

Summer Heat

by R. Garrett

Elma Johnson peeked out of the kitchen window and the morning sun stared back at her.

“Floyd, you leave the winda drapes closed today if you don’t want the house getting as hot as Hades. It’s gonna be another blazer,” she hollered. She walked over to the staircase that lead to the second floor, “Floyd you hear me?” She listened a moment, then went back to the kitchen, shaking her head, “Deaf.”

She lifted up her brown work dress just enough to view her stocking-ed feet. She slipped them into her gardening boots and clomped toward the front door.

“I’m goin to the garden to do some weedin and waterin, Floyd.”

As soon as she stepped onto the porch the heat engulfed her. “Whew. Sure is going to be a hot one. Where’s my watering can?” she said, looking around. She found the dented aluminum can, grabbed it and tottered down the rickety steps.

“Where to start?” she sighed. Elma placed the can at the end of the irises, then strolled into the row, her wide hips pushing through the greenery. She knelt down, dug her fingers into the warming soil, and began pulling weeds.

The higher the sun climbed, the more intense the heat became. Bumblebees hummed lazily around her as she worked her way from row to row.

The sun burned straight overhead, roasting the earth and everything on it. Elma’s gray bun disintegrated and the sweat-soaked hair fell around her shoulders. “Oh, for goodness sake,” she said, and wiped the hair away from her face. She glanced at the sky. *I lost track of time*, she thought, and stiffly stood up, *Floyd’s gonna have a fit if his lunch is late*. She wiped the dirt from the front of her dress. “Oh my,” she mumbled, swaying from side to side. She blinked away the fuzzy spots from the front of her eyes and headed indoors.

Dark and cool, the house was a welcomed relief. Elma wiped her dirt-streaked forehead with a dishtowel that hung near the kitchen sink. She poured herself a glass of pulpy lemonade and sipped it slowly. After she had cooled down, she cleared the leftover breakfast dishes and made a couple of grilled cheese sandwiches.

She set a place for herself. One for Floyd. She refilled her glass and poured a glass for her husband.

“Floyd, *lunch!*” she hollered down the basement stairs. “Always working on some contraption,” she mumbled and sat down to enjoy her grilled cheese. Halfway through her sandwich she noticed a tingling sensation in her boot. She scratched. In response, it burned.

Elma leaned over and lifted her dirt-covered skirt above her ankle.

“What in heaven?” A dozen brown bugs scurried around her ankle and fell to the floor. Quickly she unlaced her boot and turned it over. She watched as more of the

little insects dropped to the floor like pepper from a shaker. “*Augh!*” She slammed her boot down until every last one was flattened. She put her hand to her chest, panting heavily, “Oh my, oh my. Oh *my!*”

She gathered the courage to examine her ankle, which was bright red and beginning to burn. “A little baking soda plaster will fix that right up.” She applied the cooling paste, then wrapped it with gauze. As she headed toward the door, she noticed Floyd’s lunch.

“*Floyd, your lemonade is getting warm—drop what you’re doin and eat!*” She slammed the door and headed for the garden.



Elma worked the tomatoes until there wasn’t a single weed left, then moved on to the sprawling cucumber vines. She hadn’t noticed the setting sun until the greenery had become so dark that it blended with the soil and she couldn’t tell the two apart.

Her back ached as she slowly stood up. “I’m getting old, I guess.” She took a step and suddenly a hot burn swept p her leg. She fell to the ground and grabbed her ankle.

“*Ow!*” she cried, lifting her skirt and squinting. The darkness made it impossible to see the condition, but she knew it wasn’t good. Couldn’t have been. She found her watering can, then tottered toward the house.

Each step forced the burn further up her leg, and by the time she reached the porch, the burning sensation was up to her thigh. She tried to raise her leg to the first step, but it was too weak. “Well, that’s not very good,” she said, panting heavily. The sweat rolled down her forehead and Elma plopped down on the step.

“Floyd, I could use a little help here!” She waited for a moment then shook her head. “Useless.”

Elma hefted her large frame one step at a time up the stairs. She tried not to use her bad leg; it seemed that even the slightest movement intensified the burning. She dragged herself to the front door and stretched her dirt-covered fingertips for the doorknob. The handle turned and the door swung out. Elma slid herself across the linoleum and slammed the door behind her.

She sat in a pile in the middle of the kitchen floor. She touched her leg and pain bolted from her ankle to her thigh.

“My chair,” she panted. She dragged herself into the living room and maneuvered herself into the overstuffed Lay-Z-Boy. She turned on the table lamp and slowly lifted her skirt. The bandage was caked with bloody mud. Her eyes widened—her leg, shoe and bandage were cloaked by brown bugs. Her leg was fire red and thick purplish-brown worms wriggled painfully toward her thigh. Elma’s stomach knotted and perspiration rolled down her temples.

Her hands shook as she loosened the bandage. Finally it fell to the floor. Little bugs rolled out.

"Oh no!" Her heart pounded as she watched the bugs scamper under her chair.

"Floyd?"

She looked over the arm and saw them crawling up the side.

"Floyd!"

She looked over again and the bugs continued their march.

"Floyd, get in here!"

They had covered her sleeves and were still advancing. Her heart pounded painfully. She forced herself to stand.

Her leg gave out and Elma fell, banging her head against the coffee table. Her vision blurred. She watched helplessly as the brown mass surrounded her.

"Floyd..."



The next morning when Jim St. Clair delivered the mail, he found Elma Johnson.

Doctor Whitmore and his assistant were called to the scene. They looked over Elma's lifeless body. The doctor shook his head, "Looks like a heart attack. She was a tough ol' lady." He looked at his assistant, "Stubborn, too." The doctor lifted her wrinkled hand. "Bout how many times did I warn her about working in the garden when it got this hot?" He examined her dirty fingers.

"Maybe she'd wanted it this way?" the assistant asked.

Doctor Whitmore nodded agreement, "And look what she's done to her varicose veins. It's a wonder she could walk at all."

They had a beautiful ceremony for her at Mapleside Cemetery.

They buried her next to Floyd.