

Process Server

Smack dab in the middle of the block sat the three old women, like queens reigning from sturdy outdoor rattan thrones. They were not quite at the grizzled stage, meaning too arthritic to move about much, but each had a few hairs jutting from her chin and plenty of mouth to issue orders in the most lyrical cadences imaginable of their respective mother tongues. Move that here, plant that there, put the red, white, and blue impatiens over yonder. They took turns directing the horseman—imagine the block having a horseman—the teenagers, the young mothers and fathers, and any little ones who toddled past them. They were the lucky old timers who managed to survive because of attention from their respective families and/or neighbors and pure cussed stubbornness.

Maria Vitale, who had been a widow for many years, had lived the longest on the block, bar none. Some said that she sat down and the block grew up around her. Maria had been widowed for so long that she no longer had a story to tell about her husband. She had been there for so long that no one even speculated about who he was or how she

got there with him. Maria was just a presence gradually discovered as those moving into the neighborhood began looking around and wondering about the short, stocky woman who peered out from her lacy windows or porch on good days and waved at everyone passing by. Maria refused to leave the neighborhood to live with her son, a successful contractor in the suburbs. Where Imma go? she would say to her son. I miei amici sono qui. I feel good here. I not moving. Solo per la morte.

Those were also the sentiments of Eva Lukow, a woman who years ago chose to stay in the States when her German husband returned to his homeland, leaving her with two daughters, Angelika and Brigitte. Her husband had preceded the girls and her to the States in the first place in order to get a job and a place for them to live here because things were tough over there after the war. When she arrived in the States with the girls, things went along OK for a while until she realized that her husband had become moody, sullen, and was beginning to speak harshly to her. He slapped her a few times, causing the girls to tremble in the corner and cry. She tried to talk to him. What else can you do when you are alone in a strange country with a man who was growing stranger with it? Finally, he blew up at life one day and left. Weeks later she received a letter from overseas saying that he had found a job with his cousin. He begged her to return to Germany with the girls. But she wouldn't. She didn't trust him anymore; her feelings had been hurt. In the weeks after her husband's departure, she began to immerse herself in the neighborhood and discovered that she liked the people around her, including Maria Vitale, with whose help she was able to find work at an Italian restaurant. A teenage girl across the way came every morning to take her girls to the school a few blocks

away and bring them home at the end of the day. Eventually, both of the girls went to Germany when they reached of age to search for their father. They never returned to the States.

Ola Mae Hendrik was the last of the three to arrive on the block and the luckiest, for she lived with her daughter, son-in-law, and their children. She arrived from Athens, Georgia, Limestone County, the home of sweet iced tea. You know how every community or family has a seer? Someone who can sense things when everyone else is wrapped up in day-to-day problems? Someone who has a direct connect with forces that operate between raindrops and heat waves? That was Ola Mae Hendrik, better known as Granny, so respected for her sixth sense that individuals and families regularly sought her advice on delicate matters, from engagements to pregnancies and from divorces to deaths. Having dealt with all of life's major issues, especially coming from the South, Granny was like a book of knowledge, a resource for the neighborhood. If you wanted to be born again or live or die, you went to Granny for advice. If you wanted to love or figure out what went wrong with love, you went to Granny. You went to Granny for some advice on almost anything, except hating. Granny wasn't the type to hate. There was always a way to move past hate. Also, Granny never cooked. So there was no point going to her for advice on that. It's not that Granny was too old to cook at this point. You could understand that, but Granny *never* cooked. She couldn't stand it. Never had the patience for cornbread, greens, and whatever constituted Georgian fare, except she could make sweet tea like no other. Another thing about Granny: she loved to pick cotton in her day. And on this day she loved to order folks around about how to garden because that was where her true talent lay.

The day was caught between the end of spring and the promise of summer, a kind of sunny but cool that brought folks out to work in their gardens and to chat about how horrible the winter had been, but finally things were warming up. One or two mentioned the *Farmer's Almanac* and predictions of real serious heat this summer. That brought distressed looks from a few older residents, including Maria and Eva, who both lived alone, with only air conditioning units in their bedrooms or living rooms to try and cool their homes. Worse yet, fans that did no more than move heat around. Some had a combination of fans and small A/C units, with the fans strategically placed to distribute the cool air through other parts of the house, for example, from living room to bedroom or vice versa. Most likely the older residents would opt to have the A/C unit in the bedroom, because that's where they spent the most time, and then have a couple of fans blowing the A/C air out to other parts of the house, depending on the layout of the place. For the younger families, a single A/C unit might be placed in the living room, leading to huddles of parents and children sleeping there, with a few fans in other places. Problem was that A/C pulls current, and that means high electrical bills. It was a no-win situation for most of the older folks. But, frankly, that was how it was for most of those out there weeding and planting on Memorial Day weekend—whether small A/C units and/or fans—but the younger ones were better able to work around this humble arrangement. Back in the day, you could sleep on your front porch when nights were hot; you could catch a cool breeze now and again and no one bothered you because everyone was out there, believe it or not; if a criminal tried to mess with anyone, everyone heard and was already on the porch ready to spring into action. The only disturbance was snoring, especially from the older,

beefy workers who had to get up early and hit the clock. They snored loud as the machinery they would be facing soon enough when the moon descended and the sun peeked up from the east. The snores alone kept away what was mostly petty thievery back then, like stealing something off the car, or what else? What else was there to take? What is there to take now? A TV? We have TVs today about the same relative market value as then; so what is the difference? The difference is now you're not safe in your own home, even with bars on the windows, unless you have a big dog and/or a gun. Forget about sleeping on the porch. The young folks could manage big dogs and guns, but the older folks in that area had to rely on big-dog barking to tumble over their way and maybe confuse a criminal, and guns were too much for them, the idea of killing someone. Sometimes aging makes you doltish and slow to figure out how to survive Mother Nature and the realities of urban living, in the heart of the city where you shouldn't have to worry about being alone and battling elements. But once you're inside your brick or wood housing tomb, you could be alone and undiscovered for days if something goes wrong and neighbors don't notice your absence until . . .

But this was one of those renewing and loving days among folks, who were like family—they had all been there long enough together. Even the younger ones with their young school-aged children felt as if they had grown up there, with relatively perfect strangers becoming grandmothers and grandfathers and aunts and uncles to their families. So there was a sense of commitment to each other that develops after many times of communal planting or snow shoveling or leaf gathering. Or neighborhood summer parties when the street would be closed off and tables of food specialties dotted the sidewalks, along

with the garage sale where neighbors recycled their junk to another and another's became someone else's. Few outside the community knew of these summer events; few tasted the fried chicken, potato salad, macaroni and cheese, tamales, lemonade, seven-layer salad, cheesecake, or anise-laden biscotti that defined the neighborhood as a gourmet center.

And the dogs were as much a part of the scene as the children, each known by name and each respected for its contribution to the security and emotional well-being of the community. Even the yippy-yappy ones; at least their barks could alert.

The day was continuing as normal for the seasonal transition with marigolds beginning to edge the sunny portions of gardens and impatiens the shady areas, along with hostas and pachysandras. Teenagers raked up refuge leaves from last fall that hadn't managed to mulch into the rich soil that claimed the neighborhood. Lucky for all of them, the soil was deep and black and allowed gardens to grow wonderfully, especially since one of the neighbors had a friend with a real farm miles from the city. He would take his pickup truck and his two strapping sons out there every early spring and gather manure, which he deposited strategically throughout the block for all to access. In his day, he was a horseman, believe it or not, even in the city after he moved up from the South. He laughingly used to say that he was from Threepulo, just below Tupelo, Mississippi. He was a horseman back then and managed to keep it up when he settled in Detroit and began making some of that long money in the Cadillac plant.

His Threepulo memories with their horses stayed in his heart, and as soon as he could—given that he had a wife from Tupelo, believe it or not, who bore him two sons, obedient and calm boys who didn't get

caught up in the street nonsense that Detroit had to offer, as well as a daughter who was brilliant and college bound—he acquired a horse from a guy who worked on second shift. He also made arrangements to board the horse at the man’s stables and soon enough became involved in the Cadillac Black Horsemen’s Club. Plenty of horsepower there that probably accounted for his sons being so calm, because they took up horse riding and associating with the club members in almost weekly excursions to the stables on the outskirts of the city. The girl took up books.

So it was the trio of the horseman and his sons who contributed nourishment to the soil of the community, as well as a sense of manly purpose in a positive and gentlemanly way that made all feel secure and focused. This particular day was not a party day, the kind when neighbors cackled loudly and hand slapped and displayed enormous amounts of gaiety at every twist and turn when everything was funny and anything that fell out of anyone’s mouth was cause for laughter, that good old loud, guffawing kind that clears the lungs and frees the nostrils from winter’s constraints, the mucous from colds and lack of humidity accompanied by high heating bills that did little to relieve frozen body joints, especially the knees, shoulders, and arthritic fingers. Backs, too, sometimes, and necks. This was a hardworking day in preparation for fêtes later in the season; this day was full of dirty hands and bent backs, simple garden tools, and deep cooperation with instructions from older, more experienced green-thumbed souls, like the three older ladies. The neighborhood was early on in its work, but already the man who had the most grilling expertise, the one who could, in the vernacular of the city, throw down when it came to bar-b-q and so on (don’t talk about his baked beans), well he was

firing up the grill, getting it ready for the traditional hot dogs on the first day of planting.

Everyone was in place: teens raking leaves, other teens moving manure to designated spots, the horseman regally patrolling by foot as if on horse, worker bees receiving instructions from the elders about tools to use and where to station themselves for maximum efficiency because the crew expected to finish close to mid-afternoon and chomp on the best hot dogs in the—let’s say it—world. Detroit is the epicenter of hot dogs, and there they were with the main griller man. He was originally from Monterrey, Mexico, having arrived in Detroit years ago as a young boy with his family. He followed his father into work at the Rouge. He also learned to grill from his father. One Saturday each summer the community designated “fajita day.” Everyone chipped in to buy the meat, and the main griller man and his family would spend the eve of the day preparing for the day of. Neighbors brought sides and beer.

Gourmet food folks, gourmet grill man, gourmet hot dogs. Now this was a recipe for intense communal gardening. You might think that folks gardened collectively for love of color in the summer. But it was the grill man and the hot dogs that motivated the beginning of the season and the need to get the manure in ground. Late-season weeding and maintenance activity would require a different set of motivations. But this day was about hot dogs and the first collective time in the new fresh air, the beginning of new life, the herald of warmth, and all that crazy and fabulous hope for a few months of relaxed and civilized living.

The neighborhood people were loaded with a special history of cooking, which inspired the *mélange*, the cultural mix, the wonderful

flights of flavors, the freedom to do whatever spice and not feel locked into specifics. Maria was among the talented cooks, especially the most marvelous spaghettis imaginable, parmigiana concoctions from her home deep in the mountains of southern Italy and biscottis that eventually introduced the neighborhood to anise and to her. She was especially fond of anise as a tasty aid to digestion and would make biscottis throughout the year, not just at Christmas. For her, biscottis were the perfect way to top off a meal any time of the year. And the perfect way to begin a special circle of friendship, which is what happened on a steamy summer evening not long after Granny's arrival in the neighborhood when, in Maria's opinion, she had created the most magical biscottis ever.

Ola Mae, who lived two doors down from Maria, was an anomaly, not a cooking talent. One day, early on her arrival to Detroit, she decided to take a short walk to survey her new territory. She was strong enough to walk the entire block, and she was determined to do so on her own, as she was still smarting from her daughter and son-in-law's insistence that she relocate north with them. They just about had to pluck her out of Athens, where she was living by herself in a remote area. She wasn't entirely thrilled to be in the North and in a household full of children, three in all, but they were well behaved and tolerable. She loved her son-in-law. Her daughter got on her nerves with her bossiness. But she loved her, too. Of course.

So, Ola Mae edged down the steps of her daughter's modest brick home and turned left to head north toward the church just at the beginning of the other block across the side street, no more than three-quarters of a block away from her new home. She had spied it on the way in and took note. Her daughter and son-in-law no longer

attended church, so they knew nothing about the little white wood structure, perhaps a store in another life. But it was now called God's Little Acre Missionary Baptist Tabernacle, and it beckoned to her. She aimed that afternoon to check it out. She got as far as the boundary to Maria's property.

Hey Missus. And Maria waved. Come have some nice biscotti. Fresh from oven.

Biscotti? Ole Granny didn't have the foggiest notion of what biscotti was. She really didn't even understand what the lady was saying. She just stood still and stared at her. She didn't know what to make of Northern white people; she was still too fresh from the South. So she just stood there, not wanting to be rude but not knowing what to do.

Maria coaxed her. Come, come. Is OK. Come. I'm Maria. Come Missus.

And Granny climbed the wide stairs to Maria's porch by holding on to the old-fashioned metal handrail. It was sturdy; Maria's son had recently re-anchored it. How do, Maria, My name is Ola Mae Hendrik. Please to meet you.

I'm Maria Vitale. Nice to meet you, too, Missus Hendri, sit. I go get de biscotti. Sit. And Granny sat on Maria's glider with the big yellow flowered cushions. In no time at all Maria reappeared with a plate of biscottis and sweet iced tea. Granny was in heaven. You make sweet tea, too? Where I come from that's about all we drink. Thank you, Maria. And the two hit it off right then and there with Granny talking about Athens and the South and Maria talking about Sardinia and the mountains. Not to say that the conversation moved smoothly; neither quite understood the other because of their heavy accents. But

converse they did with looks, gestures, and the warmth of a budding, genuine friendship.

About three biscottis each into the conversation, Granny asked, What you put in these biswhatties?

Maria laughed. Biscottis. I put de anise, you know like the black long candy the kids eat.

Oh I got cha, like licorice. That's what this tastes like. I knew it was tasting familiar. Just then Eva from across the street joined them. Already she and Maria were friends, and after introductions, the three locked in as if they had known each other all their lives.

Maria, whose English was often still a little rough around the edges, called Eva, Missus Lucky because she had difficulty with Lukow. She called Ola Mae, Missus Hendri.

Thus began their near daily meetings at Maria's. Though she was still healthy enough to shuffle around the house and occasionally venture to someone's place, it was more difficult for her to move around than the others. So Ola Mae and Eva would most often gather at Maria's place. They would recount their stories over weak hot tea in the winter, fixed according to Eva's specifications with barely a hint of golden brown; she said it was healthier that way. In summer they drank sweet tea fixed by Granny herself, plenty of sugar, to give them a jolt, she claimed. There's an amazing amount of wisdom that passed from southern to northern Europe and then over to Athens, Georgia, where all of it combined to enrich the lore and culture of the block.

Not long after the first encounter with Maria and Eva, Granny began attending God's Little Acre Missionary Baptist Tabernacle. The name was longer than the building was wide, leaving the deacons to

decide on breaking the name into rows like this with “tabernacle” split across the door.

GOD’S LITTLE ACRE
 MISSIONARY BAPTIST
 TABER NACLE

The church had to go that way with the signage in order to leave room to advertise the hours of service on one of the only two windows. On the other, the deacons thought it prudent to display the pastor’s favorite inspirational slogan: IF YOU STAND BY THE LORD, HE WILL STAND BY YOU.

God’s Little Acre’s humbleness attracted Ola Mae, in addition to its proximity. She found herself praying along with the others in its tiny interior almost every Sunday. She could never convince her daughter or son-in-law to go with her, but now and again the five-year-old granddaughter would go in order to wear the flouncy dresses her grandmother bought her.

One day after several years attending the church, the pastor and deacons and elders and church mothers determined that she should be that year’s Mother’s Day feature, which would mean that she would now have her own chair right in front of the pastor in the corner of the second row. She would be escorted henceforward by an usher to her special seat, and from then on she would never have to rise for another church member. The usher would march them around wherever to avoid that. On her day the church gave Ola Mae flowers and a special crown, special prayers, and a citation that noted her special communication with the Lord Savior, through which she connected

the entire neighborhood. And almost the entire block attended the presentation that Mother's Day at the little church on its northernmost corner, including Eva and Maria, who claimed that she had gone into the church once or twice when little girls on the block received baptism. Dat was a long time, long time ago. Beyond God's Little Acre, some of the first stages of what would later be called ruination were beginning to develop, one or two empty former homes in various stages of decline. But on that block at that period of time, some of the symptoms of urban decline had not yet hit. No drug dealers, no unexplained fires, no vagrant inhabitants. None of that yet because of the informal forces of protection such as the horseman and his sons and the beefy workers, the old timers who peeped out of windows at every strange movement on the block. And, of course, Granny's special communication with the Lord.

About an hour before the hot dogs, the neighborhood was humming, knee-deep in dirt and anticipation. Happy by now with the smell of the grill and the griller's sounds as it became clearer to all that work would be coming to a good, relaxing end. The block, long known for its dazzling purple irises and tulips, had color already. Spring was already showy; they were prepping for summer and beyond. Granny, Eva, and Maria had long lost interest in orchestrating the proceedings; they were engaged in their usual round of stories, memories from past days, mini-educational on their respective cultures by the time Eva looked up in the middle of a laugh and saw him. The other two could tell something was wrong by the way Eva's lips froze, eyebrows knitted together. Her face slowly went from a pale rose to gray. She

looked horrible and shocking because, believe it or not, all three of these women were gorgeous for their age. Especially Eva, who was the thinnest and the most put together in terms of dress and makeup. She was the youngest by a couple of years and still was out and about, driving herself to and from her restaurant job, and had a gentleman friend who took her to dinner and a show now and again and visited her home. And who could be seen leaving early, early in the morning from time to time. So when Maria and Granny saw Eva's brows and frozen smile and gray coloring, they swiveled their heads around and knitted their eyebrows, as well. Eva expelled a soft shhhhhh and all lowered their eyes as if nothing was happening, but they peeked as well as they could to track the movements of the tallest man any of them had ever seen. Granny whispered that he must be at least seven feet tall, but they were sitting in rather low chairs, which gave them a strange point of view. From where they sat his head was small and his body large and pear-shaped. His face was pasty and featureless, his chest round and soft looking; his mid-section was the shape of a truck tire and his lower section flat and wide. He almost looked like the Michelin Man, except that nothing about him was cuddly. The three women looked over and around at each other while fighting to keep their heads down. Occasionally, one or the other would hazard a glance at him, and for the first five minutes or so he didn't see them. He may not have seen anyone's face because the rest of the neighborhood was bent over digging and planting, with the exception of the horseman, who gave the strange man one puzzled look then turned to assist his son with hauling a wheelbarrow full of manure to a spot north of where the ladies were sitting. The man's presence may not have even registered with him or anyone else in the neighborhood, except the

three women. The man entered the block from the south, the side farthest from God's Little Acre, which made Granny immediately suspect that he was related to the devil. They watched him a few more minutes as he assessed the area and then began walking from address to address, crisscrossing the street as he moved north before heading south again past the ladies.

His shirt was white, blinding white, so white that it reminded all three women of the bluing they used for decades to get their Monday wash whites just that brilliant. His tie was a conventional striped blue and white or gray and white or blue and gray; they couldn't quite tell. His pants were a Robert Hall cut and dark gray, almost black. Eva immediately associated him with death. He's come for one of us, she whispered. Maria, the oldest of the three, sat still, only allowing her right hand to grab the left for comfort and control. Granny noticed and reached over for her hand. Eva took the other one. So, the three sat in quiet speculation about the purpose of this man on the block while he continued to dart from one spot to another, as if looking for the correct address. Maybe he's lost, said Granny. Maybe he's on the wrong block and doesn't realize it. But something told her to not holler out to offer him assistance.

Her voice hoarse and weak, Maria said, Yes, I think he is here on death business.

Eva, sorry that she had brought up death, said, No, no. Not that, some other business.

Granny agreed, No, not death. Death don't carry a notebook like that man carryin. Which is what the man had clasped just at the top of his paunch, a black notebook. He's here for some kind of legal business, added Granny. Maybe he's a bill collector.

Maria brightened at that possibility. Maybe he come to sell insurance. My husband buy insurance from a man like that years ago. He come to the house. Only he was nice and friendly. This one doesn't smile.

Eva, glad to escape from death, latched onto insurance. Yes, he looks like he sells insurance.

Granny shook her head. Naw, insurance men have briefcases cause they have lots of paperwork for you to look at. He ain't no insurance man. He's up to something else.

The three continued to follow his progress. Once when Granny was stealing a peek at him, he looked directly at her, which made her shiver. She swiftly focused her eyes past him as if she had never been watching him in the first place. You know how you can stare at someone and then stare through them when you're caught in the act? Well, that was a technique Granny had developed back home in Athens as a way to track the maneuverings of whites without getting caught. This man gave her a look as if she could be the one he was after, then moved off to the southernmost end of the block were he frantically peered east around the corner, turned his body to gaze north up the street, then looked west, then north again.

No one besides the three women paid him any attention, and he asked no one for help. He said nothing.

Granny, one of God's Little Acre Missionary Tabernacle's Church Mothers, squeezed the fingers of her two companions and whispered, We need to pray. They closed their eyes and held their heads down while Granny muttered incantations to the Lord, recalling his almighty goodness and strength and love for his people. She begged him to lift her block into his lap of mercy and uttered the names of

each and every person living there to commend them to his mercy in forgiving whatever wrongdoings they may have committed. Lord, know that they will pay their bills because these are a hardworking and honest people.

With eyes closed and Granny's droning, they fell into a reverie.

Lord, know that they will not fornicate outside with outside women or men, know that they will love and honor their kin, know that they will forever live in the glory of your word, my sweet Lord, they will praise your name and treasure the life you give them and not tempt death . . . and on and on she went until noon struck and the neighborhood began to file into the grill master's yard for hot dogs, and the marigolds sought to stretch their roots into the manure-laden soil, and the rose leaves fluttered in the gentle air and the first buds of peony drank in the spring warmth. And the irises listened.

Lord stand by us in this our most hour of need. Stand by us, Lord, even if the moon falls from the sky and the sun refuses to rise. Stand by us. At this, the three again squeezed tight their hands. Maria was trying to recall her husband, but it had been so long. She could remember her son, though. He was as big as the man they had seen but handsome and better shaped and friendly warm, full of anise.

Granny was just trying to pray through this moment that none of them understood, but the man had brought strange vibrations with him that each of the women realized were harmful and bode ill.

Eva didn't have the faith or anise of the other two; she had only them at this point. She was trying to figure out how she had got from over there to here, to this moment. She, too, had trouble remembering things, especially the face of her husband. They were still married as far as she knew. Her daughters wrote her now and again, and sometimes

she received a call from them. She could never figure out how their father was able to pull them from her, except that maybe it wasn't him but his country. Maybe they never cared for here. She did. Was that the major difference between them? She was saving, hoping for the day when she would have enough money to visit her daughters. You would think they would send for her. But not yet.

So when Granny and Maria squeezed her hands, they gave her the strength to refocus and to wonder, as she had over the years, how long it would be until things would change for her. Indeed, how long until . . . At that thought, she turned full to Granny and Maria, and the three smiled at each other in a way you could only smile, crooked but firm, like when you are in the full knowledge of what life can give.

Just then the horseman and his sons came over to escort the ladies to the food; the strange man had disappeared.