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Cold Meats*

a short story

by

James C. Schaap

Delia's trouble started when the man who rented her deceased husband's meat market decided he couldn't make a buck anymore and just quit, leaving her alone in the building, upstairs over an empty shop. Long ago she'd come to love the sharp odor of sausage and liverwurst seeping upstairs, and she regularly entertained the sweet aroma of the smokehouse as if it were an honored Sunday guest. But once her renter left, nobody wanted the meat market, not with the new supermarket getting all the customers. Nickel and dime business in a dollar world, people said.

Then her neighbor died, and the strange preacher and his family moved in next door.

"Seems to me that Easton has already got plenty of churches," Delia told her only son, Harold, one Saturday night. "Four of them, I count. Can't understand how a man can think he can tell people anything different from what's already being said from the pulpits."

Harold chewed on a piece of fudge his mother brought along with her on her regular Saturday night visit. He used his tongue to clean off his front teeth. "What kind of preacher is he?"

Delia jerked her skirt over her knees like a fashion model. "I don't know, but already all four churches got preachers." Her hairdresser told her so. To Delia, everything the hairdresser said was gospel.

Harold finished the fudge and brushed the crumbs off his flowered shirt. His wife watched as the chocolate specks and nut meats fell to the floor and sat like a blight on her ivory carpet.

"So what's his name?" Harold asked.

"Don't know yet. All I know is he's got a family—whole bunch of little squirts. Haven't really met him formally."

That was a lie, of course. Delia Westerbeke made sure she was out back the day the new preacher moved in, pretended she was thinning irises next to the old smokehouse. In fact, she had been worked up ever since she realized the old lady next door had died and wouldn't be snipping poppies this spring like every year before. In preparation for somebody moving in, she had hired a surveyor to plot the legal lines of her own property. Then she drew a star in fluorescent yellow on the white picket fence that ran the length of the lots at the south edge. When the preacher drove his rusty station wagon up her driveway (it was right there on her land), she was there to tell him that, yes, he could use her driveway and he could, in fact, park that old car way in the back of the lot, half-in, and half-off—according to the star—her property. She thought it was a generous gesture on her part, seeing he really had no driveway at all. Her former neighbor never drove a car.

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"And furthermore," she told the man, "I can't have anybody else parking here behind my husband's market. There's just no room. I need to get in and out myself, you know." She pushed lightly at her hair, set, as was her custom, just that same Saturday afternoon.

The strange preacher had smiled and nodded. Delia liked the way he didn't argue or fuss. "And for Heaven's sake, don't allow your kids to clutter the driveway with toys." She pointed her trowel like a weapon. "I simply cannot be responsible for accidents if and when they occur." She felt that first conversation was very successful.

Harold reached for a second piece of fudge. Harold loved her fudge better than anybody's. "So where's this new preacher going to have his church?" he said.

"They rent an old one-room schoolhouse in the country somewhere. Nobody seems to know anybody who belongs. Sometime I'd love to ride out there and watch who shows up." She ran her middle finger over the glass of the coffee table and rubbed the dust between her finger and her thumb. She wanted to be sure Harold's wife, Leona, saw the soot on her finger.

The big trouble started when the preacher came over and asked if his church could lease the empty market—wanted to use the old place for Sunday worship.

"We don't believe in big buildings and beautiful pews and thick carpets," the preacher said. "We just try to be the spitting image of the New Testament church—you know—where two or three are gathered and all of that." His funny eyes looked up over his glasses.

Delia rather liked good pews and carpets. Only five years ago her church had put on those beautiful maroon pads.

"Right in the middle of town we want to be. That's why we want to rent your building. It's our job to bring the Word to the sinners, ma'am."

Delia didn't know any sinners in Easton, but she knew there had been a couple of outsiders moving into town recently who might need some help.

"You know, of course, that I'm not of your persuasion," she said.

"You certainly have grace, don't you, Mrs. Westerbeke?" he said.

Nobody ever asked her if she had grace before. She was quite sure she did. She'd always considered herself a good church person. She pushed at her hair gently with the back of her hand, as if her fingers were too dirty.

"So you want to rent the whole thing?" she said.

"Not everything," he said. "If you want to live up there in your apartment—well, that's just fine. You get a couple Sunday services without having to get your hair messed out in the wind."

She thought he was getting a little too cute. "I could only lease the downstairs," she said. "I just couldn't live anywhere but above the market. Been here for years."

That Saturday, over dinner at Dino's, Harold told her in no uncertain terms to take the preacher's offer. "Their money is as good as anybody's. You're not making a dime with the market standing empty." He sucked on a chicken wing, brought the cleaned bones down to his plate, then poked through a platter of pieces with his fork, looking for white meat. "Besides," he said, looking up, "this guy's a preacher. How you going to fight with the will of the Lord?"

Delia laughed when she saw Leona poke her husband. She thought her boy Harold was always such a card.

But the final decision was no easy matter. The man seemed so low class for a Reverend, and his eyes were odd, one of them half brown, half blue. What's more, he didn't seem ashamed of it. Half the time he could just stand there and glare without even blinking.

So she told the strange preacher—his name was Ferringbone—she told him when he came

by again a week later that it wasn't so easy, even though her boy Harold was in favor of it. "I want you to know that at my age big changes are not easy," she told him. "I'm used to the old meat market. When you get as old as me, it gets hard to change real quick. And it's hard for me to think of singing and praying down there in the market. Besides," she said, "I've lived right here in this place for an awful long time—longer, maybe, than you been living."

Ferringbone just stood there and smiled as if the decision were already made.

She spent most of a week going over the offer in her mind. She missed the shop. She missed those bells on the door ringing all Saturday afternoon when Easton's housewives stopped in for Sunday roasts. She missed the buzz of the saw, the thwack of the cleaver.

But this was a preacher, and they were willing to pay good hard cash. Delia considered herself churched, of course, prided herself in her attendance, and took some comfort from the fact that often she went off to church even though she didn't want to. Turning down Ferringbone was something like throwing Mary and Joseph out of the inn. She had enough grace to know that much, she thought. And she could always find ways to spend that extra money Harold pointed at.

On the other hand, she was leery of this crazy-eyed preacher, especially since no one in town seemed to know anything about what kind of church it was he led. "What if it's one of those cults?" she asked Harold just before leaving their home that Saturday night. "What if it's a bunch of kooks or witches?"

Harold leaned back in his recliner, a smile running across his face. "Then you got trouble, Ma," he said. "You better rent it out to them or they'll be sticking pins in you." When Leona laughed, Delia scolded her boy for being so glib about something so horrible.

She left that night in a huff, knowing that her boy knew she was angry.

It wasn't until the middle of the sermon in her own church the next day that she decided she would lease it, cult or no cult. Money was money, after all. She'd just try to make it a point to be out of the apartment when they started carrying on down in the market. Monday next Ferringbone signed the lease.

The first strange thing about the church was their meeting time. No one in Easton had ever heard of a church starting its morning worship at 11:00—so late. Of course, no one had ever heard of meeting for church in a slightly remodeled meat market either. That first Sunday, Delia wondered whether the property owner had any say at all about time of worship. Delia's own church was just over by 11:00, so by the time she walked home she still had more than half another service going on beneath her—right beneath her living room.

"I told you long ago to plug up those old heating ducts solid," Harold told her when she complained about the hallelujahs seeping through the floor boards. She told him she would be sure to get some estimates on somehow sealing herself off from all the hoopla. "Just don't spend too much money," Harold said. "Learn to shut your ears off to that junk. Don't let it get to you."

The second strange thing about the church was the service itself: much more singing and praying—loud praying, real disrespectful praying and yells and screams. Delia thought it was shocking and disgusting, especially since it happened in the middle of the old market.

"You got yourself a bunch of holy rollers downstairs," Harold told her over the phone.

Delia thought it was altogether criminal for such goings-on to happen even once a week, but Ferringbone brought his faithful together on Sunday nights and Wednesday nights as well for the same kind of wham-bang service. Whether or not she liked it, Delia was always part of the fireworks. She could hear it—the very moment they'd lift their heads in prayer down beneath her—and she frequently pictured herself all alone in her own apartment upstairs, perched up above them like some half-interested monarch.

For some time the services grew on her—sitting up there, listening to prayers—and after a few weeks she simply forgot about calling for estimates. For two months she listened religiously, until she knew every church member by name and every indiscretion by commandment broken. Then, about another month and the whole mess started getting boring, too predictable.

On Saturday afternoons she'd complain to her hairdresser, who also attended Delia's church. "It's just disgusting," she'd say. "It's the same old wailing for the same old sins, week after week. You'd think those people would learn to stop sinning with all that screaming and such."

Every Sunday Delia could predict the order of the sinners and the nature of their sins. First there was the man who smoked too much, then the grandmother whose children never went to church anymore, then the boy whose parents were splitting up, and the woman with the lush husband, and finally the old man who never got forgiveness for sins he claimed only Ferringbone could know about. Delia Westerbeke started hoping for some new converts downstairs, some fresh blood in the old market.

"I'm getting really tired of it," she told Harold. "It's so much noise and it's always the same thing. I never was sure that I was doing the right thing when I leased the place out to those people." She shoved the box of almond bark toward him. "I made them special for you just yesterday," she said.

Harold took two. "How long is the lease?"

"One whole year."

"It's good money, Ma. You don't like it, you just better start hoping for the Judgement," he said, his cheeks full of white stuff. Leona walked out of the room when Delia laughed at her boy's funny joke.

Then one Tuesday a plan finally came to her when she was finishing some week-old tuna salad while watching "Dialing for Dollars"—if she'd only give the people what they wanted, like some game show, make them all winners. Here she was sitting right above them, just between them and the heavens above like some kind of god. If she were to act like God himself, she just might be able to deal with this Lakeshore Revival Church, get rid of them for good. She put down her forkful of tuna. Maybe she could do her best to answer their prayers. Might be nice of her to do something like that, reward them for trying to fight sin. Answer their prayers—send them money or something—and they'd have no reason to pray anymore. Clean up their lives for them. They'd have no reason to come back to church. Ferringbone would just tell them all to go home for the year. She rather liked the idea of sitting up there taking orders as if it was still the market on Saturday downstairs. She could straighten out other people's lives the way she had straightened out her own.

Of course it could backfire. You couldn't keep people out of a place where prayers really got answered. Be like a miracle place. Lakeshore Revival Church would break up the four churches in town with that kind of record. Wouldn't work after all, she thought.

The TV blared. It's still money that's the root of all evil, she remembered reading once. Maybe if she were to start giving out cash—oh, not lots of money, just a handful—she'd be sure to change things, probably for the worse. Then it all seemed so clear, like some kind of divine revelation. She could send out some cash like trophies to the biggest screamers, make them think that it's sin itself being rewarded. Reward the sin. Rewarding sin would ruin faith. Who on earth could pray if sin paid off big? The meat market would be vacant. Ferringbone himself couldn't hold out if the wild prayers of his faithful were answered in the worst way. Who could possibly believe in some God who rewards evil?

She left two bites of salad in the Tupperware and ran to the phone. So who would be the

first? She settled for the Wintershof woman, the grandest howler of the lot. Shut her up and it would be like shooting the Captain of the guard. "Wintershof, Ed...Wintershof, Jacob." Her finger followed the phone listing. Had to be Jacob; the woman cried about her spoiled son, Eddie, every Sunday. Fifty dollars seemed a reasonable answer to prayer. She laid the book on the counter and reached in a drawer, drawing out two twenties and a ten. The address was simply "RR3." She grabbed an envelope.

But what if Mr. Wintershof, the screaming woman's boozing husband, would do something stupid with the money?—buy groceries or a lawn mower? She reached back for the phone book. Eighteen liquor stores were listed in the Collinsville area, so she chose the one that ran the big ad in the corner of the page. Fifty bucks of whiskey might kill the man; she wanted no part of murder. She slipped a ten and a twenty in the envelope, then found an old Westerbeke Meat Market note pad: "Please send Jacob Wintershof of RR3, Easton, three fifths of good Scotch as a birthday gift." She sealed it and ran down the stairs, her coffee cooling, the tuna salad still standing on the counter like some Old Testament offering.

Sunday, Delia skipped her own church, sat in her rocker and listened to the people come through the front door. She heard their loud talking and laughing. She heard Ferringbone tune his accordion up front where her husband used to hand his cold meats, and she sang along herself when they started on "Shall We Gather." When Ferringbone started preaching she stopped rocking and walked over to the refrigerator, cut off a piece of cheddar, and leaned up against the counter. The sermons were all alike, she told herself, all milk and no meat—just the same old business about repent and be saved, as if they needed to be told that every Sunday, as if Sunday were the first day of their lives. She wondered if Ferringbone's own folks ever got grace themselves.

But the sermons were always short. She no more than had water hot for her Sanka, and she heard the screaming start. She went back to the chair, the water boiling away on the stove.

Mrs. Wintershof was usually fourth and sometimes third in the parade, but Delia figured the woman couldn't hold out long this time. She was right. Mrs. Wintershof's testimony carried upstairs as if it were meant to rise only twenty feet. "My husband got two bottles of liquor free this week," she said—Delia had ordered three from that crooked liquor store—"and the man doesn't have a friend in the world but me," she cried. "He's been drunk every hour since, and I know that this stuff'll take him right through the weekend."

The woman's whooping trailed off in long, descending drones. "Please pray for my husband again," she continued. She must have raised her head on "pray," for Delia swore she felt it in the handles of the rocker.

"And whoever that devil was what sent my Jacob that filthy liquor, may whoever it is burn," she said, her voice shaking, "may he burn in hell."

Delia smoothed back the wave in her hair. She thought that the woman's hate went a bit too far for a church person. By the time she got back to the stove there was much less than a cup of water in the pot. She scolded herself for her forgetfulness.

By a little after nine on Monday morning, she was up and out of her upstairs apartment and on the road to the Memorial Mall in Collinsville, bound for Heavy Eddie's Sound City. She bought a gift certificate good for \$25 worth of records or tapes, drove back home, and sent it to "Son of Mrs: Artswell, 311 3rd Street, Collinsville." Every Sunday the woman blew up about her son's addiction to Godless rock and roll.

Delia loved explaining her prayer pranks to her boy Harold. She talked of nothing else as they ate hamburger steak one Saturday night at Dino's.

"The woman was absolutely out of her senses," she told him as he finished his tossed

salad. "She was sure the Devil himself had sent the boy the money."

"You better eat before your dinner gets cold, Ma," Harold said, slapping sour cream on his baked potato. He seemed out of his usual jovial mood. "How much money have you been throwing away on all of this? Must be a couple hundred already."

"Thirty for the whiskey, twenty-five for the records, and twenty for the big shrimp dinner-for-two I sent to the fat man."

Harold rubbed the ketchup from his lip with the edge of a dinner roll. He didn't look at her when he talked. "Sounds like you're having a good time, but you can't be just throwing away your money like this forever. Goodness, Ma, how long is this all going to last? This works and you'll be out rent too, you know." He seemed nervous, Delia thought. She wondered if it was something Leona had done. "You got me and Leona to think about too, you know. It's our money you're throwing away too. Don't forget it."

Money was the stuff her husband got for meat, at least that's all she ever considered it. Money had always just been there. Harold's concern showed he was a good boy, she thought; but she was sure he didn't know all that much about money himself. So she made one more unscheduled trip to Collinsville for a thirty-dollar gift certificate from Feldman's Fine Fashions for Women, sent it off to the lady who complained of her vanity. It did strike her strange, though, that her own boy should be so all-fired tight. After all, didn't she give him nearly everything he wanted all through his life? She even tried to give him the shop when his father died, but Harold claimed that eight-to-six work wasn't right for him. "Insurance," he told her then, "there's a vocation with a future." He became an independent agent, living on his wife's wages from the moccasin factory. Of course it was really sad that Leona couldn't have a son of their own.

Besides, playing God was fun. So for weeks Delia kept it up, sending bank notes, gift certificates, new green bills, even three boxes of La Palinas to a man whose horrid coughing nearly made her nauseated. And every Saturday she would hand Harold a box of sea foam or sugar specks or hand-pulled taffy, then ramble on and on about which one was her weekly pet project and how the congregation raised the roof about so many mysterious misfortunes.

"But is it working, Ma?" Harold said one night. He laid the box of candy on the ledge by the vestibule without even taking one bite.

"What do you mean?" Delia waited for her son to help her with her coat.

"I mean your plan. You aren't just answering prayer, you're trying to get rid of them—that's why you're doing this, right?"

"Well, are you going to stand there as if you were born in a barn?" She waited, shoulders arched as if she were being tortured, her arms half-in, half-out of the coat. Harold snorted, then grabbed the shoulders from behind.

"You're avoiding my question," he said. "You're throwing all this money away for a purpose, aren't you?"

Delia pointed to the vestibule. "Hang up my coat and be careful of the collar," she said. She walked toward the living room, nodded politely to Leona, and took her chair. "As a matter of fact," she said, "I'd say it's not working very well at all."

Harold took a chair and left the candy untouched.

"It makes no sense really, but it seems the more I send out, the more tuned-up they get with their prayers. And Ferringbone—my own neighbor—doesn't help out either. Last Sunday he said right from the front that all this persecution they've been getting is a sign God's right there in the middle. Imagine that!" She waited for Leona to set her coffee. "But sometimes I wonder too. I haven't heard from that Wintershof woman for a month now. Maybe it's working."

Harold glanced up, then stood and looked as if he wanted to smoke. He walked behind his chair and searched for something to lay his hands on.

"Harold," she said, "I haven't had so much fun since your father and I were courting."

"I don't like it, Ma," Harold said. "I think you ought to be going to your own church this week for once. How long has it been since you been to your own church?"

Delia didn't say it was close to three months.

"I think you ought to forget those weirdos down there this week once. You'll be throwing your money away on them fanatics, and when they leave you'll be out the rent on top of it." He stood there behind the chair, as if the back of the rocker was a pulpit. "Now you listen to me and just be gone next Sunday, you hear?"

Delia chewed on her lip.

"Promise me, Ma?" Harold said.

"What's the big deal?" she said.

"Just promise me you won't be there—go someplace—out to eat or something?"

She nodded her head just a big, and Harold smiled.

From the moment she left her boy's house that night, Delia didn't like the way her Harold had bossed her. She figured he was right about going to her own church again, but for spite alone she decided she'd tune in to Ferringbone next Sunday morning anyway. She didn't care what Harold said, and she hadn't really promised him, not really. He wasn't going to start telling her what to do now that he was forty years old. Besides, where else could she go after church on Sunday in Easton? Going out to dinner was still against something in her—maybe it was just old ways.

So when she came back from her own church that next Sunday, she browned up a nice little rolled roast, peeled a few extra potatoes for American fries during the week, and started on the cole slaw. She grabbed the cabbage from the crisper and rolled it on the counter. It was quiet below, the singing had already stopped for Ferringbone's short sermon. Wiping her hands on her apron, she walked quietly back to her rocker, conscious that her footsteps might disturb the congregation. Ferringbone talked about faith and sin and repenting again, so she went back to the cabbage, started to cut, then took two long carrots from the crisper and shredded them up with the cabbage. When she reached for the vinegar, she remembered the little roast on the range, already browned and ready for the oven. She glanced in the mirror to be sure that her hair was just so. Then she took a wooden match from the stove top, lit it against the side of the carton, and opened the oven door. With her left hand on the gas, she poked the match over the hole on the floor of the oven. Wouldn't light. She turned the gas off with her left hand, stood, and drew another match from the box.

"Just As I Am" started up just at that moment. That was her cue. She swung around to the rocker, then remembered the roast. She lit another match and turned on the gas. Suddenly the first whoop came through the floor. She blew out the match and tried to distinguish the voice. Without thinking, she covered the roast and pushed it in the unlit oven.

Already angry with herself for missing the first performer, she lit the right front burner and put on the potatoes, then adjusted the flame for a slow boil. She was sure it was Mrs. Wintershof again when she heard "filthy liquor." She took another carrot and the shredder to her rocker and finished the slaw, rocking slowly, listening. Sure enough, Mrs. Wintershof was back. Maybe Harold was right, Maybe her plan to get rid of them wasn't working at all.

This time the man with the cough followed Mrs. Wintershof, and the lady with the lazy husband took her turn early. When she told the others about the unmarked envelope which he had received containing \$35 and a note that said, "Take it easy," Delia almost laughed out loud. She covered her mouth politely with the back of her hand. Working or not, playing God was such a joy, she thought.

And then she heard a new voice. She sat up quickly, her hands clinging to the arms of the rocker as if she were strapped to an executioner's chair. She wondered if today they were burning incense, because she smelled something strange in the apartment. But the new voice was oddly familiar.

"I got something you need to know," it said. "I know I'm new here, but the Lord spoke to me in a vision and told me clear to come here and tell you the truth—and the truth will set you free."

There was no doubting that voice.

"The vision told me about that woman upstairs," he said, "and what she's been doing, fooling with your righteousness."

Delia leaned forward, leaving the chair. She sat on her hands and knees with her ear to the floor. There was no mistaking that voice. Her rump pointed to the ceiling like a red ant hill.

"The woman upstairs is toying with the Devil," he said. She could hear some mumbling in the background. "She's making contracts with him—right here above your own services."

It was him. It had to be her own son.

"I got to tell it all, because I got to clean this filth out of my own soul. Course, you know how all of us are full of sin—"

And he kept right on going. Delia jerked her head from the floor. She knew he was standing now, raising his head and his voice at just that moment. "I got to clean myself up by telling you about Satan's handmaiden just upstairs."

"Praise the Lord!" someone yelled. "Tell it all to Jesus!"

Delia could barely breathe. That her own son could say such things about his own mother—how could he tell them such awful things? Such a liar he turned out to be.

Ferringbone's accordion cranked out another verse of "Just As I Am." The entire group broke into the second verse; shouting and yelling poured up through the open ducts. To Delia Westerbeke, it was all painfully clear.

He started jabbering down there again. "And I got to make this confession because you people got to keep praying here like mad for that evil woman upstairs. You can't give it up. You got to stay right here in this place and pray, pray, pray for that woman. Let her know what she's doing is wrong—all that money you been getting. You can't give up—"

Delia could listen no longer. She had promised him she would be gone. She marched to the door of the apartment. In a minute she was down the back stairs. She stopped at the door to the slaughter room when it hit her that the whole thing was planned—Harold was pretending to have grace. Her anger exploded into rage. How stupid had she been anyway: "Promise me you won't go—" he said. It was all planned. He was putting on a show. He had it planned. Something she wasn't supposed to hear. Her own Harold. He wanted the blame money himself.

When she turned the corner to the front of the building, the truth suddenly burned clearly before her. Dumb Harold was using it like a lie. He was a spoiled, forty-year-old brat. Her own husband had always said so too. Harold was a lazy bum. That was no lie; all Harold cared about was the blasted cash.

She wiped her hands on her apron as she stood at the front door. Then she adjusted her hair—the roast, the potatoes completely forgotten above her.

Bells rang when she burst through the front door. She saw Harold in an odd swoon, his eyes bulging and empty, his heavy body flopped in a chair up front, Ferringbone standing over him as he slumped like some tired gladiator. At her startling entrance the howling and chanting stopped, as if someone had suddenly slapped a lid on the market.

"I'm the lady upstairs," she said, "the lady you rent this place from." Harold's head seemed burned. His cheeks were pockmarked like the face of a full moon. Leona sat beside him, cry-

ing, fanning him with the cover of a hymnal. The place turned deathly still.

Delia hadn't thought much about how to say what she wanted to say, but the cause of her righteous indignation was clear. People sat on the floor or on chairs; others stood or knelt alone or in groups of three or four.

She looked around again. "I just want to say that the testimony of this man here—I heard it clearly, as if it was spoken to me alone—has touched my soul, because I know a sinner when I hear one. I been a church-goer ever since I can remember too."

The shouting started again. Those who knelt leaped to their feet.

"Come up to the front, ma'am." Graciously, a man who smelled like cigars took her arm. "Be truthful now. Tell it all." She turned to face the group.

"Ma," Harold said.

"Lord be praised!" Ferringbone left Harold and retrieved his accordion. He started in with another chorus of "Just As I Am," quietly, prodding her with the music. The howling subsided into a gentle purr. Delia felt herself swept along now, her audience anxious to hear the whole business. Her eyes swept over them. Harold was back on his feet. They moved in toward her from all corners of the room.

The room itself seemed to sway and lean towards her, helping her along, pulling the words out with more hallelujahs. "I want you to be praying for that there boy too, for he's a worthless, shiftless dog—my own son he is too," she said. She looked at him as she never had before, and she heard Leona's amen carry through the other prayers.

"Ma!" Harold said.

"He doesn't smoke or drink much or run with hard women. Fact is, my son doesn't have much spirit at all. Lord knows it's hard for me to say this, but my son lays around like an old sow and gets fat on other people. Always has. Worse yet, he's a liar. Can't ever believe him. It's a terrible thing—I want you all to be praying for that selfish boy."

The music made it all seem so heavenly.

The cigar man came back to her and laid an arm over her shoulder. The place erupted again, Ferringbone starting a chorus of "Come To Jesus." Delia Westerbeke always hated the smell of cigars, but she let him hold her in the old musky tweed the man wore. She let herself be shepherded to a folding chair up front.

The old meat market glowed. It seemed to her like some kind of cartoon drawing. People, ugly people, surrounding Delia, hanging on to her, hugging her, touching her, laying their sweaty hands all over her head and her just-set hair. They didn't have to touch her hair like that. That was too far. Not her hair. She felt nauseated.

"Children of the Lord!!" Harold jumped back to his feet and ran to the front, his thick eyebrows strung high above his eyes. "I got to tell it all," he said. "The Devil is right here among us now!"

The place went wild. People jumped from their chairs. The cigar man raised both hands high above his head and chanted in what Delia thought was baby talk. Two women stood statue-like, their lips forming consecutive "Satans," then they fell straight back in a swoon and were caught by a team of three men who seemed specially called for the work.

And then it happened. The gas stove blew like a perfectly set time bomb. People on Main Street said they saw the upstairs front windows explode out over the sidewalk like thrown handfuls of dry sand. In a moment flames reached out from the empty sills and curled upward in long orange tongues.

Harold was blown off the podium by the blast. He pulled his arm up over his head instinctively and rolled over into the folding chairs. Leona was at his side in a moment. When he raised his head, his face seemed uncharacteristically calm.

But Delia Westerbeke had little chance to watch her boy. When she looked up, she saw a

ball of fire drop like a heavy burden from the ceiling. She was thrown off her seat and set whirling around sideways, knocking over chairs like bowling pins, until she landed in a heap near the door, her shoulders resting in the lap of the cigar man. Her hands jerked up to shield her eyes and she found that her hair was burned away.

"You're going to be all right now," the man said.

He lifted her bodily and carried her through the front door before she felt her own tears running like clear and clean water from the corners of her eyes, past the tops of her ears, and around the sides of her naked scalp.

He set her down in the middle of the street, and she saw the flames jumping from her apartment windows.

He passed a hand before her eyes like a hypnotist. "Lady," he said, "do you know who I am?" His red, anguished face was perfectly familiar.

"Yes," she said. "Just go and save the others."

When he left her, she stared again at her apartment. Each window gleamed like the very eye of dawn.

D'irth

"Listen, woman, you have no wight
Within, just wayward growth, a blight
On love; let doctors make it right."

These words woo Jane and soon efface
The child now stirring for its place
As equal in the human race.

But woman in her whispers: "Spare
This baby's blood, free flesh to wear
A bonnet, suck for milk and air."

But proud flesh hears the witching word
Of gnostic faith: "This kill's no murder;
baby flesh is mother's turd."

Though protests screech to stay her hand,
Their scream like fire of God's command,
She treads on coals to fairyland,

For she has heard the siren's pearl
And elbows through the chiding whirl
To buy a death to spare a girl.

Obliging imps delude her then
To see as waste what is within.
Obliging pixies salve her sin.

As clouds conceal the sun at noon
The goblins suck from pulsing womb
Her babe, not ready yet to bloom.

Her mind then hugs the painted myth:
What crunched a baby wanting breath
Was really neither birth nor death.

Night plants her heart in sinking sands
As doctors wash their Pilate's hands
And trash a life's unraveled strands.

Alone she ducks the burning sky
And burrows east to find the lie,
But every bell's her baby's cry.

Then mothers camp upon her mind
Engraving guilt with steadfast grind
Until her womb becomes her rind.

No Puck can witch the Judas rift
That cut a homeless soul adrift,
And chucked her Maker's living gift.

Mike Vanden Bosch