

# Black Orchids

by Jack Swenson

After the operation, his doctor told him he could prescribe a medicine that would cost him a thousand dollars at a drug store, or he could go down to Fleet Farm and get a bottle for fifteen bucks. The stuff at the home and farm supply store was sheep dewormer. Same stuff, the doc said. I asked Floyd which one he got. "Baaa," he replied.

He seemed to think the fact that he had cancer was funny. The first time it was colon cancer. That's when he took the sheep medicine. He recovered from that, and five years later, they found a spot on his liver. "What are your chances?" I asked him. "Zero and none," he replied. It was amazing, he said, how his body kept producing these exotic growths.

I told him he was just paying for his sins. He gave me a look. "Why me?" he asked. It was a good question. Floyd had lived a straight-arrow life. I told Floyd that since the docs had caught the cancer early, maybe he would beat the odds.

Floyd was a little fellow with a cheery manner and a good head for business. In his wayward youth, while attending the university, he had worked as a lab assistant for our crazy inventor friend. For a time he was one of the wastrels who lived at the old house on Ridgewood avenue in Minneapolis.

It was Floyd who one night initiated the burial of our friend Doc. We were living at the time in a rented house on south Lyndale Avenue. Doc came home drunk and passed out on his bed. Floyd, who was drunk, too, discovered him spread-eagled on his back and declared him dead. "Doc's, dead," he said. "We've got to bury him." Floyd proceeded to collect soiled clothing from all over the house and pile it on top of Doc. Afterwards, Floyd collapsed on the stairs

laughing. I'll never forget the anguished look on his face. You couldn't tell if he were laughing or crying.

I was visiting in Minnesota the summer that Floyd died. We had dinner at Max and Kaia's house. Afterwards we stood around in the kitchen talking, and I told Floyd he looked good. He did, too. He looked as fit as a fiddle. The little man looked me in the eye and smiled. He felt good, he said. Problem was, when he felt good, that meant that it was time for another round of chemo, and then he would feel lousy. He laughed. His wife smiled and looked away.

