

Alfalfa

by Terese Svoboda

The year I lick so much windowpane off stamps I have to use Elmer's glue to back the twenty-center for a postcard cash request to my mother, that *I am alive note* at the end of term, is the year of all the "wine" parties.

"Wine" is what we put down on a form to get the empty windowless room for the party, a room big enough to do a lot of licking in and avoid seeing the walls pulse too close. People who are not throwing up from some real wine party or people fresh from not flunking or people who have taken to feeding and watering rats to get out of flunking, all my friends, when these people hear that Bugs will cook for a party, we buy a lot of these stamps.

That doesn't mean Bugs will turn up the flame. He makes that clear. No pots at all, he says, all presentation. But as he has promised to do this meal for some time, and we have waited, party after party, begging him to do it, we are really looking forward to it. I even find the jars he needs.

He already has a net.

Alfalfa rages beside the dorm, it is that much of a spring. Our new dorm bisects the field, so many of us grad students with our new loans and our bad hayfever and our new-bought stamps with whatever drug on it to dissolve on our tongue tips, so many of us students that they had to put up this concrete bunker of bunks and bare cells, of party rooms without windows abutting all that alfalfa.

All that alfalfa out our bare cells keeps us in bed some days, it is that green, double green after a "wine" party.

The field is where he uses the net.

But first Bugs sends us off to the pet stores to buy every last chirper and writher, and we also pay a visit to the bait shop because people do fish here. Then the "wine" boy says he has heard of a genetics lab down on College Terrace that Bugs maybe should check out. All you have to do to catch them is to shake them off the meat there in the fridge. They are the ones you get before they get wings.

More and more of us sign up on the list taped up outside the party room, a list we keep there so maintenance will know we are serious and won't come in to check on what the smoke is or if someone is carrying on a little loud. Pretty soon bets are laid on how much "wine" has to go down before anyone will eat Bugs' feast. Such a bet is null and void for most of us. We will eat anything, we say, we will eat a lot of it, especially at this kind of party.

Bugs is Okay with everything.

We start the party an hour early, we who are already ravenous and lit, start by spelling out his name in textbooks on the table. Or maybe just his initials. It is hard to tell, so many books keep falling off, a lot of them mine, fresh from falling off elsewhere. The "wine" we finish fast, then stand in front of the fridge to feel it take effect in comfort. It is hot in that room with spring going on in the field outside and no windows to it. The fridge is the place to be. Two or three of us stand right in front of it, flapping our t-shirt hems and bending to get our heads in a little, just in case there is something quick in there for the party, a Kool-aid pitcher with a toothless grin, or toothpicks with flavor.

There is just the bait and the jars.

Bugs makes us back off and sit on the floor with our wild hunger. He unstacks paper plates and empties the jars and the bait with their bits and shows us how to pull off the legs and what to swallow whole. Some things he does cook, on a hot plate, but most we eat them the way they come, stuck to a little something like a cracker or a weenie. Some of us hesitate, yes they do, they curry second thoughts, they turn their heads away and say *Maybe tomorrow*. We sing to them, apart and in unison, about an old woman who is going to die because of what she swallowed, then we drink some actual wine. We are legal, all of the males over six foot but still growing, still a new size shoe every year but mostly sandals anyway. We tend to hunger, even without a party, and we eat often, spread ketchup on napkins or chew frat chains or stick the dog with forks and taste its kibble--if anybody is watching. After a lot of stamps, we are known to climb trees after squirrels.

Bugs makes such smacking noise and raises his eyebrows with such show of pleasure that even the hungry hesitant are moved to try. He then refills everyone's plates with what has been knocked off the bottles at the lab, small bits, and those have crunch, and there is quantity. He cleans these plates with the side of his hand and shakes off what clings to it while someone recites its families from the lab as he remembers them while someone else checks the book with all those families that have not yet fallen off the table, that lies under a couple of those empty plates. The protein of the future, we say to the wriggling whatever, lifting whatever off the plate, and then Bugs makes up a few more plates and those we eat too, even with all the writhing and snatching and clutching at beards. Some of us have beards then.

Bugs shakes his fingers through his, those long fingers that must've grown longer from putting them in the fridge or holding up this and that by the wing--his fingers seem very long--he shakes those long fingers through the front of his beard that is already gray

from all his grad schooling and asks More?

A few more fall out.

More, we whoop as he offers them around. More is just about right, someone weeps.

The party is going, is gone.

The bloom is on the alfalfa that day though who would know it from the party room with its no window view that keeps us so safe from maintenance. More? Bugs asks one last time. Due to our chorus, he gets out his net, whips it around the room in an S that ends over someone who claws at the webbing and then Bugs leaves to avail himself of the bloom.

We keep on pouring refreshments, such as they are, and talking up species and flavors and the crunch of it all until he gets back, sweaty, with the fat net knotted tight. A bit of bouquet on it, he says and fits all its furled green buzzy insides into a bowl just the size for a salad, and sticks it in the fridge, net and all.

Chilled, he says. You'll like it better.

We play music, we play who can see the spiders that some of us can, climbing the inside walls looking for a window, big spiders the size of the fridge with hair on them and green eyes and poison flowing from their four mouths, then we play Who is hungry still?

We get to punching the fridge.

Bugs says Enough. Enough with the chill. He puts the bowl on the floor and skinnies the net's insides into it. Shshshsh, he says. From under the green alfalfa stirs the rest of our meal. These stir and chirrup and click like safes opening in old movies we have just seen

for the first time in black and white or like a brush across a drum someone is bringing out now, is brushing, is now pounding, they stir because the night is warm and the fridge is cold and what are they doing there on the table and not out in the field, alighting and alerting each other?

We eat them all, scrabbling through the bright green for the brushing and the stirring and just as often eating the alfalfa stink that gets stuck to a bug or just gets in the way of someone else getting to what we want. A kind of explosive eating breaks out around the last elusive bits and just as these bits are getting eaten, Bugs plucks, with two of his long, long fingers, at red ones trying to fly off. Then he sings about flying away, the house on fire, and how he will help her.

In the end he catches six of them right out of the air. Later, of course, it is ten. He chews every one of them straight down while we cheer, then he closes his eyes and gives off some gas from deep from inside himself, something his body has made in a hurry.

You can already hear the flushing. Many partygoers don't make it, they just sit in corners on the floor, staring at their hands where whatever it is comes up with the green, and Bugs too, with the alfalfa the secret ingredient he regrets now moving through all his personal passages.

The next day there is a rush at the cafeteria for potatoes au gratin, for pork rugged with batter, for jello with peaches. We eye all that is concealed in the sandwiches, we strain soup for what floats. Some of us swear off all meat, not just chicken, what everything you don't know tastes like now and in the future. Plus no vegetables, I say, waving at the bright green out the window, at the rest of us still turned that green. For at least a week.

