

The Puny Column

By Melissa Hardy

My name's Nescia Flint and I'm a columnist: that is to say, I write a weekly column for the Altamount Dispatch, or the A-Patch, as it's known in these parts. That's the town newspaper. It comes out twice a week, on Wednesday afternoons and Saturday mornings. The A-Patch is not much of a newspaper, but then Altamount's not much of a town -- 724 souls, give or take a couple, some of them damned, most of them Methodist, and that's counting all the country folk that come in of a Saturday afternoon to buy feed and fertilizer and sell eggs. If you look Altamount up on a map, you'll find it smack dab in the middle of West Texas: we're one of those bitty old dots half way between Abilene and Lubbock, near to where the Brazos River slides into the Double Mountain Fork. Dry, yellow country, flat and open as the palm of a hand, good for not much but growing sorghum and some cotton, pigs and dust storms.

The A-Patch don't subscribe to a wire service. For national and world news folks get the Dallas paper and the TV, but for local news, nothing beats the A-Patch for keeping folks up to date on how the Altamount Armadillos are ranking in the playoffs (last), who won the plowing match at this year's Aggie Fair (Bobby Hiemstra, the only one to compete since 1993); the secret ingredient in Marsha Laramoor's prize-

winning White Wedding Salad (marshmallows) and who's feeling puny that week.

That's where I come in. I write the Puny Column.

I say that with a certain amount of pride. Writing the Puny Column is a family thing, a sacred trust, handed down, mother to daughter, over three generations. First my grandmother, then my mother. Now me.

My grandmother started writing the column back in the twenties. Those were more discrete times: the Puny Column consisted of little more than an enumeration of those who had felt puny over the last little while with an indication of their status in parentheses, as in, "would welcome visitors," or , "is not expected to recover," or, "would appreciate cakes and other baked goods dropped off on the screened-in porch at the back." Conventional diseases were mentioned – lumbago, sciatica, neuralgia, the pips – but distressing ones, such as venereal disease or a fallen womb, were not named. Then, too, many people just "wasted away." Judging from Grandmother's columns, that particular malady seems to have been endemic in our area through the twenties and well into the thirties.

My mother took the column over when Grandmother died and expanded her circle of visitation to include all Altamount's puny, provided they were white – Grandmother, being a chartered member of the Daughters

of the Confederacy, had only visited those citizens equipped with appropriate Southern credentials, no carpetbaggers, Northerners, or persons of foreign persuasion or of colour. Mother also started to flesh out the column, as it were, by including the nature of the ailment, its symptoms and the course of treatment prescribed, as in: “Mrs. Van Doren is experiencing some female distress this week due to excessive affluence leading to thin blood and lightheadedness, for which Dr. Kelsey has proscribed Geritol and plenty of bed rest. Cakes, pies and biscuits appreciated as Mrs. Van Doren may not remain upon her feet long enough to bake in this heat.”

Then, about fifteen years ago, Mama started to go off (I don't mean *crazy*, I mean *off*: vague, preoccupied, occasionally disoriented and subject to sudden, severe panic attacks) – and, on account of her debilitation, we thought it best that I take over the column.

Now I, being a graduate of Junior College and, therefore, a trained researcher, took a slightly different approach to the column than Grandmother and Mama: I make it a point to look up every illness I write about in my column in the medical encyclopaedia at the county library so I can provide my readers with background and details.

In addition, because I pride myself on being untainted by any sort of prejudice whatsoever, I make a point of visiting *everybody* in Altamount, regardless of their colour, creed or

religion. *Red and yellow, black and white*, as the old Sunday School song goes, *they are precious in my sight*. I even visit drug addicts, trailer trash and known homosexuals. (One of my best columns ever was about how Joey Denton came to be Josie Denton. The letters we received!) The only criteria that matters to me is: do they feel puny? If they do, I'll visit them if they'll have me and you want to know the truth? They always do. If there's one thing I have learned from fifteen years of writing the Puny Column, it is that there is not one soul alive on this earth, no matter how puny he or she may be feeling at the moment, that does not relish the thought of being interviewed, like they have died and gone to Heaven, even if the focus is on their lazy bowel or the unfortunate fact that they somehow have acquired Tourette's Syndrome or that they have fungus growing under their fingernails that they got from Julie the manicurist at Hollywood Aesthetics who never sanitizes her kit.

Or they've been abducted by aliens.

"Hey, Nescia! Howie says you'd better call Maxie Downs," Jack Wenger instructed me when I came into the office to check my messages in early June – the A-Patch's offices are two rooms over Elfman's Tack and Feed at the corner of Brewster and Main . . . and miasmal! Jack's one of those smokers who lights his next cigarette with his last and he's been puffing away in those two rooms for about a quarter of a century now without any ventilation – even with the

window open, the air tends to stay put. West Texas is not known for its breezes.

“I swear, Jack!” I declared, peering at him through the haze of his own personal weather system. “The town council should issue a smog alert and move to control your emissions. It’s not bad enough that your second-hand smoke has killed every secretary that’s ever worked here?” Jack’s last three secretaries, all non-smokers, all dead of some kind of cancer or other in the past seventeen years.

“Type-As,” Jack shook his head sorrowfully. “Would have died anyway from self-induced stress. And God knows, Nescia: I’ve never knowingly induced stress in a living soul.”

“Well, that’s a true statement,” I acknowledged. Jack’s mother had died peacefully in her sleep; he’d never shown any inclination to marry; and he was such a big, shuffling thing that no woman had ever thought to fall in love with him. “Maxie Downs? Do I know her?” I asked.

“Barker was her maiden name,” replied Jack.

“I remember her. Barker? Barker? Oh, yes. A county girl from over towards Meadowlark. Did Howie say what was wrong with her?”

“Umm. . . .” Jack consulted the message slip. “Abducted by aliens,” e read. “Howie should have been an M.D. His writing’s that bad.”

“By *aliens*?” I repeated.

“That’s what it says,” replied Jack. He spelled it out: “A-I-i-e-n-s.”

“Well, this’ll be different,” I observed, tucking the piece of paper into my purse.

“Liven things up,” agreed Jack, looking out the window at the dusty conjunction of streets baking in the sun and populated by slow moving tumbleweeds.

“Hey, there! Is this Maxie? It’s Nescia, Maxie, Nescia Flint. We went to school together up at County.”

There was a pause at the other end of the line. Then, “I know who you are,” Maxie’s response drifted back to me across the wires – her voice sounded flat, stove-in, beat. “You were editor of the school yearbook and your Mama wrote the Puny Column. . . .”

“And now I write it.”

“And now you write it,” Maxie acknowledged. “That’s why I called you.”

“Yes, I was just getting to that,” I replied. “I understand you’re feeling kind of puny.”

Maxie snorted. “That’s one way to put it!”

“Now, let me get this straight. . . .” I hesitated, not knowing quite how to proceed. “If I understand correctly. . . .”

Maxie cut me off. “I was abducted by aliens.”

“Ah!” I replied.

“Do you believe me?” Maxie demanded.

“Why. . . ! I don’t know, Maxie,” I said truthfully. “I’d have to hear the whole story.”

“Then meet me at Donut Dee-lish at 4 o’clock today,” Maxie instructed me. She lowered her voice and spoke close to the receiver. “I don’t dare talk here, Nescia. I think they’re monitoring me.”

“Four o’clock it is!” I replied. “But how will I recognize you? It’s been twenty seven years since high school.”

“I will be wearing a Dallas Cowboys baseball cap,” she informed me and hung up.

Just to be on the safe side, I took the precaution of consulting the index of my Senior Class Yearbook for Maxie Barker before I left the house. She appeared in two places, in her class photo, which showed a pert, snub-nosed girl with choppy hair and a lopsided smile, and in a group shot of the Glamor Club, comprised of aspiring hairdressers and aestheticians – she was wearing a hairdresser’s smock and sporting a teasing brush.

I checked up on Mama before I left. She was sitting out back on the screened in-porch like she always does – rocking and humming to herself some Methodist hymn or another.

“I’m going to the A&P and then to the Donut Dee-lish to do an interview!” I told her. “Anything I can get you?”

“Some of those nice Lorna Doone cookies!” Mama replied. “And, if you’re going to the Dee-lish, I’d like one of Dolly’s chocolate covered donuts with the sprinkles.”

“You all right now?” I wanted to know. “You’re not going to wander while I’m gone?” Because she did wander sometimes and tracking her down could be a chore. For being such a little bitty old thing, she had quite the legs on her for a seventy-two-year-old.

She closed her eyes and was very still for a moment, as though she were running a check on her brain. Then, “I don’t think so, dearest!” she replied sweetly. “Of course, you never can tell!”

I recognized two of the three people in the Donut Dee-lish when I walked through the door at two minutes past four: Wilson Buford, a 79-year-old retired sorghum farmer, and Dolly Palmatier, the proprietress. I’d interviewed Wilson shortly after he was diagnosed with macular degeneration – that was three years ago now – and Dolly just last year for an enema-induced bowel obstruction requiring emergency surgery. There was a wall-mounted TV over the donut racks; it was tuned in to Y&R. Wilson sat at the counter, gumming a Boston Cream donut, while Dolly described the salient particulars of Victoria’s costume to him: “It’s real tight over her butt,” she was saying. “And it’s got one of those plunging V-necks. . . .”

“Ooh!” thrilled Wilson, through cream filling .

“Take it easy, Wilson!” Dolly warned him roughly. “Don’t be givin’ yourself no heart attack in my eatery. Nesh!” she

greeted me. "It's Neshie Flint," she informed Wilson.

"What'll it be, honey?"

"Pink lemonade should do me. It's mighty hot out there. And a chocolate covered donut with sprinkles for Mama." I scanned the premises while Dolly poured the lemonade and wrapped up the donut in waxed paper and slipped it into a bag, looking for a Dallas Cowboys baseball cap. There it was, over in the far corner, perched on the head of a heap of a woman wedged into a booth and going at a plate piled up with day-olds with a knife and fork. "Over there," I said, pointing.

"Maxie Barker," Dolly confirmed my i.d.. "Haven't seen her in a coon's age. Lord, but she's laid on a few hundred pounds! What is it she's got?"

Before I could reply, Wilson was tugging at Dolly's sleeve.

"Victoria's doing something, Dolly!" he declared. "What's she doin'?"

"She's sitting on his lap, you old sex fiend!"

"You can read all about it in Wednesday's Puny Column," I advised Dolly, because I have a policy – mum's the word until it's out in ink. Leaving Dolly and Wilson to their soap, I crossed over to Maxie's booth.

"Maxie Barker Downs, I presume. . . ." I began.

“Maxie Barker Bogdanski Pettigrew Downs, actually,” she corrected me. “Married three times. And you’re Nescia. . . what would it be now?”

“Plain old Flint,” I replied, sliding into the booth opposite her. “Never married.”

“How come?”

“Nobody ever asked me.”

Maxie shrugged. She gestured towards her plate, which was flanked by a jumbo-size double double and an overflowing ash tray. “An early dinner,” she explained, then, looking me over, “You ain’t changed much.”

“Still a beanpole,” I admitted.

“What was it they used to call you in high school?”

“Olive Oil,” I reminded her. “Stick girl.”

“Yeah. . . . As for me, I’ve put on a few pounds here and there. . . . Stress.” She jammed the better part of a jelly-filled donut in her mouth.

“Three husbands would be pretty stressful!” I sympathized.

“You’re not whistling Dixie!” she agreed. “My first (that was Eddie ‘The Bog’ Bogdanski) was in training to be one of them wrestlers on TV before he crashed his Harley into the side of a Seven Eleven and died in a ball of flame.”

“Now, that was a tragedy!” I exclaimed.

“The second one just took off one day,” continued Maxie.

“I don’t know where he is and could care less. But the third – Dwayne – well, I love him to pieces and the aliens abducted him at the same time they abducted me, but the difference is, they haven’t brought him back yet.”

“They kept him?” I repeated.

Maxie’s eyes welled up with tears. One or two big ones spilled over and slid down her face; she sniffled ominously and then gulped. I pride myself on being prepared for such emergencies; I encounter them frequently in my line of work. Reaching into my pocketbook, I extracted a couple of kleenex and handed them to her.

“Thank you!” she said in a small voice, stabbing at her wet cheeks with one kleenex and noisily blowing her nose on the second. When she had recovered sufficiently to continue the interview, she informed me, “It’s been two weeks, Nescia, and not a word. He’s probably in some distant galaxy by now and I ain’t never going to see him again.”

“Have you filed a Missing Person’s Report?”

“What’s the point in that?” Maxie asked. “What do you think the police would be able to do? Track the aliens? Hunt them down? Arrest them?”

“Just a thought.”

“The thing is: I feel responsible,” Maxie told me. “If it hadn’t been for me, Dwayne would be here today.”

“Why do you say that?” I wanted to know.

“Well, usually they only take me, but, because I woke him up, they took him too.”

“Usually? You mean . . . this has happened before?” I asked.

“Oh, yes!” Maxie assured me. “A dozen times that I can remember and probably more that I can’t. It started when I was four or five and the last incident was . . . well, the time I’m talking about. When they took Dwayne.”

“So you’d say you were a *chronic* abductee?” I asked.

Maxie reflected for a moment. “You could say that, I suppose.”

“So, tell me: what happened?”

“Pretty much the same thing that always happens,” she replied. “We was lying in bed and Dwayne’s already sawing logs to beat the band and I’m just drifting off when, all of a sudden, I hear these heavy footsteps on the packed dirt outside the trailer . . . and when I say ‘heavy’, Nescia, I mean *heavy*. Aliens are real lead-foots. I think they have to wear these special shoes on account of gravity or otherwise maybe they might float away. So I grab Dwayne’s shoulder and shake him. ‘Dwayne!’ I hiss, ‘Dwayne, it’s *them!*’ ‘Cause I’ve told him all about the abductions; only, because he always sleeps through them, he thinks I’m pulling his chain. Now, Dwayne Downs could sleep through Armaggedon and not know a thing was happening, but not this time, I was bound and determined! This time he would see for himself that I was telling the truth. Well, no sooner had I shaken him and told him the aliens were coming, than the trailer starts filling up with white light and humming like one of them hover crafts and Dwayne sort of half wakes up and says, ‘What the . . . ?’ and there they are.”

“The aliens?”

“The aliens. They sort of do this materializing thing, like a heat shimmer off pavement that gets solider and solider until . . . there they are!”

“What do they look like?”

“Real tall,” Maxie replied. “Six and a half, maybe seven feet. As skinny as you with very long thin fingers. “ She glanced at my hands as she said this. “Sort of like yours!” she observed.

“Well, it’s a fact that I do have me some long fingers,” I admitted. “Mama always used to say I had the hands of a pianist, but, after a year and a half of trying to teach me scales, poor Mrs. Kelly declared me profoundly unmusical and gave up on me. Go on, Maxie. What about the aliens’ colouring?”

“Their skin’s sort of silvery -- metallic looking. It’s leathery looking, smooth, dry and powdery,” Maxie told me.

“They’re chinless with these long, long necks. . . . To tell the truth, Nescia, they look a lot like those pictures of fetuses Lyndi Saunders’s always flashing down at the clinic.” (Lyndi’s the local Anti-Abortionist.) “But the weirdest thing about them is their eyes. They have these big, almond-shaped eyes . . . and dark! Like pools of black oil. ‘Whatever you do, don’t look into their eyes!’ I told Dwayne that night, (that’s how they paralyze you), but does that man ever listen to me? The next thing I knew, he’s froze as solid as a side of beef hanging off a meat hook in an icehouse!”

“What did you do?”

“I tried to escape, naturally, but, being a big woman, it takes some doing to get myself un-horizontal and I was still in the flipping stage when one of them comes over and lays his fingers on the back of my neck and applies pressure. Then it was game over . . . ‘cause that’s the second way they paralyze you.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Nah!” Maxie shook her head. “Tingles a little.”

“What happened next?”

“They beamed us aboard their space ship.”

“What’s that feel like?”

“Like getting sucked up by a vacuum cleaner, only the tube is filled with this bright white light. There’s some resistance when you pass through the walls of the trailer and then the walls of the spaceship – like you’d get walking into a dust storm maybe with the wind whipped up good. Then, all of a sudden, there we were, laid out on a couple of examination tables in their laboratory, naked as the day we were born.”

“They have a laboratory on their spaceship?”

Maxie snorted. “Don’t you know anything?” she asked. She shook her head. “That’s what they use us for. Earthlings, I

mean. Abductees. They use us for research . . . for experiments. Then they tag us and monitor us.”

“Good Lord!” I exclaimed. “What did they do to you?”

“Oh. The usual. They did some probing. Took some samples. Made a couple of incisions. A few years ago they implanted a tracking device way back up my nose. Every time I sneezed, I could feel it. Wedged up there like a damned marble. I think they took that one out and put a new one . . . only here, in my skull. She pushed back her bangs to reveal a patch of recently shaved scalp and a straight-line incision.

“So. . . . Do they know where you are right now?” Hot as it was, I felt a sudden chill and shivered.

Maxie shrugged. “Oh, yeah,” she said nonchalantly. She looked at me and laughed. “What is it, Nescia? You scared? Oh, don’t worry. They’re not going to walk in the Donut Dee-lish right now and carry you away. That’s not their style. For one thing, they only come when it’s dark out.”

I swallowed hard, struggling to regain my professional demeanor. “Can you remember anything more?” I asked.

Maxie frowned. “Not too good,” she admitted. “It’s hard to explain. You’re awake all right, conscious the whole time, but afterwards the memory of it just kind of slips away. I

think they might give something to you to make you forget. To tell you the truth, the next thing I remember at all clearly is waking up in our bed at the trailer, still buck naked, and Dwayne not being there. Of course, I checked myself over right away; I always do after an abduction.”

“What did you find?”

“Some bruises and scratch marks that weren’t there before, a couple of puncture wounds, probably from a needle. One good thing though: they removed a big old mole on my back that was setting off in all directions and starting to look pretty scary; I was grateful for that. Otherwise, it’s been pretty much the usual drill after an abduction: a ringing sensation in my left ear, nose bleeds, sinus headaches, some spotting and, right now at least, you can’t use no cell phone or electrical device around me, ‘cause I seem to set up some kind of disturbance. That’s why I’m sitting so far from the TV.” She glanced at the counter and Wilson and Dolly watching Y&R. “If I sat any closer, I’d interfere with the signal: there would be nothing but snow and garble. It takes about a month for that to clear up.”

“That’s awful, Maxie!” I commiserated.

“No TV for a whole month!” she agreed.

“No, I mean: everything. The headaches and the ringing sensation and Dwayne being gone. . . .”

“But that’s not all,” Maxie cut me off.

“There’s more?” I asked.

“I’m pregnant,” Maxie informed me.

“Excuse me, Maxie,” I objected, “but you’re my age. Forty seven. Surely that’s too old to be pregnant!”

“Tell me about it!”

“What did Dwayne have to say about all this?” I asked.

“Dwayne had a vasectomy before we were married,” she replied. “So we wouldn’t have to mess.”

“So Dwayne is . . . not the father?”

“Of course he’s not the father! That’s what I’m trying to tell you, Nescia. I wasn’t pregnant when the aliens abducted me . . . but I was the next morning.”

I gulped. “You mean. . . ?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yup!” she replied.

***Altamount Dispatch – Wednesday,
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Maxie Downs is suffering from a condition that is not as rare as you might think: Post Abduction Syndrome. No, not the kind Patty Hearst suffered from. The alien kind.

“E.T., call home!”

“Aw, Mom, do I have to? I’m right in the middle of a genetic experiment!”

Polls indicate that anywhere between several thousand to several million Americans have been abducted or had abduction-related experiences. That’s a lot of folks. And our Maxie Downs is one of them! In fact, she’s been abducted at least a dozen times . . . that she can remember!

Maxie’s post-abduction symptoms range from a ringing sensation in the left ear, nose bleeds, sinus headaches, and assorted female problems to the fact that she causes televisions, radios and street lights to malfunction. No Y&R

for Maxie for a while . . . and no plane travel either. But the worst after-effect of this latest abduction is: no husband. The aliens failed to return Dwayne Downs, a short-order cook at the Toot Sweet Diner, to the comfortable mobile home shared by the couple in lovely Meadowlark. Dwayne's been missing for two weeks now – another big reason for Maxie to feel 'puny.' I think the aliens just wanted some hash browns and some eggs over easy and they'll be returning Dwayne to his loving wife any day now.

Have you been abducted by aliens? Did you ever wonder whether you had . . . and then forgot about it? It's not uncommon. Here are a few questions you might ask yourself:

- Are you missing any time – usually an hour and a half to two and a half hours?
- Do you experience frequent nose bleeds, sinus pain or pressure?
- Do you have nightmares about being abducted by aliens?
- Do you ever look at an object . . . and see something different?

- Have you ever noticed mysterious stains, bruises, needle marks or scars for which there is no explanation?
- Is your health deteriorating? For example, are you losing your hair?

If you answered 'Yes!' to any one of these questions, chances are that either you've been hitting the sauce a little too hard . . . or that you, like Maxie Downs, have been abducted by aliens.

You'll notice that I didn't mention that Maxie was pregnant in the column. I thought it best to let Dwayne and Maxie work that out for themselves if and when the aliens ever returned him to the trailer park. As for whether I believed Maxie's story, I would say in retrospect that I had suspended belief, much as you hang washing on a clothesline and expect that it will dry, if not today then tomorrow.

You would not believe the furor my column caused. This is how it broke down:

Half the town thought Maxie was a lunatic or a fraud.

A quarter believed that they too had been abducted by aliens.

Everyone else wondered why they hadn't been. Half of these were grateful and the other half were disappointed.

And because I had broken the news, I became the local expert on alien abduction. Everybody was calling me up with a question or stopping me on the street to tell me about their personal abduction or Out of Body Experience or asking me how they might improve their odds of having a close encounter (I advised positive thinking, although it was clear to me that the aliens were working with a genetic profile that Maxie Downs fit and others might not). Jack and Howie got so tired of taking messages for me at the A-Patch that they put in an extra telephone line with an answering machine on it to take the calls and published out its number as the *E.T. Call Home* Hotline. The *Avalanche Journal* out of Lubbock sent out a reporter to interview me and Maxie for the Sunday edition of the paper and KLBK dispatched one of those mobile camera crews that also stopped out of town to document a crop circle in Bob Woodburn's cotton field, 165 feet in diameter, where he thought a space ship might have landed a few weeks before.

Mr. Potter, the Methodist Minister, even consulted me concerning his Sunday sermon. "I want you to listen to something and tell me what you think" he informed me. Then he opened up his battered Bible, peered over the top

of his glasses and read aloud the following marked passage:
“Now as I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel upon the earth beside the living creatures one for each of the four of them. As for the appearance of the wheels and their constructions . . . the four had the same likeness being as it were a wheel within a wheel. The four wheels had rims and they had spokes, and their rims were full of eyes round about. And when the living creatures went, the wheels went beside them and when the living creatures went, the wheels went with them, for the living creatures was in the wheel. . . .’ Now, what does that put you in mind of?”

“Ezekiel 1,” I hazarded a guess. I hadn’t attended Sunday School forever for nothing.

“How about four flying saucers filled with aliens?” Mr. Potter suggested. “The eyes could be rockets, for landing and taking off. Ezekiel wouldn’t have known what rockets were . . . or lights! They could have been lights. Nescia, don’t you see? In fact, when you think about it, you have to wonder whether the holy prophet was taken up to Heaven as previously thought or abducted like Dwayne Downs, never to be returned to Planet Earth!”

But the worst was yet to come.

About a month after my interview with Maxie Downs, I came home to find my mother gone. I wasn't too surprised. Every once in a while Mama takes a notion to go out to the family farm and set a while on her Daddy's porch, maybe even spend the night in her old bed, especially when something's eating her . . . and I could tell something had been on her mind for quite a while by the way she wasn't looking at me straight when I was talking to her. So I got in the old green Impala and drove out to the farm, which is about five miles outside town on the road to Abilene.

We haven't worked the farm ourselves since Granddaddy died. My father was the druggist, so we lived in town and all Mama's brothers had up and left West Texas or got killed in the War and her sisters had married and moved, respectively, to Muleshoe, Clovis and Sweetwater. Dick Hofstader, who owns the adjoining farm, rents the land to grow sorghum and cotton on, but not the house or the outbuildings so Mama and I are pretty much free to come and go as we wish. It's not much to look at: a white two-story clapboard farmhouse with a green roof sitting in the middle of nowhere with only a little one-roomed kind of playhouse that Granddaddy built for Grandmother to go be cross in, an outhouse, a falling-down chicken coop, an equally dilapidated pigsty, and a ramshackle barn to keep it company -- although the animals have long since gone, musty traces of their various odors linger on the still air. My Great Grandfather and his sons built the house from a kit they ordered from Sears and Robuck's -- it took them one

whole summer and they were mighty proud of it, especially the big screened-in back porch. This was also the only remotely cool place on a property utterly devoid of anything resembling a tree and was, therefore, where I found Mama: sitting in a crumbling, old wicker rocker, tipping backwards and forwards as she fanned herself with a palmetto fan borrowed from Ginson's Funeral Home. She was wearing her good mint green dress, a white pill box hat, white gloves and a pair of white Reebok running shoes.

"You look cool as a cucumber and fresh as a daisy," I told her.

She gave me one of her sideways glances. "You look hot as July. Have some water."

There was a cistern at the far end of the porch. I walked over to it, opened the wooden lid and helped myself to a dipper of cool well water that tasted a little metallic. "Who'd you catch a ride with?" I asked.

"Joe Needham's grandson in a bright yellow pickup."

I hung the dipper back on its nail and sat down on the porch swing. "Why didn't you wait for me to come home? You know I don't like you hitchhiking. One of these days you're going to get picked up by somebody who's going to cut you up with a chainsaw."

“Oh, phish!” she said. “That’d be no fun for nobody, cutting up an old woman like me.”

I sighed. “OK, Mama. What is it?”

“What’s what?”

“What’s eating you?”

“What makes you think something’s eating me?”

“Well, for one, you won’t look at me,” I told her. “And, two, you’ve said practically nothing to me for weeks and everything you have said, you’ve mumbled, so I have to ask you ‘What?’ all the time. And, three, you hitchhiked out here without telling me where you were going which you never do unless something’s eating you.”

“Well, I guess you have my number!” she snorted. “So now you’re a psychiatrist as well as an . . . what was it Jack Wenger called you? ‘Our resident alienologist?’”

I groaned. “Oh, Mama,” I attempted to placate her, “don’t tell me you’re jealous of the attention I’ve been getting because of this Maxie Downs thing? That one just landed in my lap: out of the blue and gone again.”

“The only thing that came ‘out of the blue’, as you put it, was *them*,” Mama informed me. “And, trust me, *they* aren’t

gone. Oh, Nescia! Nescia!" She shook her head and sighed.
 "And I thought I'd never live to see the day!"

"What day?"

"The day we'd be having this talk," she replied. She closed her eyes and kneaded her papery white eyelids with her fingertips for a moment before proceeding. "Honey," she began, "did you ever think that Maxie Downs might have come to you for a reason? That she might have been drawn to you?"

"She was feeling puny," I said. "I write the Puny Column."

"That's part of the reason," Mama conceded. "But not the whole reason. She came to you . . . was probably *sent* to you . . . because of what you are."

I bristled a little. "If you mean an educated, liberal-minded woman who visits everybody in town, not just white people. . . ."

She cut me off. "Let's not get into that again! Red and yellow, black or white. . . . Or green! Or *gray*, for that matter! Do you think I cared for one minute? I visited white people because they were the only ones could read the danged paper. No, what I mean when I say, 'what you are', Neshie, is: *genetic experiment . . . strange hybrid.*"

“Are you talking about me?” I asked, my voice breaking up like a faulty transmission. “Because you make it sound like I was some kind of tomato with fur growing out of it.”

She turned towards me and, for the first time in weeks, looked me straight in the eye. Her expression was, at once, fearful and pitying. “Yes,” she whispered.

““Yes’?” I demanded.

“Yes, I’m talking about you,” she clarified. “Oh, Nescia, haven’t you ever wondered why you are so very peculiar looking?”

“Peculiar looking?” I protested. “I’m not peculiar looking!”

“Oh, but you are, darlin’. Very peculiar looking.” Mama reached over and patted my hand consolingly. “There, there,” she said.

“You always said I looked . . . exotic,” I reminded her. “That was your exact word: *exotic!*”

“Well, I was being kind, wasn’t I?” she observed, settling back into her rocker. “The truth was: you were peculiar looking. Those enormous black eyes and that ashy skin. . . .”

“Hey!” I objected. “Daddy always said my skin and eyes were my best features!”

“You haven’t got anything resembling a chin and just look at how tall you are! Like one of those basketball players!” No doubt about it: she was on a roll.

“You said I was a throw-back to Uncle Bob!” I countered.

“Uncle Bob was six feet one inch,” Mama came back at me.

“What are you? Six four? Six six?”

“Six seven,” I admitted.

“And your hands! Those fingers!”

“You said they were a . . . a pianist’s hands!” I cried, bursting into tears.

“Oh, Neshie!” Mama faltered. “Honey, don’t cry now. Just think of it this way: if you’d been normal, you’d have lost your looks by now anyway.”

“I am normal!” I protested, rifling through my purse for a kleenex.

“No, honey,” Mama said softly. “No, you’re not.”

“Did . . . did Daddy know?” I paused in my search for a kleenex and looked up at her.

Mama sighed, then nodded. "We were taken together. Not once. Two or three times. Sometimes he would say it had been a dream maybe, but then he would look at you and know it had been real. And you know those sick headaches I'm forever getting behind my right eye?"

I nodded, gulping. Ever since I could remember, those headaches had been like a blight upon our household, driving Mama indoors out of the sun to darkened rooms and jars of aspirin and pillows stuffed with lavender and seeping ice packs.

She removed her pillbox hat, setting it in her lap, and, with one hand, brushed back the white wing of hair from her right temple to show me the scar -- faint now with the passage of almost half a century, opalescent in color and measuring perhaps three quarters of an inch long.

"They've been monitoring me a long time now," she told me. "They know where you are and, one day, I believe, they'll come for you."

Maxie's baby is about ten months old now. I have to admit, he's a pretty funny looking kid. The aliens never did return Dwayne Downs to Meadowlark Trailer Park, but that's probably for the best; it makes it easier for Maxie to claim that Dwayne Jr. takes after his father's side of the family.

Nobody can much remember what Dwayne Sr. looked like, so it sounds plausible enough.

Jack Wenger, my editor at the A-Patch, was diagnosed with cancer of the everything a few months ago. His doctor told him he'd have to quit smoking and sent him to Abilene to get hypnotized. While he was under, he remembered that he too had been abducted, not once but many, many times. As it turned out, he had even spent a fair amount of time on another planet. So Altamount has a new resident alienologist, which has allowed me to kind of step out of the limelight a little, for which I am grateful, considering.

As for me, once a week, on Tuesday afternoons, I drive into Lubbock for my psychiatrist appointment. That's because there aren't any psychiatrists in Altamount and, even if there were, I wouldn't want word getting out that Nescia Flint was two sandwiches short of a picnic, if you get my drift. It's a small town, after all. Dr. Tuttle says that people who think their father was an extraterrestrial and that they might be abducted by aliens at any moment are more common than you might think; he says I'm probably just depressed, which is another way, I suppose, of saying I feel puny. And I do. . . . Feel puny, that is, mostly 'cause it's so hard for me to sleep at night, waiting to hear the heavy, leaden sound of their feet creak across the front porch and my first glimpse of a face that might look as familiar to me as my own reflection.