

Satellite Dish (from The New Yorker)

by Rick Rofihe

If you think it's too cold for a woman my age to be eating her lunch out here by the beaver dam, then the first thing I have to tell you is, don't worry about me. Or, if I say it the way I first said it as a little girl, "Don't worry 'bout me."

I seem to have been saying and thinking the same things right from the beginning. For a long time my mother would look at me as if the things I was saying were a little bit funny—just a little bit, not funny enough one way to laugh at or the other way to get upset about.

I don't know—is "Don't worry 'bout me" such a funny thing to say if you're a small child? Many times after I'd said it my mother would ask me if I was angry about anything. I told her I didn't think so. Maybe what I should have said to her was that I just didn't like to have anyone worrying about me. But I don't know if I knew that yet. After a while my mother didn't say any more about it, but she would still sometimes look at me closely when I said it, as if she were looking not just into my eyes but into my whole face, if that's possible.

I did start to wonder once if it might have something to do with the trains that used to go by our house—if the things I was thinking and saying might be funny because whenever I asked anyone a question I didn't hear the answer right because just then a train went by.

This is nice and hot, this vegetable soup. I make it with celery, onions, and carrots. Fresh tomato for base. The sandwich I baked the bread for in the wood stove. Now, it might look like that's roast beef in the sandwich, but it's really a thin-sliced leftover from last night. We had steak, with green beans and mashed potatoes, and

then apple pie for dessert. I could have brought some apple pie with me today, but there was this nice little piece of angel-food cake.

It wasn't so cold yesterday, but I didn't take my usual walk out here. A rather cheerless day, yesterday. Maybe just because it's the end of the season. Couldn't interest myself in anything—not knitting, not reading, not anything—so I just crawled into bed with my thoughts.

Just as one thing I say is “Don't worry about me,” one thing I think is that you love somebody by living with them. Now my husband—maybe he lived with me because I loved him, and even maybe he lived with me because he loved me, but he never loved me by living with me. Anyway, I was married once, long ago. Three children, two now away.

The satellite dish up by the barn, next to the road, on this side? Hard to miss it. My son, his wife, and the boys watch programs from all over the world now. I really do like living in my own home with family about, yet often when I hear them talking and I think it has to do with people around here but the names aren't familiar and I ask, it turns out to be about something that was on TV. So I do miss out on some talk that way, because I really don't look at the television too often. And if I haven't much interesting to say sometimes, maybe that's why.

This bread of mine, I think it's very tasty. It's from my grandmother's recipe, though I never knew her. But I do make it like my mother did, not only by the recipe but from having watched her. So it should be the same. And I've started using the wood stove again. So now it's exactly the same.

They say you shouldn't slice bread hot, but my mother would, for me. And now, if anyone's interested, I offer to do it for them. And I do it for myself, too. Because it's always the same for me, that fresh hot bread.

The pond here, that's something that's not the same. More like a lake now. Up at the other end, it's still as good for wading as it used to be, but most times now I'll just sit down at this end and watch the water trickling over the beaver dam. When it's warm

enough, I dangle my feet in. And I saw lots of baby beavers this summer—so cute.

Do you think people change? Maybe it's that they appear to—if they really do, I don't know. If it's a sudden change, maybe it's just that they go back to being like they really were all along. If it's a slow change, as they grow older, it's probably just them becoming more like they are—I think people don't get less like they are; they get more like they are. Sometimes the change is toward you. But sometimes it's away. Even if they love you. Even if you love them by living with them.

I like a crusty bread. Last spring, when the man who sold my son the satellite dish told him that the signal wasn't coming in good because of the big old elm tree across the road by the house, that it was getting in the way of the reception, everyone—my son, my daughter-in-law, my grandsons, and then, because everyone else was, even the man—looked at me. I loved that tree. It was always there. It would always make me feel good to walk in the yard through its patterned shadow on my way into the house. But then, across the road, there was the satellite dish. I said they could chop down the tree, but that I wanted every bit of wood from it cut and stacked in a pile by itself. And though I hadn't done it for years, since we'd got an electric stove and a furnace, I started back using the old wood stove, which we'd left in the kitchen mostly for looks. It's better to cook bread in a wood stove anyway. You can tell the difference not just in the crust but also in taste.

That elm tree was healthy. Perfect. Solid all the way through. So at least I'm putting it to good use. Even with such a warm summer I did. And I will, until that wood's used up.

Anyway, it's something else to keep me occupied. I do like a full day. That way, when night comes I'm tired, and can fall asleep fast. Then morning comes quick. After breakfast, that's when I take my walk down behind the house where the trains used to run. Since they took up the tracks, it's left a nice path. I almost always see rabbits.

The trains weren't really a good explanation for all those things I was thinking and saying back then and for all these years now, because the trains went by only four times a day, and one of those times I was usually in school and you could hardly hear the train from the school. And two more times I'd be in bed—for the late-night train, I'd be asleep, or almost asleep, and for the early-morning train I'd be just waking up. So unless I was dreaming and asking questions and getting answers in my dreams, and with just one other time of day when the train went by, the things I've always been thinking and saying couldn't have had much to do with those trains. And you know, at night, if I think about it, I start to miss the sound of the trains.

What I will miss now, until spring, is people coming up from the city for vegetables and things. Sometimes you meet people who, even though you never saw them before, when you talk to them it's as if they're answering questions inside of you that you don't even ask. People like that I start thinking I could live with.

Some things have happened in my life and some haven't. And I always got along by going carefully—that's even how I have to walk now. But you see a little light and you scratch at it. For a little more light. That's what I do. If you find life a little dark, I think that's what to do. Even if it only amounts to making tea for someone and serving cookies. Any little things I might do to get a little more light—well, I'm not ashamed to do them.

Could be an early cold winter. The moon was getting nice and round last night, so there might be a frost soon. I should cover the tomatoes. I wonder if anyone will remember that I like to take my own apples down to the cider mill to get pressed. Won't make any plans, but I love to go.

Didn't get enough beets this year—enough to eat, but not enough to pickle. Next year, more beets, and maybe more Swiss chard, too. And some flowers closer to the house.

The angel food's gone, so I'll get on my way. You know, whenever I cross the road now, even if I'm looking down just at my feet, I can feel the satellite dish above and behind me where it

wasn't before, and the tree and its shadow not above and ahead of me where they were before. All those things seem to make me walk differently—not slower but stiffer.

How would it all look to you after I walked from the beaver dam here, through the field? Up by the road, as you drove over the rise? On the left you'd see the barn, then the satellite dish, then me—don't worry 'bout me—crossing the line in the road on my way to the yard and the house on the right. But you wouldn't see a patterned shadow of the tree on the house and the yard, and you wouldn't see the tree.

