

Knowing

by Ajay Nair

'You are a little porcupine, aren't you? All sensitive and bunched up and thorns shooting out your body.' She said this in a gay, sing-song voice, her head bobbing up and down. She was a big woman, a massive, misshapen tree of a woman, wrapped in a rain-coat the size of a tent. She wore a cap on her head, its beak peeking out, drops of rain slipping off its edge like so many pieces of transparent candy.

Stroman, eleven, looked up at her as she pushed against him at the bus-stop. She had a fat face full of curves and if this were a movie, she'd be a cinch for the kind neighbor.

'So what kind of girls do you like, kid?' she asked again, her voice swaying dangerously in the breeze that was lifting up from the just-rained-on ground. She could squish his head between her thumb and her forefinger if she wanted to, Stroman thought.

'Or is it boys you like?' Her voice came out low and even, no cadence any more, no music. It was the smooth, hard bark of a tree. The curves on her face had straightened out and her eyes were squinting down at him, tiny stones of accusation. Stroman felt a prickly heat spread inside him in spite of the rain.

