

## AVE MARIA

Clare Baptisti

Where was the flood of sun? The heavy curtains were still closed; no frying pan sizzle, no cellophane crinkle, not even the hot coffee stink. The hall was too quiet for summer.

Mother's flannel robe came up beside me. Why was her hair still hung in frizzy ringlets?

"Your father's having chest pain this morning, dear. Dr. Martz is here."

The hall got darker; I felt numb.

"Is it bad this time?" I choked. I wanted to go back to bed and come out to the flood of sun.

"We'll have to see what Dr. Martz says. Now get dressed, please; I'll go make the coffee."

Always coffee, and always so matter-of-fact. I felt hot and mad. I had wanted to yank open the thick velvet curtains. I knew what was outside—the flood of sun, the green pool water and chlorine tickle, the hot grass under my toes. But instead I crept back behind my door and hunched on the radiator. I felt cold and numb all over.

There were voices in the hall, then a siren from far way opened up wide and screamed louder and louder, began to growl, and then stopped dead. I heard the gravel jump in the driveway. I didn't look out. It was the shady side of the house, anyway. Clickety-clack went the metal bars on the stairs, and then Daddy's gay face all bundled in a gray blanket and bumping over the flagstone walk out front. The white ambulance swallowed him up. I was sorry I'd looked.

Daddy was lying under a cellophane tent when we walked in. He wasn't gray like before, but his head looked skinny on the fat white pillow, and the rest of him was lost somewhere in the cold sheets. A whoosh like somebody sucking in bubble gum, and then a hiss like a snore was coming from the tent. Daddy's mouth was shut, but still the tent whooshed and hissed, over and over. . . whoosh, hiss. I dug my toe deep into the cracked linoleum and wished it would stop.

I saw two thick white nurse's shoes upside down in the doorway. The girl in them had platinum bangs and black roots where her hat was bobby-pinned. Her eyes jumped up and down the panel of shiny dials in the corner. When her thick white shoes started out the door they ran right into two puddles of black patent leather. The shiny

patent toes squeaked past and came inside. I looked up for Father Ryan's winking blue eyes, but I stopped at the tiny silver Jesus, hanging on the crucifix behind his fingers.

Father lifted the tent and sprinkled all around inside with a thick silver pencil. I heard Latin words all run together in a hum—like in church, when Miss Martin died. Was Daddy going to die?

I wondered what it was like to wear black and sit in the front pew in church and cry and hold Mother's arm. Would she cry? I saw shiny hearses and a big cemetery, and brass coffin handles. My nose filled up with the smell of damp funeral flowers and made my head ache. The Latin hum roared through my ears. The floor got blurry and my eyes started to overflow. I tried to stop—I looked at the ceiling—but the flowers and Latin hum slushed around and around inside and crashed down on me. The hot tears stung my face.

Father's arm was wrapped around my neck, I was right on the toes of his patent leather shoes and the little Jesus was cold against my cheek. The Latin hum was gone. I looked up the road of buttons on his black shirt. A glassy blue eye winked back down. The cold little Jesus against my cheek felt good; I squeezed up beside it. Father said the baby Jesus wouldn't let Daddy die. I started to whisper my Hail Mary's.

### Snail Talk

Russell E. Gilliom

Look at that ant a-runnin', it's pitiful but true,  
 That ant is not a-knowin' where he's a goin' to.  
 Lord, look how fast he's goin', so nimble and so quick,  
 A-passin' over everything I doubt if he can pick  
 The place that he remembers and considers best of all,  
 'Cause that old ant is too busy a-havin' himself a ball.  
 I'd rather be slow and steady and have no chance to fail,  
 Maybe 'cause I'm deliberate, but prob'ly 'cause I'm a snail.