

An aerial photograph of a long, straight dirt road stretching through a rural landscape. The road is flanked by green fields and rows of trees. In the distance, there are some buildings and more fields under a clear sky. The overall scene is peaceful and agricultural.

What's Eating Gilbert Grape

by
Peter Hedges

RosettaBooks®

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for my mother
who is not fat
and my father
who is not dead

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Part One

Standing with my brother Arnie on the edge of town has become a yearly ritual.

My brother Arnie is so excited because in minutes or hours or sometime today trucks upon trailers upon campers are going to drive into our home town of Endora, Iowa. One truck will carry the Octopus, another will carry the Tilt-A-Whirl with its blue and red cars, two trucks will bring the Ferris wheel, the games will be towed, and most important, the horses from the merry-go-round will arrive.

For Arnie, this is better than Christmas. This beats the tooth fairy and the Easter bunny: all those stupid figures that only kids and retarded adults seem to stomach. Arnie is a retard. He's about to turn eighteen and my family is planning an enormous party. Doctors said we'd be lucky if he lived to be ten. Ten came and went and now the doctors are saying, "Any time now, Arnie could go at any time." So every night my sisters and me, and my mom too, go to bed wondering if he will wake up in the morning. Some days you want him to live, some days you don't. At this particular moment, I've got a good mind to push him in front of the oncoming traffic.

My oldest sister, Amy, has fixed us a picnic feast. In a thermos was a quart of black cherry Kool-Aid, all of which Arnie drank in such a hurry that above his top lip is a purplish mustache. One of the first things you should know about Arnie is that he always has traces of some food on his face—Kool-Aid or ketchup or toast crumbs. His face is a kind of bulletin board for the four major food groups.

Arnie is the gentlest guy, but he can surprise this brother. In the summertime, he catches grasshoppers and sticks them in this metal tab on the mailbox, holding them there, and then he brings down the metal flag, chopping off the grasshopper heads. He always giggles hysterically when he does this, having the time of his life. But last night, when we were sitting on the porch eating ice cream, a countless sea of grasshopper bodies from summers past must have appeared to him, because he started weeping and sobbing like the world had ended. He kept saying, "I killed 'em, I killed 'em." And me and Amy, we held him close, patted his back and told him it was okay.

Arnie cried for hours, cried himself to sleep. Makes this brother wonder what kind of a world would be if all the surviving Nazis had such remorse. I wonder if it ever occurs to them what they did and if it ever sinks in to a point that their bodies ache from the horrible mess they made. Or are they so smart that they can lie to us and to themselves? The beautiful thing about Arnie is that he's too stupid to lie. Or too smart.

I'm standing with binoculars, looking down Highway 13; there is no sign of our annual carnival. The kid is on his knees, his hands rummaging around in the picnic basket. Having already eaten both bags of potato chips, both peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches and both chocolate donuts, he locates a green apple and bites into it.

By trying to ignore Arnie's lip-smacking noises, I am attempting the impossible. You see, he chews as if he's just found his mouth and the sounds are that of good, sloppy sex. My brother's slurps and gulps make me want to procreate with an assortment of Endora's finest women.

It's the twenty-first of June, the first day of summer, the longest day of the year. It isn't even 7:00 A.M. yet and here I stand, little brother in tow. Somewhere some smart person still sleeps.

"Gilbert?"

“Yeah?”

~~Bread crust and peanut-butter chunks fall off Arnie’s T-shirt as he stretches it down past his knee~~

“Gilbert?”

“What is it?”

“How many more miles?”

“I don’t know.”

“How many, how many more till the horses and stuff?”

“Three million.”

“Oh, okay.”

Arnie blows out his lips with a sound like a motorboat and he circles the picnic basket, drool flying everywhere. Finally, he sits down Indian style and starts quietly to count the miles.

I busy myself throwing gravel rocks at the Endora, Iowa, town sign. The sign is green with white printing and, except for a divot that I left last year at this time with my rock throwing, it is in excellent condition. It lists Endora’s population at 1,091, which I know can’t be right, because yesterday my second-grade teacher, Mrs. Brainer, choked on a chicken bone while sitting on her porch swing. A great loss is felt by no one.

Mrs. Brainer retired years ago. She lived half a block from the town square, so I’d see her pretty much every day, always smiling at me as if she expected me to forget all the pain she’d inflicted. I swear this woman smiled all the time. Once, as she was leaving the store, her sack of groceries ripped. Cans of peaches and fruit cocktail dropped out onto the floor, cutting open her toes. My boss and I saw this happen. She pushed up a real big grin as the tears fell off her cheeks. I resacked her cans, but she couldn’t stop smiling and crying, and her toes couldn’t stop bleeding.

I’m told that when they found her on the porch, her hands were up around her throat, and there were red scratch marks on her neck, in her mouth, and pieces of flesh under her fingernails. I wonder if she was smiling then.

Anyway, they took her body to McBurney’s Funeral Home in Motley. They’ll be planting her tomorrow.

“Gilbert?”

“What?”

“Uhm.”

“What?”

“Uhm. The horses, the rides, the horses are coming, right? Right?”

“Yes, Arnie.”

Endora is where we are, and you need to know that describing this place is like dancing to no music. It’s a town. Farmers. Town square. Old movie theater closed down so we have to drive sixteen miles to Motley to see movies. Probably half the town is over sixty-five, so you can imagine the raring place Endora is on weekend nights. There were twenty-three in my graduating class, and only four are left in town. Most went to Ames or Des Moines and the really ambitious made it over to Omaha. One of those left from my class is my buddy, Tucker. The other two are the Byers brothers, Tim and Tommy. They stayed in town because of a near fatal, crippling car accident, and they just kind of ride around

the square racing in their electric wheelchairs. They are like the town mascots, and the best part they are identical twins. ~~Before the accident no one could tell them apart. But Tim's face was burned~~ and he's been given this piglike skin. They both were paralyzed but only Tommy lost his feet.

The other day in our weekly paper, the *Endora Express*, pigskin Tim pointed out the bright side of all of this. Now it is easy to tell which is which. After many years Tim and Tommy have finally found their own identities. That's a big thing in Endora these days. Identities. And the bright side. We got people here who've lost their farms to the bank, kids to wars, relatives to disease, and they will look at you square in the eye and, with a half grin, they'll tell you the bright side.

The bright side for me is difficult on mornings like these. There's no escaping that I'm twenty-four years old, that I've been out of Iowa a whopping one whole time, that you could say about all I've done in my life to this point is baby-sit my retard brother, buy cigarettes for my mother, and sack groceries for the esteemed citizens of Endora.

"Gilbert?" says Arnie. He has frosting all around his mouth and a glob of jelly above his good eye.

"What, Arnie?"

"You sure they're coming? We've been standing such a *long* time."

"They'll be along any second." I take a napkin from the basket and spit in it.

"No!"

"Come here, Arnie."

"No!"

"Come here."

"Everybody's always wiping me!"

"Why do you think that is?"

"Because."

For Arnie, that is an answer.

I give up on spring cleaning his face and look down the road. The highway is empty.

Last year the big rides came pretty early. The trailers and the campers came later. Arnie is really only interested in the horses from the merry-go-round.

I say, "Hey, Arnie, there's still sleep in my eyes," but he isn't interested. He nibbles on his bottom lip; he's working on a thought.

My little brother is a somewhat round-looking kid with hair that old ladies always want to comb. He is a head shorter than me, with teeth that look confused. There's no hiding that he's retarded. You meet him and you figure it out right away.

"Gilbert! They're not coming!"

I tell him to stop shouting.

"They're not coming at all, Gilbert. The rides got in a big crash and all the workers hung themselves...."

"They will be here," I say.

"They *hung* themselves!"

"No, they didn't."

"You don't know! You don't know!"

"Not everybody hangs himself, Arnie."

He doesn't hear this because he reaches into the basket, stuffs the other green apple inside his shirt.

and starts running back to town. I shout for him to stop. He doesn't, so I chase after him and grab him by the waist. I lift him in the air and the apple drops out onto the brown grass.

"Let me go. Let me go."

I carry him back to the picnic basket. He clings to me, his legs squeeze around my stomach, his fingers dig into my neck. "You're getting bigger. Did you know that?" He shakes his head, convinced I'm wrong. He's not any taller than last year, but he's rounder, puffier. If this keeps up, he'll soon be too big for me to pick up. "You're still growing. You're getting harder and harder for me to carry. And you're getting so strong, too."

"Nope. It's you, Gilbert."

"It's not me. Believe me, Arnie Grape is getting bigger and stronger. I'm sure of it."

I set him down when I get to the picnic basket. I'm out of breath; beads of sweat have formed on my forehead.

Arnie says, "You're just getting little."

"You think?"

"I know. You're getting littler and littler. You're shrinking."

Stupid people often say the smartest things. Even Arnie knows that I'm in a rut.

Since I don't believe in wearing a watch, I can't tell the exact time—but this moment, the one when my goofy brother rips the bandage off my heart, is followed by a yelp. Arnie's yelp. He points east and with the binoculars I locate a tiny dot moving our way. Several dots follow.

"Is it them? Is it them?"

"Yes," I say.

Arnie's jaw drops; he starts dancing.

"Here come the horsies. Here come the horsies!"

He begins howling and jumping up and down in circles; slobber sprays from his mouth. Arnie is entering heaven now. I stand there watching him watch as the rides grow. I just stand there hoping he won't sprout wings and fly away.

It's the same morning of the same day, and I'm asleep on the couch in the family room.

I'm truly savoring this period of rest, this catnap, when a rude smell comes dancing up my nose and starts screaming in my head. My eyes smack open. I look around, fuzzy at first, only to find my little sister sitting there in shorts and a halter top, painting her nails. The smell of that—Jesus.

My little sister's name is Ellen. She turned sixteen last month. She also just got her braces off, and for days now she's been walking around the house, running her tongue all over, going "Oo-ah"—like she can't believe the feel of teeth.

Ever since Ellen got her braces off she has been one big pain in the butt. And now with a sudden penchant for lip gloss and painting her toes red, she has bumped to the big time—becoming even more of an already impossible thing.

The smell of the polish forces me to rise up and look her in the eye. She stays fixed on the toe of the shoe in that moment, so I say, "Little sister, must we?" She keeps painting, coating toe after toe. No response, no answer. So I say, "CAN'T THIS BE DONE SOMEWHERE ELSE?"

Without looking at me, my sister dishes this shit: "Gilbert, some of us are only sixteen. Some of us are trying to do something with our one chance at life. I am trying something new, a brand-new color is being applied, and I could use your support and your encouragement. When that is there I might consider moving, but you are my brother, and if you don't support these new steps, who will? Who will? Tell me, who will!"

She breathes a few times fast through her nose, making a whistly noise.

"I'm at such a difficult age. Girls my age bleed. We bleed every month and it's not like we did anything wrong. Just to be sitting there in church..."

"You don't go to church."

"Hypothetical, Gilbert."

"Don't use big words."

"Okay. I'm at work, mixing the toppings or making cones. And suddenly I feel it coming, and I didn't do anything. You are a guy. So you don't know how this feels. You should be understanding and let me in peace do the one thing that brings me joy and a sense of completion. So thank you Gilbert, thank you sooooo much!"

I stare at her trying to decide the most discreet way to murder. But she turns suddenly and stomps out of the family room leaving only the smell of her new toes. I decide to smother myself, as it is the most immediate option. Covering my face with an old orange sofa pillow, I begin the process. It gets to the interesting part where my lungs want air and my heart doesn't, when I feel this poking on my arm. This family. If it's Ellen, I'll smother her, first thing. And if it's Arnie, we'll have a pillow fight, laugh a bit, then I'll do the smothering.

But this time the voice is that of my big sister, Amy. She's whispering, "Gilbert, come here."

I don't move.

"Gilbert, please..."

I'm almost dead. Surely she can see this.

"Gilbert!"

I give in to the idea of air and say, "I'm busy" from underneath the pillow.

“You don’t look busy.”

Amy pries off the cushion and pulls it away from me. My eyes adjust to the sudden light. She is wearing a worried and concerned look. But what else is new? This look of terror is most often her face of choice, and I’ve grown fond of it. I find its predictability somehow comforting. It’s only when Amy smiles that you know something is wrong.

Amy is the oldest of us Grape children. At thirty-four, she’s ten years older than me. Most of the time she feels more like a mother than a sister. During the school year she works for the Clover Hill Elementary School in Motley. As assistant manager of the cafeteria, she serves the little ones green beans, frankfurters, and sugar cookies. She also works as a teacher’s aide, spending her nights drawing elaborate smiley faces on the papers of those students who make no mistakes. Most important, though, is this—Amy doesn’t work in the summers. Since, during the school year, our family finds a way to fall apart, she uses June, July, and August to put us back together.

“I’m sleeping,” I say. “I’m *trying* to sleep.”

Amy puts the pillow between her fleshy arm and her light blue Elvis T-shirt. She squints, her eyes searing into mine.

“Amy, please. God, if there’s a God, please. I took the kid to wait for the rides. We got out there four-thirty something. I need sleep. I work at ten. Please, Amy. Please! Don’t stare at me like that!”

“You might think about Momma.”

I want to say that I think about our mother all the time, that every move I make is made with her mind, but before I can say anything, Amy grabs my wrist and jerks me up. “Ouch. I’m coming already.”

Amy pulls me toward the dining room.

“This house stinks,” I say. “The smell, God!”

Amy stops. We’re standing in the kitchen, buried in several days’ worth of dirty dishes and numerous sacks of trash. She whispers, “What do you expect? No one helps around the house. Ellen is good for nothing, you’re working all the time or never home. I can’t do it all.”

She takes a deep breath and then turns around in a circle like those fashion models do.

“Look at me. Look.”

“Yeah?” I say.

“Don’t you see?”

“New outfit? Uhm. I don’t know. What do you want me to see?”

“I’m starting to get like Momma.”

I lie and say, “You’re not.”

“My skin is rolling over my clothes. I can’t fit into chairs so well.”

“Momma’s on a whole other level. You’re nowhere near...”

“These are the early stages, Gilbert. What you see here is the early phase.” Amy wipes her eyes with the backs of her hands and smiles.

Oh boy.

Okay.

It’s time for you to know the rarely spoken truths about my mother, Bonnie Grape.

There is no nice way to break it to you. My mother is a porker. She started eating in excess the day our dad was found dead seventeen years ago. Since that day, she’s been going at it nonstop, adding pound upon pound, year after year, until now we have a situation where no one knows her actual weight. No household scale goes high enough.

Momma has the first room at the top of the stairs, but she doesn’t like climbing, or even walking f

that matter. She sleeps all day in this blue padded chair and only wakes up for meals and many occasional cigarettes. She doesn't sleep at night but stays in the chair, chain-smoking and watching the TV. We splurged and bought her the kind of television with a remote control. When Momma walks, she holds on to things, she clings to counters and shelves. It will take her fifteen minutes to make it to the bathroom and get situated. She hates baths, and quite honestly, she's barely able to fit in the tub. Not a particularly happy lady, she does laugh when Arnie dances for her and is all smiles when one of us, usually me, brings her a carton of cigarettes. She smokes Kool.

It's been over three years since she stepped out of the house, and other than her children and a former friend here and there, no one in town has seen her. They talk about her, sure, but mostly in whispers. Only the water-meter man during his monthly checks has gotten a good peek at Momma. Dr. Harvey came by once when we thought she was having a heart attack. It was a false alarm, though. Apparently she swallowed wrong, or there was some kind of intestinal gas in her veins, something like that.

If you were to gripe to my mother about her weight, or express in any way any fear you have about her steady growth, she would say "Hey! I'm here! Alive! I didn't cop out like other people we know!"

I've tried to tell Momma that her eating is a suicide of sorts. But those words are never easy.

So.

Amy drags me through the kitchen. We stop short of the dining room where Momma sits snoring with her mouth wide open. Amy points to Momma's feet. They are swollen, very red and purple and dry, crackly. Her feet don't fit into shoes anymore.

"I've seen her feet before," I whisper.

She points again, mouthing these words: "*The floor.*"

I'm unable to believe what I see. The floor below Momma curves down like a contact lens. "Oh my God," I say.

"This is no longer a joking matter, Gilbert."

Once, after several beers, I suggested to a sloshed Amy that maybe Momma would fall through the floor and we'd be done with it. We laughed hard about it then.

"Something's gotta be done about this," Amy says, not laughing now.

Please realize that I'm no carpenter. I have no skill in home repair or craftsmanship. And with that in mind, notice how Amy's still got me in mind to fix the floor.

"Gotta do it without her knowing it," she adds in a hissed whisper.

Amy's right. If Momma knew she was slowly drilling a hole in her house, she would cry for days.

"I'll talk to Tucker."

Tucker is my best friend. He loves to build things—birdhouses, wooden ducks, and shelving for his beer-can collection.

"When will you talk to him?"

"Soon. Real soon, I promise."

"Today."

"I work today."

"This is urgent."

"I'm aware of this, Amy." I walk away, because her face is starting to contort into that weird shape again.

"Later today then. Okay, Gilbert? Gilbert, okay?"

I shout "OKAY!" and Momma wakes up with a snort.

"Morning, Momma," Amy says. "You want some breakfast?"

The next sequence of events defines predictability. Momma will say, "Wouldn't you think?" Amy will ask, "What will it be today?" and Momma will order a stack of pancakes or a couple of waffles French toast, half a pound of bacon, some eggs maybe, fried or scrambled, and lots of pepper. Pepper on everything. And Amy will make whatever Momma wants, and it will taste great, and Momma will clean her plate like a big girl.

Having lost what little appetite I had, I head for fresh air. As I swing open the screen door, Arnie dives into the evergreen bush next to the mailbox. He loves to hide, but only if you take the time to find him. And while I suspect that's true for most people, only a retard or a kid would admit it.

"I wonder where Arnie is," I say too loud. "Where could he be?"

Amy is at the front door and speaks through the screen. "Thanks for talking to Tucker."

I make a face, like it's no problem, point to the bush, and say, "Have you seen Arnie? I can't find him anywhere."

Amy is a pro at this game. "Gilbert, I thought Arnie was with you."

"Nope, not with me."

"Shoot, 'cause I was hoping he'd help me with breakfast."

"I've looked all over for him."

The evergreen bush is giggling.

"Momma's up and she's hungry. Guess I'll have to make those pancakes by myself!"

The garage door rises, and Ellen emerges wearing her candy-cane bikini. Her red toes and fingernails match. She unfolds our only lawn chair and lies back to receive the morning sun. In an effort to include her in this, a family activity of the rarest kind, I say, "Ellen, have you seen your brother?"

She ignores me. I look to Amy. The bush is getting restless.

"Little sister, did you hear me? We can't find Arnie."

Ellen flips through *Cosmopolitan* magazine. She's still mad from this morning.

Amy says, "We're looking hard. Have you seen him?"

She pretends to read.

Amy hates not being answered. "Ellen, did you hear me?"

"He's in the bush!"

I will kill her.

"No, he isn't," Amy says. "Gilbert checked the bush."

"Yeah," I say.

"Gilbert is blind and a liar and quite, quite stupid!"

Arnie rises, oblivious, and shouts his traditional "Boo!" I make a big noise and fall to the ground. "You scared me, Arnie. Oh God, you scared me."

With a new batch of pine needles in his hair and a thick streak of dirt across his mouth, he laughs at me in a way that reminds us he's retarded.

Amy says, "Breakfast," and he runs into the house to watch her cook.

I walk to my pickup, climb in, and it starts up right away. My truck is a 1978 Ford: it's blue, and even though the bottom is rusting out, I know you'd want to go for a ride in it.

Before backing out of the drive, I study my little sister. Most people who sunbathe do so in the backyards; at least this is how most people sunbathe in Iowa. But Ellen will be the first to tell you that she is not most people. She knows that she is the prettiest girl in these parts. And that by strategically placing herself on our oil-stained driveway, she also knows that all day long cars and trucks and bicycles from all over the county will drive past and watch as she toasts her skin. Ellen likes an audience.

I've this dream of building Arnie a lemonade stand and setting him up in business. The kid would make a killing.

I honk my horn, even though it's a sound I can't stand. Ellen looks up, and in an attempt to make peace, I wave and shout, "Have a nice day!"

She says nothing, pushes out a fist with the back of her hand facing me, and her middle finger stretches toward the sun. It stands there like a candle.

She loves me—she just doesn't know it yet.

I wait for her finger to go away, and when it doesn't, I shift into drive and take my foot off the brake. My truck and I roll slowly toward her. She looks up confident that she'll win. The closer I get, the louder her laugh becomes. At three feet, I press on the horn, and she is up and off the lawn chair. Before she can pull it out of the way, I accelerate fast and drive over it, crush.

The chair is dead.

Ellen stands to the side, her face matching the red in her bikini, the red on her toes. She wants to cry, but it would mess up her makeup.

I was fine till the finger, I say to myself, as I shift to reverse. You don't flip off Gilbert Grape. Let that be known.

As Ellen struggles to bend the chair back into shape, I back out of the driveway. I see Arnie looking out the living-room window. He starts banging his forehead on the glass. He does this seven, eight times before Amy pulls him away.

In Endora, there are two grocery stores. Smack on the town square is Lamson Grocery, where I work and on the edge of town, there is Food Land, where everyone else shops.

Food Land was built last October. Apparently, it's loaded full of every cereal imaginable and Italian sausage that hangs down. They say a smile can be found in every one of their fourteen aisles. They installed these electric doors that open when your foot hits the black rubber mat. Many would say that this is the greatest thing ever to happen in Endora. Also, they installed a stereo system that plays the dentistlike, elevator-like music, whatever you call it. The *Endora Express* reported at the time that the music was intended to calm the customer, to soothe. Please, spare us. Food Land is equipped with special cash registers that have conveyor belts, the kind of belt you see in Des Moines, the kind you never thought would make it to Endora.

Food Land had a kind of grand-opening celebration this past March. Amy made me drive Arnie around her. Having made up my mind never to set foot inside, I sat in my truck while Amy took the retard for a look around. She said that when Arnie saw the beans and Pop-Tarts and peanut butter move along the belt for the first time, he started whooping and hollering.

I regret having to describe Food Land to you. I tried to avoid even mentioning that garbage dump, but there is no way around it—not if you are to fully understand Mr. Lamson and Lamson Grocery and why I, Gilbert Grape, can still be found there in his employ.

You won't find electric doors and conveyor belts and computerized cash registers at Lamson Grocery. The store is composed of only four aisles—each only twenty-one feet long. Lamson Grocery contains everything that a reasonable person requires. But if you need the trappings of technology, I think you're getting a good bargain, then I guess you better mosey your brainless body down to Food Land.

We at Lamson Grocery price every product by hand. We talk to our customers, we greet them without faking a smile, we say your name. "Hello, Dan." "Hello, Carol." "Hi there, Marty, you need some help?" If a person wants to write us a check, we don't take down all kinds of information to make you prove that you're you. There's none of that crap. We say without saying it that your word is good. Then we sack up your groceries and carry them out to your car.

Perhaps it is this excess of integrity that keeps the crowds away from Lamson Grocery. Perhaps Mr. Lamson is like a constant reminder of our shortcomings. A man who works all day, every day and loves each apple he uncrates, who cherishes each can of soup—a man like that surely puts us all to shame.

I started working for Mr. Lamson on a part-time basis when I was fourteen, and since graduating from high school seven years ago, I've worked full-time.

It is a white building with gray steps, red trim, and a sincere sign that reads, "Lamson Grocery—Serving you since 1932."

I push open the door that says ENTER and see Mr. Lamson at the cash register. His wife of a thousand years is in the little closetlike cubicle that we use as our office, stacking pennies. The store is empty of customers. As I get my apron from off the hook, he says, "Good morning, Gilbert."

“Hi, boss.” I poke my head in the cubicle and say, “Good morning, Mrs. Lamson.” She looks up and smiles the nicest smile. I get the push broom from the back and start sweeping Aisle One.

Mr. Lamson moves toward me, his hands in his pockets. “Son, are you all right?”

“Uhm, yeah. Why?”

“You look like you aged ten years. Honey, look at Gilbert.”

“I’m in the middle of counting.”

“Is something wrong at home?”

There is always something wrong at home. “No, sir,” I say.

Mrs. Lamson pokes her head out of the office. “Oh, he just looks tired. You just look tired, that all.”

“Is that what it is?”

“You’re looking at me like I’m dying, please, I’m not dying. It was an early morning. I took Arnie out to see the carnival rides come in. I didn’t get a whole lot of sleep.”

“How do they look?”

“The rides? Okay, I guess. You know, same old rides.”

Mr. Lamson nods as if he knows what I mean. He goes to the cash register, rings it open, and brings me a crisp five. “This will help.”

“Huh?” I say.

“Arnie and the merry-go-round. This will get him a couple of rides, right?”

“Yes, sir,” I say. “It will buy a bunch of tickets.”

“Good.” Mr. Lamson walks away.

There is nothing he wouldn’t do for Arnie. I put the five in my back pocket and continue my sweep

I’m whipping down Aisle Four, my rhythm really rolling, when I see two feet in ladies’ shoes. A cloud of dust floats over these shoes, and I look up to find Mrs. Betty Carver standing before me dressed like a Sunday-school teacher. She sneezes.

“Gilbert.”

“Hi,” I say.

“Bless me.”

“Huh?”

“You bless a person when they sneeze.”

“Oh. Bless you.”

“I can’t reach the Quaker Oats. Could you for me?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She smiles when I say “ma’am.” I notice my fingernails are dirty. I try to hide my hands.

The Quaker Oats are on the top shelf in Aisle Three, and I’m tall enough to reach. I hand her a box. Mr. Lamson comes around the corner and says, “Oh, Gilbert got that for you. Good.”

Mrs. Betty Carver suddenly blurts out, “Is Gilbert a good employee?”

“Yes. The best I’ve ever had.”

“He’s reliable, I assume. Conscientious?”

“Yes. Very.”

She follows him to the cash register. “I’m perplexed, then. Why is it, do you think, that he’s not prompt with his insurance payments? For his truck. Why do you think that is?”

Mrs. Betty Carver is the wife of Ken Carver, the only insurance man left in Endora.

"I'm afraid you'll have to ask Gilbert that."

She turns to look at me.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I'll take care of it right away."

"Of course you will," Mr. Lamson says. "In fact, Gilbert, why don't you run on over there and see about the matter straight right now?"

"No!" Mrs. Carver practically shouts. Then looking at me, and in this churchlike voice she says, "I don't believe an afternoon appointment would be better."

I look at my feet and say nothing.

Mrs. Betty Carver and the Quaker Oats are gone.

"That woman could have been a movie star," Mrs. Lamson says. "Don't you think, dear?"

"Prob'ly so," Mr. Lamson says, all the while looking at me. "You think she could have been a movie star, Gilbert, huh?"

I find the broom and go back to sweeping.

It's forty minutes later and there have been no customers since Mrs. Betty Carver. I'm in the back of the store. Mr. and Mrs. Lamson are up front. Opening a carton of eggs, I drop two of them on the floor. I break the shells of three more. I make a noise like I just fell. From the floor I start yelling, "Darn it. Man! I can't believe this!"

Mr. Lamson hurries down Aisle Three. "What is it? What's wrong?"

He sees the eggs. I sit there, my hands covering my face. "I can't believe this day. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, boss...."

"It's all right, son. You're having one heck of a day."

"Yes, sir."

"Listen. Clean up the mess, okay? Then take the rest of the day off."

"No, I can't do that."

"I insist."

"But..."

"Gilbert, I know when you need a day off."

I pick up the shell bits with my fingers and then mop up the rest—half impressed at my theatrically half ashamed that I've deceived him. Never has a man been so good, so honest.

As I'm hanging up my apron, Mr. Lamson approaches. "Just a friendly reminder. I know that it isn't any of my business...."

"The insurance?" I ask.

"Yes."

"I intend to take care of that today, sir."

"I knew you would. You're a good employee, son. You're the best I've ever had."

There was a time when I would have agreed with him.

I'm heading out the door when he says, "Gilbert, keep hanging in there."

I stop and look at him.

"Why do you think that you should keep hanging in there?"

Nothing will come out of my mouth. I'm stumped.

"Because..." Mr. Lamson pauses in that I'm-about-to-say-the-most-important-thing-ever wa

“Because...”

“Yes,” I say, trying to hurry him along.

“Because there will be wonderful surprises.”

Taking a moment to soak that in, I then smile as if to say “I hope so” and proceed to leave by the wrong door.

I get in my truck and start it up.

Inside the store, the Mrs. brings her husband a clean rag and he begins polishing the cash register. They must sense me watching because they look my way and wave in unison.

I drive off.

I feel sorry for them, believing in me the way they do. I’m not the stock boy I once was. Plus there’s nothing worse than being told you’re good when you know you’re bad. For a moment, I even mourn for the eggs. Their sudden, tragic death at the hands of a deceptive employee. Life might be full of wonderful surprises as Mr. Lamson says. But more than that I believe Life is full of unfairness. I offer the fate of the eggs as proof of my point.

It isn't even eleven in the morning and already the day is boiling hot, the seat in my truck is on fire and I'm sweaty wet. How I wish I were a fish.

I drive two blocks to that bastion of security and protection, Carver's Insurance. Housed in an old gas station that's been converted, Carver's Insurance is one of the many buildings in Endora that have been remodeled or made over—only Lamson Grocery has remained the same.

I pull into the gravel parking lot. Tears of sweat roll down the back of my legs as I climb out of my truck. I'm careful going inside because there's a bell above the door that smacks in your ear. Clunk, clank, dong, bang.

Melanie, Mr. Carver's secretary, looks up, startled, as if she can't believe the sight of another human being. She puts the cap on her White-out and says, "Well, hello there, Gilbert Grape."

"Hi," I say.

Melanie wears her red hair in a beehive style that is completely out of date. She has a mole on her face that must weigh a pound and a half, but I guess she's nice enough. She's over forty but has always insisted that we call her by her first name. When I was in high school, she worked as the library monitor. She would let me sleep in the conference room. Once I saw her smoking, and something about her smoking disappointed me.

"Are you here to see Mr. Carver?"

He calls from the back, "Is that you, Gilbert? Melanie? Is that Gilbert Grape?"

"Yes. Hello," I say. "I think I'm late on my payment."

Melanie doesn't even check my file. "You are late, Gilbert. Write us a check for a hundred twenty-three dollars and forty-three cents, and then you can scoot on out of here." She closes the door to Mr. Carver's office. "But you're always late with your payments—why the sudden appearance of responsibility, why now?"

"Oh, I'm trying, you know, to better my life."

Melanie smiles. Bettering your life, getting a fresh start, the bright side. Spout these concepts daily and you will survive in Endora; you might even thrive.

"You don't need an appointment, am I right? You just need to pay up."

"No. Uhm, also I've some confusion regarding my whatever you call what insurance does for you."

"I think you're inquiring about your *benefits*."

"Yes, that's it."

"So am I hearing that you actually do need an appointment?"

I don't know what Melanie is hearing. I can hardly talk to that hairstyle of hers. I wish I had a can of paint and a pair of hedge clippers. Fortunately I rarely speak what I think.

"An appointment would be most opportune."

"Gilbert, what a fine vocabulary you have."

I want to explain that any flashes of intellect that spit through me are a tribute to the many study halls I spent sleeping in the library. "I only have you to thank for my vocabulary. I owe it all to you, Melanie."

"You charmer."

"No, I mean it."

“Well then, you exaggerate.”

“No, I do not. ~~All those study halls we shared. You were the finest study hall supervisor at the~~ school. No question about it in my mind or in anyone else’s.”

“How kind of you to say that.”

“Is it kind if it’s the truth?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Rest assured, I love working for Mr. Carver—I would never say otherwise—and I believe in Insurance. But, between you and me, I miss working at the high school.”

“And the high school misses you, I’m sure.”

“The high school is closed, Gilbert. How could it miss me?”

“It would if it could.”

“I’m hard to anger, you know that, but I could bite off the heads of the people who made the decision to close our high school. Busing all those kids to Motley.”

“Well, everyone’s moving away.”

“I know, but still.”

“There were thirty-nine in my freshman class and only twenty-three were left when we graduated.”

“You don’t say. Well, we could talk all day, couldn’t we? We have so much in common, don’t you think?”

I don’t know how to answer that without lying in the most blatant of ways. “So much in common yes, come to think of it.”

“I’ve always thought it a shame that we’re not the same age. You older or me younger. We’d have made a lovely couple, don’t you think? Really, it’s quite a shame.”

“A pity.”

“Yes, pity is a good word.”

I left this conversation hours ago, but somehow my mouth is still moving, words are still forming and none have seemed to offend. Amazing, the mind. My mind, I mean. Not hers.

It’s suddenly down to business for Melanie. Her voice becomes sharp and biting. “So you’d like to make an appointment to see Mr. Carver?”

“Yes, ma’am. Please.”

“One moment.” She stands, moves to his door, and taps ever so lightly. She gently pushes it open and hear classical music playing from inside his office. It takes a few minutes but soon she’s standing in the doorway, smiling as if she’s the most wonderful news. “How fortunate. You can see Mr. Carver right now if you’d like.”

Mr. Carver calls out, “It would be a treat to see you! Step on back and let’s see what we can do.”

“Thank you, Mr. Carver, but I’ll have to come back later. Errands and all.”

Mr. Carver says, “Oh,” like he’s about to cry, Melanie smiles, smacks her lips and says, “I know how that is. I run errands day in, day out. Sometimes I think it’s all I do.”

“Well…”

She opens his appointment calendar, which, for this particular Wednesday, the first day of summer is completely blank. “Well, you have picked a marvelous day. Mr. Carver lunches at noon sharp. He’s back at one sharp. At four o’clock, he and his wife are driving to Boone to make a surprise visit to their boys at church camp. So up until four, you have free rein.”

“How does two sound?”

“Perfect. A perfect time for an appointment. If it suits you, that is.”

“Yeah, fine.”

“We’ll see you at two o’clock sharp, then.”

“Okay.”

~~“Have a nice day. And hello to Amy, your family. Your mother. I haven’t seen your mother in years. How is she?”~~

“Oh, you know...”

“No, I don’t. It’s been some time since I’ve...”

I say, “Big things are happening for her, big things.” I’m backing up toward the door.

Melanie puts a finger over her mouth, signaling me to be quiet. Then she waves me over to her and whispers, “You haven’t mentioned my new hairdo?”

“That’s true.”

“You like it, don’t you?”

“Oh, it’s you.”

“You think?”

“It suits you perfectly.”

Melanie stops for a moment. She shines—all four and a half feet of her. I don’t know how I did it but somehow I made this woman’s day. “If I were any younger...”

Oh God. Here we go again. Leap for the door, Gilbert. “Bye now!” I open the door slowly but surely and the bell jingles and clinks.

I drive off with the windows rolled down. My hair is getting blown all over, scratching my eyes. My hair is so long that it's beginning to eat my head.

I pass Endora's Gorgeous, one of two beauty parlors in town, and suddenly the image of Melanie's bright red cotton-candy hairdo returns to haunt me. The way it stands straight up, it's like a new eraser on an old pencil. I try to picture her after a morning bath, her hair all wet and droopy. She looking in the mirror, trying to create the lie she tells herself to get up and get moving. I'll never know how she keeps such a positive point of view. If I were her, I think I'd cry all day, all night.

My truck's gas gauge says it all. I drive over to the other side of town and pull up at Dave Allen's gas station. Buying my gas from Dave is a pleasure because of his cord or tube or whatever you call the black thing that stretches across the station. It's supposed to go bing-bing or bong-bong or ding-ding when tires go over it. The one at Dave's stopped working several years ago, and he won't have it fixed because he feels as I do—that none of us need to be reminded we exist.

So I always drive there for my gas. No cord, no bing-bing, bong-bong, ding-ding. Bliss.

I pump in a few bucks' worth, buy an Orange Crush from the pop machine and a bag of Cheetos. I pay in exact change.

Dave says, "The carnival."

"Yep?"

"Real good for business, you know."

"Really?" I say.

"Some of the rides run on gasoline."

"They buy it from you, I hope."

"Yeah." Dave smiles. I've never seen him look so proud.

Driving out of town, I pass Chip Miles driving a tractor on his daddy's farm. I honk and Chip waves—*all* happy, I guess, that someone recognized him. Chip is a nice enough guy, strong in that I-throw-a-lot-of-hay way. He was a champion wrestler for the high school team in Motley. He graduated a few weeks back. The tragedy with Chip is that he never had a date the whole four years he went there. See, he's got one of his front teeth capped in silver and that just discourages any girl in these parts. When he talks, he barely moves his top lip. But if you catch him off guard, like I just did, he will open his mouth wide, yell "Hey!" and you'll get a glare from his tooth.

I've got time to kill before my insurance appointment, and I'm going to relax. I speed up to seventy-five miles an hour and head for my favorite county road.

The roads all around Endora are completely straight and flat and bland except for Highway 2, which I am presently on. This road curves, and there is a small bridge stretching across Skunk River, which is actually just a creek, but since it's officially named a river everyone thinks that's what it is.

It's eleven miles later and I'm at the county cemetery. I drive under the metal framelike gate thing, turn off my truck and walk across the graves. I find my place and sit. I eat my Cheetos, drink my Orange Crush. I lie back and look at the sky. Every five minutes or so I hear a car or a semi drive past. I look at the clouds, which are not even clouds today—wisps of white, little streaks, strokes, the

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