

Cucumber Gravy
by Susan Palwick

I wasn't too happy when the knocking started on my door that morning. Nobody's welcome out here except UPS and customers, and I wasn't expecting any deliveries, and customers have to call first. New buyers have to be referred by people I know. That's a rule. I check references, too. I don't let anybody in who isn't vouched for, and even so, it's amazing I've never had cops out here. Some of my buyers ask why I didn't go legit when the medical-marijuana bill passed four years ago, but that's a no-brainer: I do not need the government crawling up my backside to regulate me, and I have a lot more customers this way, and I make a lot more money. Being legal would be nothing but a pain in the ass, even if I didn't have to worry about keeping people from finding out about the space cucumbers. As it happened, my latest bunch of cucumbers was due to start singing any minute, which meant the last thing I needed was somebody in the house. That's another reason buyers have to call first: depending on what the cucumbers are up to, I tell people they have to wait, I can't see them today.

So when the knocking started, I thought, shit, government, and my stomach tied up in a knot. I'd have pretended I wasn't home, but you can get stranded motorists out here too, and the sooner you let them use your phone or whatever, the sooner they go away. So when I heard that knock and looked out and didn't recognize who was there—some bearded guy pushing forty, about my age, in jeans and a plaid shirt and hiking boots, had tree-hugging liberal written all over him—I grabbed my gun and yelled through the door, "Who is it?" Since it was only one guy, that made cops less likely, but on the other hand his car was in front of the house, a nice little Toyota, which made mechanical failure less likely, too. Maybe he had to use the bathroom, in which case I'd tell him to use the desert. If he needed water I'd give him some, though. You always give people water, out here. You'd think people would know not to drive anywhere in this state without extra water in the car, but between the dumb college kids from Reno and the morons moving here from California, the average survival IQ in Nevada isn't what it should be. This guy was too old to be in college, so I pegged him as Californian. Local folks only drive in the desert with four-wheel drive.

"Mr. Whitwell Smith?" he yelled through the door. "Welly?"

"Yeah?" Only buyers call me Welly: it's a kind of code. I'm Whit to everybody else, not that I've talked too much of anybody else since Nancy Ann left. "Who wants to know?"

"My name's Jim Humphreys." The name didn't mean anything to me. "I'm a friend of Sam Mortimer's."

That name did. Sam used to be one of my best customers, out here once a month spending big money, until he suddenly stopped coming altogether about six months ago. No call, nothing. I'd been wondering what happened to him, not that it's any of my business. I'd almost started to think of Sam as a friend, I'd known him so long; we'd even gone skeet-shooting on my property a few times. "Yeah? You know Sam, you know you have to call before you come out here. Sam knows that."

"I've been trying to call for three days, Mr. Smith. Your phone's out of order."

Shit. That was the first I knew of it. I hadn't gotten any calls for three days, but that's not unusual: you never know when business is going to be slow, and nobody else calls me. But it could still be a trick. "You wait just a minute," I hollered through the door, and ran and picked up the phone. Dead. No dial tone. Nothing. Which meant I'd have to get telephone repair people out here, but that would have to wait until the latest batch of cucumbers was gone. In the meantime, I turned on my cell phone in case anybody was trying to reach me. I don't like the cell phone; I don't like having my conversations broadcast all over hell and gone for the government to spy on. But you have to have a cell phone for emergencies, just like you have to have water. If you miss a customer call, you could lose business.

"Okay," I hollered, back at the door. "Thank you for telling me about the telephone, but I can't see you today. We can make an appointment—"

"Mr. Smith, I drove seventy miles to get here, and this is an emergency. Please open the

door."

Emergency? Nobody'd ever used that line on me before. My crop isn't addictive, which is one of the things I like about it. You don't get strung-out dopeheads at your door who'd murder their own mothers for their next fix. Who needs that kind of trouble?

I checked my watch. The cucumbers were due to start singing in about thirty minutes, but sometimes they go off early. I'm never sure exactly when they've gotten here, which makes the timing tricky, and that means I wasn't about to open the door. "If it's an emergency, call 911, Mr. Humphreys. I'm not in that line of work."

"Welly, please. Sam's very sick. He has cancer. He had surgery four months ago and now he's having chemo and it's making him sicker than a dog, and the prescription stuff isn't working for him. He says it isn't strong enough. He says yours is the best. He sent me out here with two hundred and fifty dollars to buy some. Please don't send me back to that poor man empty-handed."

"Huh," I said. I wasn't surprised the government couldn't grow good plants. They were probably growing oregano and charging pot prices for it; you can't trust those people as far as you can throw them. I started with the best stock when I got into business fifteen years ago, and I've been refining it since then. Genetics was my favorite part of biology in high school.

I looked at my watch again. I could run and get a quarter bag and shove it through the door and pull this Humphreys' cash in, and it would all be over in ten seconds. And if the cucumbers started up and he heard them, I'd tell him it was the TV. "You wait there," I called out. "I'll be right back."

I ran and got a quarter bag and a paper lunch sack, and put the gun on a shelf near the door, where I could grab it fast if I had to but Humphreys couldn't reach inside and get it, and then I opened the door a crack, as far as the chain would allow. "Here," I said. I held up the quarter bag so he could see it, and dropped it in the lunch sack. "You pass the money through, you get this."

He held up a sheaf of bills and slipped them through. All singles and fives, Jesus, what had Sam been thinking? Come to think of it, a quarter bag wouldn't get him very far, not given Sam's smoking habits, but I was guessing he didn't have much money left over, after the cancer. He'd probably been saving up since the chemo started, the poor bastard, and insurance wouldn't pay for mine. I wondered if I should give him some extra for free—he'd been a very good customer for a long time—but in the meantime, I started counting the bills. Old habits.

While I was counting, Humphreys said drily, "Sam said you let him come into the house." I could hear him more clearly now, with the door open, and something about his voice nagged at me. He had a little bit of an accent, English or Aussie maybe. Where had I heard a voice like that lately?

"I know Sam," I said. "No offense." I finished counting—it was all there—and then I handed the bag through. As I did, I got a good look at Humphrey's face for the first time, and two things happened at once.

The first thing was that I recognized him from TV. You just don't see many preachers with Aussie accents feeding bag ladies on the news, especially when the preacher has one deformed ear, the right one, all ugly and lumpy and crumpled up like a cauliflower. I hadn't picked up on the ear before because I'd only gotten a side view of him when I looked out the window.

The second thing was that the cucumbers starting singing, all three of them at once: wails and whistles and grunts, like a cross between a porno soundtrack and an orchestra of teakettles.

Humphreys' eyes widened. "What—"

"It's the TV," I said, and tried to slam the door, but I couldn't because he'd wedged his foot in there, and he was staring behind me, goggle-eyed. When I turned to look over my shoulder, I saw that one of the cucumbers had staggered out of the den, away from its friends and the

nice warm heaters, and was hopping in pathetic circles around my living room, which makes it the first time in almost ten years that a cucumber's moved from where I put it once it got into the house.

I was about to have a very bad day.

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The space cucumbers started coming here a few months after Nancy Ann ran off. I don't know why they picked this place—it's just a ranch house out in the middle of nowhere, halfway between Reno and Gerlach, with nothing to look at but sagebrush and lizards and alkali dust, so flat that the mountains on the horizon seem like a mirage—and I never have figured out how they keep from attracting the attention of the air base in Stead. Those bastards are government, and I figure they have to have instruments that can tell if you throw a penny in the air, and the cucumbers have to come in some kind of ship, or come down through the atmosphere, anyway. And you see those air base planes and 'copters doing maneuvers out here all the time, so I don't know why they've never picked up on what's going on. I guess the cucumbers are smarter than they are. It's not hard to be smarter than the government.

I call them space cucumbers because they look like a sea cucumber I saw once—or at least, they look more like that than like anything else. My parents took me on a trip to San Diego when I was a kid, and we went to the aquarium there. They had all kinds of animals, scary ones like sharks and smart ones like dolphins and whales who did tricks, but for some reason, the one I always remembered best was the sea cucumber. It was lying in a tank of water, in this kind of petting zoo they had, and you could reach in and touch it. It was brown and very very soft, and if somebody had grabbed it and started cutting it into pieces, it couldn't have fought back. It didn't swim or do tricks. It didn't do anything. It just sat there. The aquarium lady said it ate by filtering tiny bits of food out of the water. It was a really boring animal, and I never have known why it made such an impression on me. Probably because I couldn't figure out how a creature like that could survive in the ocean with sharks and lobsters and stingrays. "I guess sharks don't think they taste good," the aquarium lady said, but you could tell she didn't know either. That cucumber was a mystery.

Which is what mine are, too. They show up two or three at a time, every five or six weeks. I just open the door in the morning and there they are, waiting on my welcome mat. They're much bigger than the sea cucumber in San Diego, about three feet tall and as thick around as a flagpole, and I can't touch them because they're wrapped in something like plastic. Like really thick shrink wrap. Or maybe that's their skin, but I don't think so: I think it's some kind of spacesuit, and the animal's the thing inside, the brown blobby cylindrical thing that hops along on nine stubby little legs, all clustered at the bottom of the cylinder, like tentacles. Hopping isn't easy for them, you can tell—I don't think it's how they usually move around, wherever they come from—so I usually pick them up to carry them inside. Wherever they're from, they've come a long way to get here, and I figure if there's anything I can do to make it easier for them, why not? They're always exactly air temperature, or the shrink wrap is, and they're not as heavy as you'd expect from their size. I can just stick them under my arm, like pieces of firewood.

When the first ones came I was terrified, of course. The cucumbers would have been weird whenever they showed up, but Nancy Ann had just left, and I was out of my mind with grief and anger, smoking entirely too much of my own crop just to get to sleep at night. I felt like I was going crazy, and having space cucumbers on my welcome mat didn't help. I didn't know what they were or what they wanted. I didn't know if they were going to kill me or take over the planet or poison the water supply, and I couldn't ask anybody because that would have gotten the government involved, and even if I trusted the government I couldn't have people

tramping around my house and finding the plants and grow lights and sprinklers in the basement. I have one hell of a professional setup down there: no way I could argue personal use, even if possession weren't still a felony for anybody without an approved medical condition.

The first time they showed up and hopped into the house, I just went weak in the knees and started babbling at them, trying to figure out what they wanted, trying to find some way to communicate. Didn't work, of course. If they can talk or understand me when I talk, I haven't found any way to tell, not in all these years. Maybe the singing's some kind of language, like what whales have, but if so I haven't figured it out yet, and they never respond in any way I can tell when I say things to them. That first visit, they all hopped over to my wood stove and stood around it, shaking, and the entire forty-eight hours until they started singing, I don't think I slept a wink. I didn't know what they were going to do. I didn't dare shoot them because I didn't want to give them an excuse to destroy the planet, and anyway I could tell even then they had some kind of suit on, and if I broke through it and whatever they were made of came out, who knew what kind of plague I'd start? I never have breached one of those suits.

They didn't do anything that first time, of course, not until they started singing. When the noise started, I got into a duck-and-cover position under my coffee table because I thought they were going to attack me. And then when nothing happened and the singing stopped, I just crouched there, waiting, until about half an hour later the first one liquefied on me, and then within half an hour after that, the other two had gone gravy, too.

You know those gravy packets that come with some kinds of TV dinners? The plastic pouches you throw into boiling water and then pull out of the pot with tongs, so you can cut them open to pour the gravy out? I guess some people use microwaves, but I think boiling water works better. Anyway, that's what the cucumbers look like when they liquefy: giant gravy pouches. There's a big sploosh, and then all of a sudden where there used to be something that looked like an animal, there's just brown mush. If you pick up the suit then, it's like holding a bag of thick brown water, and frankly it's pretty disgusting. The first time I saw it, I nearly got sick, and then I got even more scared, wondering what would happen next. Nothing happened. Nothing's ever happened, after they go gravy. I think they're dead, then. As near as I can tell, they come here to die. Why they'd come here, I have no idea. Don't think I haven't thought about it, but I've never come up with any idea that makes sense. The first few times it happened, I thought they'd just crashed here or gotten stranded, like motorists without water, and Earth had killed them somehow, or I had. But it's been happening every five or six weeks for ten years, so now I think they come here deliberately. Maybe this is some kind of pilgrimage for them; maybe my house was built on some kind of alien shrine, like Area 51. I just don't know. And I could be wrong, anyway. Maybe they aren't dead at all. Maybe if I opened one of the suits up, they'd come back to life.

For a while I kept some of the cucumber-gravy bags stacked out where the newest ones could see them when they showed up; I thought maybe they'd show me somehow what to do with them. They never responded at all. It was like the gravy packets weren't even there. Don't ask me what kind of animal doesn't recognize its own dead. Then I kept some of those first packets down in the basement, to see if they'd change over time, but they didn't. The suits keep whatever's inside from decomposing more, I guess.

Now I bury them. I've got forty acres here. I don't know what I'll do when my land gets filled in. Go out into the desert, I guess, and try to find places where people won't see me, places that aren't likely to get developed. Who knows what would happen if a backhoe sliced through one of those suits? None of the ones I've buried have ever gotten dug up by coyotes. I guess the cucumbers, dead or alive, are as invisible to coyotes as they are to the government. And as far as I know, the government hasn't seen me digging, either. I don't dig any time I can see or hear planes or 'copters, not that that's any guarantee.

For a while at the beginning I thought maybe the cucumbers really were invisible, thought I was having hallucinations, losing it over Nancy Ann. I drove into Reno a bunch of times to

use the Internet at the library—I won't have a computer here because I don't trust the government not to spy on what I'm looking up—and did research, trying to find out if anyone else was reporting space aliens who looked like sea cucumbers. Nothing. I keep checking, every six months or so, but if other people are getting visits, I've never found any sign of it. I've read about crop circles and UFO abductions and all kinds of damnfool things, but never anything about singing cucumbers in plastic suits who turn into mush.

After a few visits, I wasn't scared of them anymore. They're nothing if not predictable. Every five or six weeks I wake up and open the door and find a couple or three on my welcome mat. I've never seen any bright lights in the middle of the night, or heard anything; I just open the door and there they are. And they hop into the house, and forty-eight hours later, give or take an hour, they start singing. They sing for three to seven minutes, and within an hour after that, they go gravy.

Sometimes I wonder what my life would be like if they'd never started coming. Would I still be living here? Would I have taken all the money I've made and moved to Hawaii, the way Nancy Ann and I always planned? Would I have taken that trip around the world I dreamed about when I was a kid? As it is, three or four times a year I take off for a week or two, always right after the latest cucumbers have gone gravy. I go someplace fancy, someplace that might as well be a different planet—New York or New Orleans or Bermuda—and I live it up. Good hotels, good food, high-class hookers. Those women like me. I tip well, and I treat them like human beings. They don't have to worry that I'll get ugly on them, and I don't have to worry that they'll break my heart. Works out for everybody. I could use Nevada hookers too, of course, the legal ones, and sometimes I do, but it feels less like a vacation that way. I enjoy those trips. But I always come back home, because I always know another batch of cucumbers will be landing on my welcome mat.

I've learned what they like over the years, or I think I have. They like heat: they shake and shiver less the closer they are to the wood stove, or something else warm. I don't like having them in my living room for anyone to see, so early on I covered up the windows in the den and got some heavy-duty space heaters in there, the most powerful ones I could find at Home Depot. I figure the cucumbers wouldn't move close to things that made them shake less unless shaking less meant they were comfortable or happy, so I started paying attention to what else makes them shake. I feel itchy when they shake; it's like watching someone about to sneeze. They're happier on soft things than on the floor, so I used to cover the floor of the den with pillows, but then one time I had an old black-and-white polka-dot beanbag chair and the cucumber sitting on that shook less than the ones on the pillows did. I experimented, moving them around—I felt fine picking them up by then—and all of them seemed to like the beanbag chair better, although some of them shook a little more on it than others did. They seem to have individual tastes, although I can't tell them apart to look at them.

So I went to Wal-Mart—no sense buying fancy when budget will do—and bought a bunch of beanbag chairs. One of them was a really ugly day-glo pink, and I found out the cucumbers liked that better than the other colors, so I went back to Wal-Mart, but they were out of pink ones. They had day-glo orange and yellow and green, so I got those. The cucumbers love those day-glo beanbags. They seem to have different favorite colors, so when they get here I have to spend some time moving them around to see which one likes which color. But all of them like the day-glo chairs better than anything else.

The walls are another thing. Most of my house is decorated with Penthouse Pets and some Playboy pictures. That started as revenge after Nancy Ann left, but I kept doing it, because it makes me happy. Those women are even more beautiful than the hookers I hire, who can't always arrange perfect lighting. But the cucumbers hate those pictures. Once I held one up to my favorite Penthouse Pet, as a kind of joke, and that cuke started shaking like it was about to explode. I tried it with a few others: same thing. Maybe they think naked humans look repulsive, the way lots of people would think the cucumbers themselves do.

So I drove into the library and got out a bunch of art books and started showing them

pictures. They don't have eyes that I can tell, but if you hold a picture up to any place along the middle of the cucumber, it will respond. French painters, that's how they voted. Especially Matisse and Monet. So now I've got Matisse and Monet posters all over the walls of the den. I think those pictures are about as exciting as watching paint dry, and they seriously clash with the day-glo beanbags, not that I'm Martha Stewart. But when I put the cucumbers in that room now, they hardly shake at all.

Of course, there's always the chance I'm wrong about all of it. If there's anything I've learned, it's that you can't trust appearances, even in your own species. I loved Nancy Ann, and I thought she loved me. She was as beautiful as a Penthouse Pet, and she was smart and funny and taught me how to cook. I loved her even after she got religion; I loved her even after she started telling me that I was going to go to hell for cursing and growing pot and reading Penthouse, even when she said I was possessed by the devil. I figured she was saying all those mean things because she loved me too and didn't want me to go to hell, and even though I didn't believe in hell and never have, I tried to make her happy. I didn't shut down my business, of course, because we needed the money if we were going to move to Hawaii, which was what Nancy Ann wanted. She had expensive tastes, anyway: diamonds and perfume and a new sports car every couple of years. She cut down on some of that stuff after she got religion, I'll give her that. She said showiness was the sin of pride. Since she seemed serious about it, I tried to curse less, and I canceled my Penthouse subscription for a while, and I even went to church with her a couple of times, to hear the Reverend Jebediah Wilkins bellow about Jesus and Satan and hellfire and how we had to tithe to the Lord if we wanted to be saved, hallelujah, while people nodded and moaned and said, "Oh yes, tell it brother," all around us.

That church was the scariest thing I've ever seen, much worse than space cucumbers could ever be. But I tried to love Nancy Ann through all of it, I really did. And I thought she was trying to love me too. And then one day I came home from a trip to town, where I'd just bought her some of her favorite perfume, because it was her birthday and she deserved something nice on her birthday, even if it would have been pride any other time. And I found all her things gone and a note on the kitchen table saying she wouldn't be back, because she'd found true love with Jebediah Wilkins. She said she'd be praying for me, oh yes she would, praying that I'd change my sinful ways before the Lord struck me down and I burned in hellfire forever.

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So naturally I was not happy to have a preacher at my front door, staring at a space cucumber staggering in circles around my living room. The one time I've got unwanted company, and that's when the cucumbers have to go and do something different. I wish I could say I handled the whole thing calmly, but I didn't. I flat-out panicked. I'm not sure I've ever moved that fast before; I got the chain off the door and grabbed Humphreys and yanked him inside, and grabbed my gun off the shelf and aimed it at him. "The safety's still on," I said, raising my voice over the cucumbers' singing, "but if you do anything funny, it won't be, I'll blow your head off, I swear to God—"

Humphreys held his hands up and tried to say something, but it came out as a squeak. He was shaking worse than the cucumbers ever have, and I knew the cucumber behind me was too, although I couldn't turn around to look, because I had to keep an eye on Humphreys. Don't ask me what I thought he was going to do: go to the government, or start raving about Satan and try to burn my house down. All I knew was that I couldn't let him leave, once he'd seen the cucumber, and I'd never killed a man before and didn't want to, but I had no idea how else I was going to get out of this one, except that Sam was expecting Humphreys back with the crop and if Humphreys didn't come back Sam would call the police and— You can see how clearly I was thinking. About all I could figure was that I was doomed. I couldn't see any way out that didn't involve a jail cell or worse.

Humphreys found his voice, then. "Please," he said. "Welly, don't shoot me. I don't—I don't—"

It occurred to me right then that if I could get that cucumber back into the den, where it belonged, maybe I could convince him he'd just been seeing things. And he'd just bought a quarter bag from me, which made him a felon too. He wouldn't want his flock to know about that, except Sam. Preachers may be hypocrites, but most of them try to hide it. I had some leverage here.

I started calming down. The cucumber in the living room stopped singing, too, so it was a little easier to think. "Sit down," I said. "Right there. With your back to the wall." He did, just slid down that wall with his hands still up, and I said, "If you don't move, you'll be fine. Got it?" He nodded, his eyes still big, but he was watching me and the gun, not the cucumber. "Close your eyes," I said, and he did—he was still shaking, you'd better believe it—and I backed up, keeping the gun on him, and scooped that crazy lost cucumber back under my arm so I could take it back into the den.

But it picked that very instant to go sploosh, and Humphreys' eyes flew open at the extra noise—I guess he couldn't help it—and he saw that bag of cucumber gravy, and he turned green and gulped and whatever he'd had to eat that day came back up, all over his lap and my carpet. While he was heaving I backed up quick and opened the door to the den and tossed the gravy bag inside, and slammed the door shut again. I don't know if Humphreys saw that or not; he was busy reviewing the contents of his stomach. When he'd finished losing his breakfast he looked up at me, his face wet the way it gets after you've thrown up, and said, "I'm sorry. I really am sorry. I'll clean it up. If you bring me some soap and water and some rags—"

"Never mind that," I said. "I'll clean it up myself. You just get out of here, Reverend. You get out of here and bring Sam his medicine. You didn't see anything unusual, you hear me?" He shook his head. "What was that?"

"It wasn't anything." One of the other cucumbers stopped singing, and I said, "You haven't seen or heard anything. Go on home, now." He just looked at me. The third cucumber shut up, so the house was very quiet, all of a sudden. I still had the gun trained on Humphreys; the safety was still on. I clicked it off and said, "Reverend, you need to go home now."

He swallowed. He'd stopped shaking. When he spoke again, his voice was a lot calmer than it had been before. "Mr. Smith, I've been in front of guns before. The worst you can do to me is kill me. I have to know one thing: that—that creature I didn't see, is it dangerous?" "Something you didn't see can't be dangerous, Reverend. Go home."

He shook his head again. "I wish that were true, but it's not. What we pretend not to see is what harms us. And if anyone's in danger—"

"Nobody's in danger but you, Reverend." I was starting to panic again. This guy wasn't going to let himself be convinced that the cucumber had just been his imagination. "As far as I know, the creature you didn't see isn't dangerous to anybody. Now go home!"

He just looked at me. He looked very sad. "If it's not dangerous, then why did you kill it?"

I lost it, then. Everything piled into my head in that one instant: how Nancy Ann had told me I was evil and how she'd left me even though I tried to make her happy, and all the work I'd done over the years to try to keep those cucumbers comfortable, to keep them from shaking. Jim Humphreys didn't understand a single goddamn thing. "I didn't kill it! It just died! That's what they do! They die! That's how they die! They've been coming here to die for ten years and you don't know a single thing about it, but you think you know everything, don't you? You think those creatures are the minions of Satan and you think I'm going to hell for taking care of them and for having pictures of naked women on the walls and for selling pot, and you think you can come in here and—"

"Welly!" he said. He sounded like I'd hit him over the head with one of those beanbag chairs.

"Welly, if I thought you were going to hell for selling marijuana, why would I have come here to buy some for Sam?"

"How do I know? So you could preach to me about it! So you could preach to Sam and tell

him he's going to hell! He probably confessed that he'd been smoking because he's dying and scared for his soul, because you people have your hooks in him just like you got them into my wife. I bet you smoke yourself, don't you? I bet you stand up every Sunday and preach about how drugs are a sin and everybody has to give you their money so they'll be saved, and then you come out here and spend that money on pot for yourself. All those fives and singles came from the collection plate, didn't they? Little old ladies giving you their last dollar and then you turn around and spend it on—"

"It's Sam's money," Jim Humphreys said. "The marijuana's for him, Welly. You can call and ask him. I have a phone in the car."

"I'm not done!" I said. "You just listen to me." It felt awfully good to yell at him like that, to have a man on the floor in front of me and to be able to point a gun at him and tell him exactly what I thought of him and have him not be able to do anything about it. It felt better than anything had felt in a long time. "I know about you people! Don't think I don't! I know how you ministers act in the pulpit, trying to scare ordinary folks who are just trying to get by and do the best they can, and then you turn around and you run off with people's wives after you've had the goddamned fucking nerve to make all that noise about the devil! Your kind think they're better than the rest of the world, don't they? Don't they, Reverend? You think you can tell me everything about who I am and how I should live my life, like you've got God in your pocket. Your people think that all they have to do to be saved is to put somebody else down—"

"My people," said Jim Humphreys, very quietly, "believe in welcoming all strangers as Christ." I squinted at him, because I couldn't believe how calm he was, and he said, "Even strangers who aren't human. I don't think I need to tell you anything about that, Welly. I think you've been welcoming strangers as Christ for—what did you say? Ten years? And if you're doing a better job with them than you're doing with me, well, that's because you think I'm not a stranger. You think you know who I am. But you're wrong, Welly. I'm a stranger, too."

I was ashamed, then, of how good I'd felt when I was yelling at him. And then I got angry again because he'd made me ashamed, which was what Nancy Ann and Jebediah had always tried to do. "High and mighty, aren't you? I bet you think I'm the scum of the earth—" "I think you're scared," he said. "I think that if I were in your place, I'd be scared too. And I think it must be awfully hard, having to watch things die like that for ten years, without being able to talk to anybody about it."

I got a lump in my throat when he said that. It shocked me, because I hadn't cried since Nancy Ann left, and I was damned if I was going to start in front of this preacher. "It's not like that," I said. "It's not like I know them. They all look the same and they all die the same way, and I don't know how to talk to them. This is where they come and I do the best for them I can, but I don't get attached, Reverend. So don't get all sentimental."

He smiled, sitting there on the floor in his own puke. "All right. I won't. But would you mind if I cleaned up the floor here?"

Kicking him out hadn't worked. I might as well let him clean up his own mess. "Go on," I said, and used the gun to wave him into the kitchen. "Bucket and rags are under the sink." I watched while he filled the bucket with soapy water and carried it back into the living room and knelt down and cleaned up the mess. He did a good job; he was careful about it. When he was done he took everything back into the kitchen and rinsed it all out, and then he put a little clean water in the bucket and turned around and looked at me.

"Welly, I'd like to—may I visit your guests? May I see them?"

What the hell. He knew too much already; I wasn't going to get anywhere by trying to keep it from him. And I was starting to be curious about what he'd think of them, frankly. And I guess I wanted him to see that I wasn't just killing them. He'd struck a nerve there I didn't even know I had.

I looked at my watch. We had twenty-five minutes before the others went gravy, max, if they hadn't already. I didn't know what had gotten into the one who ran into the living room. Maybe it was crazy or extra sick, or maybe the cucumbers were about to start pulling new tricks on me, in which case I couldn't count on anything. "I don't know if the others are still alive," I said.

"They may have gone gr—they may have died while we were out here. When they sing like that, it means they're going to die pretty soon. So they may look like that other one, now. I'm just warning you."

"Thank you," he said. "I think I'll be fine now." So I took him into the den. It was way too hot in there, with the space heaters, but that's how the cucumbers like it. I still had the gun with me, just in case Humphreys tried to pull something. The other two cucumbers were still solid. I'd never taken a gun into the den before and I was a little worried about how they'd respond, if they'd start shaking again, but they didn't even seem to notice.

Jim Humphreys had a plan, you could tell. He didn't pay attention to anything in that room except those two solid cucumbers. He got down on his knees right away and started muttering and waving his hands over the water in the bucket. Then he dipped his hand in the water and used it to make a sign of the cross on each cucumber—which was awfully brave, really, since it had taken me months to be comfortable touching them, but I guess he'd seen that I was okay after picking that other one up—and mumbled some more. "Look at you," I said. I didn't know whether to be impressed or disgusted. "You talk about welcoming all strangers as Christ and here you are trying to do an exorcism—"

He looked up at me, looking shocked. "Oh, no!" Then he looked a little sheepish.

"Emergency baptisms. Although it's somewhat the same thing." He rocked back on his heels and stood up and said, "Now what?"

I shrugged. "Now nothing. Now they have"—I checked my watch—"maybe fifteen minutes left."

He looked at his watch, too. "May I wait here with them? Would that be all right?"

"I don't see why not," I said. He nodded and sat down on the floor, and I sat on the polka-dot beanbag chair. "All right, Reverend. You tell me this. If all strangers are Christ already, why do they have to be baptized?"

Humphreys smiled. "You should be a theologian. That's a good question. Mainly because it's what I know how to do, and it makes me feel better."

"Huh! You think it'll do them any good?"

"I have no idea. I don't see how it can hurt them." He looked around the room, then, up at the walls, and raised his eyebrows. "Matisse?"

"They like Matisse. Or I think they do. Don't ask me, Reverend, I don't know a damn thing. I do this and I do that, and I find chairs I think they like, and I say they're dying, but I could be wrong about all of it. They're not from around here. They're not dogs or cats; they're not the same kind of animal we are at all. I try to keep them still and happy, but maybe when they're still that means they're in pain. Maybe I've been torturing them all this time without meaning to. Maybe they're invading Earth and I'm the one making it possible, and in another ten years all these dead aliens are going to come back to life and take over the world."

He listened to me, his face still and serious. "Yes. It's hard, isn't it, not knowing if we're doing the right thing? I don't think any of us ever know, not really. We do the best we can, and we pray to do more good than harm, but we have to trust God to see it all, and to sort it all out, and to forgive us when we go wrong."

I looked away from him. "I don't believe in God. No offense."

"None taken, Welly."

"Good. What happened to your ear? I saw you on TV, feeding those bag ladies. That's how I knew who you were, when I saw your ear."

"It's a birth defect. My family didn't have enough money for plastic surgery." He shrugged. "I used to keep my hair long to hide it, but it doesn't bother me anymore. It's a help in my work, frankly. People bring their scars to church. They bring the wounds they want healed, but they're ashamed of them, too. If they can see mine, that makes it easier."

"I'll just bet," I said. Nancy Ann had a little scar on the inside of her left thigh, high up. It was a birthmark, too, like Humphreys' ear. It didn't take Jebediah very long to see that one, did it? The second cucumber went sploosh, just then, and Humphreys and I both jumped a little. Humphreys didn't puke, this time; he got back on his knees and made another sign of the

cross and muttered some more. When he was done I picked up that gravy bag and put it in the corner with the other one, the one I'd tossed back into the den from the living room, and then Humphreys and I sat back down to wait for the third cucumber to go gravy. Five minutes, now.

"Why do you suppose they come here?" he asked me.

"Damned if I know. Maybe they're sick and their people send them away so they won't infect everybody else. Maybe they're dead already when they get here, and Earth's their eternal reward. Now that's scary, isn't it? Maybe when we die we're all going to land on some alien's doorstep, and we just have to hope they'll have comfortable chairs for us and find out what kind of art we like." My heaven will have Lay-Z-Boy recliners and Penthouse Pets, but I wasn't going to tell Humphreys that.

He smiled. "In my father's house are many mansions."

"What?" But the last cucumber went sploosh, so I never did find out what Humphreys had been talking about. He did his little praying routine again, and I piled the third cucumber in the corner with the other two.

He looked at the gravy bags, and then at me. "How do you—what do you do with them? Afterwards?"

"I bury them. I've got these things all over my property."

He nodded. "Do you need help?"

"If you're as good with a shovel as you are with a pail, I could use the help, Reverend. Thank you."

So we piled the gravy bags into my pickup, and I threw a tarp over them and loaded up a couple of shovels, and then I drove out to the next gravesite. I've been keeping track of where the cucumbers are, so I can pick a fresh place each time. I brought the gun with me, but that was in case we ran into snakes or something: I wasn't worried about Humphreys anymore, not that way.

He was good with a shovel, strong and fast. He hadn't always been a preacher, you could tell. He'd done manual labor someplace. Watching him dig, I started to get curious. When we stopped to take a break, I said, "So when were you in front of guns before?"

"In Africa." He wiped the sweat off his face. "In Zaire, back during the eighties. A group of us were rebuilding a church. Mobutu's thugs had burned it down because the clergy were speaking out against the government. And the soldiers came when we were rebuilding, and they lined us up against a wall and threatened to shoot us all. I still don't know why they didn't. They killed plenty of other people, before and after that." His eyes got far away, then, and he said, "All the people I worked with there—they're all dead now."

"That's not right," I said.

"No." He started digging again, and I let him. I know how working with your hands can help, when you're upset about something. I re-roofed the house all by myself, after Nancy Ann left. We got the cucumbers neatly buried, one to a grave, and Humphreys said a little prayer over each one, and then we got back into the truck to go back into the house. I was worried. I had to figure out what to do about him, and it would have been easier if he'd been easier to hate. "Reverend," I said, "you were right before. I'm scared about what will happen if people find out about what's been going on out here."

"I'm not going to tell them," he said. "This is under the seal of clerical confidentiality, Welly. I take that very seriously."

I didn't know if I could believe him or not. I wanted to, but that's not the same thing. "I just hope I can trust you, Reverend."

"I hope you'll learn that you can. I can't expect you to, yet. You've only known me a few hours. Earning trust takes longer than that."

I grunted. That was a better answer than a lot of other people would have given. "Well, listen, you let me know when Sam dies."

"He may not die, not for a long time. We have to hope the chemo will work. We have to hope he'll be healed. But if he dies, certainly, I'll call you." Humphreys smiled. "He'll be having a

church service, I have to warn you."

"Call me anyway." We were back at the house. I stopped the truck and said, "You left that bag inside, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

"Wait here. I'll get it for you. I'll be right back out."

The paper lunch sack was still sitting in the hallway, next to where Humphreys had gotten sick. It was wet from the soapy water he'd used. I threw the old sack away and got a fresh one, and then for good measure I threw another eighth into the plastic bag. I knew Sam would notice, and that kind of gesture's good for business, if you don't do it very often. I guess it was my way of gambling that he'd stay alive. And if he mentioned it to Humphreys, maybe the Reverend would be more likely to keep his mouth shut.

I took the sack back out and handed it to Humphreys. "I have something for you, too," he said, and gave me his business card. "Call me if you ever want to talk, about anything at all. You can call me any time. Both my home number and the church number are on there."

"Kind of you," I said, although I was thinking, when hell freezes over. "Thank you, Reverend."

"You're welcome, Welly." He held out his hand, and I shook it, and then he got back into his car and drove away. I watched his car until it disappeared, and then I went back into the house. I almost threw the business card away, but something made me toss it into one of my kitchen drawers instead. Don't ask me what. It wasn't like I planned on calling him. It was just a superstitious thing, maybe like what he'd said about the emergency baptisms. Having his business card probably wasn't going to help me, but it couldn't hurt, either.

I was hot, from all that digging. I opened the fridge and got out a beer and drank it down in one gulp. Then I got my cell phone and took it into the living room, and sat back in my recliner and started dialing the phone company.

The End