



2000

Cradler

Cara Snider

[DigitalCommons@Cedarville](#) provides a publication platform for fully open access journals, which means that all articles are available on the Internet to all users immediately upon publication. However, the opinions and sentiments expressed by the authors of articles published in our journals do not necessarily indicate the endorsement or reflect the views of DigitalCommons@Cedarville, the Centennial Library, or Cedarville University and its employees. The authors are solely responsible for the content of their work. Please address questions to dc@cedarville.edu.

Recommended Citation

Snider, Cara (2000) "Cradler," *Cedarville Review*: Vol. 3 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarvillereview/vol3/iss1/4>

Cradler

Browse the contents of [this issue](#) of *Cedarville Review*.

Keywords

Essay

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarvillereview>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Cradler

⌘ Cara Snider

When I was a child, he was a white-haired mystery. The man who lived on the corner. The one who smoked cigars and never let his car sit out in the rain. His full name was Curtis Cradler, but he was known by the entire neighborhood as just “Cradler.” I never really spoke to him until I was about twelve, and even that was a meeting by chance. My mom had asked me to take a plastic container of homemade vegetable soup up to him because, after all, it was cold outside and she was sure that he hadn’t had a decent meal since his wife died five years earlier.

He had a difficult life, and although I don’t know the whole story, I know that his only son and his daughter-in-law were killed in an automobile accident while traveling home for Christmas. And now that his wife had died too, he spent his days alone in the musty brick rancher on the corner of Hamilton and Seventh.

I was told that he was crabby. Very eccentric. But that night I delivered his vegetable soup I saw him as someone who was very lonely, with blue eyes the color of a stormy October sky- eyes that met me with a combination of suspicion and relief. Veiny, age-stained hands opened the soup container eagerly and gratefully. There were moments of

through the intimidating threshold. As a naive child, I figured I could visit him from time to time. Help him out when he needed it. I remember how, for years after that, I raked the leaves from his two maple trees in the fall, shoveled his driveway in the winter, helped him dig out his white Buick, even though he wouldn't drive it

He received Meals on Wheels three times a week, and chicken noodle soup and carved turkey with mashed potatoes from my family. And somehow in the course of a year or so, I stopped by his house almost daily to see how he was doing, to check up on him, acquaint myself with the Mystery. Often my questions were met with a harsh grunt or a shrug of his shoulders, but sometimes he did talk. Sometimes we had lengthy conversations, usually about the weather or our opinions of President Bush. I remember how he would sit back in his ragged blue armchair, sigh, adjust his gold-rimmed eyeglasses, and then speak slowly as if planning out each word. He had a gruff voice and often complained about the state of things. We didn't need to send troops to Iraq. Why was his social security check so small? How could the Redskins possibly lose to the Raiders? Somehow though, I think he was just glad that someone was taking the time to listen to him, and on those days, he talked endlessly.

I never thought about it much then, but looking back I find it strange that I visited an old next-door neighbor everyday, after dinner and before homework, or in the middle of summer nights when the rest of the

town read their newspapers on their clean, white porches. But I did, and then it seemed as natural to me as eating pizza on Friday nights. I remember how I used to go up to his house almost every night in the summertime and watch Orioles games with him. He told me that I could just let myself in the back screen door, since he wouldn't hear the doorbell, but he never heard me come in either, so as I approached the living room, I would call out to him, letting him know I was there. I called him Mr. Cradler when I spoke to him, just Cradler any other time. He never could remember my name, and often referred to me as "the Snider girl." I remember how his house smelled of cigar smoke. It made my nose burn every time, that woody, spicy scent that reminded me of singed leaves and the ashen stench of cheap cigarettes. His kitchen wallpaper was a dark orange and gold pattern, probably left on the walls since the '60's, and he always had his windows and doors open to let in the cool night air. I remember feeling that breeze against my face as I came into the living room nearly every evening

The television volume was always turned up extremely high, announcing the pitcher's name and stats to all the neighborhood. I can still see him sitting in that armchair, wearing his usual white T-shirt and tan twill pants. In some ways his position in that chair was as much a fixture of the house as the Kenmore stove or the brick fireplace. I always sat on the tattered couch across from him. It gave me a great vantagepoint—I could see the baseball game and observe him at the

vantagepoint—I could see the baseball game and observe him at the same time. Often I watched him more than the ball game, making sure I knew the score at the end, though, so I could announce it to my dad when I went home. But I was most intrigued with the mysterious man that sat before me. I wondered about his past and how he met his wife. I wondered about the flower garden that was planted in the back yard, the one his wife planted and took care of year after year. The one he tried to maintain on his own.

I wondered about his childhood. I wondered if he played baseball when he was younger. I asked questions sometimes, but he was most content to just sit there and speculate about Ripken's next at-bat. I was painfully aware of the fact that I only witnessed a small fragment of his life, that there was so much I didn't know. So much I would never know. More beneath the surface and beyond the barriers. I wondered if I was one of the only people who tried to penetrate the walls he put up, and on those lazy summer evenings, when the sky was streaked with pink and we talked about the young rookies warming up in the bullpen, I wondered if there were any walls at all.

I remember that his movements were slow and standing up was a chore. Sometimes it took him several tries to stand up, but he never complained about that. He used to offer to get me a Coke and I'd say yes. Walking to the dim kitchen, he bent his arms and held them out stiffly on either side of him, as if bracing himself and carefully balancing

like a man I once saw when I was five years old, walking on a tightrope at a sawdust-strewn circus. Even though I could have gotten the Cokes quicker, I think he was proud of himself that he could do it. I think he wanted to make me feel like his guest, not his babysitter, and it worked, because those sodas always tasted sweeter and more refreshing than any others.

I remember how he would occasionally yell at the sportscaster if they talked to fans in the stadium and took their camera off the game for too long. He hated that. There was one particular announcer he couldn't stand- I think his name was Jim something or other. He called him a "fat-head" and to this day, when I see Jim covering an Orioles game, I think of Mr. Cradler shaking his head and muttering at the TV screen. I recall how he scoffed at the commercials too, and once he told me, after a commercial for Desenex athlete's foot spray that putting Borax in your shoes does the same thing. "It's a lot cheaper too," he'd say.

He was rough around the edges and his drawn face often went unshaved for a day or so. His house was always kept in meticulous order and he always put four ice cubes in every glass of Coke or water. He was grateful for the dinners my mom sent up to him and although he decided not to go with us to church on Christmas, he thanked us for the offer and said maybe next time. I remember thinking that he wasn't nearly as crabby as everyone said. That was just their defense, their excuse, their reason for just saying hello in passing and not taking time to

really get to know him.

I remember distinctly one October day. My dad had just picked me up from school and as we were getting out of the car, we heard someone yell my dad's name. It was Mr. Cradler. He had lost his balance while taking out the trash and was now lying between his car and the house, not visible from the street. He said he was okay, but was noticeably shaken, not nearly as composed as he usually was, and he had a frightened look on his face that reminded me of a lost child I once saw at Martin's grocery store. It took us a while for my dad and I to help him up and he was very weak on his feet. He had been lying there for hours, unable to get up on his own. I, of course, was scared to death because in the past his frailty was just part of who he was, and now it seemed as though it was a force against him. A monster that had knocked him flat and whipped him with the bitter October air. I had never thought of him as being so helpless and the reality startled me.

He went downhill fast. The days past by unnoticed, and before I knew it, he wasn't able to take care of himself and he couldn't live alone anymore. That autumn he moved into a nursing home about an hour away, a clean but dimly lit place that seemed too sterile and lacked the familiar sounds of baseball and the honeysuckle-scented breeze that used to fill his house. I wrote often and even visited him once, finding him in a wheelchair in the hallway, an afghan over his lap, his white hair thinner, and his eyes squinting against the bright fluorescent lights. I think he got

worse because he was out of his home, his shell. Vulnerable and wilted like a transplanted fern or ivy. His mind was cloudy and he didn't remember me, and the mug I had brought to give him as a Christmas gift seemed obsolete, ridiculous. He thought I was someone else, probably one of those faceless, nameless people in his past. The ones I wondered about on balmy August evenings while we watched baseball. It hurt that he didn't remember me. In fact, it was harder for me to take than I would admit to anyone and even my parents didn't know that I was upset, at least not to my knowledge. There was so much I didn't know about him, so much I wanted to know. He had become my friend, somewhere along the line.

I remember that I cried the day he died. That day now seems like a distant memory and is more vague in my mind than the nights we spent drinking Coke in the cigar scented living room. He had ceased to be a mystery to me and I felt that somehow I understood him. At least the parts he allowed me to understand. I felt privileged that he allowed me into his world and I regretted that I did not get to know him sooner. I could have learned so much more...

A few months after he passed away, his things were auctioned at a public sale. He had no immediate relatives, no one to want the kitchen table where he had eaten all his meals. No one to keep his black and white photos. No one to see the treasure in his old dishes, lamps and silverware. I can still hear the auctioneer calling out bids across the

street as the crowd gathered to see if they could get anything good. They seemed like vultures to me. They tore at his memories and ripped apart his home.

I couldn't watch. I couldn't listen. None of them understood who he was. None of them sat by his side and laughed at his dry jokes. None of them knew that the dead flowers in the garden were once beautiful pansies and impatiens planted by his wife. Lovingly tended by his stiff, frail hands...

I knew.