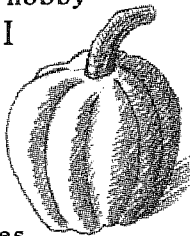


S A M



I saw people on the sidewalk, watching something. I crossed to join them, like a cat who smells herring. Men in jumpsuits, from the jail I think, were clearing the lot. Unbelievable. The woman beside me told me the land was for anyone who wanted a garden. Even more unbelievable. The word "paradise" came out of my mouth, without thinking. The woman looked at me strange. It's a hobby with me, studying words. I looked at the three walls surrounding the lot, then at a garden coming up beautiful, planted there close to the sidewalk. "Paradise" comes



from a Persian word. It means "walled park." I told the woman that. This time she gave me a little smile. I smiled back. That's my occupation.

You've seen fishermen mending the rips in their nets. That's what I do, only with people. I used to try to patch up the whole world. For thirty-six years I worked for different groups, promoting world government, setting up conferences on pacifism, raising money, stuffing envelopes. Not that I've given up the fight. I've just switched battlefields, from the entire planet to this corner of Cleveland. Sometimes I think I've actually had more effect on the world since I retired. What do I do? I smile at people, especially black people and the ones from different countries. I get 'em looking up at me instead of down or off to the side. I start up conversations in lines and on the bus and with cashiers. People see I'm friendly, no matter what they've heard about whites or Jews. If I'm lucky, I get 'em talking to each other. Sewing up the rips in the neighborhood.

I hadn't had a garden since I was a kid.

I wanted one now, only this time I was seventy-eight to be exact, and in no condition to dig up the soil. So I hired a teenager, Puerto Rican, who said he knew where he could get a shovel. He knew he'd have to do a good job to be paid. He worked that soil until it flowed through your fingers like silk. I paid him well and offered him a row. He wanted to grow marijuana, to sell. A real businessman. We discussed this. We finally compromised on pumpkins, after I explained how much he could probably get for them at Halloween, not to mention the advantages of staying out of jail. He was new to the neighborhood. We chatted back and forth. Squatting there in the cool of the evening, planting our seeds, a few other people working, a robin singing out strong all the while, it seemed to me that we were in truth in Paradise, a small Garden of Eden.

In the Bible, though, there's a river in Eden. Here, we had none. Not even a spigot anywhere close by. Nothing. People had to lug their own water, in buckets or milk jugs or soda containers. Water is heavy as bricks, trust me. And new seeds

have to be always moist. And in all of June it didn't rain but four days. The result? People bent over like coolies, walking sometimes three or four blocks, a gallon jug in each hand, complaining all the time about the water. Mine I had hauled by a third-grader with a wagon. The contest I started came later.

Water aside, we had other problems. People in the garden told friends and relatives. The lot was big, there was plenty of room. But when newcomers joined, at least at the beginning, they could usually get a spot near people they knew. One Saturday, when the garden was fullest, I stood up a minute to straighten my back. And what did I see? With a few exceptions, the blacks on one side, the whites on another, the Central Americans and Asians toward the back. The garden was a copy of the neighborhood. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. A duck gives birth to a duckling, not a moose. Each group kept to itself, spoke its own language, and grew its own special crops. One man even put up a pole and flew the Philippine flag above his plot.

Then there was the garbage. A few well brought-up people in the buildings around the lot still used it for a trash can. Just couldn't get out of the habit. They emptied their ashtrays out the windows and tossed out all sorts of stuff. One day a bottle came down, like a meteor. A man picked it up and threw it back, straight through the window it came out of. A minute later, five more flew out. Next, I thought to myself, come gunshots. Instead, thank God, it was only shouting.

That crazy homeless man, the one who used to sleep on the broken-down couch—he also missed the lot being a dump. He showed up, saw his couch had been taken, and started ripping out people's plants. The police had to come. Some people started worrying, looking ahead to ripe beans and tomatoes and thinking about strangers coming in. That week, a man put chicken wire around his garden, five feet high, complete with a little gate and padlock. The week after that someone built a board fence. Then came the first KEEP OUT sign. Then, the crowning achievement—barbed wire.

God, who made Eden, also wrecked the Tower of Babel, by dividing people. From Paradise, the garden was turning back into Cleveland.