

OASIS

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The day the construction crew arrived, Alvis Sasser was sitting on the front porch step cleaning his nails. As he carefully scraped between the nail and tip of each finger with the dulled small blade of an old pocket knife, bits of reddish dirt fell away back to the ground. As always, he inspected each finger carefully to make sure he hadn't missed any dirt, then moved on to the next. This bit of grooming was generally done outside because Virginia didn't like him doing it in her clean bathroom.

Since he'd gone on worker's comp, Alvis had plenty of time to keep almost everything in order. He'd put new skirting around the trailer, built new front steps, painted the window trim, built little wooden fences around the azalea beds, and put in a good-sized vegetable garden. He raked, mowed, and mulched relentlessly.

Only a few small tobacco farms with their wilting yellow leaves and sagging gray barns remained on the old road that ran in front of the Sasser's land. They had bought four acres there twenty years ago hoping to build a house at the back of the property one day when their ship came in. Virginia Sasser liked to point out that it hadn't floated through this part of North Carolina yet and wasn't likely to, but Alvis still had hope.

Before they bought the trailer, they had lived on the other side of his parents' old duplex in town until Alvis's mother got touchy about having another woman in her way. Virginia finally convinced her husband it was time to get a place of their own. After that, they had made do with a used mobile home that Virginia's nephew had sold them at a good price.

The trailer suited Alvis; he liked its simple, clean lines, the efficiency of its design. Everything had a place and no space was wasted. Virginia tried

to be cheerful. It did have 'all the amenities,' as her nephew had phrased it: a large living room with all the furniture already in it; wall to wall carpet; a well-equipped kitchen, including a dishwasher; and a nice, big utility closet with a washer and dryer. It even had two small bedrooms and an extra bathroom for the kids. But Virginia could never get used to its thin walls and the temporary feeling it gave her.

When they first moved in, she and Alvis had scrubbed the floors, cupboards and walls and Virginia lined the shelves and drawers with clean, bright paper. Careful about spending too much money on a place they would only be in temporarily, she bought some yellow cotton and made new curtains for the kitchen windows but left the plain white living room drapes as they were. It would do for now, she said, more than once.

And God knows, she tried to make it a home. That first year she arranged a crocheted red and green afghan over the back of the cheap beige couch and put a bowl of African violets on the veneer coffee table. She hung up pictures of butterflies and put her dead mother's little collection of salt and pepper shakers—all chickens of one sort or another—on a shelf above the stove. The next year, she added throw rugs to the hallway and matching pink towels in the bathrooms. The creeping ivy she planted in the kitchen window box that fourth year now curled and twined over the curtain rods, up across the plastic moulding surrounding the entire kitchen and dining area and, recently, had moved on into the living room. Over the years, Virginia had lost the will to counter its sneaky invasions. If she was honest with herself, Virginia knew she hadn't made any real changes to the place in a long time. All these years later, the same lace doilies she had carefully crocheted when they first moved in were still on top of the built-in dressers; the only difference was the pictures on top of the doilies were of the grandkids instead of Virginia's own babies. Still, she longed for a real house, one without wheels. Sometimes, she told Alvis, she imagined some big truck would pull in one day, hitch up their house, and just haul them away.

So, the day the men in their big black pick-up pulled into the field across the road, Virginia laughed and said she felt a little nervous. They didn't see many people out this way. You had to drive ten miles into New Cairo to

get groceries and she liked it that way. She liked the solitude of their piece of land, just the two of them quietly tending their garden or reading the paper or watching television. Now, though, as she watched the men from the kitchen window, Virginia felt a sudden tightness near her heart. She pulled the curtains closed and took a couple of Tums.

Alvis, unlike his wife, felt surprisingly light-hearted as he watched the men clearing the ground. He thought maybe he'd have some neighbours, somebody to talk to besides Virginia. Since the accident, he missed his job and his buddies at the ice plant. It might seem odd to some that lifting huge blocks of ice would be satisfying but in the beginning it was the perfect work for him. He loved the clean purity of each crystal square and the way the blocks looked all neatly stacked. When the company started making bagged ice chips he'd lost some interest but he still liked the feel of the plant after he'd been working hard and had a moment to just stand on the concrete floor and take in the damp, cold smell of the air. But then some new kid backed into him with a forklift. After that, his lifting days were over.

After he finished cleaning his nails he went inside, washed his hands, then carefully dried them on the old hand towel on the hook inside the vanity door. He knew better than to use the fancy pink guest towels that Virginia kept like new. Sometimes, though, he wondered why they had good towels since they rarely had guests. Still, he understood that his wife liked to keep some things special, just in case. They were alike that way.

Virginia had cooked hamburgers and was putting the plastic mustard and ketchup containers on the table. 'What do you suppose it is?'

'Don't know yet,' Alvis said, 'but they haven't gone too deep. Doesn't look like they're digging a basement.'

Virginia started to ask him if he wanted a cup of coffee but when she turned around from the stove, Alvis was already out the door with his hamburger on a paper plate. She could see the back of his head through the screen door. It moved slightly as he chewed and watched the men across the road.

Usually, Virginia was relieved to have her husband out of the trailer. Since he'd lost his job, he'd begun to make her nervous, especially in the

winter when he was always under foot looking for something to do. She knew he meant well, but sometimes she thought she'd just scream if he came along behind her one more time tidying up before she was even finished with what she was doing. When she was trying to cook, every time she put a spoon or a spatula down, he'd grab it and wash it. She couldn't find measuring cups or seasonings she'd just taken out of the cupboard because he'd whiz through the kitchen and put them away. She silently thanked God for longer, warmer spring days and gently ushered Alvis out the door into the garden when he began to get twitchy.

As summer approached, Alvis found more and more projects to keep him busy outside. Lately, though, Virginia had begun to feel uneasy as he planted and pattered and tended. Every week yielded a new shrub or tree or recently repositioned plant, each one closer to the house. Virginia began to feel an almost physical sensation that she couldn't exactly pin down. It seemed like a tightness of space and time and it sometimes left her breathless and sad as she watched her husband from the kitchen window.

When the men took their lunch break, Alvis stood up and looked around to see what he might do next to organize the place a bit more. He decided to sweep the walkway from the drive to the front steps so he could keep an eye on the construction crew. While he swept, he watched as they unloaded the long metal pieces of a prefab building. Alvis could tell from the size of the clearing and the siding that they weren't putting up a house. He hoped they weren't going to put in a convenience store or something like that, where a bunch of kids would be hanging out all the time.

A cement truck came in and, in no time, a smooth concrete floor had been laid. Alvis occasionally watched the workers as he carefully trimmed some dead branches from the Bartlett pear tree he had planted the first year they bought the trailer. That tree had been his way of telling Virginia there would be more, that they would gradually add more trees and flowers and, eventually, a real house to make this piece of land theirs. It was a beautiful specimen, full of snowy blossoms every spring. And, each year he had planted something new. Now, cherry trees, dogwoods, maples, junipers and a variety of azaleas and rhododendrons surrounded the trailer. He liked the

cozy feel of the green plants all around them and the occasional burst of colour when the flowers bloomed.

Virginia was watching the local news when Alvis finally came in. 'What's it look like they're doing?' she asked as he sat down with his crossword puzzle. He saved it from the morning paper so he could do it in the evening while he watched TV.

'I hate to say it but I think it's going to be some kind of business. Maybe a store or something.'

Virginia took off her glasses and turned the TV down. 'It can't be. It's not zoned commercial.'

'Well, somebody sure thinks it is.' Alvis didn't know quite how he felt about it now. During the day he had begun to feel more and more excited as he watched the trucks come and go and the men lifting and pouring and measuring. He liked watching the mystery unfold but he was afraid of what the final result might be. He hadn't known it before as he gazed out at the grassy lot across the road, but he had always wanted something else there, something to look at and think about. Something to make his heart beat just a little faster. He looked at his wife, thinking maybe he'd try to tell her about this feeling, but she was frowning.

'I don't like it a bit,' Virginia said. 'What if it's one of those gas station convenience stores? We'll have traffic day and night. People dropping their garbage all over the place.' She stood up and turned the television off, an unusual gesture since she usually watched right through the national news and then settled in for *Jeopardy*, which she loved. She'd shout out the answers before most of the contestants had a chance. 'You fool!' she'd holler at the people who missed a question. She was smart and she knew it and she sometimes imagined she'd get to be a real contestant. She told Alvis she'd win easily over most of the dim bulbs on the show. She'd tell him that she'd use the money to build a real house.

Alvis reached over and gave her a pat on the arm. 'I could call the County office to see if it's zoned commercial or not.'

Virginia turned a look on him then. He hadn't seen it in a long time but he knew it sure as day—she was mad at him. It showed in the small tremble in her lower lip and the way her eyes seemed to look right past him out

beyond the vinyl walls of the trailer, across their well-kept yard, over the road and right down into the big concrete slab drying in the clear country air. It was that old look from the old argument that said it was time for him to pay up. It said she'd waited all these years for something better, something he promised, and what had he given her? A house on wheels and a convenience store across the road.

Alvis's heart pounded like the pistons in the hot-rod he'd owned when he first met Virginia at New Cairo High School. She was a freckled, bouncy girl then, a girl who didn't take guff from anybody, and he'd liked her spunk. It was a good contrast to his shy orderly ways and he fell for her there and then. He'd learned over the years that he couldn't win an argument with her so he turned back to his crossword puzzle. Virginia turned the TV back on and cranked the sound up.

On the day the building finally went up, Virginia was even more crabby. She told Alvis she felt like she was coming down with something, maybe a cold or some kind of flu. A big healthy woman with pink, sunny skin, she was hardly ever sick. For the last two nights, though, she had slept in the guest bedroom at the other end of the trailer because she said she was afraid her restlessness might keep him awake.

Alvis made a pot of coffee, trying to be quiet and give Virginia a wide berth. He stood at the screen door and shook his head at the sight of the men hoisting up the large blue metal walls. It was just a big ugly box with a tan door and no outside windows. He tried to ignore the lump in his throat as he went out to the front steps to watch as a couple of men lifted a big square object from the back of a truck. It was covered in black plastic and they carefully leaned it against the building. He thought it was probably a sign and that cheered him up. Maybe they'd put it up today and he'd find out just what it was he'd been watching.

(end of excerpt)