

My Friend and I*

Amy Isenhower

Mr. Hartman sits in his tiny warm kitchen in his tiny, warm, yellow house. Lonely, he gazes out of his tired eyes and through his window to the small backyard which is surrounded by an old wire fence. The grass is overgrown and shabby like Mr. Hartman and his house.

It is one of those cool, cloudy afternoons that are nice for staying inside. I, sitting in my small bedroom at my green linoleum table, feel a need for company, not the silly laughing company of my playmates at the end of the block, but for warm quiet company. Putting on my shoes and pulling my white anklets up so that the embroidered boats are inside-out, I trip down the stairs, fly out the door and leave it wide open in my usual haphazard manner. I walk briskly down the gray pavement leading from my house, being careful not to step on the cracks, onto the sidewalk, and down the walk leading to my neighbor's house. I knock on the door. I knock again, impatiently.

"Who is it?"

"It's Amy, Mr. Hartman!"

"Come in. The door is open!"

As the door closes slowly, I sniff the warm familiar odor that brings back memories of many happy afternoons. Swelling with a sense of security, I walk across the dull gray tile to my pal sitting at his table in the corner. As our eyes meet, his wrinkled face changes. Light shines in his eyes, peeking through folds of wrinkles. The deep lines in his face curve upward. His large elephant ears pull back. The cracked lips form a faint smile. I pull a chair up to the table and sit in anticipation for what I know will happen next. Mr. Hartman rises slowly and asks, "Hungry?"

"Yes!"

He walks over to the cabinet above the sink, opens it, and takes out two small cut-glass dishes, one filled with peanuts, the other with good sharp cheese. Sitting down at the table, we talk about little unimportant things, as I munch on the cheese and peanuts. I tell Mr. Hartman about the new family moving in down the block, what

happened on "Popeye" this morning and of my recent trip to the beach. He sits and nods, smiling. Mr. Hartman has nothing to tell me about his days. They are all the same. He eats and sleeps and shaves and takes baths. Occasionally he walks to the store for groceries and always for cheese and peanuts for a special friend who breaks the boredom of his day, who smiles, and who reminds him of another world long past.

My Mr. Hartman is not well. Loneliness and many years have changed my friendly old pal. I do not know this now, but when I am much older, my mother will tell me that Mr. Hartman is very afraid. He believes that all his friends have turned against him, all but a special little girl whom he loves very much. He tells my mother of his fear, and when a little boy across the street drives the car of his parents into the front of the warm yellow house, Mr. Hartman sinks deeper into his delusions. When he is alone, he sits at his kitchen table and wonders why they are trying to kill him. When his friend sits across from him, however, he is not the same man. He grins, he smiles, he laughs, he chuckles, and he gives a little girl a warm happy feeling.

One day Mr. Hartman is shaving in his tiny bathroom. He nicks himself with his razor. He jumps. He falls back. Directly behind him is his bathtub of hard cold porcelain.

My mother sits down with me and gently tells me, "Mr. Hartman was very old, Amy. He was not happy. He was alone."

I know better. He was happy. He smiled. He gave me cheese and peanuts, and he was my friend. I feel strange inside my stomach. I feel empty. I do not cry. I do not understand. Mother gives me some medicine for my stomach ache, and I run outside, leaving the door open. I run down the gray pavement leading from my house, being careful not to step on the cracks.