

Snow Bird

by Jerry Ratch

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Then Bess was officially a Snow Bird. She was on the waiting list to become a permanent resident at the camp as soon as the expansion they were planning was completed. But it was being held up by some county people who were doing everything they could, it seemed, to block the expansion. This might have been because these were nudists, not everybody's political favorite. Even though the camp had been there for decades already, the growth of suburban developments had pushed housing tracts practically right up to the border of the encampment. A conservative minister in one of the tracts had gotten on the county commission that handed out the permits for such expansions, and he was doing everything he could to block the nudists from having their way.

Quebec knocked on the flimsy metal door to Bess' trailer. It wasn't much of a trailer, really. It was what they called a fifth-wheeler, something Harris had gotten using his mother's last \$3,000.

The recession kept getting heavier, much more severe than people thought at first. Things kept changing left and right in peoples' lives. Families were filing for bankruptcy. It was destroying people's homes. Banks were repossessing some of the trailers at the park, even though they were nominal in cost in comparison to everything else out in the normal world.

Bess opened the screen when she saw it was Quebec at her door. Immediately a bee flew into the trailer. Bess stepped outside, holding the screen open and waving a rolled newspaper back and forth across the doorway. She was wearing a top as she always did around the park, so she wouldn't get sun poisoning,

which left big blisters along her arms. "Shoo," she said. "Shoo! Oh, these bees are driving me nuts already!"

"Bess," said Quebec, "I just came from the meeting of the Board, and they made a decision. It was unanimous."

The old woman shaded her eyes with the newspaper.

"What is it?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to move like they said."

"You voted with them? Against me?"

"Nobody is against you, Bess. It's in everybody's best interests."

"It's not in *my best interest*. I have nobody left but you, Quebec. I trusted you. You were my son's wife. You, at least, could have voted for me. Where am I going to go?"

"You can go down to Lake Elsinore. It'll just be for the summer."

"That lake! I've seen that lake. Harris took me there one time when I first moved down here from Santa Rosa. It's a festering spittoon, not a lake. I don't want to go there." The old woman shook her head. There was a streak of blood in her eye.

Bess started raising her voice. "Oh, if I ever thought I'd be forced to move out of this park, I never would have consented to let Harris move me down here in the first place. I was perfectly content where I was up in Berkeley. Otto and I lived there for ten years after he retired. Why, we were perfectly content there. Otto was so happy, playing golf every day."

Her face grew a focus to it, and her eyes started to grow moist.

"Oh, Quebec, Otto died right in front of me. I was with him. He was sleeping in his chair, it was four in the afternoon. He opened his eyes and smiled at me. He smiled at me! Then he gasped for air and was gone."

Her head began wobbling back and forth as she stared at something in front of her. "I think he knew that was it," she said. "He knew."

Quebec drew in a breath. "It won't be for that long, Bess. It'll be over and done before you know it. Three months, that's all. Then you can come right back, and you'll never have to leave again, I promise you that."

"But why, Quebec? Why do I have to go? Don't I get special treatment because of Harris? They acted like I was going to get some kind of special treatment when it happened. They said."

"Now, don't start, Bess. They never said that."

"They did so, when it happened. They did so say that. I remember."

"No, Bess, you know that's not what happened."

"But, why, Quebec? Why are they doing this to me. He was my own son, for God's sake — and he was your husband! You should do something about this. Doesn't that mean anything around here, that you were his husband, and I was his mother? Doesn't that mean anything anymore? Harris did so much for them here. You're on the Board. Can't you do something?"

"I'm sorry, Bess, but those are the rules, and they can't bend the rules for people just because they're on the Board. I'm held to an even stricter standard because I'm on the Board."

"You! You know what your problem is? You worked for the telephone company far too long, that's what, if you want to know the truth."

"Now, come on, Bess, let's not start up."

"Well, that's the truth. You're nothing but a bureaucrat, if you ask me. You can't stand up to those men on the Board. That's what I think. You've got no gumption in you. You owe it to me. That's my money that went into that trailer of yours."

"Bess, I'm not going to stay here and listen to this. I've got more important things to do."

"Like what? Throwing old ladies out on their ear — that's all you got to do. You just run and do their bidding with those people, that's all you do. You and your rules. Rules mean more to you than people do. You're just a bureaucrat!" Bess spit in the dust. "I am seventy-one years old, and I don't have anywhere left to go, and

you, you call yourself a daughter-in-law? All you can do is throw me in the bush."

"Bess, I've done a lot for you, you know that very well. I do a whole lot for you."

"I don't want to go, Quebec. Please. I won't! I won't go! I won't come out of my trailer when they come. I'll lock myself in. They can't make me go. I won't!"

"Bess, don't start with that kind of behavior again. You know what happened the last time you did that."

"But Harris was alive then. This is different. He's gone now. Oh! Oh! Maybe none of this would've ever happened if he'd just stayed married to that Francine!" Bess spit out bitterly.

"Bess!" Quebec gasped. "How can you even talk like that?"

"Well — it's the truth!" Bess said.

But then she bit her tongue and thought about it, and she immediately apologized to Quebec.

"I don't know what's got into me," she said. "It's just — I don't want to leave here, Quebec. I don't want to leave my Otto . . . and . . . and Harris!"

"I know, Bess," said Quebec, comforting the old woman. Bess' perm was all but gone, and the curls hung limp in the heat. Quebec smoothed out the thin white hair on the old woman's head. "I know."

