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What Can You Do?

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What Can You Do? · *Ruth Stone*

Mrs. Dubosky pulls a handful
of sharpened pencils out of her apron pocket.
They're for the grandchildren.
She picks envelopes out of wastepaper baskets
and soaks off the stamps.
The boys have a stamp collection.
Mrs. Dubosky is paying on a trailer.
She can't retire until she's paid off the seven thousand.
She's sixty-two.
Mrs. Dubosky says, "We'll see."
Her new daughter-in-law lives in the trailer.
Her old daughter-in-law has the house.
"What are you going to do?" Mrs. Dubosky says,
looking at me. "He's my only son.
He's come home. Want a kiss.
You know, those private things.
He's away all week pulling that semi to New Jersey.
And she says, 'Not now. I'm busy.'
Or, 'Leave me alone.'
He says, 'Ma, right then I knew.'
He made himself a bed upstairs.
He said, 'Let her go on, who cares?'
Then he asked her, 'How come Don is here
when I get home midnight? He's got a wife and kids.
What's he doing here all the time?' And she says,
'Are you accusing me?'
You know, I had my trailer on my son's land.
I had the hole under it for the flush toilet
and I had to move it to a trailer park.
That woman got everything."
Mrs. Dubosky wears other people's old tennis shoes.
Chemicals in the cleaning water eat right through them.
She's got a bad leg.
Her mother's legs were bad. They had to be amputated.

While her mother was in the hospital
her father's colostomy quit working and he got a blockage.
Her mother told her, "You burnt him. I know you did."
"Oh, no Ma."
"Yes, you did," she said. "I saw it in the paper."
"Marriage," says Mrs. Dubosky. "You know how it is.
I had just had the baby.
My husband was after me all the time.
You know, physical.
Oh, he slapped me but that's not what I mean.
My mother came over and she said,
'What's the matter with you?'
You know, the eye-bags was down on the cheeks.
I says, 'He's always after me,'
and she says, 'You're gonna come home.'
The judge said he'd never seen a case that bad.
You know what he called him? He said,
'You're nothing but a beast.' "
Mrs. Dubosky isn't sure. She says,
"What can you do?"
When she retires, she tells me,
she's going to get a dog. One of those nice little ones.
"When you rub them on the belly
they lie back limp," she says, "and just let you."