing everything exactly right. He got up early on Thursday mornings and carefully washed the leg, bending almost double to see better what he was doing, and then he went out and sat on the porch and waited for the girl to come from the County and scold him.

“You’ve been walking too much on this,” she would say, “you shouldn’t be doing that, it’s going to get worse.”

He chuckled at the girl sometimes, but he liked to talk to her even if she did admonish him for chuckling and for not taking the whole thing seriously enough. He did not like to have her go away again because the children did not come to see him anymore and there wasn’t anybody else.

The children had come to see him every day during the summer when they were putting the house together across the dirt road. He had been better then. They came across the dirt the first time and stood and looked for a long time at him sitting in the straight chair, and then the littlest one ran up to him and giggled and reached up and touched the long hair on his cheeks and chin. He picked her up and put her in his lap and she played with his beard and called to the other two. They came then, smiling big grins, and both of them touched the beard and sat down on the old wood of the porch and talked to him, and all during the summer they brought leaves for him to tell them about and helped him put the seeds into the ground for the garden. He told them of the times back before the Cottonwoods and the Hedge that grew in rows between the fields all around, times when the dirt rose on the wind in great dark clouds that covered the sun, and it was bad for seeds of any kind, times that he remembered. They were very quiet and pensive when he told them, and they were again quiet and they shifted from one foot to the other and looked down at the ground in the fall when he was ready to go back to the boarding house in the town for the colder weather. He gave them each a seedling Elm to grow in the house during the winter.

“You take real special care of ’em now,” he said as he handed each one carefully down. “I’ll be wanting to see ’em, come summer.”

The ones who were building the house did not say anything about that, but they smiled and were flustered and said that they were very sorry to see him go because he was good with the children. He gave them all of the vegetables from the garden because he did not have any use for them once they were grown and ready to use, the man said as they smiled and were flustered again, and they thanked him very very much for all of the tomatoes and for the corn and the squash.

When the car brought him out from the town in the summer that followed, the children met him and took him over to see the trees and to look at all of the things that the ones who had built the house were doing to make it better. He tripped on the front steps, because they had not been there the summer before, and he was barely able to catch himself on the railing to keep from falling down.

“You should have something done about that,” the woman said evenly.

He nodded to her tone and he was very careful during the rest of the tour.

The children did not come to see him as much that summer. She did not want them to get too much sun, she said, and there was a lot of pollen in the air, and it was bad for them while they were growing up like they were. He spent one whole day with them planting the little trees in the front yard of the new house, and there were several times when the smallest came very quietly over to him as he sat in the straight chair on the old porch and climbed up into his lap and hung onto his beard with her small hand for a long time in silence.

It was during the summer after that one that the doctor came out from town and told him that his eyes were no good and that he should move into some place where they could care for him. They put the machine on the pedestal across the dirt road to keep the air cool in the house and to keep the pollen out, and a man who did landscaping came out and dug up the entire front yard of the house and seeded it and took away the trees because they were not planted in the right places. The larger two children did not come to see him at all that summer and the smallest came only once, quietly, and looked at him for a moment, and ran back across the dirt road because they were calling her. He did not make much of a garden. The weeds grew faster than they ever had and it took something away from the plants. When he left for town at the end of the summer he went to the house to tell them that they could have the vegetables, but it took them a long time to answer his knock. They said thank you very much and that they would go over a little later and see what they might use.

There was a man who showed him a card that said the bearer worked for the County waiting to see him and to talk to him when he came back out late in the spring to sit on the porch in the hot months. He could not read the card, but the man said that it said that.

“You got to do something about this place,” the man said as he tested the firmness of one of the porch supports and looked gravely up to the places near the eaves where the paint was gone. “People starting to complain, not so good for the property values, you know.”

He told the man that he would do what he could and the man said that he would come back out at the end of the summer to see about things because they’d be putting a top on the road pretty soon now and things had to get done pretty quick.

The old man tilted his face even more fully into the sun and let the skin of his cheeks and forehead grow warm from the rays and he did not think about the man from the County. He did not open his eyes until he heard the light steps coming across the dirt road. He could not make out her face but he knew from the shape and the size that it was the smallest child. The figure stopped on the broken stones

of the walk in front of the porch and she cocked her head to one side and stood there and looked at him for a long time. He smiled as he sat and watched the light shimmer where the sun reflected from her hair, and he wished for once that he had taken the doctor's advice about the glasses. She came another step slowly toward the porch and he watched her and he wondered why she did not come the rest of the way. And then he heard her begin to weep, small sounds at first, down in her chest, then louder, growing, then big gulping sobs.

The old man did not know what to do. He listened to the sobs as they came up from the child and he leaned a little forward in the straight chair to try to see better, but it was no good. He slowly hooked the handle of his cane over his arm and bend a little more forward in the straight chair and put his hands a little way out and open in front of him.

The child stood for a moment more, the sobbing regular and hard in her throat.

"Why don't you go away?" she stuttered then, through the sound of her tears. "Why don't you just go away?"

And then she turned and ran quickly back across the dirt road and into the house where the shades were down.

