

Chapter 3

The House in the Trees

Yes-or-no, it-might-be-so, then-again-it-mightn't-but-you-are-IT.

Of course you are; that goes without saying. Unfortunately nobody else is available to play.

You'd compared notes with the gang this morning in Sunday school, and the results were just gruesome. Janey's mother had grounded her again for sassing, and Laurie'd started clarinet lessons and needed to work on her scales; Cathy Sue had the sniffles (Cathy Sue *always* had the sniffles) while Amy the second-grade arithmetic genius was off studying for tomorrow's multiplication test. (Good grief!) So there was nothing else for *you* to do but hang around the house.

Clump clump up the stairs, creak creak down the hall. Accidentally-on-purpose undo your stupid braids as you go. What a day it'd been already—all that jabber about the Sabbath, a word that always made you picture Bible characters crying. Moses with tears running down his long white beard: "What's the manna, Moses?" the Israelites would ask.

You had to get all gussied up, your hair braided just so, and allow Gramma to hold your hand crossing the streets as if you weren't a capable mature individual of almost eight. (Well, nearly seven-and-three-quarters.) And then at church you had to wallow through Sunday school under the heavy thumb of Mrs. Mills the choir director, whom you in a burst of clever brilliance had named "General" Mills since she was square and flaky like a cereal box. I'm-keeping-my-EYE-on-you-Kelly-Rebecca! *And* she took her own sweet time

awarding you the colored stickers you earned getting Bible verses by heart. Today you'd recited:

That which the palmermoth hath left hath the locust eaten; and that which the locust hath left hath the cankerworm eaten; and that which the cankerworm hath left hath the caterpillar eaten. Awake, ye drunkards, and weep; and howl, all ye drinkers of wine, because of the new wine; for it is cut off from your mouth.

All that without a single mistake, a bigger tongue-twister than "Peter Piper picked a peck," and did General Mills hand over your blue sticker-star? HA! Perfectly disgraceful for a Sunday school teacher to hold a grudge. Especially against an innocent little girl who'd just found out all her friends were going to waste their afternoons *not* in her company. (Though it was pretty neat that caterpillars were mentioned in the Bible.)

So you had to go join Gramma and stand up and sing, before sitting down for a *very* long time while the Reverend Hall put stray thoughts in your head of Moses blubbering in the wilderness. The Reverend Hall ought to be called "Howell" since he looked just like the millionaire guy on *Gilligan's Island*, though he sounded more like Mr. Mooney on *The Lucy Show* and that was entertaining to think about every Sunday for a minute or two before it all got really BOring. Then you had to stand up and sing again. And you couldn't openly fidget. So let's make up for that, here and now:

WOULDN'T *it be nice if we were older?*
Then I wouldn't have to go to church!
And I could fidget all I really wanted...
Da da da da... Gomez, Pugsley, LURCH—
"You rang?"

Not too loudly, though, or Gramma'd be scandalized. And you mustn't scandalize Gramma if you're ever going to land that pony, instead of the thirdhand two-wheeler you'd been given in place of horseflesh. So *da da da da* under your breath and dance around a bit. Do your versions of the Freddie, the Watusi, and the Jerk (twitch twitch)!

You're not supposed to change into play clothes till after dinner, but that's been

delayed while Gramma tends to Grampa so you might as well get comfy. Lose the stupid old Sunday dress and the starched crinkle-inkly petticoat. A shame to take off your shoes—genuine patent-leathers, the pride of your life, but Absolutely Not To Be Scuffed Young Lady and so hardly practical as regular footwear. Add 'em to the heap on the floor and dance around in your sockhop feet, *da da da da*: get a load of the stripper in her Sunday undies! (Which truth to tell come out of the same drawer as your everyday undies, and what would the Reverend Mooney Howell have to say about *that?*)

Wrinkle your pointed-button nose and look down it at the rest of you. Someday soon you're going to be big, with boobies out to here, and wear stylish unmentionabubbles to tote them around in. Lawnjer-*ray*, lawnjer-*ree*, lawnjer-*RAH*-hahaha—and pose in tight sweaters with an arched back like Ann-Margret. Speak of the devil! Guess who enters the room just then, to be scooped up and squeezed tight and walloped with the end of her own orange tail?

Owwwrr?

Here thanks to Ruthie Mundt, the most enviable girl on the entire planet or at least in Marble Orchard because her folks owned a whole barnful of horses, plus a pudgy momma cat who kept getting fatter and kept having kittens. And *finally* after weeks of pleading and coaxing, the ponyless Kelly Rebecca was allowed to choose the orangest kitten and name her Ann-Margret. But then Uncle Buddy'd chortled "Kitten with a whip," so she came to be called Whip or Whippy or Old Whipper.

By any name she was now a half-grown kittycat "with the bulgiest damn eyes ever seen on a live animal in these parts," according to Ruthie Mundt's father. (Who probably ought to know, having so many horses in such an enormous barn.) So let's drape your discarded slip over slippery Whippy's orange head, and sing:

*Heeere comes the bride,
She's a FEEline,
See how she flips
When you fill her with wine—
Flippy!
"I call her Flipper, Flipper, psychotic kitty..."*

“Psychotic” being the latest hilarious word you’ve added to your collection. First there was Batman—then there was Robin—and then the psychotic Psycho Tick, who preys upon helpless kitties! Oh no! But Psycho Tick hasn’t reckoned with the likes of Catwoman (secret identity Ann-Margret) in her utility flea-collar belt (the petticoat becoming a superhero cape) who goes flying across the room to do battle with Timmy the half-stuffed horse, take that! and that! ZAP! POW!

Meanwhile, tragically unaware of the furious struggle, you pull on a sweatshirt that has NILNISI POWER & LIGHT and a smiley-faced bolt of lightning on it. Next jump into your jeans, which would involve leaping off the dresser if you wanted to do it properly. But Gramma found that as objectionable as what she called dungarees (*dungarays*, *dunga-RAH-hahahas*), forbidding you to wear them to school even in cold weather. Lace a pair of Keds over your Sunday socks and you’re ready to fly—once you rescue Whippy from the white cotton Starchmonster.

Now comes the dangerous part: out we go on extreme tiptoe and “Not a peep out of you” to Secret Agent D.O.G. (so called to throw off the scent) as we creak creak down the hall.

Your room—“Aunt Livy’s old room,” they always called it—was the little one back by the linen cupboard. At the hall’s other end was the biggest bedroom, and from behind its closed door came a constant RUMBLE *nebbish* RUMBLE *nebbish* BUM-BUR-UMBLE *nebbish*. The room across from that used to be Uncle Buddy’s, but now that he lived in Chicago all the time “and since your Grampa snores, hawney, something fierce,” Gramma had moved into it. (Did you yourself snore? You’d been trying to catch yourself at it, but kept falling asleep.)

The younger Hungerford boys, Doug and Jerry, said a little girl in the olden days had coughed herself to death in that room. Her ghost was supposed to come out of the closet from time to time, always at the stroke of midnight. When you’d asked Uncle Buddy about that, he’d laughed and laughed. “Midnight’s the *best* time to do that, darling! But don’t tell your Gramma I said so, she’s got enough on her mind.”

Which was a darn shame because otherwise you’d have volunteered to stay up late

and catch the girl-ghost. If you weren't snoring your head off when she finally came out.

"You couldn't catch her anyway, she's almost invisible," Doug had explained.

"She's more like a kind of *feeling* that sneaks up on you—"

"Yeah, but with a stink too," Jerry the Creep had added, "like rotten eggs and sewer gas—"

Then Mickey Hungerford had come out of Grampa's room in his new uniform (that wasn't one like Marines wore, because Mickey was "an ordinary grunt") and ordered Jerry to knock it the hell off. "Are you telling her that damnfool ghost story? You wanna give the poor kid nightmares? Leave her alone."

"Yeah, you heard the grunt!" you'd added.

Now an *owwwwrr?* was coming from under your arm. Pipe down, pussycat, don't blow our cover; let's pretend we're hunting wild dust bunnies. Though the best place to find those was in closet-corners, among the mothballs and girl-ghost innards. But sometimes you got the idea they were fluttering around out here in the hall, especially in the "wee" hours when you had to make a potty run. Sometimes Grampa would let loose a snore before you'd finished, and since his snores came out *Oooohhhh*, the dust bunnies did a lot more than go hippety-hop.

Grampa stayed in his room most of the time nowadays. He called it loafing, no different than lying in the hammock outdoors. (At least that's what it sounded like; it took longer nowadays to figure out what Grampa was talking about.) Every Saturday he declared he was going to get up Sunday morning and escort them to church. He'd have Gramma lay out his good blue suit on the chair by the bed where he could see it, together with a shirt and a tie and his hat. One of your own chores was to keep Grampa's shoes shined; he would have you bring them over for what sounded like "inspection" on Saturday afternoon, and if they weren't gussied up just so, you had to fetch the polish and do them over. Then they too went by the bedside chair.

But every Sunday morning Grampa would wake up "feelin' middlin'," and back on the hanger the blue suit would go. Then he might get a case of what Gramma called the *frets*, though it sounded more like ordinary worrying. How would the P & L bowling team

fare without him that season? How could they hope to overcome the Water Department? Why didn't his hunting and fishing pals come over to shoot the breeze more often? How come Uncle Walt Hungerford never had boo to say when Grampa wanted to hear exactly where they'd gone and how they'd done and what they'd bagged and what had gotten away and why? Cousin Mickey was better at this sort of talk; what had he gone and joined the Ordinary Grunts for?

RUMBLE *nebbish* RUMBLE *nebbish* BUM-BUR-UMBLE; the *nebbishes* turning into *Now Bert, now Bert*.

Scoot past the door, gallop downstairs to the kitchen. Sunday dinner warming in the oven, sniff sniff sniff—ham loaf again, yum. Your duty to check on it: Gramma had been giving you lessons in the fine arts of stirring and tasting. The Whipcat was a born expert at tasting, and would stand on extreme tiptoe to lick butter from a spoon; better plop her in the corner with her dish and bowl while you climb onto your personal footstool, pull on your personal potholder, and peek carefully into this and that.

A slice gone from the ham loaf; presumably on a plate upstairs, with Gramma trying to get it inside Grampa. Give a stir to the mashed potatoes, give a stir to the lima beans, and what's this? Rhubarb pie. GROHsss. Lucky for you there were still a few fudge brownies in the octagon-shaped tin (hee hee! "octagon") with verses from "America the Beautiful" on its eight sides.

*O beautifully patient sides
Forever wave to Spain,
I will not eat this rhubarb pie
It would give me a pain—
(No, better:) Unless I lose my brain—*

"Needs a soupsong of garlic." And you'd sing it one, too, had Gramma not taken to hiding the garlic and horseradish and onion salt.

Ham loaf or no, you wished you could go downtown to Sidney's Diner and hop up on one of the tall round stools and order a couple of peanut butter sandwiches from Agnes, who always said, "You remember me to your Grampa Bert," and spread on extra jelly.

Well, there was no point hanging around till Gramma came down. Your work here was done, except for the sweeping of floor and setting of table and emptying of trash. All of which had to be finished by bedtime if you were going to get your quarter-a-week allowance; though it was hardly worth emptying trash into the burner if you weren't permitted to strike the match and set it ablaze.

So haul Whippersnapper up from her water bowl in the middle of a lap, and it's out the back door we go. Jump, skip, hop. Pop, crackle, snap. Head for the colossal twin oaks that must have been planted in prehistoric times by Indians or Israelites, and make your way up the long ladder to the house in the trees. Which was no mean feat with a half-grown bug-eyed cat now over your shoulder, now under your arm, digging in with claws like little needles (ouch).

The House in the Trees, like the One With All the Porches, had been built about a thousand years ago by a bunch of your ancestors; but the treehouse was obviously for kids and not grownups. Everything here was on a smaller, closer scale than in the grownup house, yet the place as a whole was huge—what Uncle Buddy called a “suite.” (Hee hee! a Hershey's *semi*-suite.)

And today it all belonged to you alone. You were just kind of borrowing the bedroom back by the linen cupboard, but the treehouse was practically all yours. The younger Hungerfords only came over once in awhile; Cousin Mickey was away at grunt camp; Uncle Buddy had moved to Chicago; and you could just picture your mother trying to climb up here in one of her tight Ann-Margret outfits.

Gramma would come as far as the feet of the trees, to remind you of things. When you'd first figured out how to manage the ladder, it was always “Kelly hawney! I don't want you going up in that treehouse all by yourself do you hear?!” Now it was “Absolutely not, young lady!” when you proposed spending the night aloft in a sleeping bag, with the big new flashlight you were officially saving up to buy if you could ever save anything from your allowance, which was another good reason why that ought to be raised to fifty cents a week like *all* the girls got, even Janey whose parents kept grounding her for acting sassy.

It was such a neat House in the Trees too. Real shingles on the roof, real glass in the window frames. The front door was on genuine hinges, as were the cupboards inside. Behind one was a tiny space perfect for somebody your size to hide in, even when no one else was around to seek you. If only there was a secret passageway to somewhere! But Uncle Buddy had shown you the panel that *would* have led to *his* secret passage, and that was practically as good.

Names and dates and initials were carved or drawn all over that panel and every other wall in the house. Uncle Buddy's name could be found in several places. "Carrie V-E Day" adorned one cupboard, meaning your mother *must* have been up here at least once. Across the back of the front door, cut in deep dark letters with what looked like a woodburning set, was LOUIS WUNDERLICH JUN 14TH 1892 FLAG DAY. But you had to look sharp, down near floor level, for the hard-to-read lines:

*Way down here
Out of sight
Was the only place
Lou would let me write*

—*Ha-ha Willie W. age 8.*

You yourself weren't yet allowed to pack a knife or chisel, much less lay your hands on a woodburning set; so SKEETER KELLY REBECCA KITEFLY was printed in Magic Marker along the windowseat. And was partly hidden at the moment by the Elmer's glue you'd used last week to attach a Dixie cup to the palm of your hand for Show 'n' Tell at school. Miss Gibson of course had refused to understand the clever brilliance of this invention, which was bound to save her hours of second-graders slurping at the water fountain; but like Janey said, Miss Gibson was a pig woman.

Over *here* was the cuuute little ladder leading through a trapdoor to the treehouse roof. Doug Hungerford said that from the rooftop you could see all the way to Market Square and the County Courthouse; or at least you could when it was wintertime after all the leaves had fallen. Aunt Ollie had loudly forbidden Doug and Jerry to go up on the roof last

Easter, but they'd gone and done it and laughed down at the rest of you; and Gramma'd had to make you swear on the family Bible not to join them—not to even *touch* the trapdoor till your tenth-yes-your-tenth-all-right-your-*ninth* birthday. And since you'd sworn this on a Sunday, and it being Sunday now, you (sigh) probably ought to wait till then. Or at least a little longer. (Though it would be a killer place to play Snoopy vs. the Red Baron.)

In the meantime there was always The Rope.

Outside the windowseat was a sort of balcony, a platform that was really a blastoff launchpad. On it lay a long thick coil of rope. One end of this rope had been lashed stoutly to the farther-away oak tree; at the other end was a heavy knot, big around as a basketball and worn smooth by the bottoms of your assorted ancestors as they'd straddled it, held on tight with all their might—and jumped off the platform, pushing away with their feet at the same time.

When you'd do this you would plummet earthward between the oaks, swinging to and fro (depending on just how you'd jump and push away) and finally you would touch down where the ground was all bumpy and gnarly with tree roots. It was a good idea to make a soft landing there and so far you always had, though it was lots of fun to let go of the rope before you'd quite arrived.

Then you would climb back up to the treehouse and heave-ho the rope back to the balcony for another turn. Now and again you had tried to shinny all the way up the rope, but truth to tell you hadn't even gotten far enough to make Gramma put it on the Absolutely Not list, which was kind of humiliating. And funny that she'd let you swing on the rope when you'd had to swear a Bible oath about the trapdoor.

“Why Kelly, I used to swing from that rope my own self when I was your age,” Gramma'd said. Giving you a mental image so weird it beat blubbering Moses all hollow.

So strap yourself into the cockpit knot-seat, draping Whippy around your neck like a pilot's scarf—a very much *alive* scarf with pins still in it or rather in *you*, owweee owweee owweee—detach the cat, replace her under your arm, get a good firm grip with both hands on the rope and both feet on the edge—

5-4-3-2-1—*blastoff!*

And another croak-meow from Old Whipper.

It was what riding Invisible Timmy used to be like when you were little, but this was a hundred times better: you were on top of the world, flying high above everything and everybody, at the center of the universe—then with a *shwoooooop* you hurtled down down down, racing like the wind, the ground rushing up at you HA! missed you that time! and back up up up you went, looking out over all creation in the first burst of new-green springtime, it whirling one way while you twirled the other.

*SWING low, GO tell Aunt Rhody,
Comin' round the mountain when she comes—
SWING low, FROM the town of Bedrock,
Have a yabba-dabba-doo time.
I looked for my accordion, what did I see
Comin' for to give a dog a bone?
A band of Monkees comin' down the street—
Gettin' funniest looks from ev'ryone they meet—
Hey hey! the old grey goose is dead!
Swing HO—*