

Chapter VII

The Envy of the Neighborhood

They say it's supposed to be cooler tomorrow. But like Orphan Annie put it, that's always a day away. (And the goblins'll get ya if ya don't watch out.)

What makes it doubly frustrating is the idea that there's people out there cooler off than *we* are, RIGHT NOW. And I don't just mean wolves in the Yukon or Eskimo Piemakers. Is there some *religious* reason why you object to having an air conditioner?

All right, all right, don't have a spaz; it was just a suggestion. Quit being such a grouch.

I mean, it's not like I'm some pampered la-de-da debutante who's never been *un-air-conditioned*. We didn't have one in Marble Orchard; we had porches instead. Front porch, side porch, back porch—all full of gliders and rockers and suchlike. We'd sit out there to catch the breeze and swat the bugs and gulp lemonade and so on.

(I'm going to make myself a little drink. You want anything? Did you get more Gilbey's? Hey, this is *vodka!* Oog! Don't you know how they *make* vodka? They pour rubbing alcohol over a peck of Polish potatoes! Oh well—thank God for V-8 juice, at least. Two Bloody Marys coming up—oops—um, make that one Bloody and one Hemophiliac.)

So anyhoo... what was I talking about? What do you mean, "when?" All the time! Oh right, the House With All the Porches. It wasn't that enormous indoors, but we had all those porches plus a treehouse out back and four acres of yard, including this big honking vegetable garden. Flowers too, but mostly veggies and berries and other edibobbles. For the

longest time they had me convinced it was *fun* to work in that garden, pulling weeds and stuff. It even had a scarecrow called Clem, but he was mostly decorative so there was also this bell on a pole you could ring to send the crows packing. At family get-togethers I always got to ring the bell to signal dinnertime, 'cause I was the youngest one there. And every time it just tore up Jerry-the-Creep Hungerford's jealous guts, 'cause he'd've been the youngest if I hadn't happened along.

(Slurp.)

That garden. The stuff we grew—everything imaginable, right down to sprigs of parsley. Grampa Otto used to spend hours tending it and winning prizes for it and calling it “the envy of the neighborhood,” before he got sick. We didn't grow it just to make the neighbors green-eyed, or even just to save money; Gramma'd say you could “taste the goodness” when something was homegrown. But then she always insisted on storebought potato salad, too; so there you are.

(Slurp.)

There was a brook out back that was too shallow for doing anything really adventurous, but you could paddle your feet in it on hot days. It was out along the railroad tracks. I got so used to hearing trains go by at night that I had a hard time falling asleep after I moved to Demortuis. We'd put pennies on the tracks, 'cause Dougie-the-Kook Hungerford claimed you could derail a train that way; but none ever did. (Doug's spent a few years in rehab, though.)

(Want a refill? These V-8 Marys kind of grow on you. Must be my green thumb.)

Have I told you yet about the treehouse? It was an actual sure-enough House in the Trees, straddling these colossal twin oaks I forget how many feet high, with real shingles on the roof and real glass in the window frames, and this real long rope to swing from. I remember the first time the Hungerfords took me up there, to show me the swing and where to jump from and so forth. “You've got to hold on tight, with both hands,” Mickey's saying (he hadn't bought the farm yet) when Jerry the Creep butts in: “Yeah! Otherwise you'll wrap the rope around your neck and *hang* yourself!”

“Like Uncle Murgatroyd?” I say, and ad-lib this neat-o story about a mythical uncle who *had* hanged himself on the treehouse rope after getting jilted by a cruel figure skater named Heidi. Boy, did I lay it on—even had the Creep half-believing it, till I went “Heavens to Murgatroyd” in a Snagglepuss voice, and then he got mad and broke every commandment in the book by *shoving* me (the bastard!) so I stomped on his creepy bastard foot, and while he was hopping around it was easy to trip him and knock him on his sorry ass.

I learned some *good* cusswords that day.

(Slurp.)

(Thirsty tonight.)

I spent a lot of time up in that treehouse by myself. As much or more than in my regular bedroom, which was the little one back by the linen cupboard. It had this bitesized four-poster bed, just right for somebody my height but with the noisiest springs you ever did hear. Luckily this was ages before I started doing any serious bed-squinketing. (I did lure Jeff Scolley up to the treehouse once or twice, but nothing happened—unless you count “overbite exploration.”)

The bed had a velveteen patchwork quilt and these enormous feather pillows from which tiny wisps of fluff kept escaping, tra la, off to Feather Adventureland. I inherited them all—bed, quilt, pillowfluff—from Gramma Otto’s Aunt Livy. Who would be my great-great- (or maybe it’s great-*great*-great-) aunt, if you’re still trying to follow this. Everything in that room, practically, had been hers. And as I was reminded umpty times, “Aunt Livy kept it in apple-pie order every day of her life, even when she was over eighty.”

(I didn’t, when I was eight.)

(Slurp.)

I guess I can be a little homesick about the place, now. But GEE ZUSS it got to be boring. Not a whole lot ever happened in Marble Orchard. I’m not saying it was a bad place to live; just that it was so DEADLY DULL. My mom fell into the nostalgia trap a few years ago and made *AR*nold move back there with her after Gramma died. And now Mom’s stuck out there, in the house she grew up in, bored out of her skull.

(Slurp.)

You know what that's like? Always feeling restless? At loose ends? Like you're wasting your life? Despite knowing, deep down in your heart of hearts, that you're *better* than well-adjusted? And uniquely unforgettable? Except that other people have somehow lost sight of that fact—lost you in the crowd, and your name from their brains—despite your being the Onliest One of a Kind of Distinct Significance?

(Do I have a way with words, or what?)

Told you I wasn't any ignoramus. You may not think it to look at me, but *I* am a voracious reader. Been one all my life. Even when I was little, I collected hilarious vocabulary words like “voracious” and “obsession”—and “sotto voice,” which I thought was the way you talk when you get drunk.

(Har har.)

I read this book once that had a character who was a “B-girl.” I thought that meant she dressed up in a little bumblebee outfit—a striped teddy with a stinger on her tush instead of a Playboy cottontail, and spring-antennas instead of rabbit ears.

But it's not like that, not at all. It's just lame and bleak and nothing but near dowels. That's how I thought “ne'er-do-wells” was pronounced, when I was a kid and didn't realize how goddam accurate I was. “Near dowels” is right, all right; as near as you can get. Till you think there's nothing left for you but Chinese Communism: no more pretty clothes, no more steppin' out, no more parties or clubs or fun of any kind. Spend New Year's Eve alone in some crummy hole with a leaky ceiling and a bottle of tequila but not enough lime so that next morning you feel like molten lava laced with barbed wire is pouring in through your eyeballs but even *that's* better than, than—than ending up a raddled old callous old star attraction at some, some—some Ramada Inn when you're forty and feeble-minded and fat as a goddam sumo wrestler while everybody else *STILL* think they're cooler off than you are, right now, all the time, summer and winter, and you wanna know something I don't care I don't CARE I don't GIVE a good goddam *I don't* it makes no diff to ME—

Wha'?

Oh. Kleenex. Thanks.

(—*phonk*—)

(Shniff.)

(By the way, you're almost out of vodka...)

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I'm sorry I called you a grouch last night. And got so hotheaded. And sappy-sad and everything; I'm not usually like that. I should've told you about Mao, the cat I adopted in Mount Oriela. After I had him fixed he'd still chase all the unspayed puddytats, but when he caught them he'd get this baffled-looking "What do I do *next?*" expression on his face.

Near dowl!

Anyway, I sure hope Gramma Otto wasn't listening last night. Though if there really is a Heaven Hereafterthis, I'd expect her to be watching nonstop episodes of her "stories"—*The Edge of Night* and *As the World Turns*, that is. When I was a drama major her fondest wish was that I'd get cast someday on one of those soaps—playing some diabolical temptress with a name like "Margo" or "Serena." (Though if I know casting agents, they'd've made me the *femme fatale's* zany little henchgirl.)

Gramma had other stories too, ones she made up and told me at bedtime. Most were about my dolls—well I didn't have *dolls*, as such, unlike Cathy Sue Hoopleman and her hundreds of Barbies; I had a Raggedy Ann and Timmy the half-stuffed horse. And Rusty Bugs, who started off as a white rabbit, but got more and more oxidated-looking.

Finally Gramma said, "Hawney" (that's me) "it's high time Bugs went back to being a white rabbit." So she put him in the washing machine and then hung him out on the clothesline by his ears—it looked kind of painful but so *cute*. Then suddenly this windstorm came out of nowhere and blew most of the laundry into the garden. Not Rusty Bugs, though; we never found any trace of him except his ears—still pinned to the clothesline.

Boy did I have hysterics. It was SO ridiculous. Poor Gramma, of course, thought my pore heart must be busted; so she started telling me these bedtime stories about all the adventures Bugs was having in Whiskaway. He was known as "Fearless Earless," never paid any attention to what grown-ups told him, and ran around Feather Adventureland with a pack of wild dust bunnies.

(I keep forgetting about the ones under your sofabed.)

(What's in this pitcher? Lemonade? *Country Time!* Did you mix this with your own hands, just for me? How thoughtful of you! Not to mention atmospheric! And much more wholesome than potato drippings.)

I wish Gramma'd written down her Whiskaway stories. Or that I had, instead of all those dumb haikus and book reports and how-I-spent-my-summer-vacation assignments. What do you teachers *do* with those things, anyway? And how come they were always due on rainy days? No matter how carefully I took them to school, the ink would always run.

Actually I liked going to school, even in the rain, 'cause there were lots of other kids around; I don't do "alone" too well, outside of treehouses. Sure been to a *lot* of schools, though. Let's see: nursery school on Oahu, kindergarten in Santa Ana, first through fifth grades in Marble Orchard, sixth at Oswald Elementary in Demortuis, then Whitman Junior High and Bonum High School—hey ray Bonum Vivants!—then two years in Keening at the University of Nilnisi, then awhile at the School of Hard Knocks—I'm running out of fingers here—then off and on as a philosophy major then a poli sci major then a psych major then a sociology major at Windohwa U. down in Mount Oriela!

(Whew!)

"So what have I learned?"

What to watch out for, if nothing else.

The good and the bad; the ups and the downs; your haves and your wants. How to count your blessings if you want to be able to count *on* them. Keep one eye out for pitfalls and drawbacks and mousetraps; and the other eye open for...

...well...

...for Power and Light, I guess.

Like the first time I saw Chicago by night, when I was only nine and Buddy-Buzz drove me around and around the Loop—all these palace-like cathedral-type towering electric infernos were blazing away at me on every side: neon and freon and shivaree bewitchery. Sweet Jesus! It never got like that in Marble Orchard or Demortuis. Or Keening or Mount Oriela or even *Istanbul*, for crying out loud.

That was the first time I experienced Power and Light like that; the first and only time, for years and years. Till you know what? Just a couple weeks ago my friend RoBynne—I *still* haven't told you about her, have I? Well, I'm not going to try to describe RoBynne O'Ring; nothing I could say would give you an idea anywhere *near* what she's like. Suffice it to say (hee hee! "suffice") that when I went to work at SMECK in my dowdy little duds, and caught sight of RoBynne boppin' around doin' her thing (she's an X-ray courier) wearing the very *heighth* of New Wave fashion—well, I was so sick with envy I just about ate my own pea-green liver. Seriously!

But it was open-and-shut obvious we were meant to be kindred spirits. So I staged this little routine about my shoes being stolen by a medical foot-fetishist, and before you knew it RoBynne was showing me where to shop and what to buy and how to wear it, in Elsew after dark—going to breakers clubs like the BoogaBloo Angel, where you spin and you soar and you're in the very heart of the hub, surrounded by Power and Light, outRAYgeously specTACuular to the bitchen twitchen max! And not just to be trendy, either—

—but To Be.

And *How* To Be.

That is refreshing.

When you can stand in front of a mirror again, staring yourself square in that eye you're keeping open; and it doesn't really matter what you've got on (it can be nothing at all!) so long as you can say *and* think *and* feel *and* mean:

GETTA LOADA ME NOW!

'Cause then you can quit your yappin' and MAKE it happen, any old how...

