

The Vegetable Man

by Con Chapman

He would come, pushing his cart before him,
up the street from his home across from the doctor's office,
more than a half-mile away. His cart,
loaded down with vegetables he'd grown himself,
was as ramshackle as that house; the boards of both
were weathered and rough, like his face.

When he'd stop on our street, we the children
would look at him through screen doors with curiosity.
When we ventured out to take in the spectacle of
the man and his wagon, a grocery store on wheels,
we knew his life was different from ours inside,
air-conditioned, televisioned, mothered and at night, fathered.

Mom would open the door and we'd approach him gingerly.
He'd hug us against our wishes when we tried to get a better
look at his cart, his odor a mix of sweet and sour and stink
from sweat. He was dirty--we weren't allowed to be.
She'd buy tomatoes, okra, sweet corn, and we'd go back inside.
At least he *did* something for his job, instead of sitting at a desk.

Some days we'd stay inside if mom didn't need anything, and the tedium of our summer days would be heavier for the lack of him, even though we came to understand that he was odd. "Why does he live in that old shack?" we asked. "His children don't take care of him," mom said. "His wife died, he's all alone."



And then one day, after mom told him through the screen that she was fine for now, thanks, we went back to our coloring books and dolls, only to hear the country girl, minutes later, say "Ma'am, that Mr. Whitesell's on the front porch, relieving himself over the rail." Doors were slammed shut and locked around the house

and when dad got home that night, the horrible tale was told. "I guess a man like him, walking the streets all day, he's gotta go somewhere." "But not on my . . ." "I wasn't finished. I agree." "So you'll call him?" "I don't suppose he's got a phone."

I'll have to find him home or catch up to him sometime on the street."

Dad stopped down to the old man's house the next day, before going to work. He found him in the back, weeding and hoeing.

"Mr. Whitesell . . ."

"Be careful where you step. That's manure . . ."

"Mr. Whitesell, I spoke to my wife and we'd . . ."

"Them's mighty nice kids you've got. That boy's the spit 'n image of you."

"Thank you. As I was saying . . ."

". . . and those girls are just as cute as peahens."

"Mr. Whitesell, my wife has signed up for our groceries to be delivered. We won't need you anymore."

"You can't get good okra like I got at the supermarket," he said, "and I come by your way every day anyway 'cause I call on the other houses."

"Thanks, but we'd appreciate it if you wouldn't stop at our place anymore."



There was silence, and the old man looked down at the dirt he had tilled by hand. "You sure you won't reconsider? I hate to lose a good customer."

"Thanks, but we're all set for the foreseeable future.

Dad started to walk back to the car, and Whitesell called after him: "I've got sweet corn comin' in soon. Nice white corn . . . none better. I'll just stop by when it's ready."

Dad turned and walked up close again, so the neighbors and the people walking into the doctor's office wouldn't hear.

"You don't seem to understand. You're not welcome on my property anymore. No man who takes a piss off my porch would be. If you so much as stop your damn cart at my curb again, I'll call the police and have you arrested."

With that he turned and got in the red and white Oldsmobile with the turquoise seat cushions we'd put in the back, and drove off, grim-faced and annoyed, to the shoe plant. The old man stood there and watched him go, then turned back to the corn, which had been knee-high on the Fourth of July, and now had light-yellow tassels, about to turn brown.

From "Town Folk & Country People."

