

WHY I LIVE AT THE P. O.

BY EUDORA WELTY

I

I WAS getting along fine with Mama, Papa-Daddy, and Uncle Rondo till my sister Stella-Rondo just separated from her husband and came back home again. Mr. Whitaker! Of course I went with Mr. Whitaker first, when he first appeared here in China Grove, taking Pose-Yourself photos; and Stella-Rondo broke us up. Told him I was one-sided — bigger on one side than the other, which is a deliberate, calculated falsehood: I'm the same. Stella-Rondo is exactly twelve months to the day younger than I am, and for that reason she's spoiled.

She's always had anything in the world she wanted, and then she'd throw it away. Papa-Daddy gave her this gorgeous Add-a-Pearl necklace when she was eight years old and she threw it away playing baseball when she was nine, with only two pearls.

So as soon as she got married and moved away from home, the first thing she did was separate! From Mr. Whitaker — this photographer with the pop-eyes she said she trusted! Came home from one of those towns up in Illinois, and to our complete surprise brought this child of two.

Mama said she liked to make her drop dead for a second. 'Here you had this marvelous blonde child and never so much as wrote your mother a word about it,' says Mama. 'I'm thoroughly ashamed of you.' But of course she wasn't.

Stella-Rondo just calmly takes off

this hat with a snood. She says, 'Why, Mama, Shirley-T.'s adopted — I can prove it.'

'How?' says Mama, but all I says was, 'H'm!'

There I was over the hot stove trying to stretch two chickens over five people and a completely unexpected child into the bargain, without one moment's notice.

'What do you mean — "H'm!"' says Stella-Rondo, and Mama says, 'I heard that, Sister.'

I said that oh I didn't mean a thing, only that whoever Shirley-T. was she was the spit-image of Papa-Daddy if he'd cut off his beard, which of course he'd never do in the world. Papa-Daddy is Mama's papa and sulks.

Stella-Rondo got furious! She said, 'Sister, I don't need to tell you you got a lot of nerve and always did have, and I'll thank you to make no future reference to my adopted child whatsoever.'

'Very well,' I said, 'very well, very well. Of course I noticed at once she looks like Mr. Whitaker's side too. That frown. She looks like a cross between Mr. Whitaker and Papa-Daddy.'

'Well, all I can say is she isn't.'

'She looks exactly like Shirley Temple to me,' says Mama, but Shirley-T. just ran away from her.

So the first thing Stella-Rondo did at the table was turn Papa-Daddy against me.

'Papa-Daddy,' she says. (He was

trying to cut up his meat.) 'Papa-Daddy!' (I was taken completely by surprise. Papa-Daddy is about a million years old and's got this long-long beard.) 'Papa-Daddy, Sister says she fails to understand why you don't cut off your beard.'

So Papa-Daddy lays down his knife and fork! He's real rich. Mamma says he is; he says he isn't. So he says, 'So you don't understand why I don't cut off my beard.'

'Why,' I says, 'Papa-Daddy, of course I understand. I did not say any such of a thing — the idea!'

He says, 'Hussy!'

I says, 'Why, Papa-Daddy, you know I wouldn't any more want you to cut off your beard than the man in the moon. It was the farthest thing from my mind! Stella-Rondo sat there and made that up while she was eating breast of chicken.'

But he says, 'So the postmistress fails to understand why I don't cut off my beard. Which job I got you through my influence with the government. Maybe you think it's a bird's nest. Is that it?'

Not that it isn't the next-to-smallest P.O. in the entire state of Mississippi.

I says, 'Oh, Papa-Daddy.' I says, 'I didn't say any such of a thing. I never dreamed it was a bird's nest. I have always been grateful, though this is the next-to-smallest P.O. in the state of Mississippi, and I do not enjoy being referred to as a hussy by my own grandfather.'

But Stella-Rondo says, 'Yes, you did say it, too. Anybody in the world could of heard you that had ears.'

'Stop right there,' says Mama, looking at me.

So I drew my napkin straight back through the napkin ring and left the table.

As soon as I was out of the room, Stella-Rondo says, 'She said it not once but repeatedly,' and Papa-Daddy says, 'Started growing it on the Coast when

I was fifteen years old.' He would of gone on till nightfall if Shirley-T. hadn't lost the Milky Way she ate in Cairo.

So Papa-Daddy says, 'I am going out and lie in the hammock and you can all sit here and remember my words: I'll never cut off my beard as long as I live, even one inch, and I don't appreciate it in you at all.'

Passed right by me in the hall and went straight out and got in the hammock.

II

It *would* be a holiday. It wasn't five minutes before Uncle Rondo suddenly appeared in the hall in one of Stella-Rondo's flesh-colored kimonos all cut on the bias like something Mr. Whitaker probably thought was gorgeous.

'Uncle Rondo!' I says. 'I didn't know who that was! Where are you going?'

'Sister,' he says, 'get out of the way. I'm poisoned.'

'Then stay away from Papa-Daddy,' I says. 'Keep out of the hammock. Papa-Daddy will certainly beat you on the head if you come within forty miles of him: he thinks I deliberately said he ought to cut off his beard after he got me the P.O., and I've told him and told him and told him, and he acts like he just don't hear me. Papa-Daddy must of gone stone-deaf.'

'Well, he picked a fine day to do it then,' says Uncle Rondo, and before you could say Jack Robinson he flew out in the yard.

What he'd really done, he'd drunk another bottle of that prescription; he does it every single Fourth of July as sure as shooting, and it's horribly expensive. Then he falls over in the hammock and snores. So he insisted on zigzagging right on out to the hammock, looking like a half-wit.

Papa-Daddy woke up with this horrible yell, and right there in the hammock he tried to turn Uncle Rondo against me.

I heard every word he said. Oh, he told Uncle Rondo I didn't learn to read till I was eight years old and he didn't see how in the world I ever got the mail put up at the P. O., much less read it all, and he said if Uncle Rondo could only fathom the lengths he had gone to to get me that job! And he said on the other hand he thought Stella-Rondo had a brilliant mind and deserved credit for getting out of town. All the time he was just lying there swinging as pretty as you please and looping out his beard, and poor Uncle Rondo was *pleading* with him to stop the hammock, it was making him so dizzy. He was too dizzy to get turned against me as yet. He's Mama's only brother, never married, and is a good case of a one-track mind. Ask anybody. A certified pharmacist.

Just then I heard Stella-Rondo raising the upstairs window. While she was married she got this peculiar idea that it's cooler with the windows shut and locked. So she has to raise the window before she can make a soul hear her outdoors.

So she raises the window and says, 'Oh!' You would have thought she was mortally wounded.

Uncle Rondo and Papa-Daddy didn't even look up. I had to laugh.

I flew upstairs and threw the door open. I says, 'What in the wide world's the matter, Stella-Rondo? You mortally wounded?'

'No,' she says, 'I am not mortally wounded, but I wish you would do me the favor of looking out that window there and telling me what you see.'

So I shade my eyes and look out the window.

'I see the front yard,' I says.

'Don't you see any human beings?' she says.

'I see Uncle Rondo trying to run Papa-Daddy out of the hammock,' I says. 'Nothing more. Naturally, it's so suffocating-hot in the house, with all the windows shut and locked, everybody who stays in their right mind will have

to go out and get in the hammock before the Fourth of July is over.'

'Don't you notice anything different about Uncle Rondo?' asks Stella-Rondo.

'Why, no, except he's got on some terrible-looking flesh-colored contraption I wouldn't be found dead in, is all I can see,' I says.

'Never mind, you won't be found dead in it, because it happens to be part of my trousseau, and Mr. Whitaker took several dozen photographs of me in it,' says Stella-Rondo. 'What on earth could Uncle Rondo *mean* by wearing part of my trousseau out in the broad open daylight without saying so much as kiss-my-foot, *knowing* I only got home this morning after my separation and hung my negligee up on the bathroom door, just as nervous as I could be?'

'Well, what do you expect me to do about it?' I says. 'Jump out the window?'

'No, I expect nothing of the kind. I simply say that Uncle Rondo looks like a fool in it, that's all,' she says.

'Well, he looks as good as he can,' I says. 'As good as anybody in reason could.' I stood up for Uncle Rondo, please remember. And I said to Stella-Rondo, 'I think I would do well not to criticize so freely if I were you, and came home with a two-year-old child I had never said a word about and no explanation whatever about my separation.'

'I asked you the instant I entered this house not to refer one more time to my adopted child and you gave me your word of honor you would not,' was all Stella-Rondo would say, and started pulling out every one of her eyebrows with some cheap tweezers.

So I merely slammed the door behind me and went down and made some green-tomato pickle. Somebody had to do it. Of course Mama had turned both the Negroes loose; she always said no earthly power could hold one anyway on the

Fourth of July, so she wouldn't even try. It turned out that Jaypan fell in Eagle Lake and came within a very narrow limit of drowning.

So Mama trots in. Lifts up the lid and says, 'H'm! Not very good for your Uncle Rondo in his precarious condition, I must say. Or poor little adopted Shirley-T. Shame on you!'

That made me tired. I says, 'Well, Stella-Rondo had better thank her lucky stars it was her instead of me come trotting in with that very peculiar-looking child. Now if it had been me that trotted in from Illinois and brought a peculiar-looking child of two, I shudder to think of the reception I'd of got, much less controlled the diet of an entire family.'

'But you must remember, Sister, that you were never married to Mr. Whitaker in the first place and didn't go up to Illinois to live,' says Mama, shaking a spoon in my face. 'If you had, I would of been just as overjoyed to see you and your little adopted girl as I was to see Stella-Rondo, when you wound up with your separation and came on back home.'

'You would not,' I says.

'Don't contradict me! I would,' says Mama.

But I said she couldn't convince me though she talked till she was blue in the face. Then I said, 'Besides, you know as well as I do that that child is not adopted.'

'She most certainly is adopted,' says Mama, stiff as a poker.

I says, 'Why, Mama, Stella-Rondo had her just as sure as anything in this world, and just too stuck-up to admit it.'

'Why, Sister!' says Mama. 'Here I thought we were going to have a pleasant Fourth of July and you start right out not believing a word your own baby sister tells you!'

'Just like Cousin Annie Flo. Went to her grave denying the facts of life,' I remind Mama.

'I told you if you ever mentioned Annie Flo's name I'd slap your face,' says Mama, and slaps my face.

'All right, you wait and see,' I says.

'I,' says Mama, 'I prefer to take my children's word for anything when it's humanly possible.' You ought to see Mama — she weighs two hundred and two pounds and has real tiny feet.

Just then something perfectly horrible occurred to me.

'Mama!' I says. 'Can that child talk?' I simply had to whisper! 'Mama, I wonder if that child can be — you know — in any way? Do you realize,' I says, 'that she hasn't spoken one single solitary word to a human being up to this minute? This is the way she looks,' I says, and I looked like this.

Well, Mama and I just stood there and stared at each other. It was horrible!

'I remember well that Joe Whitaker frequently drank like a fish,' says Mama. 'I believed to my soul he drank *chemicals*.' And without another word she marches to the foot of the stairs and calls Stella-Rondo.

'Stella-Rondo? O-o-o-o-o-oh, Stella-Rondo!'

'What!' says Stella-Rondo from upstairs. Not even the grace to get up off the bed.

'Can that child of yours talk?' asks Mama.

Stella-Rondo says, 'Can she what?'

'Talk! Talk!' says Mama. 'Burdy-burdy-burdy-burdy!'

So Stella-Rondo yells back, 'Who says she can't talk?'

'Sister says so,' says Mama.

'You didn't have to tell me — I know whose word of honor don't mean a thing in this house,' says Stella-Rondo.

And in a minute the loudest Yankee voice I ever heard in my life yells out, 'Oi'm Pop-oi the Sailor-r-r-r Ma-a-an!' and then somebody jumps up and down in the upstairs hall. In another second the house would of fallen down.

'Not only talks, she can tap-dance!'

calls Stella-Rondo. 'Which is more than some people I won't name can do.'

'Why, the little precious darling thing!' Mama says, so surprised. 'Just as smart as she can be!' Starts talking baby talk right there. Then she turns on me. 'Sister, you ought to be thoroughly ashamed! Run upstairs this instant and apologize to Stella-Rondo and Shirley-T.'

'Apologize for what?' I says. 'I merely wondered if the child was normal, that's all. Now that she's proved she is, why, I have nothing further to say.'

But Mama just turned on her heel and flew out, furious. She ran right upstairs and hugged the baby. She believed it was adopted. Stella-Rondo had turned her against me from upstairs while I stood there helpless over the hot stove. So that made Mama, Papa-Daddy, and the baby all on Stella-Rondo's side.

Next, Uncle Rondo.

I must say that Uncle Rondo has been wonderful to me at various times in the past, and I was completely unprepared to be made to jump out of my skin, the way it turned out. Once Stella-Rondo did something perfectly horrible to him — broke a chain letter from Flanders Field — and he took the radio back he had given her and gave it to me. Stella-Rondo was furious! For six months we all had to call her Stella instead of Stella-Rondo, or she wouldn't answer. I always thought Uncle Rondo had all the brains of the entire family — a brilliant mind. Another time he sent me to Mammoth Cave, with all expenses paid.

But this would be the day he was drinking that prescription, the Fourth of July.

So at supper Stella-Rondo speaks up and says she thinks Uncle Rondo ought to try to eat a little something. So finally Uncle Rondo said he would try a little cold biscuits and ketchup, but that was all. So *she* brought it to him.

'Do you think it wise to disport with ketchup in Stella-Rondo's flesh-colored

kimono?' I says. Trying to be considerate! If Stella-Rondo couldn't watch out for her underwear, somebody had to.

'Any objections?' says Uncle Rondo, just about to pour out the ketchup.

'Don't mind what she says, Uncle Rondo,' says Stella-Rondo. 'Sister has been devoting this solid afternoon to sneering out my bedroom window at the way you look.'

'What's that?' says Uncle Rondo. Uncle Rondo has got the most terrible temper in the world. Anything is liable to make him tear the house down if it comes at the wrong time.

So Stella-Rondo says, 'Sister says, "Uncle Rondo certainly does look like a fool in that pink kimono!"'

Do you remember who it was really said that?

Uncle Rondo spills all the ketchup out and jumps up and tears off the kimono and throws it down on the dirty floor and puts his foot on it. It had to be sent all the way to Jackson to the cleaners and repleated.

'So that's your opinion of your Uncle Rondo, is it?' he says. 'I look like a fool, do I? Well, that's the last straw. A whole day in this house with nothing to do, and then to hear you come out with a remark like that behind my back!'

'I didn't say any such of a thing, Uncle Rondo,' I says, 'and I'm not saying who did, either. Why, I think you look all right. Just try to take care of yourself and not talk and eat at the same time,' I says. 'I think you better go lie down.'

'Lie down my foot!' says Uncle Rondo. I ought to of known by that he was fixing to do something perfectly horrible.

III

So he didn't do anything that night in the precarious state he was in — just played casino with Mama and Stella-Rondo and Shirley-T., and gave Shirley-

T. a nickel with a head on both sides and tickled her nearly to death, and she called him 'Papa' and he believed she was adopted. Men believe anything. But at 6.30 A.M. the next morning he threw a whole five-cent package of some unsold one-inch firecrackers from the store as hard as he could into my bedroom and they every one went off. Not one bad one in the string. Anybody else, there'd be one that wouldn't go off.

Well, I'm just terribly susceptible to noise of any kind; the doctor has always told me I was the most sensitive person he had ever seen in his whole life; and I was simply prostrated. I couldn't eat! People tell me they heard it as far as the cemetery, and old Aunt Jep Patterson, that had been holding her own so good, thought it was Judgment Day and she was going to meet her whole family. It's usually so quiet here.

And I'll tell you it didn't take me long to make up my mind what to do. There I was with the whole entire house on Stella-Rondo's side and turned against me. If I have anything, I have pride.

So I just decided I'd go straight down to the P. O. There's plenty of room there in the back, I says to myself.

Well, I made no bones about letting the family catch on to what I was up to. I didn't try to conceal it.

The first thing they knew, I marched in where they were all playing Old Maid and pulled the electric oscillating fan out by the plug, and everything got real hot. Next I snatched the pillow I'd done the needlepoint on right off the davenport from behind Papa-Daddy. He went 'Ugh!' I beat Stella-Rondo upstairs and finally found my slave bracelet in her bureau drawer under a picture of Nelson Eddy.

'So that's the way the land lies,' says Uncle Rondo. There he was, piecing on the ham. 'Well, Sister, I'll be glad to donate my army cot if you got any place you can set it up, providing you'll leave

right this minute and let me get some peace.' Uncle Rondo was in France.

'Thank you kindly for the cot, and peace is hardly the word I would select if I had to resort to firecrackers at 6.30 A.M. in a young girl's bedroom,' I says back to him. 'And as to where I intend to go, you seem to forget my position as postmistress of China Grove, Mississippi,' I says. 'I've always got the P. O.'

Well, that made them all sit up and take notice.

I went out front and started digging up some four-o'clocks to plant around the P. O.

'Ah-ah-ah!' says Mama, raising the window. 'Those happen to be my four-o'clocks. Everything planted in that star is mine. I've never known you to make anything grow in your life.'

'Very well,' I says. 'But I take the fern. Even you, Mama, can't stand there and deny that I'm the one watered that fern. And I happen to know where I can send in a box top and get a packet of one thousand mixed seeds, no two the same kind, free.'

'Oh, where?' Mama wants to know.

But I says, 'Too late. You tend to your house and I'll tend to mine. You hear things like that all the time if you know how to listen to the radio. Perfectly marvelous offers. Get anything you want free.'

So I hope to tell you I marched in and got that radio and they could of all bit a nail in two, especially Stella-Rondo, that it used to belong to, and she well knew she couldn't get it back — I'd sue for it like a shot. And I very politely took the sewing-machine motor I helped pay the most on to give Mama for Christmas back in 1929, and a good big calendar, with the first-aid remedies on it. The thermometer and the Hawaiian ukulele certainly were rightfully mine, and I stood on the stepladder and got all my watermelon-rind preserves and every fruit and vegetable I'd put up, every jar. Then I began to pull the tacks out

of the bluebird wall vases on the archway to the dining room.

'Who told you you could have those, Miss Priss?' says Mama, fanning as hard as she could.

'I bought 'em and I'll keep track of 'em,' I says. 'I'll tack 'em up one on each side the post-office window and you can see 'em when you come to ask me for your mail, if you're so dead to see 'em.'

'Not I! I'll never darken the door to that post office again if I live to be a hundred,' Mama says. 'Ungrateful child! After all the money we spent on you at the Normal.'

'Me either,' says Stella-Rondo. 'You can just let my mail lie there and *rot* for all I care. I'll never come and relieve you of a single solitary piece.'

'I should worry,' I says. 'And who you think's going to sit down and write you all those big fat letters and postcards, by the way? Mr. Whitaker? Just because he was the only man ever dropped down in China Grove and you got him — unfairly — is he going to sit down and write you a lengthy correspondence after you come home giving no rhyme nor reason whatsoever for your separation and no explanation for the presence of that child? I may not have your brilliant mind, but I fail to see it.'

So Mama says, 'Sister, I've told you a thousand times that Stella-Rondo simply got homesick and this child is far too big to be hers'; and she says, 'Now why don't you all just sit down and play casino?'

Then Shirley-T. sticks out her tongue at me in this perfectly horrible way. She has no more manners than the man in the moon. I told her she was going to cross her eyes like that some day and they'd stick.

'It's too late to stop me now,' I says. 'You should have tried that yesterday. I'm going to the P.O., and the only way you can possibly see me is to visit me there.'

So Papa-Daddy says, 'You'll never catch me settin' foot in that post office, even if I should take a notion into my head to write a letter some place.' He says, 'I won't have you reachin' out of that little old window with a pair of shears and cuttin' off any beard of mine. I'm too smart for you!'

'We all are,' says Stella-Rondo.

But I said, 'If you're so smart, where's Mr. Whitaker?'

So then Uncle Rondo says, 'I'll thank you from now on to stop reading the orders I get on postcards and telling everybody in China Grove what you think is the matter with them,' but I says, 'I draw my own conclusions and will continue in the future to draw them.' I says, 'If people write their inmost secrets on penny postcards, there's nothing in the wide world you can do about it, Uncle Rondo.'

'And if you think we'll ever *write* another postcard, you're sadly mistaken,' says Mama.

'Cutting off your nose to spite your face, then,' I says. 'But if you're all determined to have no more to do with the U.S. Mail, think of this: what will Stella-Rondo do now if she wants to tell Mr. Whitaker to come after her?'

'Wah!' says Stella-Rondo. I knew she'd cry. She had a conniption fit right there in the living room.

'It will be interesting to see how long she holds out,' I says. 'And now — I am leaving.'

'Good-bye,' says Uncle Rondo.

'Oh, I declare!' says Mama. 'To think that a family of mine should quarrel on the Fourth of July, over Stella-Rondo leaving old Mr. Whitaker and having the sweetest little adopted child! It looks like we'd all be glad!'

'Wah!' says Stella-Rondo, and has a fresh conniption fit.

'*He* left *her* — you mark my words,' I says. '*That's* Mr. Whitaker. I know Mr. Whitaker. After all, I knew him first. I said from the beginning he'd up and leave her. I foretold it all.'

'Where did he go?' asks Mama.

'Probably to the North Pole, if he knows what's good for him,' I says.

But Stella-Rondo just bawled and wouldn't say another word. She flew to her room and slammed the door.

'Now look what you've done, Sister,' says Mama. 'You go apologize.'

'No, I am leaving,' I says.

'Well, what are you waiting around for?' asks Uncle Rondo.

So I just marched off without saying kiss-my-foot or anything, and never did tell Stella-Rondo good-bye.

There was a Negro girl going along on a little wagon right in front.

'Girl,' I says, 'come help me haul these things down the hill. I'm going to live in the post office.'

Took her nine trips in her express wagon. Uncle Rondo came out on the porch and threw her a nickel.

IV

And that's the last I've laid eyes on any of my family or my family laid eyes on me for five solid days and nights. Stella-Rondo may be telling the most horrible tales in the world about Mr. Whitaker, but I haven't heard them.

As I tell everybody, I draw my own conclusions.

But oh, I like it here. It's ideal, as I've been saying. You see, I've got everything cater-cornered, the way I like it. Hear the radio? All the war news. Radio, sewing machine, book ends, ironing board, and that great big piano lamp — peace, that's what I like. Butter-bean vines planted all along the front where the strings are.

Of course, there's not much mail. My family are naturally the main people in China Grove, and if they prefer to vanish from the face of the earth, for all the mail they get or the mail they write, why, I'm not going to open my mouth. Some of the folks here in town are taking up for me and some turned against me. I know which is which. There are always people who will quit buying stamps just to get on the good side of Papa-Daddy.

But here I am, and here I'll stay. I want the world to know I'm happy.

And if Stella-Rondo should come to me this minute, on bended knees, and *attempt* to explain the incidents of her life with Mr. Whitaker, I'd simply put my fingers in both my ears and refuse to listen.

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