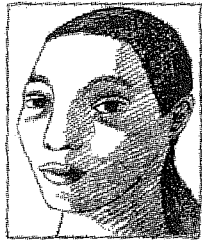
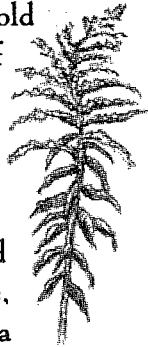


## LEONA



**M**ama believed in doctors, but not Granny. Not even if they were black. No, ma'am. I grew up in her house, back in Atlanta. She drank down a big cup of goldenrod tea every morning, with a nutmeg floating in it, and declared she didn't need no other medicine. Dr. Bates tried to sell her his iron pills and told her straight out that that tea of hers would raise her blood pressure and burst her heart. He passed away that very same summer. Next doctor said it would give her brain fever. He died on his fiftieth birthday, I believe, right during the party. Had him a



real nice funeral, later. Granny lived to ninety-nine, by her count. She kept a scrapbook with the obituaries of all the doctors she outlived and could recite the list of names by heart, like a chapter out of Genesis. We took to going to their funerals right regular over the years. She always laid some goldenrod on their graves.

I was thinking about her one day, walking home from the grocery store on Gibb Street. Then I came to the vacant lot and saw three people in different parts of it. I thought maybe they were looking for money. Turned out they had shovels, not metal detectors. When I saw they had little gardens going, I said to myself, "I believe I'll plant me a patch of goldenrod right here."

There was a man standing and watching from the sidewalk and a girl looking down out a window. There were probably lots of folks who'd want to grow something, just like me. Then I studied all the trash on the ground. Don't know why anyone called that lot "vacant." The garbage was piled high as your waist, some of it from the neighborhood and some dropped off by

outside people. The ones who don't want to pay at the dump, or got dangerous chemicals, or think we're such slobs down here we won't mind another load of junk. We can't get City Hall to *pick up* our trash, but we got it *delivered* just fine. The smell's enough to curl up a crocodile's nose, especially in the summer. The gardeners had made some trails through it. But I knew precious few would join 'em until that mess was hauled away. Looking at it, I knew this wasn't a job for no wheelbarrow. This was a job for the telephone.

I marched on home. I've got two kids in a high school that has more guns than books, so I know all about complaining to officials and such about things that need changing. Next morning was Monday. At nine o'clock I drank me a tall glass of water. I knew I'd be having to say the same thing to fifteen or twenty government folks. I put Miles on the CD player and stretched out on the bed. Might as well be comfortable when you're on hold. Then I opened the phone book and started in dialing.

You ever watch a sax player close? They push down a key and way at the other

end of the instrument something moves. That's what I was looking for—the key that would make that trash disappear. I tried the City of Cleveland, then Cuyahoga County, then the State of Ohio, and finally the U.S. government. Six and a half hours later I found out the lot was owned by the city. But the people running Cleveland don't usually come down here, unless they take a wrong turn on the freeway. You can't measure the distance between my block and City Hall in miles.

Just the same, I kept working on it the next day. That Citizens' Information Center told me to call the Public Health Department. They sent me to someone else. They're all trained to be slippery as snakes. And to be out to lunch, to not return messages, and to keep folks on hold till they get gray and die. I had the feeling I was getting farther from the key I needed instead of closer. Then on the third day, I thought on it. When people talk to you on the phone, you're nothing but a voice. And when you're on hold you're not even that. I had to make myself real to 'em.

That morning I took a bus downtown and

walked into the Public Health Department. Told about the trash all over again to this dolled-up receptionist. Let her see me up close and personal and hear me loud and clear. She just told me to sit down with the others waiting. I did. Then I opened the garbage bag I'd picked up in the lot on my way.

The smell that came out of it made you think of hog pens and maggots and kitchen scraps from back when Nixon was president. It was amazing how quick people noticed it, including that receptionist. And even more amazing how quick I was called in to have a meeting with someone. I was *definitely* real to them now. I brought that bag along with me into the meeting, to keep it that way.