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Editor
Ed McBain

Managing Editor
Robert Goodney

Associate Editor
Demi Marciano

Art Director
Sol Immerman

Designer
Richard Smith

Production Manager
Maxwell Marx

Cover
Harry Bennett

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Every time he looked over, the little guy was sitting on the porch.
Just sitting there and staring into space.

SOUNDS



FLETCHER FLORA

& SMELLS

WHEN RECTOR GOODHUE GOT HOME that evening a few minutes after five o'clock, Charlie Treadwell was sitting on the front-porch steps of the house next door. It was all right for Charlie to be sitting there, for it was his house, but what impressed Rector was Charlie's air of abstraction. He was sitting on the top step, hunched over his knees, and when Rector spoke and waved in a neighborly way, he didn't respond by either voice or gesture. Rector went on into his house and back to the kitchen, where Gladys, his wife, was spooning strawberries over shortcake.

"What's the matter with old Charlie Treadwell?" he said.

"Is something the matter with him?" Gladys said.

"Well, he's sitting over there on his front steps, and he acts as if he were in a trance or something. He didn't even answer when I spoke to him."

"Maybe he's had another fight with Fanny."

"That Fanny's a real witch. The truth is, she's more than old Charlie can manage."

"Oh, nuts. All he needs to manage her is a little more backbone. What he had better do about Fanny, if you want my opinion, is make her quit wearing those short shorts and tight dresses that ride up when she sits down. She's far too sexy for her own good."

"It's true that men are always running after her. It makes old Charlie frantic."

"It's not men running after Fanny that makes Charlie frantic. It's Fanny running after men."

In Rector's opinion it was really six of one and half a dozen of the other, but he did not wish to debate the issue, especially with Gladys, and so he said he guessed he'd go out and mow the back yard before supper, and Gladys said supper would be at six, which meant six thirty. Rector went into the bedroom and changed into the old clothes he wore working in the yard, and then he went out and started the power mower and mowed the grass neatly, and he was just finished with the back yard when Gladys came to the door and said

supper was ready. They ate in the kitchen, baked ham and potato salad with the strawberry shortcake for dessert, and Gladys said over coffee that Sinatra was at the Paramount.

"To hell with Sinatra," Rector said.

"What's wrong with Sinatra?" Gladys said.

"For one thing, he's getting bald."

"So are you, in case you didn't know it."

"Just a little on top where it doesn't show much. That Sinatra has to wear a toupee."

"How the hell do you know?"

"It's common knowledge."

"I don't care if he wears a toupee and a full plate besides. He makes me break out with prickly heat, and he's playing at the Paramount, and I want to go see him."

"Be my guest."

"You mean you'll actually go with me?"

"I mean I'll pay your way and give you enough extra for a sack of popcorn."

"Thanks. And what do you plan to do while I'm gone, or is it a secret?"

"Not at all. I'm going to mow the front yard, and afterward I'll have a couple cans of cold beer and maybe watch television or just sit on the front steps and watch lightning bugs."

"God, you're exciting! Being married to you is just one long exciting experience! Don't you ever worry about me running around alone at night?"

"Why don't you take Fanny along? If she and old Charlie are sore at

each other, it might relieve things to get them apart for a while."

"Going with Fanny is better than going alone, I suppose. You run over while I'm dressing and ask her if she wants to go."

"I've got to get on that yard," Rector said.

"That's after you do the dishes."

She got up and went off in one direction to the bedroom, and Rector got up and went off in another direction to the back door and then around the house and across to the Treadwells'. Charlie was still sitting hunched over his knees in a trance on the top step, and he didn't pay any attention when Rector approached and stopped a few feet away, and Rector thought for a few seconds that he wasn't even going to pay any attention after he, Rector, had spoken and stood waiting for an answer. Then Charlie twitched suddenly and looked around at Rector slowly, his eyes coming back from a long way off and adjusting with apparent difficulty to a short focus.

"Oh, hello, Rector," he said. "I didn't hear you come up."

"What's the matter with you, Charlie?" Rector said. "You feeling sick or something?"

"No. I'm all right. I'm just sitting here listening to sounds and smelling smells."

"What?"

"Nothing. Is there something I can do for you, Rector?"

"I came over to see if Fanny would like to go see Sinatra at the Paramount with Gladys."

"Fanny's gone."

"Oh? You expect her back soon?"

"She won't be back at all."

"Oh, come off, Charlie. Don't talk nonsense."

"It's true. Fanny's gone for good."

Well, anyhow, it was pretty apparent now why old Charlie was out in left field. He and Fanny had had another fight, probably over Fanny's liberality relative to other men, and Fanny had left Charlie as a result, but in Rector's opinion it was probably only temporary. Hell, Gladys had left Rector at least half a dozen times, and it had *always* turned out to be temporary. It was foolish for a fellow to become excessively disturbed by such events. It was rather embarrassing to Rector, though, standing there with nothing sensible to say to Charlie, and he decided that the best procedure would be to say nothing at all, sensible or otherwise, except whatever was necessary in making his departure.

"Well," he said, "I'll go back and tell Gladys that she'll have to go see Sinatra alone."

He went back to his house and into the bedroom, where Gladys was giving her hair a few strokes with a brush after having pulled her dress over her head.

"Now I know what's eating old Charlie," he said.

"What's eating him?" Gladys said.

"He had a fight with Fanny, and Fanny's left him."

"What did they fight about?"

"Charlie didn't say, and I didn't ask."

"She'll be back. Just wait and see."

"That's what I think myself, but I doubt if she'll be back in time to go to the movies with you, and so you'd better go on by yourself."

"I'm going," she said. "See that you do the dishes."

She went out and drove away in the car, and Rector did the dishes in the kitchen, leaving them to dry in a rack by the sink. By that time, he only had about half an hour of daylight left, and he'd have to get on that front yard right away, he thought, if he wanted to get it done. He pushed the mower from the back yard to the front and began mowing, and all the time he was doing it, walking up and down the yard from street to house behind the mower, he kept thinking about what Charlie had said about listening to sounds and smelling smells. It was a curious thing for a fellow to say, let alone to do, but Charlie *was* a curious fellow, when you came to consider him, and he was somewhat inclined toward doing and saying things that might seem curious to other people. As a matter of fact, however, there actually were a hell of a lot of sounds to listen to that a fellow didn't ordinarily hear, and a lot of smells that he didn't ordinarily smell. At the moment, Rector couldn't hear anything but the roar of the little engine on the mower, or smell anything but the exhaust of the same, but he remembered having had, sometimes in the past, such aural and nasal awareness. But not, he realized with a mild sensation of diminishment, since he was a boy.

Darkness gathered thickly at the close of the long dusk, and Rector, having finished the front yard, pushed the mower around to the garage and went on into the kitchen and plugged a can of cold beer. Carrying the can, he went out through the house the front way and sat down on the front steps and drank the beer slowly and watched lightning bugs. He wondered if Charlie was still on the front steps next door, listening and smelling, and after a while he walked out a few steps into the yard and peered over that way through the darkness, and Charlie was.

"Hey, Charlie," Rector called.

No answer. No shifting of the shadow on the Treadwell steps.

"Hey, there, Charlie," Rector called again.

This time, after a moment, the shadow shifted.

"Is that you, Rector?" Charlie said.

"Yes, it is," Rector said. "You like to have a cold beer?"

"No, thanks," Charlie said.

Rector felt sorry for old Charlie. It was easy enough to feel sad and lonely in a summer dusk with no good reason whatever, and it would surely be easier and worse if you'd had your wife go off and leave you besides. Especially a dish like Fanny, who wouldn't be easy to replace, especially by a nondescript little guy like Charlie. So feeling sorry for Charlie and carrying what was left of his beer in the can, Rector walked across and sat down on the Treadwell steps to be neighborly.

"You hearing and smelling a lot of

different things, Charlie?" Rector asked.

"Quite a few," Charlie said, "but not as many as I used to smell and hear when I was a kid."

"It's a fact that you lose the knack," Rector said. "Since talking to you earlier, I've been smelling and listening myself, but I'm not so good at it any more, either."

They were silent for a few minutes, during which time Rector drank the last of his beer and set the empty can beside his feet.

"What got you to smelling and listening all of a sudden?" he said.

"Well," Charlie said, "Fanny and I had this fight over someone, and I killed her, and afterward I got to thinking about all the smells and sounds I used to know and hadn't really known for a long time since, and I thought I'd just sit out here and try to know them again while there was still a little time left."

"What did you say about Fanny?"

"I said we had this fight, and I killed her. I lost my head and began choking her and didn't quit soon enough. I didn't really intend to kill her, but I did, and she's dead."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Where is she now?"

"She's up there in our bedroom where we had the fight."

"Well. Well, God Almighty."

It occurred to Rector later that this was a rather remarkably casual exchange over a serious matter, but Charlie was so calm and sensible, and so palpably telling the simple truth,

that it did not seem remarkable at all at the time.

"What are you going to do, Charlie?" Rector said.

"After a while, when I've finished listening and smelling, I'm going inside and shoot myself."

"You think, when it comes to it, you'll have the nerve?"

"Oh, yes. I'll have the nerve, all right. It won't take much with things as they are."

Rector sighed and stood up, remembering to retrieve the empty beer can.

"Well," he said, "you can probably do a better job of listening and smelling if you're alone, and so I'll go on back home."

"You won't call the police or anything, will you, Rector?"

"I couldn't get around to calling them before morning at the earliest," Rector said.

He went back across the yards to his own house. He didn't feel like sitting on the steps any longer, what with old Charlie sitting there listening and smelling so close at hand, and so he went inside to the bedroom and undressed and lay down on the bed in his shorts. He was pretty sweaty from the mowing, and he badly needed a shower, but he simply didn't have the heart for one. He lay quietly on the bed, smelling himself, until Gladys got home in prickly heat from having seen Sinatra.

"You asleep, Rector?" Gladys said.

"No."

"You should have seen the movie. That Sinatra's something."

Rector didn't answer, thinking instead with a kind of deadly domestic despair: *Will you, please, for Christ's sake, shut up? I'm sick of Sinatra and sick of myself and most of all, dear heart, I'm sick of you. All I want to know, if there is anyone to tell me, is why everything must go sour that started sweet, and why a man must be driven in the end to a ruin that seems preferable, at least for a little while, to things as they were.*

Gladys went into the bathroom and turned on the light above the lavatory. Rector could hear her washing and brushing her teeth and getting ready for bed. Pretty soon she came back into the bedroom in her nightgown and sat down on the edge of the bed across from Rector.

"What in the world's got into that crazy Charlie Treadwell?" she said. "He's still sitting out there on his front steps like a stump."

"I told you. He had a fight with Fanny, and Fanny's gone."

"That's no reason to sit on the front steps all night."

"He's listening and smelling for the last time. After a while, he's going inside and shoot himself."

"Oh, don't try to be funny, Rector. How many beers did you have?"

"Never mind. Lie down and forget it. Think about Sinatra."

Gladys lay down on top of the covers, it being a warm night, and Rector laced his fingers under his head and continued to lie there quietly, on his back, smelling himself and listening for the sound of a shot next door.