

*I'd like to dedicate this story to my mother, who's always made holidays special, and who I got my story-telling gene from. What follows is a tale I wrote start-to-finish over two days in October 2007. It's unedited, unpolished, and raw. And it was great fun to write.*

## Old Clara's Favorites

**O**ld Clara only bought gourds. God only knew why, and folks didn't line up to ask for themselves. Not that Clara would have answered.

We'd seen Clara around town once or twice, only in fall, and only at the farmer's market. We had a stand open on Saturdays, and although we got up at five to haul the produce to it, I swear Clara would get there even before that. She'd hobble around the baskets and barrels, searching for what she wanted with gray eyes that sat in a face wrinkled like a corn husk during drought.

Didn't matter if you had the best looking tomatoes. Didn't matter if you had silver queen corn worthy of its namesake. Didn't matter...unless you brought gourds. If you had, she'd find em' even if the best you mustered was dropping your truck's lift gate and trying to hock from the parking lot.

We saw all kinds of folks at the market: Local cooks. Buyers from the big restaurants along the highway that sold to tourists looking for authentic "kountry-with-a-k cookin'". Families dragging yawning kids around. Single parents and poor folks we'd try to give freebies too. People haggled, traded, or just stood around and caught up on news or gossip.

Not Clara. She'd come up to your booth, fix that stern underbite-addled frown at you, and pull out a silver dollar, of all things. She'd ask what she could get for it, and you'd either answer with a bag of gourds, or she'd just turn and go to someone else.

Then about sun up, she'd vanish. It wasn't a Houdini trick, or anything. You'd just get busy and you wouldn't see her again.

The first and only time I'd spoken to Clara was over the phone late one October night. I'd put down this book I'd been hearing about--"Mockingbird" something--and grabbed the receiver that shook like a June bug on the end of a kite string.

"Is this the Phelps' house?" she'd asked, before I'd even spoke.

"Yes ma'am. Who's this?"

"Mrs. Clara. My arthritis is acting up, so I'm gonna be quick about this. I can't make it into town this weekend, and I need some gourds."

Transactional as always, but I figured if I could help other old folks, I could help her.

"Want me to bring some to you?" I offered.

"Three bags. But bring em' over tonight. And just you, Phelps. I don't like anyone out here I don't need."

"Mrs. Clara, I don't---"

"I got a jar full of silver dollars for your trouble."

The prospect of all that money didn't make me decide to go over there. What did was her being so desperate she'd offered it. I went upstairs and told Allie where I was going. I could tell she didn't like it, but she knew why I went. She didn't give me a hard time, just a quick kiss and a plead to be careful. Lot of drunks on the road that time of night. Lot of deer, too.

Even the truck seemed reluctant, not wanting to start until the third or fourth crank. She lived at the end of a winding dirt road off Old Highway Six. Hadn't been there, but I'd heard of it. Only house on that road.

It took me almost half an hour to get out there, what with the darkness and the bumps that rattled the truck's frame. Twice I almost got stuck in mud-saturated ruts at the bottoms of hills. The truck eased down a long, straight stretch that ended in waist-high grass. An old log cabin crouched there like a molded-over tree stump.

I killed the headlamps, took a deep breath, and climbed out of the truck. An amber glow shined through the dusty, rippled window on the left side of the cabin.

I went around to the passenger's side and got the first bag of gourds. Then I walked through the grass, up a few steps, and stopped at the doorway. Light flickered between the hewn pine logs that comprised the door.

A distant tweeting sound, like a songbird but not quite, came from the inside.

I raised my right fist, hesitated, then rapped it against the door.

The sound ceased.

I waited another moment, glanced around behind me. I heard frogs calling out from the woods.

I knocked again. Nothing.

Then, something scratched the other side of the door, about knee level. Maybe Clara had a cat.

"Go on, get back there," she said, her words muffled by the door. "Get, now. You'll get it soon."

Scratches as the animal scampered away.

I swear she unlocked about six latches before opening the door just wide enough to poke her head through the opening. It was dark as pitch inside.

"Phelps," she said. Her eyes glittered like pools of water, her eyes submerged tadpoles. "You bring what I needed?"

"Yes ma'am," I replied. The bag crinkled as I hefted it up.

"Good." She snatched it from me. "Get the other two."

She slammed the door so hard the wind almost knocked my hat off.

I went back to the truck and took the other bags. It suited me just fine that she wanted to make this quick. Truth be told, I didn't like the woods at night, not unless there was a good fire, a guitar, and several friends.

I carried the two bags back up to her door. It swung open before I even got there.

Clara stood there, waiting.

"Can you bring them inside?" she asked. "It hurt taking that last bag down to the vegetable cellar. Back about gave out on me." She backed against the door, and waved a hand in front of me.

I had my reservations, sure, but mainly because it was so dark inside. Even the light I'd seen inside earlier seemed to be out. I don't know how she found her way around like that.

"Sure, Mrs. Clara, but can we turn on a lamp or somethin'?"

She opened a nearby door and hobbled into the next room, floorboards creaking under her feet. She closed the door behind her. I heard her mumble to herself, or maybe to that cat.

A razor of illumination appeared at the bottom of the door. It flickered as she fumbled with something.

More scratches. When she came back, she held an old miner's lamp nearly opaque from disuse. The light inside seemed to intensify as it got close. She smacked the glass a few times, saw my expression, then turned the oil feeder knob.

"Too much," she said. The lamp's light played across her face, casting crags of shadows over her wrinkled skin.

She turned and walked down the hallway. I followed, passing only one other door to the left. Cobwebs and dust seemed to inhabit every spare inch of the home. There were framed pictures on the wall, but I couldn't make out what they were.

We reached a set of stairs leading downward into utter darkness. Clara stood, a single foot on the top stair, and looked at me for a moment.

"Watch your feet," she said. "Steps'a narrow."

They groaned as she descended. I sighed, and followed her downwards.

Let me tell you about that cellar. First, I think we went down more than a story. Second, you could smell the age in it. Third, I'd seen brighter places during an overnight white-out in winter, lights off, with nothing but the moan of a long night's storm keeping me company. This place was darker, almost as cold, but dead silent.

Except for one sound: scratches. I'd hear one every few seconds, always from a random direction.

Clara stood out ahead, just in front of a cabinet. As I walked forward, I heard scratches and scuffles in front of me, then the sounds faded off to the right and left. I started to dismiss the idea of a cat. Whatever was down here, I figured, was Hell's own take on a roach problem.

She indicated an empty shelf, then stood to the side as I put the bags down.

"No," she said. "Spread em' along the shelf."

I glanced at her.

"Makes em' easier to pick," she said.

So I took the gourds out and spread them along the wood. About the time I was done, I heard more scratches. This time, they came back towards us, working their way along the wall.

I wasn't a rude man, but I had to ask. Maybe she was hard of hearing and didn't know she had an infestation.

"Mrs. Clara, I think I hear bugs."

"Don't you worry about that," she replied.

"But ma'am."

"I said don't you worry."

"Look, Mrs. Clara, this ain't sanitary--"

"You're gonna stir em' up."

Now I was 'stirred up'.

"What exactly you got in this house?"

"Look her Phelps," she snarled, brow creased, a gnarled finger pointed at me. "I paid you for the gourds. I'm not concerned about what I got in here, and you ain't be gonna be either, or you don't get those silver dollars."

I folded my arms. Maybe she'd talk when I told her I was going easy on her promise.

"I'll take a single dollar," I said. "Nothin' else."

"Fine," she said, waving her hand dismissively. "Now follow me back up, Phelps, so you can leave."

She walked towards the stairs. I wasn't interested in being in the cellar longer than I needed to, and old woman or not, I'd had about enough.

The scratches descended on the shelves behind us. I tried not to think about them. I wanted to still be able to eat when I got home.

Clara stepped on the first step, then up on the second. It strained, then suddenly cracked under her weight. I jerked forward, arms out, and caught her, but the lamp went flying from her fingers and crashed on the floor.

The lantern disintegrated, and the light glowed something fierce. I thought we had a house fire on our hands.

Until that light moved across the floor.

Clara stood on her own, and shoved me away.

"You get out of here, Phelps." First time I ever heard her voice crack.

light went back over to the shelves, and when it got there, other lights burst out. Each light had glowing limbs attached to it. They were all over the gourds, splitting the skins and driving themselves inside, like someone holding a gas flame up to a potato.

Clara was yelling something at me, telling me to go.

Frozen in place, I watched one of them force its way inside, the gourd's skin splitting as it entered.

Then holes appeared in the gourd, and light poked through them. I watched long enough to see those holes take the shape of a face. Long enough to see that face turn towards me. Then there were scratches as that face moved off that shelf, and across the floor.

Can't tell you what happened after that, 'cause I was up them stairs, then across that house, then outside and in my truck, throwing up gravel as I drove away.

I don't see Clara anymore. Folks around town say they do, but I don't. I've never told anyone about that night in her house. I don't even like to think about it. If you're ever out driving with me, you might laugh if you see the detours I'll take to avoid that old dirt road.

I know Clara only buys gourds. That's why I haven't grown them in years. And, God willing, Clara's got all she'll ever need.

End

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