

The Relatives Came

BY CYNTHIA RYLANT

It was in the summer of the year when the relatives came. They came up from Virginia left when their grapes were nearly purple enough to pick, but not quite. They had a station wagon that smelled like a real car, and in it they put an ice chest full of soda and some boxes of crackers and some bologna sandwiches, and they came from Virginia.

They left at four in the morning when it was still dark, before even the birds were awake. They drove all day long and into the night, and while they traveled along they looked at the houses and different mountains and they thought about their almost purple grapes back home. They thought about Virginia—but they thought about us, too. Waiting for them. So they drove all their pop and ate up all their crackers and traveled up all those miles until finally they came into our yard.

Then it was hugging time. Talk about hugging! Those relatives just passed us all around the car, pulling us against their wrinkled Virginia clothes, crying sometimes. They hugged us for hours. Then it was into the house and so much laughing and shining faces and hugging in the doorways. You'd have to go through at least four different hugs to get from the kitchen to the front room. Those relatives! And finally after a big supper two or three times around until everyone got a turn at the table, there was quiet talk and we were in twos and threes through the house.

The relatives weren't particular about beds, which was good since there weren't any extra beds. A few squeezed in with us and the rest slept on the floor, some with their arms thrown around the closest person, or some with an arm across one person and a leg across another. It was difficult going to sleep with all that new breathing in the house.

The relatives stayed for weeks and weeks. They helped us tend the garden and they fixed the broken things they could find. They ate up all our strawberries and melons, then promised to eat up all their grapes and peaches when we came to Virginia. But none of us thought about Virginia much. We were so busy hugging and eating and breathing together.

Finally, after a long time, the relatives loaded up their ice chest and headed back to Virginia at four in the morning. We stood there in our pajamas and waved them off in the dark. We watched the relatives disappear down the road, then we crawled back into our beds that felt too quiet. We fell asleep.

And the relatives drove on, all day long and into the night, and while they traveled along they looked at the strange houses and different mountains and they thought about their dark grapes waiting at home in Virginia. But they thought about us, too. Missing them. And they missed us. And when they were finally home in Virginia, they crawled into their silent beds and dreamed about next summer. ■