12

The Cookie Lady

– *Philip K. Dick*

"Where you going, Bubber?" Ernie Mill shouted from across the street, fixing papers for his route.

"No place," Bubber Surle said.

"You going to see your lady friend?" Ernie laughed and laughed. "What do you go visit that old lady for? Let us in on it!"

Bubber went on. He turned the corner and went down Elm Street. Already, he could see the house, at the end of the street, set back a little on the lot. The front of the house was overgrown with weeds, old dry weeds that rustled and chattered in the wind. The house itself was a little gray box, shabby and unpainted, the porch steps sagging. There was an old weather-beaten rocking chair on the porch with a torn piece of cloth hanging over it.

Bubber went up the walk. As he started up the rickety steps he took a deep breath. He could smell it, the wonderful warm smell, and his mouth began to water. His heart thudding with anticipation, Bubber turned the handle of the bell. The bell grated rustily on the other side of the door. There was silence for a time, then the sounds of someone stirring.

Mrs Drew opened the door. She was old, very old, a little dried-up old lady, like the weeds that grew along the front of the house. She smiled down at Bubber, holding the door wide for him to come in.

"You're just in time," she said. "Come on inside, Bernard. You're just in time -- they're just now ready."

Bubber went to the kitchen door and looked in. He could see them, resting on a big blue plate on top of the stove. Cookies, a plate of warm, fresh cookies right out of the oven. Cookies with nuts and raisins in them.

"How do they look?" Mrs Drew said. She rustled past him, into the kitchen. "And maybe some cold milk, too. You like cold milk with them." She got the milk pitcher from the window box on the back porch. Then she poured a glass of milk for him and set some of the cookies on a small plate. "Let's go into the living room," she said.

Bubber nodded. Mrs Drew carried the milk and the cookies in and set them on the arm of the couch. Then she sat down in her own chair, watching Bubber plop himself down by the plate and begin to help himself.

Bubber ate greedily, as usual, intent on the cookies, silent except for chewing sounds. Mrs Drew waited patiently, until the boy had finished, and his already ample sides bulged that much more. When Bubber was done with the plate he glanced toward the kitchen again, at the rest of the cookies on the stove.

"Wouldn't you like to wait until later for the rest?" Mrs Drew said.

"All right," Bubber agreed.

"How were they?"

"Fine."

"That's good." She leaned back in her chair. "Well, what did you do in school today? How did it go?"

"All right."

The little old lady watched the boy look restlessly around the room. "Bernard," she said presently, "won't you stay and talk to me for a while?" He had some books on his lap, some school books.

'Why don't you read to me from your books? You know, I don't see too well anymore and it's comfort to me to be read to,'

'Can I have the rest of the cookies after?"

'Of course.'

Bubber moved over towards her, to the end of the couch. He opened his books, World Geography, Principles of Arithmetic, Hoyte's Speller.

'Which do you want?'

She hesitated. 'The Geography.'

Bubber opened the big blue book at random. PERU. "Peru is bounded on the north by Ecuador and Columbia, on the south by Chile, and on the east by Brazil and Bolivia. Peru is divided into three main sections. These are, first --"

The little old lady watched him read, his fat cheeks wobbling as he read, holding his finger next to the line. She was silent, watching him, studying the boy intently as he read, drinking in each frown of concentration, every motion of his arms and hands. She relaxed, letting herself sink back in her chair. He was very close to her, only a little way off. There was only the table and lamp between them. How nice it was to have him come; he had been coming for over a month, now, ever since the day she had been sitting on her porch and seen him go by and thought to call to him, pointing to the cookies by her rocker.

Why had she done it? She did not know. She had been alone so long that she found herself saying strange things and doing strange things. She saw so few people, only when she went down to the store or the mailman came with her pension check. Or the garbage men.

The boy's voice droned on. She was comfortable, peaceful and relaxed. The little old lady closed her eyes and folded her hands in her lap. And as she sat, dozing and listening, something began to happen. The little old lady was beginning to change, her gray wrinkles and lines dimming away. As she sat in the chair she was growing younger, the thin fragile body filling out

with youth again. The gray hair thickened and darkened, color coming to the wispy strands. Her arms filled, too, the mottled flesh turning a rich hue as it had been once, many years before.

Mrs Drew breathed deeply, not opening her eyes. She could feel something happening, but she did not know just what. Something was going on; she could feel it, and it was good. But what it was she did not exactly know. It had happened before, almost every time the boy came and sat by her. Especially of late, since she had moved her chair nearer to the couch. She took a deep breath. How good it felt, the warm fullness, a breath of warmth inside her cold body for the first time in years!

In her chair the little old lady had become a dark-haired matron of perhaps thirty, a woman with full cheeks and plump arms and legs. Her lips were red again, her neck even a little too fleshy, as it had been once in the long forgotten past.

Suddenly the reading stopped. Bubber put down his book and stood up. "I have to go," he said.

"Can I take the rest of the cookies with me?"

She blinked, rousing herself. The boy was in the kitchen, filling his pockets with cookies. She nodded, dazed, still under the spell. The boy took the last cookies. He went across the living room to the door. Mrs Drew stood up. All at once the warmth left her. She felt tired, tired and very dry. She caught her breath, breathing quickly. She looked down at her hands. Wrinkled, thin.

"Oh!" she murmured. Tears blurred her eyes. It was gone, gone again as soon as he moved away. She tottered to the mirror above the mantel and looked at herself. Old faded eyes stared back, eyes deep-set in a withered face. Gone, all gone, as soon as the boy had left her side.

"I'll see you later," Bubber said.

"Please," she whispered. "Please come back again. Will you come back?"

"Sure," Bubber said listlessly. He pushed the door open. "Good-bye." He went down the steps.

In a moment she heard his shoes against the sidewalk. He was gone.

"Bubber, you come in here!" May Surle stood angrily on the porch. "You get in here and sit down at the table."

"All right." Bubber came slowly up on to the porch, pushing inside the house."What's the matter with you?" She caught his arm."Where you been? Are you sick?"

"I'm tired." Bubber rubbed his forehead.

His father came through the living room with the newspapers, in his undershirt. "What's the matter?" he said.

"Look at him," May Surle said. "All worn out. What you been doing, Bubber?"

"He's been visiting that old lady," Ralf Surle said. "Can't you tell? He's always washed out after he's been visiting her. What do you go there for, Bub? What goes on?"

"She gives him cookies," May said. "You know how he is about things to eat. He'd do anything for a plate of cookies."

"Bub," his father said, "listen to me. I don't want you hanging around that crazy old lady anymore.

Do you hear me? I don't care how many cookies she gives you. You come home too tired! No more of that. You hear me?"

Bubber looked down at the floor, leaning against the door. His heart beat heavily, labored. "I told her I'd come back," he muttered.

"You can go once more," May said, going into the dining room, "but only once more. Tell her you won't be able to come

ack again, though. You make sure you tell her nice. Now go pstairs and get washed up."

"After dinner better have him lie down," Ralf said, looking up the stairs, watching Bubber climb slowly, his hand on the banister. He shook his head. "I don't like it," he murmured. "I don't want him going there any more. There's something strange about that old lady."

"Well, it'll be the last time," May said.

Wednesday was warm and sunny. Bubber strode along, his hands in his pockets. He stopped in front of McVane's drugstore for a minute, looking speculatively at the comic books. At the soda fountain a woman was drinking a big chocolate soda. The sight of it made Bubber's mouth water. That settled it.

He turned and continued on his way, even increasing his pace a little.

A few minutes later he came up on the the gray sagging porch and rang the bell. Below him the weeds blew and rustled with the wind. It was almost four o'clock; he could not stay too long: But then, it was the last time anyhow.

The door opened. Mrs Drew's wrinkled face broke into smiles. "Come in, Bernard. It's good to see you standing there. It makes me feel so young again to have you come visit."

He went inside, looking around.

"I'll start the cookies. I didn't know if you were coming." She padded into the kitchen. "I'll get them started right away. You sit down on the couch."

Bubber went over and sat down. He noticed that the table and lamp were gone; the chair was right up next to the couch. He was looking at the chair in perplexity when Mrs Drew came rustling back into the room.

'They're in the oven. I had the batter all ready. Now.'

She sat down in the chair with a sigh.

'Well, how did it go today? How was school?'

'Fine.'

She nodded. How plump he was, the little boy, sitting just a little distance from her, his cheeks red and full! She could touch him, he was so close. Her aged heart thumped. Ah, to be young again. Youth was so much. It was everything. What did the world mean to the old?

"Do you want to read to me, Bernard?" she asked presently.

"I didn't bring any books."

"Oh." She nodded. "Well, I have some books," she said quickly. "I'll get them."

She got up, crossing to the bookcase. As she opened the doors, Bubber said, "Mrs Drew, my father says I can't come here anymore. He says this is the last time. I thought I'd tell you."

She stopped, standing rigid. Everything seemed to leap around her, the room twisting furiously.

She took a harsh, frightened breath. "Bernard, you're – you're not coming back?" "No, my father says not to."

There was silence. The old lady took a book at random and came slowly back to her chair. After a while she passed the book to him, her hands trembling. The boy took it without expression, looking at its cover.

"Please, read, Bernard. Please."

"All right." He opened the book. "Where'll I start?"

"Anywhere. Anywhere, Bernard."

He began to read. It was something by Trollope; she only half heard the words. She put her hand to her forehead, the dry skin,

brittle and thin, like old paper. She trembled with anguish. The last time?

Bubber read on, slowly, monotonously. Against the window a fly buzzed. Outside the sun began to set, the air turning cool. A few clouds came up, and the wind in the trees rushed furiously.

The old lady sat, close by the boy, closer than ever, hearing him read, the sound of his voice, sensing him close by. Was this really the last time? Terror rose up in her heart and she pushed it back.

The last time! She gazed at him, the boy sitting so close to her. After a time she reached out her thin, dry hand. She took a deep breath. He would never be back. There would be no more times, no more. This was the last time he would sit there.

She touched his arm.

Bubber looked up. "What is it?" he murmured.

"You don't mind if I touch your arm, do you?"

"No, I guess not." He went on reading. The old lady could feel the youngness of him, flowing between her fingers, through her arm. A pulsating vibrating youngness, so close to her. It had never been that close, where she could actually touch it. The feel of life made her dizzy, unsteady.

And presently it began to happen, as before. She closed her eyes, letting it move over her, filling her up, carried into her by the sound of the voice and the feel of the arm. The change, the flow, was coming over her, the warm, rising feeling. She was blooming again, filling with life, swelling into richness, as she had been, once, long ago.

She looked down at her arms. Rounded, they were, and the nails clear. Her hair. Black again, heavy and black against her neck. She touched her cheek. The wrinkles had gone, the skin pliant and soft.

Joy filled her, a growing bursting joy. She stared around her, at the room. She smiled, feeling her firm teeth and gums, red lips, strong white teeth. Suddenly she got to her feet, her body secure and confident. She turned a little, lithe, quick circle.

Bubber stopped reading. "Are the cookies ready?" he said.

"I'll see." Her voice was alive, deep with a quality that had dried out many years before. Now it was there again, her voice, throaty and sensual. She walked quickly to the kitchen and opened the oven.

She took out the cookies and put them on top of the stove.

"All ready," she called gaily. "Come and get them."

Bubber came past her, his gaze fastened on the sight of the cookies. He did not even notice the woman by the door.

Mrs Drew hurried from the kitchen. She went into the bedroom, closing the door after her. Then she turned, gazing into the full-length mirror on the door. Young -- she was young again, filled out with the sap of vigorous youth. She took a deep breath, her steady bosom swelling. Her eyes flashed, and she smiled. She spun, her skirts flying. Young and lovely. And this time it had not gone away.

She opened the door. Bubber had filled his mouth and his pockets. He was standing in the center of the living room, his face fat and dull, a dead white.

"What's the matter?" Mrs Drew said.

"I'm going."

"All right, Bernard. And thanks for coming to read to me." She laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Perhaps I'll see you again some time."

"My father --"

"I know." She laughed gaily, opening the door for him. "Good-bye, Bernard. Good-bye."

She watched him go slowly down the steps, one at a time. Then she closed the door and skipped back into the bedroom. She unfastened her dress and stepped out of it, the worn gray fabric suddenly distasteful to her. For a brief second she gazed at her full, rounded body, her hands on her hips.

She laughed with excitement, turning a little, her eyes bright. What a wonderful body, bursting with life. A swelling breast -- she touched herself. The flesh was firm. There was so much, so many things to do! She gazed about her, breathing quickly. So many things! She started the water running in the bathtub and then went to tie her hair up.

The wind blew around him as he trudged home. It was late, the sun had set and the sky overhead was dark and cloudy. The wind that blew and nudged against him was cold, and it penetrated through his clothing, chilling him. The boy felt tired, his head ached, and he stopped every few minutes, rubbing his forehead and resting, his heart laboring. He left Elm Street and went up Pine Street. The wind screeched around him, pushing him from side to side. He shook his head, trying to clear it. How weary he was, how tired his arms and legs were. He felt the wind hammering at him, pushing and plucking at him.

He took a breath and went on, his head down. At the corner he stopped, holding on to a lamp-post. The sky was quite dark, the street lights were beginning to come on. At last he went on, walking as best he could.

"Where is that boy?" May Surle said, going out on the porch for the tenth time. Ralf flicked on the light and they stood together. "What an awful wind."

The wind whistled and lashed at the porch. The two of them looked up and down the dark street, but they could see nothing but a few newspapers and trash being blown along.

"Let's go inside," Ralf said. "He sure is going to get a licking when he gets home."

They sat down at the dinner table. Presently May put down her fork. "Listen! Do you hear something?"

Ralf listened.

Outside, against the front door, there was a faint sound, a tapping sound. He stood up. The wind howled outside, blowing the shades in the room upstairs.

'I'll go, see what it is,' he said.

He went to the door and opened it. Something gray, something gray and dry was blowing up against the porch, carried by the wind. He stared at it, but he could not make it out.

A bundle of weeds, weeds and rags blown by the wind perhaps.

The bundle bounced against his legs. He watched it drift past him, against the wall of the house.

Then he closed the door again slowly.

"What was it?" May called.

"Just the wind," Ralf Surle said.