

1991

Ain't the 1950s Anymore

Ellen Stader
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stader, Ellen (1991) "Ain't the 1950s Anymore," *Exile*: Vol. 37 : No. 1 , Article 23.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol37/iss1/23>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Exile by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

Ain't the 1950s Anymore

When I got ready to go to town this morning my damn hands were so stiff I could barely open the truck door. I was late anyway because it took me so long to do the latches on my overalls, and then the stove wouldn't light. I wished Sophie was here to do it. But finally I got through my usual bacon, eggs, biscuits, and coffee, and I started for Larkin's Grocery. I've known Virgil for 27 years now, and shopped at his store every one of them.

The truck wouldn't start, and it was hard to keep twisting the key and pumping the gas. I don't recall being so stiff yesterday, and not just my hands but my knees, hips, ankles, wrists, just about everywhere. Finally I got it to turn over -- the son of a bitch never fires up after it's set for a couple of days.

I was surprised to see such a haze on everything so near to noon on a fair day. I slowed down to about 40 just to be careful, and a damn bunch of silly kids passed me on the hill by the Davenport place. I saw that one of them was Jack Stephenson's boy; if his daddy sees him, that boy will catch hell -- be standing for a week! Jack's wife Myrna waved at me when I went by, like always. I thought of the years Sophie and I went down to help them with their tobacco crop, and what good times we had.

I pulled into the parking lot at Larkin's and when I walked in, Virgil said, "Hey, you old man, how you doing?" That's our joke because he's almost 76, near my own age. He comes by the house now and again to talk a bit, catch me up on his wife's gossip. It's always good to talk to him since there's not many of us still living.

We were standing by the counter talking, Virgil watching the door like he always does. After a minute I heard the cowbell on the door, and I saw Virgil's face change. His eyes squinted up and he ducked his head a little, just glaring at whoever opened the door. He looked just like an old dog I used to have; that animal growled at anything that moved! When I turned around, I saw why Virgil was looking that way.

A colored woman had just walked in, with a little one with her. She smiled and said hello and we said hi back, then she walked down an aisle. Virgil looked at me and didn't have to say anything because I knew what he meant by the look. I remembered some years back when the county ordered him to take down the "WHITES ONLY" sign that had been there since I could remember -- since 1944, he said -- and longer than any other place I knew of. It wasn't that Virgil had nothing against coloreds; he just thought that since we never bothered them, they shouldn't bother us. "They got everything they need over there in Eubanks," he would

always tell me, "They can just keep to themselves over there. Don't need to come over here for anything." Can't say I blame him.

We could see her as she passed the first aisle and the next, and Virgil whispered to me just what I was thinking, that it was easy to tell she was a kind of smart-assed one. She had on a real pretty outfit, like the suit the phone company lady wears when I go in to pay my bill every month. And this woman walked real proud, with her nose in the air, and stretching her neck. I can't stand anybody to act like that, especially a woman . . . and a colored woman, at that!

Just as she turned up the third aisle, the cowbell rang again and we turned around to see Russell Carter's two girls. They was both nice, and the oldest one was as pretty as her mom, and taller already. Virgil said, "Hi, girls! Can I get you all something?"

"Hey, Mr. Larkin, Mr. Reppert! We came to get some Hamburger Helper and a gallon of milk."

"Well, the Hamburger Helper is in the second aisle, and you know where the milk is."

Just as they walked away, the colored woman picked up a loaf of bread and walked towards the counter where me and Virgil were standing. She said, "Excuse me, do you have any fresh bread? I'd like some but this is pretty stale." Well, Virgil didn't know what to say. I could see him biting his tongue and just looking at her. Finally he said, "That bread is just fine. Nothing wrong with it."

She turned the loaf around for him to see the end of it. "But the expiration date was for almost two weeks ago. It's going to mold soon, if it hasn't already," she said, like he was too stupid to know that or something. His face was turning red and his hands were shaking and he said to her real calm. "Don't you come in here and tell me my business. If I had it my way, you wouldn't be in here at all. You people come over here and give us a hard time, and we don't never bother you. So if you want some bread, you just go on back to Eubanks and buy it there." He wasn't so calm by the end of his speech.

Well, the colored woman just looked at him, and turned her head real slow and looked at me, then back at him with a surprised look on her face like nobody had ever talked to her like that before. Her jaw went slack and her lips hung open with the bottom one all loose and shaking. She didn't look so proud now. The little girl with her stood and looked at us, too, with those great big, scared eyes like they have. The two of them looked they was going to cry or yell or maybe both.

Then I saw the Carter girls out of the corner of my eye, and when I looked at them. I saw *they* both had that same scared, shocking look on their faces, too -- they looked like they couldn't believe Virgil had said

what he said. The box of Hamburger Helper was laying a few inches from their feet, with the corner of it all mashed in. I thought maybe Virgil had got a little too excited, but I didn't think he was wrong.

When I looked back at the woman, she was still bug-eyed but now her lips were pinched together, too. She looked ready to spit fire, but she just stood there looking Virgil right in the eye. Virgil hadn't moved at all, either. He still had that same mean-dog look on his face, still staring at the woman and not saying a thing or even blinking. It was dead quiet in the store except for the buzz of the lights and the window fan, and it stayed that way -- nobody talking or moving -- for the longest time. I thought we were all six going to be there forever, just standing and looking.

But then the Carter girls walked past us real slow, the older one looking at Virgil like she was about to get sick. She said something that sounded like, "Ain't the 1950s anymore," but she said it too quiet for me to tell. She was pulling along the younger one, who was wiping her eyes and looking at the floor. They walked right out the door without even buying what they came for. That was the first time Virgil moved; he turned his head to look at them and then wiped his top lip. He looked at me and back at the colored woman, but still never said a word. She finally slammed down the sack of bread on the counter -- it made a loud noise, so it must have really been stale -- and walked out on her high heels, letting the door slam on her way out. Her little girl looked back at us over her shoulder, with those eyes that just got bigger and bigger.

Virgil watched them get out, then turned toward me. We just looked at each other for a minute, then he shook his head. "Dear God!" he said. "Jimmy, none of this would ever happened if the county had just let me keep things the way they always was back then." And I can't say I blamed him, cause he was right. It wasn't his fault she came in acting so proud, and that she mouthed off to him. I asked him, "Well, what can you expect? Not many of us left who know the old ways was best."

Ellen Stader