

A Little Fishing

by Jack Swenson

Len and I sit on Harpo's porch, drink beer and gab. It's hot, even for July. Len and I joke and laugh, and Harpo stares off into the middle distance.

I'm in the city for just a few days, then I'm going up north to visit my folks, then it's back to California. I can't stay, I tell Harpo's wife when I first get there. My girlfriend misses me. "What about your wife?" she asks.

Len wants to say hello to the hippie girl who lives next door. The girl is outside lugging around a big gardening can, watering the plants. Harpo calls out her name. She looks up, waves and grins. "Ask her over," Len says.

Len gets up and goes outside. Pretty soon he's back with the girl, leading her by the hand. She's a pretty girl. Tall, freckle-faced, gawky. She sits down, and Len fetches her a beer. Len whispers sweet nothings into her ear. The girl giggles.

Harpo sits and looks at something I can't see. I drink beer and ask him questions. I ask him how they found the cancer. Backache, he says. He went to see a doctor.

When Harpo's wife comes home from work, I stand up and give her a big hug. The neighbor girl is long gone. So is Len. After dinner I help Alice with the dishes. "He hasn't got much zip," I say. "No," she says. She's going to take him up to the lake this weekend. Maybe do a little fishing.

Before I leave, we go out to the garage behind the house and Harpo shows me his Packard. He's going to restore the old car, he says. The engine's shot, but otherwise it's in good shape. I get in the back seat and sit there for a minute. It's perfect. Like new. It smells like an old musty closet.

The next day I stop by on my way out of town. Harpo stands next to my spanking new red BMW 2002, and we shake hands. "See ya," I say. "Maybe," Harpo replies.

