THE NUTMEG EATER

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The finest garden in Picket Rock, where gardening annually assumed the significance of a spring rite, was always that of a simple fellow by the name of Jesse Jonas, who had a strange addiction. He was addicted to nutmeg.

It was not a noxious habit. To be sure the little house where Jesse lived with his mother was permeated throughout the winter by the odor of the spice, the way a spiceball will flavor the entire contents of a closed dresser drawer; but it was not an unpleasant smell, and as far as people could see the spice did Jesse no harm. Certainly, he seemed a harmless fellow.

Jesse made a strange appearance. His vague blue eyes protruded slightly, and his broken teeth were stained with nutmeg, and his thin body was warped and stooped from a childhood injury and from the burden of the heavy manual labor which was

the only kind he was able to perform.

But he had uncommon strength in his long hands and arms, and he did well whatever job was assigned to him, whether it were cleaning a privy pit or filling in an open grave after a funeral service (jobs no one else could be persuaded to do); and such of the townspeople as liked a job well done held him in respect.

He was a quiet man, and people liked that. He talked to himself a good deal, mumbling and gesticulating, as the lonely and the eccentric frequently do, and there were times when he seemed morose and withdrawn, moving quickly and nervously and failing to reply when spoken to. But there were other times, and those were more frequent, when he was strangely animated, whistling queer tunes of his own making and smiling foolishly at everyone he met.

"Well, there goes Nutmeg," Zack Kaufmann would say, watching Jesse's odd sidling canine-like progress down the street. "Happy as though he had good sense."

"Well, I'm not sure he ain't," Charlie Hamblett said once. It was one of Charlie's bad days. "I'm not sure I wouldn't rather have what he's got than what I've got."

But the people of Picket Rock worried about Jesse sometimes, too. It was a part of the town's solidity that its citizens took seriously the responsibility of caring for the unfortunate and the poor. "Whatever will become of him when his mother goes?" they asked.

As a matter of fact, so far as finances went, Jesse and his mother got on as well as most; indeed, a good deal better than some. Old Pleeny Jonas, Jesse's father, had been a veteran of the Civil War and every month Grandma Jonas, as she was generally called, received a pension check. And Jesse was a good worker. He really looked after Grandma, people said. In winter, while Jesse did the housework, even to the washing and ironing of her tiny high-necked dresses, or prepared his garden for spring, Grandma sat beside the fire with her little feet on a padded stool and crocheted dozens of intricate lace doilies; and in summer she tripped about the neighborhood making calls and giving the doilies away. There was not a home in Picket Rock, save that of Sabina Trenton, who did not believe in doilies, that did not have at least one of Grandma Jonas' creations on a stand table or across a chair back. A small plump woman, with short silver-white curls worn in the fashion of her girlhood and tied with a ribbon, Grandma was a sight to behold as she went about the town with her reticule and her lavender knitted shawl, her tiny feet encased in a pair of high-topped button boots.

The Jonas house, which was very small and neat, sat halfway between Asa Steffen's and the rambling combination house, office and apothecary shop occupied by Dr. Bombach. It was not a bad place to live. Asa and his wife were stingy, but they were kind where kindness cost nothing; and Dr. Bombach and his wife Lila, a tall shy intelligent girl, were as open-

handed as they come.

The Bombachs had not been in Picket Rock so very long before Grandma Jonas came to call on Lila. "The strangest little woman came to see me today," Lila reported to Doc as they sat at supper that evening. "She was straight out of one of Louisa Alcott's books, even to the reticule and shawl. She told me in the most ordinary manner, the way I'd tell you I bought a dozen eggs at the grocery, that she had dropped her son on his head as a baby and that he had never been bright since."

"It might be true," Doc said.

"Oh, I know the son," Lila said. "Only I'm not sure as to the exact degree of his brightness. His name's Jesse, or that's what his mother calls him. The boys all call him 'Nutmeg,' because he eats them. Have you ever run across anything like that in your travels?"

Doc looked up. "You mean anyone who eats boys? Many times. It's not at all rare."

"Nutmegs, silly," she said. "He's an addict."

Doc laid his fork down. "Look," he said, "do you lock your doors at night when I'm gone?"

"Of course," she said. He knew very well that none of the doors had locks and that no one locked a door in Picket Rock. Lila had gone over to Mrs. Steffen's once to borrow a cup of sugar and Mrs. Steffen had called to her to come on

in. "Isn't the door locked?" Lila had asked. "Bless you, no," Mrs. Steffen said. "Nobody locks doors here. Suppose you were to have a spell? The neighbors would have to chop the door down to get at you." Lila had repeated that to Doc.

"Well, see that you do," he said, taking up his fork again.

"Anyway, Jesse's harmless, she said. "He just has to have nutmeg the way I have to have coffee of a morning before I'm civil, and the way we both have to have music and books."

"Now I've heard everything." Doc said.

"He's musical, too," Lila said. "He improvises the strangest little monotunes. And he listens when I play. I saw him standing at a corner of the woodshed the other evening." She didn't say that the sudden sight of him there had sent shivers down her spine and that a favorite phrase of her mother's, "We'll all be murdered in our beds," had popped into her head.

"His mother told me she saw when he was a baby that Jesse couldn't learn," Lila went on, "and so she never sent him to school at all. But I was talking to him the other day about building some cold frames and he came up with the number of panes of glass I would need before I could get my pencil out of my pocket. Do you remember Thoreau's story of the half wit who came to Walden and told Thoreau he was 'deficient in intellect,' which caused Thoreau to wonder if there

was much difference after all between the half and the whole? And have you noticed his garden?"

"Whose garden? Thoreau's?"

She gave him a playful clout. "You ought to see his radishes," she said. "I'm green with envy."

"You're brown," he said. He caught her hand when she would have taken his plate away. "You spend so much time outside that I can still feel the sun on your skin when I come home at night." He moved his chair back and drew her down on his knees. "Are you happy here?"

"I love it here," she said honestly. "There's something about these people. Take Mina Bettis. She takes in washing. But she holds her head up, the way she ought to do, and comes to call on you like anyone else. And Sabina Trenton's probably the most respected woman in town. But when she came into Picket Rock as a girl they say she brought a baby and no husband; and then just went ahead and behaved herself and people forgot all about her never having been married, the way they should have. She could very well have come into town posing as a widow, but she didn't. She just lived so decently and with such dignity that people forgot she had ever made a mistake."

"Play something," Doc said. "Play something light and sweet and haunting Before the telephone rings again and I have to drive out ten miles to treat a case of cholera morbus or to doctor a horse for spavin.

Lila went to the piano. She sat on the bench and let her fingers get the feel of the keys. She was not an accomplished musician. She played by ear mostly and only for her husband's pleasure or her own. Now she began to make up a melody. Doc would be asleep in a moment; he was dead tired. She cupped her hand about the chimney and blew out the flame in the lamp. The moonlight made a silver filigree out of the lace vine over the arbor and the Madonna lilies were like pure patches of moonlight in the Jonas garden. The lights were already out in the Barney house. Was Old Man Barney, who had been a freight wagon driver on the Oregon trail in his early youth, dreaming of a headlong flight from Indians? A pinpoint of light shone from between the drawn blinds of the bedroom Asa Steffen occupied with his gaunt wife Ada, and in the back room of the livery stable she could see that the nightly poker game was already in progress.

There was no light in the Jonas house. "I go to bed with the chickens and sleep like a baby," Grandma had said. But now, as Lila played, the thin stooped figure of Jesse emerged in his linen duster, and came down the steps and stood underneath the chinaberry tree in an attitude of listening.

"Don't get up," Lila told Mrs. Jonas. "I can't stay. I have bread in the pans." She sat in a low chair facing the window and watched the tiny withered hands feed the fine thread. "I thought maybe Jesse could spare me a few tomato

plants to fill out a row." Neat flats of vigorous young plants filled the window shelves, sturdy green peppers and velvet-leafed tomatoes and Swiss chard, the bright labels from the packets pasted along the side.

"I'll see he does," the old lady said. "But you stay a minute. Jesse's so busy with his garden I get hungry for talk."

"He has a fine garden," Lila said. "He really has a green thumb." She wondered what they found to talk about. She thought of the moment of realization when you first knew your son could never be like the sons of other women, the time of acceptance, the moment relived in the lonely darkness of a sleepless night. The rasp of a file came from the woodshed, where she supposed Jesse must be at work.

"He's at it early and late," the old lady said petulantly. It's all he cares about. You'd think a plant was human the way he coddles them along and the way he grieves when one withers up and dies."

The house was immaculately clean. The windows gleamed and the curtains were freshly washed and ironed. A heap of freshly ironed clothing lay on the sideboard and one of Grandma's tiny old-fashioned tucked Mother Hubbards hung behind the door.

"Jesse was late with his ironing this week," the old lady complained. "He's not put it away yet. He had to get outside." She swept a heap of ribbons and bits of lace

from the ironing board into a paper sack. "He likes little fripperies," she said. "He's forever pressing them."

"He's certainly a fine housekeeper," Lila said, embarrassed. "I've never seen a woman do better."

"It's the way I brought him up," the old lady said modestly. "Jesse's a good boy." Her thin lips moved, counting stitches. "There's not many women as favored as I am, to have a son with them for fifty years."

Lila considered that, trying to visualize Jesse as a boy. She saw a thin frail figure peering between the pickets at the passing school children. To what degree had he been aware of the difference?

"He's took a great notion to you," Grandma said brightly. "He likes to hear you play."

As well not repeat that to Doc, Lila thought, getting up to go.

"Of course he's got his little ways," Grandma said. "And he might not be as bright as some. But if he had been he'd have married likely and then where would I be? In an old folks home somewhere with nobody to care about me in my old age."

Lila repeated the remark that evening to Doc.

"Well," Doc said, "I've seen many another woman try to keep her children from growing up."

"I think she dropped him on purpose," Lila said. "Not too much; just enough to keep him with her in her old age!"

It was several weeks before Lila went again to the Jonas house, but she saw Jesse frequently. It had turned dry and he worked in his garden from early until late, patiently hilling the earth about the tomatoes and the young corn and carrying water from the cistern to pour into sunken perforated cans about the roots. Working in her own small plot or sitting beside the window with her solitary supper tray while Doc was out on call, Lila liked to hear the steady sound of his hoe scraping earth and the monotonous tunes he sometimes whistled. There was a kind of earthiness about the tunes, it seemed to her, an almost Pan-like quality; as though they had to do with roots and stems and leaves and loam, as though they had to do with the fertile earth in which he delved.

She tried to recapture the tunes sometimes, to play them back, but they were not for normal human beings to capture and reproduce.

Occasionally, Jesse went by with his pick and shovel, bound for a day's work. Lila always spoke and smiled pleasantly and sometimes she made some comment about the weather, which remained alarmingly dry.

One afternoon in early June, when Lila had crossed the lots to the Jonas house to inquire about a box of strawberries, and was about to knock, she was arrested by the sound of Grandma's voice raised in anger. The timbre of patient old age and of childlike gentleness was missing and in its place

was the shrillness of an angry shrew.

"I tell you you're not to take another drop from the cistern! There's hardly enough now to prime the pump and you've not washed for a solid week! Let the garden die and good riddance! If you don't stop pouring water on it I'll go out some night while you're asleep and hoe it all up!"

As Lila stood, too startled to turn and go, the door opened and Jesse came outside. His body seemed more stooped than usual, as though his mother's words had fallen upon him like physical blows, and his face was a pasty gray. His blue eyes held the frightened, cringing look of a whipped dog. He did not appear to see Lila at all. She stepped to one side and he sidled past and went down the steps and around the smoke-house, padding along in his old soft shoes.

Grandma stood in the doorway. Beyond a slightly heightened color in her wrinkled cheeks, she seemed unperturbed. She held a web-like doily in one hand and her steel crochet hook in the other, and her silver-white curls were meticulously arranged and tied with a purple ribbon bow, which gave her an absurd little-girl look.

"Come in," she welcomed Lila. "I haven't seen you in weeks. I know the young don't have much time for the old. The old can't expect it.

"It's not that," Lila said. She sat uneasily on the edge of the indicated chair, and kept seeing Jesse's gray, punished-looking face and hearing the shrill old voice raised

in anger. "I've had a lot to do."

"I know, dear," Grandma said. She took up her crochet again. But, then, she must have felt Lila's eyes upon her, for she looked up. "Jesse's being a bad boy," she said. "He uses the water on his garden and spends all his time out there. He's not done a wash for more than a week."

A jar of stock sat on the table. Its heavy fragrance filled the little room. The kettle hummed on the range and Grandma's cat came and purred against Lila's sandaled feet.

"Go on," Grandma told the cat. "Get out now."

"He's not bothering," Lila said.

"He'll have you all hairs." The old lady made a quick chain and fastened it into the medallion pattern with her hook. "Of course you can have the berries," she said. "I've been meaning to send you over some."

"I won't take them without pay."

"Then I'll pay Jesse," Lila said when the old lady made a deprecating gesture.

Grandma's eyes met hers levelly. "Don't ever give Jesse money," she said. "People here know not to pay him for his work; they bring the money to me. He's not competent to have money."

Jesse had come into the lean-to. Through the doorway from the kitchen, Lila could see him quietly opening and closing drawers. Grandma did not look up or interrupt her

work; but when she spoke her voice, although controlled, had an unpleasant edge, and the tone of command employed by one accustomed to being obeyed.

"Jesse," she said, "go on back to your work. Pick Mrs. Bombach some berries. You'll not find anything there you need."

He went quickly, with a backward look at Lila. In his eyes, dark now, was a singular look of desperation. He left the door ajar and again Lila heard his padded footfalls on the walk.

She arose to go. There was that about the house that made her uncomfortable, an uneasiness and a kind of tension. She could not forget the rasping sound of Grandma's voice and now it occurred to her that there were two people present besides herself; this gentle, picturesque old lady with her absurd curls and another, who had dropped her son on his head as a baby and now knew a complacent satisfaction that he had not grown up mentally and gone away to live a normal man's life.

Grandma did not try to keep her. When Lila said, as she always did, "Don't get up," Grandma remained in her chair.

"I'll send Jesse over with the berries," she promised. Her crochet hook stopped. "But don't try to pay him. He'd as likely as not drop the money into the cistern, just to hear the splash."

Lila was halfway home when the meaning of the scene she had witnessed came to her. The impact was so great

that she stopped on the sidewalk and stared at her feet.... Jesse had been looking for nutmeg! She deprives him of it, Lila thought. She uses it to control him, the way you would use sugar to reward a horse or toss out fish to make a seal do tricks! She doles it out or withholds it, according to whether Jesse has been a "good" or "bad" boy!

It was an incredibly cruel thing to do.

The weather continued hot and dry. Looking out across her own dying garden, Lila saw Jesse, a dejected figure in his linen duster, scrabbling in the dry earth. The hot winds had come and the leaves of the corn curled and burned and the small immature tomatoes cooked on the vines. A sudden epidemic of summer grippe struck the town, and Doc went almost day and night. Lila, too, came down with the disease.

It was while she lay on her cot in the open window of the darkened room above stairs one night that she caught a glimpse of Jesse's linen duster in the pale wash of moonlight that filtered through the chinaberry tree. He was kneeling and carefully drawing water, with a tin pail and rope, from the Jonas cistern.

By the middle of July a breathless heat had settled over the town. The roads lay ankle deep in dust and a film of dust covered the leaves of the trees and shrubs, making them gray instead of green; and people, generally, had given up hope of rain.

On a Sunday afternoon Lila attended a funeral service for an old lady who had been one of Doc's patients. The mercury stood at a hundred and twelve. The floral pieces withered in the closeness of the church and by the time the procession reached the cemetery the flowers as well as the mourners were wilted and drooping. Aware, while the last rites were being spoken, that she was the object of scrutiny, Lila looked up. Jesse, his long hands clasping the handle of the shovel, stood waiting to fill in the grave. He was staring at Lila, and his eyes were profoundly sad.

The minister said his "amen" and the crowd began to disperse. People gathered in little knots in the shade of the dusty maple trees and shook hands and exchanged comments about the heat and the drouth. As always after a funeral, Lila marked the increased preoccupation of the attendant living with the affairs of their daily lives. It seemed to her that there was invariably apparent after an interment a spirit of release, of almost holiday, as though the living, made newly aware of the brevity of life by this passing, congratulated themselves upon their own survival.

She saw Will Brewster, hopelessly crippled with arthritis, limp away from the grave in an almost sprightly fashion and climb into his rig and set whip to his horse.

She was aware of Jesse standing close.

"They're all dead," he said. His Adam's apple worked and his face was contorted with grief. "The little plants

is all strowed around on the ground, dead." He turned away and began to lay the wilted flower sprays to one side upon the grass....

It came to Lila suddenly that, aside from his having named the number of panes of glass Lila would need for the cold frames, these were the first words she had ever heard him speak.

An hour later, as she sat at supper, Lila saw him return home. He would be talking to himself, she thought; his head was bowed and his free hand drew patterns in the sultry air. Without so much as a sidewise look at his ruined garden, he leaned his shovel against the tool-shed wall and climbed the steps and entered the Jonas house.

It was a good time of day. A breath of coolness had come with evening and the sticky fragrance of the petunias came in through the open window, and the shouts of the children out for their after-supper play. Lila looked about the pleasant room. The book covers looked companionable and the finish on the old piano glowed softly and the round-bellied pewter teapot gave back a little of the color from the sky.

Now she saw that Dad Barney had come out on the porch of his daughter's house and had settled himself in his accustomed place in the little wicker rocker he occupied every night. She saw the flare of the match and then the wreath of smoke from his pipe, and then saw him sit back, the way he always did after his pipe was lighted, and lift his feet to the porch

railing.

Lila went down and talked to him sometimes. He was often tiresome, as most old people are tiresome, but she liked to hear him tell of his days on a freight wagon, and to visualize the times. As he talked, his voice grown thin with age, she often ceased to see the shrunken old figure in the rocking chair and saw the other instead; Dunbar Barney, strong and youthful, swinging his whip and shouting to his team. She heard the long call down the line as the wheels rolled, whips cracking and men shouting and clouds of dust swirling about the covered wagons. The pull of adventure, the smell of it, the lift of it....

Lila was there, now. She was to ride with young Dunbar in the lead wagon. There would be long days in the open, nights under the stars, the smell of fires and wind-swept prairie, the sage brush and the far purple hills to be crossed tomorrow and tomorrow. She felt the lurch of the wagon, the strength of the dark-eyed young man beside her.... She saw the shrunken spare figure on the porch.

"Good Lord, Lila," she said aloud, and went to light the lamp.

It was while she stood beside the table, holding the chimney and adjusting the wick, that she heard a gentle scratching or tapping at the back door. She set the chimney in place and went to open it.

Jesse Jonas stood in the path of light that fell

across the porch. She knew at once that there was something strange about him. His body and its shadow, in the dim light, looked strangely misshapen, as though he had knocked and half turned to go and had then turned back, throwing his body into a contortion of uncertainty.

She resisted a sudden impulse to latch the screen from the inside.

"Hello, Jesse," she forced herself to say calmly. "Did you want something?"

He did not reply. He still wore the linen duster in which he did his garden work. Now he put his hand into the pocket and extracted a length of folded tulle ribbon, such as is used on floral sprays, and proffered it.

Puzzled, she accepted it, unrolled it to its full length. It was pale lavender, and might have come, she thought, from the grave he had filled this afternoon. Worked along its length, in coarse gold thread, was the word: **MOTHER.**

Lila looked up. "Well, thank you," she said uncertainly. "It's very pretty."

But Jesse was gone, with that queer sidling motion, off the porch and down the steps and out of the light.

It was Syd Benton who found Grandma Jonas when he went, early the next morning, into the Jonas house to deliver the milk. Mrs. Jonas had asked him to bring it in in warm weather and put it into the ice box. And that was what he had been

about to do when he saw the body of the old lady, half fallen out of her chair. One hand still held a web-like doily and her steel crochet hook lay in her lap.

She had been strangled to death by a length of lavender tulle.

All of the drawers in the kitchen and the lean-to stood open, as though the killer had been searching for something hidden. But there was no evidence of robbery. The old lady's gold watch was still pinned to the pocket of her Mother Hubbard, and her reticule lay, untouched, on the cushion of the chair.

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