



WISH AGAIN

Book One of

BOLSTER, NOT MOLEST HER

(Being & Nothingness with Vicki Volester)

a novel by

P. S. Ehrlich

author of the *Skeeter Kitefly* books and *13 Black Cats Under a Ladder*

WISH AGAIN

BOOK ONE

of

BOLSTER, NOT MOLEST HER

(Being & Nothingness with Vicki Volester)

a novel

by

P. S. EHRLICH



<http://www.skeeterkitefly.com>

2011

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Ups and Downs of Skeeter Kitefly
Skeeter Kitefly's Sugardaddy Confessor
13 Black Cats Under a Ladder

FORTHCOMING

Bolster, Not Molest Her — Book Two: Vicki in Vanderlund
Bolster, Not Molest Her — Book Three: Thrown for a Look

Cover design and artwork by the author

Bolster, Not Molest Her — Book One: Wish Again

Copyright © 2008-2011 by P. S. Ehrlich

Split Infinitive Edition October 2011

A Split Infinitive Production

All Rights Reserved

This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part without written permission.
For information contact the author at **psehrlich@gmail.com**.

ONE: WISH AGAIN

1	<i>Mole in a Hole</i>	1
2	<i>Far Away from Harm</i>	11
3	<i>Crown Thy Good</i>	25
4	<i>Shedding Tears</i>	37
5	<i>The Concrete Garden</i>	49
6	<i>Nobody's Watching</i>	65
7	<i>Turn Out Your Toes</i>	77
8	<i>Peachblow</i>	91
9	<i>A Star Is Borrowed</i>	109
10	<i>Passing Over</i>	123
11	<i>The Less You Spend</i>	135
12	<i>Creepy-Crawly</i>	153
13	<i>The Spurning Point</i>	167
14	<i>Not Bad</i>	185
15	<i>Ritz of Passage</i>	203
16	<i>Smile</i>	227
17	<i>Pick Up the Pieces</i>	251

DISCLAIMER

Bolster, Not Molest Her is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

for all the ingredienttes

Vicki Volester: rhyming with “bolster,” not “molest her.”
Precariously balanced between the beautiful and grotesque...

—13 BLACK CATS UNDER A LADDER

One

WISH AGAIN

*If your heart is in your dream
No request is too extreme
When you wish upon a star
As dreamers do.*

—PINOCCHIO

Mole in a Hole

Her earliest pinpointable memory was of crawling under her sister's bed: burrowing into a dark secret place behind the overhanging coverlet. You could hide down here for a long, long time, living like a mole in a hole in the ground. Vicki'd played being Morocco Mole earlier that day, with the two girls who lived in the house next to hers. They'd re-enacted that morning's cartoon, where Poojie the elephant disappeared just before his royal weigh-in. One neighbor girl had played Secret Squirrel and the other, younger one had been Poojie, doubling as the villainous Yellow Pinkie.

(The younger one always got stuck with the fatso roles.)

Vicki didn't mind portraying Morocco. It mostly meant squinting a lot and saying "Yes, O Secret One" in a funny mole-voice. That Saturday had been nice and mild outside; she'd been allowed to go out wearing her regular winter coat instead of the bulky snowsuit, and they'd had a good time until Secret pushed Poojie into a mud puddle. Poojie called Secret a *very* bad word that their mother overheard so they were both ordered inside right-this-minute, and Vicki was left to play All-Alone Mole by herself.

Now she could do it in this snug hidey-hole, where nobody would ever think of looking for her. Maybe she'd stay put here and never come out again. Maybe she'd find some sort of door in the floor that would open up to reveal a magical-wonderful room of her own—

—or maybe land her in the middle of the Wild Wood on an awful stormy night, lost among shadows and whatever they concealed.

That wasn't just a place she'd heard about in *The Wind in the Willows*, either. No, it felt like where she was RIGHT NOW, with Something or Other spying on her from the secret darkness. Watching her start to tremble and whimper, but not cry—only babies cried—a big girl could be frightened but never shed tears or give way to panic, no matter what might be lurking nearby. Or creeping and crawling toward her unseen, *about to grab hold*—

“Vicki! Are you going to be down there all day?”

Scrape and scratch and scrabble backward, outward, upward into the light and onto unsteady feet. Breathing hard and sneezing twice. Emerging less like Mole than a whiskerless Water Rat in corduroy coveralls: grave little face, small neat ears, thick silky hair, eyes like glittering black stars.

Victoria Lorraine Volester.

Her sister was sitting at the bureau, whose top also served as a desk and vanity table. There she belted forth a few bars of Petula Clark while cutting blood-red hearts out of construction paper, sticking the results into the vanity mirror's frame. Her reflection jabbed Vicki with the familiar green glare.

“Did you get them all, Maid?”

“Yes Moddom,” said Vicki, displaying a rag loaded with dust bunnies.

“Well, dump them in the wastebasket—*carefully*. And quit fidgeting! You all the time act like you've got ants in your pants.”

“Sorry Moddom.”

“There's no good Valentine songs,” grouched her sister. Tricia the loved and feared; Tricia the envied and resented; Tricia the emerald-eyed blonde beauty who was seven-and-a-half and knew absolutely everything. Who stepped back from the mirror to admire her handiwork, as well as herself in what she called an “ensemble”: plaid wool jumper over pink turtleneck, argyle kneesocks and saddle oxfords. Most of which would be handed-me-down to Vicki after all the newness got purged out of them.

Tricia snapped open a vinyl coin purse and extracted a penny. “A-BRA-HAM LINCOLN KIND-AND-GOOD,” she chanted, holding the penny up for Vicki to see (but not touch). “This is his birthday today. He freed the slaves and then got shot.”

“How many days till *my* birthday?” asked Vicki, trying not to fidget in front of the penny.

“Seventeen,” said Tricia, pointing at crossed-off squares on the wall calendar. “And it’ll be sixteen tomorrow and fifteen on Monday, so don’t ask me again till Tuesday.” She turned and deposited the penny in a cow-shaped piggybank on Vicki’s side of the dresser. “There you go, Maid.”

Vicki blinked at the bank’s black slot. “Cantcha ever give *me* the penny, Moddom?”

“No I can’t. You’d just spend it.” (Again the green glare.) “If you were born a couple years before or a couple years later, you’d’ve been a Leap Day baby. Then you’d only have a birthday every *four* years.”

“I don’t wanna have a birthday only every four years! I’m gonna *be* four!”

“So be glad things are the way they are,” Tricia was lecturing, when they heard a clatter at the front of the house.

“Daddy’s home!”

“Go wash up for dinner, then.”

“I wanna see Daddy first!” Vicki dared to object; but Tricia propelled her into the bathroom.

“*When* you’ve scrubbed off all that dust. Or do I have to do it for you?”

“I can do it myself!” Vicki retorted, mounting the stepstool to reach the sink. Silently vowing that when the family’s New Baby came, nobody’d better treat Vicki like one ever again. ‘Cause then *she’d* be a big sister, with a littler one she could be the boss of.

Tricia had announced the New Baby’s name ought to be “Julie,” in honor of Tricia’s favorite actress from *The Sound of Music*. And since (according to their father) Tricia was a Princess and Vicki was a Kitten, maybe Julie could be a “Raindrop”—that being the first word of a Julie-song on Tricia’s favorite record album. One thing was certain, Vicki decided as she dried her hands: when Julie the Raindrop was old enough to be a big sister’s maid, Julie the Raindrop would be given *her* penny payments to *keep*.

Vicki found her father leaning against the kitchen doorjamb, wearing an unusual-for-Saturday suit and tie. “Hi Daddy! I’m all washed up!”

Ozzie Volester laughed and stooped and kissed the top of her head. “That makes one of us,” he told her. “Hopsy thinks I’ve got a good chance,” he told Mommy in the kitchen.

“That Hopsy is an L-U-S-H,” said Vicki’s mother.

“Now, Fel—”

“Come get this, would you please?”

Ozzie hastened to be of service, fetching a casserole and placing it on the dining room table. He was a jaunty broad-faced man whose eyes and mouth were crinkled by constant affability—“My butter-and-egg smile,” he called it. “You know, Hopsy did me a favor scheduling that interview today. Even if Little Bavaria doesn’t make me an offer, old Crucolo won’t know I ever talked to them.”

Vicki’s father liked his job, traveling around town selling Milkpail Dairy Products to groceries and restaurants. Milkpail’s mascot, Mildred the Cow, adorned promo items throughout the Volester house, including Vicki’s piggybank and the mat beneath the casserole. But Daddy didn’t like Mr. Crucolo the sales manager, who thought he was too easygoing and needed his quotas raised. (Which sounded like it would hurt.) So now he was “looking for a different racket”—quietly, though, lest Mr. Crucolo hear about it and get cheesed off.

Which Vicki’s mother already was, as she made clear by lugging in a basket of rolls and setting it *thunk* on the table. Vicki had dim memories of a time when Mommy was slim and swift and happy to play with her; but now with each passing day she looked fatter and slower and more crease-browed.

“Little Bavaria. A brewery,” Felicia sighed.

“Hey, like Hopsy says: ‘Suds always sell.’”

“Your friend Hopsy lives in an apartment. By himself.”

“Now, Fel—”

Tricia brought in two perfectly-poured glasses of Milkpail Homogenized (“Mildred calls it *moo-riffic!*”) and the girls took their seats, Vicki atop a booster-cushion. Mommy ladled a plateful of pot roast, its meat already cut up bite-sizably, and slid it in front of her.

“I thought you liked my father,” she remarked.

“Hunh?” went Vicki.

“I do like him,” said Daddy. “But if I had to—”

“It wouldn’t be working *for* him, it’d be *with* him, like partners. You love cars anyway, people would come to *you* to buy them, and then when my father retires—”

“When! Make that ‘if’—and later, okay? The kids—”

“Exactly,” said Felicia. With a glance down where her waistline used to be.

“This is great pot roast,” Ozzie commented. “Doesn’t your mother make fine pot roast, girls?”

“Delicious,” said Tricia, showing off her vocabulary.

“I don’t like carrots,” Vicki managed to not say aloud, since Mommy knew that anyway.

The rest of the meal was eaten in silence, other than an occasional chomp or slurp. Vicki again felt an awareness of Something or Other watching her—not all four Volesters, just *her* as she sat there trifling with orange blobs. Imagine being a tiny carrot trapped on a plate, pushed around by a fork, then sensing the merciless scrutiny of two black stars glittering overhead—

“—Victoria Lorraine—”

She thrust a heap of blobs into her mouth and chewed vigorously. “Wha’, Mmby?”

“Don’t gobble, dear.”

“And eat with your mouth closed,” added her sister.

“That’ll do, Tricia.”

“Yes Mommy.”

“Help me clear the table, please.”

Ha! There were *some* advantages to being the littlest one—you didn’t have to go dry the dishes as Mommy washed them; you got to accompany Daddy to the living room and watch the evening news. Ozzie switched on the old Philco (that made Tricia moan every time the NBC peacock declared, “The following program is brought to you in living color”) and Vicki climbed onto his lap.

She was cheered up further by a prediction of flurries, though that would mean having to wear her bulky snowsuit again; and Daddy was cheered up somewhat by Cazzie Russell and the Wolverines having defeated Wisconsin. Mommy, on the other hand,

sounded frazzled when she called Vicki to come have her bath and don't dilly-dally.

In the bathroom Tricia had to help Mommy kneel on the rug, and that had never been necessary before. So Vicki tried her best to be good and not splash, making no exclamation about the heat of the water or the roughness of the washcloth. But those wrigglesome ants persisted in her pants, even when she wasn't wearing any.

"Fidgety Phil can never keep still," said her mother through clenched teeth.

Vicki longed to respond with the *Fidgety FEL can never keep WELL* line she'd laboriously composed back when Mommy'd devoted part of each morning to losing her breakfast. But no: she kept her mouth shut, submitted to having her hair lathered with Johnson & Johnson, then rinsed clear.

"Okay, Brownie, you're done," said her thankful mother, hauling Vicki out and wrapping her in a towel. "In you go, Blondie."

Tricia drained the tub, daintily swabbing it with a sponge, and would've refilled it to the brim with bubbles had Mommy not halted the flow at belly-button level.

"Honestly, you girls... Now watch how Tricia washes," she told Vicki.

"Yes, watch me," said the Princess, always eager to perform for an audience.

"Why do we keep the shampoo on the edge of the tub?" Felicia inquired.

"Because—"

"Let Vicki answer."

"Um... so we don't hafta stand up and reach for it and slip and get hurt?"

"That's right," said her mother, giving her towel-swathed body a squeeze. Then holding it snugly—no, tightly—against her own swelling bulginess.

"...Mommy?"

"What am I going to do?" Fel murmured.

"To me?"

"All of us."

"Don't you worry," said Tricia from amidst her bubbles. "*I'll* get Daddy to move us to the city."

"What city?" Vicki demanded.

"*The City*. And out of this poky little house. I hate it here too, Mommy."

“I never said I hated—” their mother was beginning, when Vicki burst in.

“It’s not ‘poky,’ it’s cozy! It’s a nice house, it’s *our* house, an’ I like it!”

She was speared by Tricia’s green glare just as Mommy gave her a smart dig in the ribs.

“Ow! What was that for?”

Felicia laughed: a rare occurrence lately. “No, darling, that was the New Baby saying hello.”

“It felt like a kick! Did the New Baby *kick* me?”

“Don’t take it personally. All babies do it.”

“Did I kick?”

“You did a lot of squirming, same as now. (Stand *quietly* and I won’t snag the brush in your hair.)”

“I bet Tricia never kicked.”

“She was more of a shover; couldn’t wait to make her debut. Speaking of which, Trish, it’s almost 7:30.”

“I need to soak for a few minutes.”

“—Patricia Elaine—”

“Yes Mommy.”

Tricia took her time rinsing off, though, as if she were onstage and had to give a crowd its money’s worth. Vicki knew it was naughty for people to peek at you when you had no clothes on, unless they were your parent or sister. But Tricia (the big hotdog) would probably *welcome* such attention—even from a Something or Other.

Vicki shuddered as she donned flannel jammies and fuzzy slippers and left the warm bathroom to go kiss her father good night. Ozzie felt a bit cold and tasted a bit smoky, having indulged in a Lucky Strike out in the Corvair. (Felicia could no longer abide the smell of cigarettes.) Tricia joined them, wearing a pink quilted robe, and blocked all view of Flipper’s farewell on the TV.

“You and I need to have a chat, Daddy.”

“Oho!” smiled Ozzie. “What’s this? Has some young feller proposed?”

“Now Daddy, this is serious—” Tricia was saying, and “Listen to her, Oz,” Mommy was adding, when Vicki realized *She’s going to make him move us to a city—THE City—*

“Daddy I really like it here, here in this house!”

“Well that’s good, Kitten. Guess we won’t make you sleep in a box on the porch, then.”

“I’ll just put Vicki to bed first,” said Tricia. “Then we’ll chat.”

Felicia tried to rise from her chair before sinking back. “Thanks a million, Trish. Sleep *deep*, darling.”

Vicki kissed her mother and glanced wistfully at the TV, where the pretty lady genie was dancing out of her bottle. Someday Vicki intended to stay up past eight and watch more than the opening credits. But this evening she got marched firmly through the lemon-yellow bungalow she called home, gawking at everything as if for the very last time. As if it weren’t a crowded little cottage on the unfashionable side of town, but Toad Hall surrounded by wicked weasels intent on breaking in, taking over, and kicking them out into the cold winter night. Vicki didn’t *want* to go live anywhere else; she didn’t want to spit her toothpaste into some other sink or flush her TP down some unknown potty. Above all, she was afraid of losing her bed and bedroom (the two being inseparable in her mind) and every essential for a good *deep* sleep—her pillow in its Mildred the Cow case, her coverlet with its puppet-show pattern, her collection of stuffed animals. There was Sylvester and King Leonardo and Linus the Lionhearted, and the cat from the Alice book whose grin kept glowing when all the lights were turned off. Usually Tricia made her keep that one hidden under the blanket; but tonight it was arranged with the other felines around Vicki as her sister tucked them in.

“Now,” said Tricia, taking a seat on a corner of the bed, “I’m going to tell you a bedtime story.”

This was an infrequent treat, often asked for since Tricia was exceptionally dramatic, and Vicki would have wriggled with anticipation had she not caught herself in time.

“Molly Whuppie?” she timidly suggested. “Or Snow-White and Rose-Red?”

“No, this is a new one I just made up. It’s called ‘The Mad Man Who Got Away With Murder.’”

And Tricia proceeded to relate, in brief but vivid detail, the parable of a young girl who ignored the advice of her Gardening Angel. “Leave that shabby crackerbox where you’re living and come with me to The City,” the Angel told her, “‘cause there we’ll have such fun together.” But the young girl wouldn’t follow her, even though everyone else in the neighborhood did and soon the girl was all alone. Or so she thought—before a Mad Man appeared in the distance, a Mad Man who started racing toward her down the empty street, chasing the young girl faster and faster like a big mean dog after a helpless kittycat till he trapped her inside the shabby crackerbox! The young girl tried to hide from him, and when that didn’t work she yelled for her Gardening Angel to come save her—but it was no use. The City was far away, and by the time the Angel showed up it was too late. The young girl had been hideously murdered; the Mad Man got away unpunished; nothing remained except a few bloody bones. If only the girl had listened to her Angel and moved to The City, the Mad Man wouldn’t have been able to find her—she’d still be alive and safe and happy ever after, thanks to her good Gardening Angel who always knew best. The End.

“Make sure you’re asleep before *my* bedtime,” Tricia concluded. Absently patting her as she switched off the lamp, swung the door shut, and left Vicki embedded in a dark pit with a Cheshire grin hovering luminously beside her.

We’re all mad here.

Big girls could tremble. Big girls could whimper. Only babies cried.

And Vicki’s Gardening Angel would *too* show up in time. Armed with a hoe and rake and pinking shears made of fire, to scare any old Mad Man right out of his wits.

Or so she told herself.

But the Something or Other had a name now, and a furious violent hate-filled face, and a presence (for the next thirty-nine years) in Vicki Volester’s dreams. Which would often consist of her trying to hide, and trying to yell, and endlessly running away.

2

Far Away from Harm

Tricia got her way, like always; and the Volesters prepared to move to The City. Ozzie told Mr. Crucolo he wouldn't be working for Milkpail anymore—and he was going to tell Mr. Crucolo a lot of other things too, such as “exactly where to get off” (no mention of off *what*) but decided to “let sleeping dogs lie” (no explanation as to why doggies were asleep at a dairy).

Felicia was in buoyant spirits now, like the reinflated balloon she increasingly resembled. She took over crossing off the squares on the wall calendar, counting down the days to Moving Weekend, which was scheduled way before the New Baby's due date. (“This child is *not* going to be born on the Indiana Toll Road. One delivery at a time, please.”)

Vicki had to participate in this daily countdown, as though it were some sort of game; but at least Mommy was feeling pleasant again. During the winter's final snowfall, she even came outside and helped Vicki build a miniature snowman that they perched on the porch railing to surprise Daddy. Then after Mommy went back indoors, Vicki decided it'd be a much bigger, better surprise to transfer the little snowman to the arm of Daddy's favorite chair. But she couldn't manage opening the front door while cradling the snowman, and he slipped through her mittens to smash on the welcome mat.

“What happened??” Mommy demanded, looking ready to deflate. So Vicki quit crying and fibbed that it was the wind's fault: a sudden gust had toppled the snowman off the railing and reduced him to flakes. Mommy regained her buoyancy, promising they would

build a bigger, better replacement the very next day; but temperatures rose overnight, and by morning all the snow had melted.

Now it was springtime, and the Volesters were spending Easter Sunday with Ozzie's parents in Beansville. This crossroads village lay twenty miles east of town in what people called the "Thumb," because on maps the state of Michigan looked like a giant ovenmitt. Ozzie, as a boy, had worked summers on a farm near Beansville; and then when PopPop retired, he and MomMom had come to the Thumb to live in what people called a "ranch house," despite its lack of cowboys or any animal larger than the opossums that raided MomMom's fruit trees at night.

There was always enough food at the ranch house to supply several chuckwagons. Today they'd started with baskets full of marshmallow chicks, spiced gumdrops and chocolate eggs; followed by an enormous glazed ham with pineapple slices, and an enormous walleye fish that PopPop had caught and grilled, and sweet potatoes (that didn't taste anything like Sugar Smacks) and stuffed *golumpkis* (that smelled just like their name) and finally an enormous homemade cheesecake topped by half a can of Reddi-Wip.

The Volester family tucked in and packed all this away, with MomMom frequently urging additional helpings on everybody. "Felicia! Remember you're eating for two—take some more ham! Oswald! I can see the pattern on your plate—take some more fish! Girls! There are children starving in China, and you haven't finished your vegetables—what did you do with your appetites?"

Tricia's had been spoiled by the Easter baskets, and Vicki was a fussy eater at the best of times. Their grandfather, however, needed no persuasion to accept seconds or thirds or Vicki's surreptitious offer of unfinished *golumpki*, pausing only to dab his mouth with a linen napkin or swab his brow with a cotton bandanna.

The latter later got spread over PopPop's face when he settled down for an afterdinner snooze on the living room Barca Lounger. Vicki watched solemnly as the bandanna fluttered up and down, up and down, while PopPop made deep rumblly blusterous noises like a Badger clearing its throat.

In later years Walter Volester's granddaughters would realize he must have led a rather dramatic life—growing up by the sea in Küstenland, serving in the Austrian Navy

(possibly under Captain George von Trapp), leaving Trieste in 1920 (perhaps on the same boat or train as James Joyce), putting in four decades at the Saginaw Steering Gear factory, becoming a charter member of the UAW and surviving the early union wars—

—but whenever they asked PopPop about any of this, he'd only say: "I don't remember. Let's talk about *now*."

(One thing he never forgot, though, was an indelible antipathy to all things Italian. No spaghetti was ever allowed under the ranch house roof—not even Franco-American.)

Vicki shifted her gaze from the fluttering bandanna to a large tinted photograph hanging above the Barca Lounger. This was of MomMom as a girl, looking very much like Tricia might in ten years or so, with the same pink cheeks and green eyes and yellow hair. Geraldine Kosnowski she was called back then, a gumsnapping switchboard operator at Saginaw Steering Gears, and to PopPop she hadn't changed the least little bit. Her eyes were just as green (though now behind hornrims) and her hair even yellower (thanks to Clairol Nice 'n Easy) and she still snapped Wrigley's Doublemint (when her dentures permitted).

Also on the living room wall was a big color picture of Tricia, along with a smaller one of Tricia and Vicki together, and snapshots collected in a single frame of Uncle Ted and Aunt Edie's five kids. That made—counting on fingers—seven grandchildren, of whom Cousin Barbara was the oldest, with her brother Beaver (Ted Jr.) next in line; yet Tricia was by far the favorite. Probably because she took after their grandmother so much: "the spitting image" people said, which Tricia thought inelegant.

MomMom and PopPop treated Vicki with a "You *too*, dear" attitude she guessed was every secondborn's lot in life. "I'll ALWAYS be older than you," Tricia repeatedly informed her—implying smarter, richer, happier, and lovelier as well. But just wait till Julie the Raindrop was born: then Vicki would be promoted up a rung of the ladder and not be forever bringing up the rear.

She smoothed the skirt of her Easter dress (handed-me-down, of course) over her own little rear and wandered into the ranch house kitchen. There she stood awhile in fascination by the Lady Kenmore, which made its own deep rumbling blusterous noises as it washed a load of dishes. "Robots can do anything," thought Vicki as her mother called her over to the breakfast nook.

“Come have some Swiss Miss, darling.”

“Yes, you *too*, dear,” added her grandmother.

Vicki was handed a brimming mug of hot cocoa that she blew on and took tiny sips from while Tricia and the others gabbled about the wonders of The City. MomMom had acted upset for awhile about “the last of my little birds leaving the nest”—which Vicki’d thought must mean the feeder out back, till Tricia explained the birds were *them* and especially Daddy. Uncle Ted and his brood might be in Pontiac, Aunt Bonnie in Grand Rapids (as a Dominican Sister) and Uncle Jerry wherever the Merchant Marine sailed; but “Oswald” had always lived within twenty miles of the Old Folks. And now he and Felicia were not only leaving, but taking Tricia (plus Vicki and the yet-to-be-born New Baby) away with them!

On the brighter side, the Old Folks could afford to do some traveling. PopPop had retired on a comfortable pension, thanks to his forty years in the UAW; and MomMom didn’t need a team of wild horses (since there was a Buick Special in the ranch house garage) to drag her off to visit The City.

As the breakfast nook conversation grew repetitious, Vicki took her still-brimming mug and departed unnoticed in search of her father. There he was, sitting out on the patio beyond a sliding glass door. And here Vicki was, in a rerun of the snowman-on-the-porch dilemma. She wanted to join Daddy on the patio; she needed both hands to manipulate the tricky latches on the glass door and sliding screen; she dared not risk spilling her Swiss Miss.

Okay. She’d been taught not to bang on windows, and Daddy couldn’t hear her call through the glass. She didn’t want to ask the others for assistance, lest she be branded as infantile or ordered to finish the hot cocoa first. No—Vicki wanted to *be* outside, *holding* a full mug, with *no* scalding brown stain down the front of her Easter dress. (So there.)

Thus, painstakingly, she set the mug down on the kitchen linoleum. Wrestled open the glass door and sliding screen. Moved herself and mug out to the patio. And slid the doors shut again—an accomplishment ranking right up with Hannibal’s crossing the Alps.

She found her father singing softly to himself: a song about having been born in Michigan, so he wished and wished again he could go back to some old farm, far away from harm.

“Hey there, Kitten. You bringing me something to drink?”

“No, this is mine,” said Vicki. “It’s still awful hot, though. You want it?”

“Naw, I’m stuffed,” said Ozzie, clapping his stomach. “Your grandmom sure gave us a humdinger of a feed.”

Vicki parked her mug on the patio table and sat on the neighboring chair. Before them was a verdant lawn, blossoming apple trees, and a hint in the distance of the Lake that surrounded the Thumb like Jack Horner’s plummy pie.

“Are you gonna sing any more, Daddy?”

“Hmmm? Oh, that. Just an old tune from an Easter movie I saw on TV the other night... heh! Haven’t even left yet, and already I’m homesick.”

“Is that like carsick?”

“Heh! No, Kitten, it means you miss the place you came from. ‘The rooster that use-ter wake me up at 4 a.m.’—well, I don’t feel *that* homesick. I’ll settle for an alarm clock at 6:30.”

Vicki picked up her cocoa, blew on it, returned it to the table untasted. “Daddy, do we *hafta* move?”

“Now sweetheart, we’ve gone over this and over this, you ‘n’ me. It’s an important step we’ve got to take, for your mother and the New Baby—”

“—*and* Tricia—”

“Lordy yes, and Tricia. But just wait till you see our apartment in The City: big room for you girls, a little room for the Baby, *two* bathrooms—won’t that be nice? And no more worrying whether the roof’ll leak” (the bungalow’s had, that winter) “or whether the drains’ll clog” (the bungalow’s had, the previous autumn) “—‘cause we’ll have a landlord living right in the same building, there to handle any problems. Sure, it’ll be different—better for all of us, I hope—I mean it *will* be better. For us all. Think how excited Mommy and Tricia are! You will be too, Kitten; I promise.”

“...Daddy...”

Ozzie laid a broad jaunty hand on her tight-clenched little fist. “Let me tell you something. First summer I was going to work on the Tatum farm, I was scared stiff. Fact! I’d lived in town all my life, hardly ever *seen* a live pig or mule before, much less had to slop

or harness ‘em. I almost chickened out—told your PopPop I didn’t want to go. But he said to me, ‘You got to be strong to get along.’ And he put me on the bus and sent me to the Tatums, and I tried to be strong to get along, and it all turned out fine! Why, I didn’t even want to come home when summer ended—couldn’t wait till I could go out there again. Boy! The smell of that hayfield, the clover in the pasture—I tell you, that was the life!”

“So why can’t we go live on the farm?”

“Well, it’s gone, Kitten. The Tatums sold it, and houses like this one got built on the land.”

“We could live in one of those houses—”

“No, sweetheart. We have to live in The City. Maybe someday we can come back here, but it probably won’t be till you’re a really big girl. So now I need you to be a *pretty* big girl. Can you do that for me? Be strong to get along?”

Vicki felt a colossal weight descend upon her narrow tulle-clad shoulders.

“Um... I’ll try...”

“That’s my Kitten!” Her father scooped her into his arms and carried her inside, leaving the forgotten mug of cocoa on the patio table for an opossum to knock over that night.

*

It took all of Vicki’s get-along strength to withstand the subsequent week. Most of her toys and clothes and other belongings were taken away, bundled together and packed up in cartons. It was like birthday presents in reverse, except that these were finished off not with ribbon-bows but smelly brown sealing tape. As the week wore on, more and more cartons got stacked higher and higher in emptied closets or in front of cleaned-out cabinets. And though Vicki kept getting reassured this wasn’t for keeps, that all her things would be returned to her at the end of the move—

—still, you never knew. Maybe they’d *forget* to bring Vicki’s stuff to The City. Or accidentally send it somewhere else, or lose it along the way. Tricia told her to quit talking silly nonsense, and then began worrying about the salvageability of her own possessions.

“Girls,” said their father in his most patient voice, “everything is going to turn out *just fine*.”

But how could you be absolutely certain of that? Especially on the bleak Friday when two large sweaty men you'd never seen before parked a big truck in the Volester driveway and started carrying all the cartons out of the bungalow, followed by *all the furniture*. Mommy meanwhile kept filling up bags and parcels and suitcases that Daddy loaded one by one in the Corvair (when he wasn't saying "Take it easy, Fel"). Vicki's grandparents arrived in mid-afternoon, having collected Tricia from school, and more bags and boxes got stowed in the Buick Special.

Finally there was nothing left to extract. The sweaty men closed up their van and drove it away; the Volesters squeezed into their two cars and took off for Beansville. Vicki tried to grab a parting glance at the lemon-yellow bungalow, but her view was blocked by all the luggage; and in later years when she'd ask if they could revisit the old neighborhood, she would be told it had gotten too dangerous.

At the ranch house they had a light supper (by MomMom's standards) and then even the grownups went to bed early. Ozzie and Felicia slept in the guest room, while Tricia and Vicki bunked down on a fold-out divan.

"Get plenty of rest, girls. We've got a big day ahead of us."

"That means none of your whining," Tricia added privately. "You better not kick me in your sleep, either."

Vicki apologized in advance, then decided to show Princess Smartysnoot by not shutting her eyelids all night long. But before she could cap that resolution with a *So there*, morning had somehow dawned and a sketchy breakfast was being served, and flush-brush-wash-'n'-dress was the order of the day.

There was a gap on the Corvair's back seat just wide enough for Vicki to fit inside, accompanied by Sylvester and King Leonardo and some Little Golden Books. Tricia, she knew, occupied a similar socket in the Buick Special. Vicki wished her sister's hand was there to hold as Daddy *vroomed* the car ("Here we go, Kitten! You feel like a spacegirl on a moon rocket?") and PopPop *vroomed* his, and then a split second later they were racing down the highway with a constant surging WHZZZZSSSH as if carried off by a cyclone—except that Dorothy, at least, got to bring her old house *with* her.

Every so often Mommy or Daddy asked how Vicki was doing. “Okay,” she’d reply. Sometimes they would tell her to take a look at this interesting object or that curious vista, and she would pretend to be able to see it. To ward off boredom she opened *Walt Disney’s Sleeping Beauty*, studying the illustrations and picking out words that had a *v* in them. Particularly the nice big capital *V* as in Vicki; also Volester. Though smaller *v*’s were also acceptable, since they didn’t lose bits of themselves in lowercase like dumb old *b*’s or *h*’s.

At lunchtime they stopped at a Howard Johnson’s in Kalamazoo, a town that didn’t live up to its alacazammy name. There Vicki ordered the Jack Horner—peanut butter sandwich and chocolate milk—while Tricia, as usual, demanded the Simple Simon Plate (highest-priced item on the children’s menu) and had to be cajoled down to the Miss Muffet. Both girls were allowed to choose from 28 flavors of ice cream: Tricia selected Peppermint Stick for herself and Black Raspberry for Vicki, who was dithering; while their mother ate an entire Banana Royal on behalf of the New Baby.

Settling back in her spacegirl-gap with a replenished tummy, Vicki took her version of PopPop’s after-Easter snooze and awoke two hours later on rubbery legs, being guided by a firm hand into a diner restroom.

“(Yawn.) Are we there yet?”

“No, darling. This is Indiana.”

Vicki felt too drowsy to look for any Indians, and declined more than a few swallows of water. The grownups fortified themselves with coffee and tea (how could they *gulp* steaming hot beverages without burning their tongues??) as Daddy and PopPop ran fingertips over roadmaps, tracing what they called the “home stretch.”

Which took them straight through Dante’s Inferno.

Or so Vicki would think of it in later life, when she’d know it to be steel mills and blast furnaces and oil refineries. But the glimpses her four-year-old eyes caught were of Maleficent in massive-dragon form, attacking one beleaguered castle after another, causing dusty smoke to spread a reek like rotten eggs on a grease-caked griddle—

“Breathe through your mouth, Brownie. It’ll get better soon.”

The stink did lessen (gradually) but scary images kept flashing at her whenever she dared peep over the front seat. They were on a bridge—they were passing slums—they were

heading for a canyon whose cliffs were made of buildings, the tallest ones she'd ever seen—a jagged line of them looming up to scrape the horizon, folding in on either side to trap a swarm of cars and trucks and buses that made their own Corvair swerve—jolt—lurch—*honk*—adding to the accumulated racket that rose and rose till Ozzie and Felicia had to yell to be heard and still not be understood—

Vicki shrank down as far as the gap would permit, covering her face with King Leonardo as she wondered just how bad it was going to hurt when they crashed and burst into flames—

“This is it,” Daddy declared in his regular voice. “Walrock Avenue: we’re here.”

King Leonardo got lowered (gradually) to reveal neither Inferno nor traffic purgatory but rows upon rows of brick and granite and concrete. At intervals a lone tree sprouted out of the sidewalk, but Vicki could see no bushes or shrubbery or even much that could be called grass. Heavy clouds obscured the sky above, sending occasional raindrops (none of them Julie) to blob against the windshield.

Munchkinland it wasn't.

Yet when they turned into an alley and parked the Corvair and Buick Special, and all got out and walked around to the front stoop of what Mommy called a “greystone”—*their* “greystone”—the door was opened by a short stout man very much like the Munchkin Mayor. He lacked the curly moustache and green top hat, but still greeted the Volesters most reee-gally: “Welcome, my friends! Welcome to Pfiester Park.”

Vicki didn't recognize anything remotely parklike nearby before she got tugged inside *their* greystone and up several flights of stairs. She and Mommy had to rest a moment on each landing, while Tricia and MomMom galloped ahead with Daddy and the Munchkin Mayor, and PopPop lumbered placidly behind.

At the top of the staircase they all had to wait while the Mayor hunted through various pockets for the right key. The other adults urged Vicki to come look at the “3W” hanging on the locked door. She knew they expected her to read it as “Three-Double-Vee,” due to her previous objections that *W*'s were obviously two *V*'s stuck together, so what did *U*'s have to do with it? Now she felt too bewildered to play along, but all the grownups kept pointing and grinning (except the Mayor, who went over to bellow “JUNIOR!” down the

stairs) so she said her line, dutifully.

“That’s foolish,” glared Tricia. “When do we get to *go in*?”

The Mayor was about to give another shout when Junior appeared. The inelegant spitting image of his namesake in the Three Bears cartoons, he wore a flannel shirt and dungarees instead of a diaper, but was just as huge and hairy and said “Yes Paw?” the exact same way. “I have got the key that you want in my hand, Paw!”—for which he received a bristling scowl from his short stout father.

3W’s door opened and everyone entered the New Apartment. “Ohhhh!” went Tricia; “That lovely bay window!” went MomMom; “The phone’s installed! Is it working? It is!!” went Mommy. She immediately wanted to call Gran and Dime and Aunt Fritz, but Daddy said “Take it easy, Fel.” The *first* people to contact were the movers, as he was about to do; why didn’t the womenfolk go check out the rest of the place?

“This way, ladies,” announced the Munchkin Mayor. Not that there was more than one hallway to follow him into.

A kitchen. A small bedroom. (“This could be *mine*,” exclaimed Tricia; “No, the Baby’s going in here,” said Felicia.) A middle-sized bedroom. (“*This* one is yours, you girls— isn’t it nice?”) A middle-sized bathroom. Then a large bedroom, with its own smaller bathroom. All extremely vacant-looking, in Vicki’s opinion. *And* the wrong colors: dull tan and tacky beige instead of the bungalow’s bright Crayola shades.

“Felicia! You really ought to have a lie-down,” MomMom declared, with a “You *too*, dear,” to Vicki.

“Got just what you need,” said PopPop, toting a lawn chair and lounge into the biggest bedroom and setting them up in a corner as MomMom directed.

“Now, you two have a nice nap, and I’ll take Tricia for a gander at the neighborhood. (Walter! Don’t try to carry too much.)”

Resting in the lounge chair, Mommy had an uncharacteristic fit of giggles: “*Goosey Goosey Gander, / Whither shall I wander?...*”

Vicki had always been bothered by that nursery rhyme, since “wander” and “gander” sounded different. Increasing her discomfort were the many, many stairs in this greystone, down which not just old men but innocent little girls might be taken by their left leg and

thrown. Then the stairs would go crack, she would break her back, and all the little ducks would say *quack, quack, quack*...

“Moving van’s coming!!” Daddy hollered.

Incredulous delight from Mommy. Portent in stomach-pit for Vicki. And before they knew it the cyclone raged round them once more, hoisting furniture and stacks of cartons into 3W’s vacancies along with the parcels and suitcases being lugged up from the cars by Daddy and PopPop. No pretty lady genie was there to blink the twister into magical place; so Mommy called out anxious instructions and inquiries, struggling off the lounge to poke her head through the biggest-bedroom’s door, only to gasp and retreat as another lamp or nightstand or chest of drawers was hauled in.

Be strong to get along, Vicki kept telling herself. *Be strong get along and in my lady’s chamber, ALL THE LITTLE DUCKS GO—*

Sudden silence.

“Oz...?” went Felicia.

“Come out, come out wherever you are!” sang Tricia and MomMom.

Vicki and her mother emerged from their hideaway to find all the Volesters’s worldly goods well and truly moved, not to say jumbled. Ozzie was paying the large sweaty moving men; he and PopPop shook hands with them, with each other, with huge hairy Junior.

“I will tell Paw that you’re here,” Junior remarked.

※

Tricia stayed awake late that night, which meant Vicki had to also.

“I don’t understand why the Baby has to have the small bedroom. It’d make a lot more sense for her to be in here with *you*. Then you could look after her—you’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Um. Sure.”

“Of course you would. Remind Mommy and Daddy of that, as often as you can. There’s still plenty of time before Julie gets born. They could put my stuff on wheels, and we’d have no trouble rolling it next door.”

“Um. I guess.”

“Aren’t you *excited*?? (Shhh! Keep your voice quiet. Oh wait—maybe they didn’t hear. Maybe they *can*’t hear us in here.) ‘Daddy? Mommy? Can I have a drink of water?...’ Neat! In the old house they would’ve heard that even if I whispered.”

“They know you get your own water.”

“Yes, but the glasses aren’t unpacked yet.”

She and MomMom, during their gander at the neighborhood, had found Such a Nice Corner Grocery across the street. From it they’d wisely acquired paper plates and cups and plastic utensils, plus some provisions for that evening’s supper (makeshift) and tomorrow morning’s breakfast (potluck).

After dining on cheese and cold cuts, the elder Volesters had departed to spend the night at the Conrad Hilton—“our own little vacation.” Any other time, Tricia would have pitched a fit at missing out on a deluxe hotel. Yet tonight she was content with a mattress on the bare floor of Apartment 3W at 1710 West Walrock Avenue in the neighborhood known as Pfister Park, since all of it—right down to her innerspring—was located in *The City*.

Tricia was so content she kept getting up to go over to the curtainless window, raise the blinds and have another gloat. Vicki, when dragged along to share the exhilaration, could see nothing but a narrow side alley illuminated by a streetlight. Which cast really weird shadows into the bedroom, to splotch across its bothersome bunches-of-gray-grapes wallpaper.

“We’re going to have such fun,” Tricia insisted. “Me and you and Julie. It’s going to be a wonderful life for us from now on.”

“Um. Okay...”

“Hey!” (Brief shake of narrow shoulder.) “Where’s my brave little sister?”

“...here...”

“*Who*’s my brave little sister?”

“...I am...”

“Well then! Remember that. And if I *do* have to stay in this room, don’t you go messing up my side of it before I get back.”

Get back?

With all the day's upheaval, Vicki had managed to forget that MomMom and PopPop were taking Tricia home with them tomorrow. Special arrangements had been made so she could finish second grade at her old school, including daily transport to and fro by Buick Special for the next six weeks.

UNFAIR.

It was terribly, horribly, monstrously unfair that Tricia—who *wanted* to come live here; who'd made the family leave their bungalow and drive a billion miles through hellacious pandemonium to *be* here—now got to return to the reassuringly familiar Thumb, while Vicki was stuck by herself in this strange room with weird shadows and dreadful wallpaper and many, many stairs between it and escape for *six whole weeks* which was practically forever! “Brave little sister?” She'd be a broken-down old lady when Princess Smartysnoot finally reappeared to get her own way like always—ALWAYS—and take the smallest bedroom for her own exclusive use, leaving Vicki in here with Julie the Raindrop whom yes, she already adored, but didn't even *know* yet and who as a New Baby would probably go *Waaaaaaaaaaaah* all night every night for the rest of Vicki's oh-so-wonderful life from now on!

UNFAIR.

But to share such thoughts with Tricia was inadvisable.

Therefore Vicki shed no tear and heaved no sigh.

Instead, she took a deep silent breath and started singing to herself that she'd been born in Michigan, so she wished and wished again...

3

Crown Thy Good

On May 21st Tricia didn't actually say "How could you let this *happen?*" when she spoke to Vicki over the phone. But her tone left no doubt about who was to blame for Christopher Blaine Volester's having been born that day.

Vicki would never come wholly out of mourning for Julie the unfallen Raindrop, who'd apparently sacrificed her existence so This Boy might live. Which seemed to thrill the rest of the family—not least Diamond Joel Schmelz, father of two girls and grandfather of two others, the younger of whom he was looking after while Daddy and Gran went to collect Mommy and This Boy from the hospital.

"A grandson named 'Christopher' yet," said Diamond Joel. "It's Boychik I'll be calling him, the first boy born to a Schmelz since me myself and I."

"But Dime..." said Vicki.

"Well, Dillydoll?"

"Aren't chicks sposda be girls?"

"Now there you are telling the truth, partly. Some chicks (the best ones) are, as you say, girls. Then there are chicks that run around clucking and squawking like they don't know where their heads are at. No, pardon me, I am mistaken; *those* are the little girls—"

"Dime!"

"—all right, the *not* so little girls. Then there are other chicks that grow up to nourish us, after they get roasted or boiled or turned into chopped liver. And now we have coming here in just a few minutes your brand-new brother, who will be called Boychik for reasons I

explained before. So you see, Dillydoll, one sort of word can mean all sorts of things if you're clever. Just as a Dime can be your old grandpa as well as this bright shiny coin I produce thusly—"

One from Vicki's left ear, another from her right, and a third from within her diminutive nose. She did some cautious probing to see if more dimes could be found, while her grandfather demonstrated pitch and toss and call the turn: "*Kopf oder Zahl*, Dillydoll? Everything's gold at Diamond Joel's!"

Vicki plucked her finger out of her nostril and beamed with pride.

She would never forget the first time she saw Dime say that. She'd been watching a silly movie about four sisters, one of whom had sharp cheekbones and kept saying "Christopher Columbus!" Sisters weren't Vicki's favorite subject, what with Tricia having vamoosed to Beansville; but television programs in The City were on a whole hour earlier than back home, meaning Vicki not only got to see *Lassie* and *My Favorite Martian* but part of *Ed Sullivan* before going to bed. So she stuck to the old Philco, greedily relishing even this nonsense about not-so-little women, when it paused for a commercial. And who to her wondering eyes should appear but Vicki's own Grandfather Schmelz, wearing a derby hat and a suit of many checkers.

"That's *Dime!* Dime's on the TV!!"

"Mmm," went her mother.

"Twenty years at the same location," Diamond Joel informed The City, gesturing with a fat black cigar in a flashy-ringed hand. "We'll be here for you tomorrow because we can't be undersold today!" And a very tall lady with a very tall hairdo came on in a spangly circussy outfit, to help illustrate the benefits of flexible financing.

It was as good as any kiddie show.

Then there were excursions to the Lot and the Showroom, located on what Dime claimed was the Longest Street in The City if not the world. Vicki marveled at all the cars her grandfather owned, more than she knew enough numbers to count: an auto armada parked beneath the banners and streamers and lines of colorful triangles fluttering overhead. There were even a couple of cars *inside* the Showroom, waiting to be bought; along with a big bowl of dime-sized chocolate coins whose foil wrappers said EVERYTHING'S GOLD AT

DIAMOND JOEL'S. The letters were too teensy-tiny for Vicki to decipher, so they had to be read out to her by the very tall lady with the very tall hairdo, who that day was wearing a very snug dress with a very bright badge identifying her as LuAnn. She sat behind the Showroom counter and sighed every time its phone rang.

"I liked the thing you had on, on the TV," Vicki told her between calls.

"Oh. Thanks, honey." (Ring.) "(Sigh.) DiamondJoelsAutoSaleswefinanceanyone howmayIhelpyew?... opentillninetonightlookforwardtoseeingyewwe'reneverundersold." (Click.)

Vicki sampled another chocolate coin. "I bet it's more fun to be here than—than Disneyland, even!"

"Mmm," went LuAnn.

Vicki turned to her father. "Dontcha think so, Daddy?"

"Why sure I do, Kitten. A regular Fantasy on Parade."

"You bet it is, Dillydoll," added Dime. "Already your Daddy's my right-hand wheeler-dealer. Why, he could clean up driving a Good Humor truck in Eskimo Town."

(Which made Vicki picture her father pushing a broom around polar bears.)

One of the first things Ozzie had done upon joining the Lot was trade in his Corvair for an Oldsmobile Eighty-Eight. It looked new enough, so Vicki didn't understand why it was called an Olds; and she regretted the loss of the Corvair till overhearing her parents discuss how it was "unsafe at any speed." That made Vicki's heart thump, thinking how narrowly they'd avoided spinning out or rolling over or blowing sky-high like the moon rocket they'd only joked about before. Suddenly the New-Enough Olds seemed a great deal more comfortable.

Thump went her heart again, faster and harder, as 3W's door opened and in came Daddy and Gran, each carrying a bag in one hand and steering Mommy along with the other. On Mommy's face was the well-known smile of hopeful reassurance, always worn when presenting Vicki with eggplant or broccoli or any dish bound to taste bad. And clutched in Mommy's arms was a blue-blanketed bundle.

Which appeared to contain eight pounds of shrimp.

(Which was another food that Vicki didn't care for.)

“Well, Kitten, what do you think?” Ozzie chortled. “Say hello to ChrisTOpher the GOpher.”

“Looks more like a Goofer,” said Vicki; and all the grownups laughed except Gran, who smiled slightly.

“Our Lord High Gooferduster!” said Dime. “Come on, hand him over—good morning Boychik! Would you feast your eyes on that head of hair! It’s from his grandpa he gets that. You maybe won’t believe it to see me now, but the hair on *my* head used to be red like carrots. I couldn’t stretch out on the grass without some bunny rabbit taking a nibble at my noggin.”

Vicki (in the middle of a great big hug with her mother) thought the shrimp-bundle’s fine orange fuzz might’ve been a pretty color on a baby *girl*. But instead of saying so, she answered Felicia’s many questions: yes, she had missed Mommy. Yes, she’d been eating and sleeping and “going” all right. Yes, she was glad to meet her own little brother at last.

And yes, there was steadily diminishing sincerity to her responses. Vicki could feel her jaw sagging lower and lower, as was its tendency when the rest of her got anxious about sounding untruthful. But Gran’s observant eye caught Vicki’s, and Gran’s vigilant chin flicked upward.

Don’t gape, Miss, or your tongue may not fit inside your mouth.

Vicki’s teeth snapped shut—happily not on her tongue.

Very good, Miss.

Ruth Schmelz came from a place called Vilnius and a clan called the Sennmanns, who (according to Diamond Joel) all whistled through their teeth. “And, what is more, those Litvaks put pepper on their gefilte fish.”

“Better pepper,” Gran would reply, “than to *sssugar* it like a Galitzer.”

“All our lives she’s been hissing at me,” Dime would say.

Pronouncing *SH* as *SS* had not prevented Ruth Sennmann from marrying a Schmelz, or naming her daughters Felicia and Francesca, or telling them all to shush whenever she thought fit. Dime and Mommy and Aunt Fritz were accustomed to being addressed as *Sssmelz* and *Feleessya* and *Frenntzzesca*; but her eldest grandchild could not get used to the sibilance.

“She KNOWS my name’s not ‘Patrissa’—she just says it that way ‘cause she’s stubborn!”

Gran also knew everything knowable about Manners and Behavior and something called Deportment, which Vicki figured had to do with how to act at J. C. Penney. And since Tricia intended to Go Places and Be Somebody, she was attentive and obedient to Gran’s instructions.

“You are a smart girl, Patrissa,” Gran would declare. “And *you* are a *good* girl, Victoria.”

Vicki would feel gratified, though uncertain whether it was nobler to be good or be smart. Or maybe just be QUIET—

—as the shrimp-bundle went off like an alarm clock, causing everyone to jump except Gran. In whose arms Dime hastily deposited the bundle, now imitating a police siren.

“*Sssusss*,” Gran told the bundle. “*Sssusss* yourself.” Back and forth she swayed it, back and forth; and the siren-sound soon subsided to a gurgle.

“Always she’s had that knack,” said Diamond Joel.

“Wish she could teach it to *me*,” said Ozzie.

“It’s all in the wrists—isn’t that right, Mother?” asked Felicia.

“Mmm,” went Gran.

*

The next two days (and nights) were harrowing.

Fel and Ozzie, who’d undergone jealous-Tricia-tantrums four years earlier, were determined that Vicki not feel neglected or resentful of Baby Goofer. So she was compelled to take part in every aspect of his care—the feeding, the burping, the rocking, the *changing*—till it blurred into a sordid montage of pee and poop and puke and pacifier-rejection. Fetch this, carry that, oops there he “goes” again, quick bring a sponge, watch how I wipe, hand me the talcum, we need fresh Pampers NOW—

—till Vicki was ready to do a little screaming herself. She hadn’t asked for This Stupid Dumb Rackety Boy to be brought home from the hospital, but now she was obliged to mask her disgust and help sing him lullabies while holding her breath, and wishing she could open her eyes to find Julie the Raindrop there in the crib or the rocker or on the table or

sprawled across Mommy where she (and not This Boy) belonged.

“Did I yell like that?” Vicki murmured as they tiptoed out of Goofer’s momentarily quiet lair.

“No, you whimpered and fretted.”

“I bet Tricia never yelled.”

“She *yodeled*. Like a prima donna at the opera.”

Vicki didn’t know what that was, but thought it sounded appropriate. “Can I go play with Hayley now?”

Her mother’s face put on its concerned expression. “You love your little brother, don’t you?”

“Well I can’t play with *him*, he just went to sleep.”

“But you do otherwise, right?”

“Mmm,” went Vicki. “Hayley loves him—too. She’s got this big doll bed she wants to keep him in, *all the time*.”

Mommy smiled but didn’t take the hint. “Ask her to come up after awhile, and you can both play with Goofy.” (Meaning they could both play his nursemaid. And without much hope of getting a piggybank penny out of it.)

Hayley Tamworth lived downstairs in 2W. She was a chubby little girl a couple months older than Vicki, with a marked resemblance to Larry Mondello on the old *Beaver* show. Hayley wore dresses and had longer hair, but could often be found munching an apple like TV Larry. As a fortunate only child she had a whole room of her own, and it was so full of dolls and blocks and Kenner these and Mattel those and Fisher-Price t’others that you could scarcely wade through it all to reach the bed.

“Gee!” Vicki’d gone when first shown this abundance. “It’s like you get to sleep in a toy store.”

“Is it?” went Hayley, sounding confused. “Why?”

“‘Cause everything looks so new! Dontcha *do* stuff with it?”

“What stuff?”

“Well,” Vicki considered, reaching tentatively for a Skipper and a Skooter. Hayley didn’t say “Leave them alone!” or “Those are mine!,” so she proceeded. “These two could

be ‘co-eds’—that means they go to school. But on the way there they could ‘scover this cave, with a treasure hid in it that nobody knows about? But they can’t just take whatever they want, ‘cause they hafta carry it out one treasure at a time? And there’s this bunch of wild creatures” (nod at a furry animal assortment) “guarding the cave, that don’t want them to take *anything*. And they’re all on a planet in outer space... okay?”

“That sounds like fun,” said Hayley through an admiring apple-bite. “You’re a good thinker.”

“Well, I got this big sister who makes up stuff a lot. So—which one do you wanna be?”

“Um. You pick.”

Vicki, not used to deferential treatment, found it quite agreeable. She quickly learned to feed lines to the less-imaginative Hayley, sometimes growing impatient with her denser reactions. Yet she never lost sight of the chubby girl’s generosity—or her skill at making growly monster-noises.

Hayley’s parents were considerably older than Vicki’s. They looked rather like Santa and Mrs. Claus in middle age, before the beard was grown or the locks turned silver, but already rosy-cheeked and twinkle-dimpled. Mr. Tamworth was Harry the butcher at Hardesty’s Supermarket, where he got to wear a straw hat and a bloody striped apron. “I always get *first* cut at the *best* cuts,” he’d say, laying a finger aside of his cherryish nose. And indeed Vicki would never taste steaks or burgers quite so succulent as the ones Mr. Tamworth grilled in the back alley, with Ozzie Volester’s enthusiastic help.

Mrs. Tamworth called herself “an old social worker” (though, like the Eighty-Eight, she wasn’t *that* old) and used to earn a living as one. Then Hayley’d arrived as a midlife surprise, her folks having almost given up hope of having a child. “Yes, just when I stopped looking, here came my Precious Puddin’—so remember, girls, to always keep your eyes wide open.”

(Hayley rolled her small blue blinkers at being called Precious Puddin’, and Vicki smothered a laugh into a spluttery smile.)

As an old social worker, Mrs. Tamworth looked after everybody at the Walrock greystone. She ran errands, offered a helping hand and receptive ear and cry-onable

shoulder, while teaching the girls that doing someone a good deed means it's *your* lucky day. Vicki's mother said Mary Tamworth was the Answer to a Prayer—which was unusual for Felicia, who normally frowned on praying.

The girls accompanied Hayley's mother as she "made her rounds" of the building. They'd begin (and spend the most time) down in 1W with Mrs. LoCascio, a macaroni-maker's widow who really *was* old. She had only one leg and seldom got out of her wheelchair, yet Vicki and Hayley suspected there were actually *two* Mrs. Los sharing that leg and chair. There was a bad one full of grievances and complaints, objecting to the children's presence if not existence; and a good one who appreciated their company, pressing them to stay longer and drop by more often.

Either way, old Mrs. Lo needed less attention than her birds. There was Aldo the budgie and Bella the cockatiel and Luigi the Amazon parrot, all of whom could talk and usually did simultaneously. Other birds came and went, most often on warm days—"You can always tell when the poor soul leaves her window open," Hayley's mother would say—and at times so many flocked together that Mrs. LoCascio looked like the Tuppence-a-Bagwoman in *Mary Poppins*. An entire Sunday newspaper would be needed to reline all their cages. (Bad Mrs. Lo scared girls and birds alike, shouting at them to keep away from each other, while Good Mrs. Lo trained the birds to greet Vicki and Hayley by name.)

Across the hall in 1E lived Beany Boy the Mighty Beagle. No friendlier dog could be found in The City: he'd fetch a ball thrown down the alley till everyone involved was thoroughly worn out. His name did give Vicki a brief pang, reminding her of Beansville; and she was baffled by Beany Boy's being owned by a *postman*. Even less explicably, Mr. Frank didn't deliver the mail to his own building.

"Well," he explained, "dair's dese guyyyyyce, see, dat tell me where I'm sposda go. So, I gahda go over by dair."

"Dat's right," chimed in Mrs. Frank, a lunchlady at the local grade school. "Just like I gahda dish up wahdever sammitch's on da menu dat day. And da kiddies, dey gahdeet wahdever I dish up, hunh?"

(The Franks had been City-dwellers unto the fourth generation.)

Upstairs in 2E lived another widow, Mrs. Partridge, who despite her name kept no birds except plucked ones in the freezer. Instead she had an upright piano on which she gave professional lessons. (Bad Mrs. LoCascio griped about the noise of these, almost as often as she deplored Beany-Boy's barking—not that either dog or lessons could be heard over 1W's screeching cackle-chatter.)

Along with the piano, Mrs. Partridge had a pair of twelve-year-old granddaughters named Candice and Corliss Grusza. Unlike the two Mrs. Los, the Grusza twins were rarely seen separately. They'd descend the greystone staircase side by side, wearing identical outfits and hairstyles and inscrutable demeanors. Out back they'd mount matching Schwinn Starlets and pedal away, trailing a chill in the air behind them.

Vicki would never discover why Candice and Corliss lived with Mrs. Partridge. Hayley's mother knew, and she told Vicki's mother and they shook their heads sorrowfully, but kept the reason mum. Even Mrs. Lo at her worst wouldn't breathe a word of it. Vicki and Hayley privately speculated that the Gruszas were orphans like Pollyanna, but played a Gruesome Game rather than a Glad one.

Finally there were the Hulls in 3E, across the hall from the Volesters. Mr. Hull (the Munchkin Mayor) had been a cement contractor before he retired and bought the greystone. His wife Nellie fit nicely into the role of cartoon Mama Bear, though instead of saying "But *Henry*..." Mrs. Hull would go "But *Baldwin*"—probably because Mr. Hull had such a bright shiny scalp.

Their son Junior let Vicki and Hayley ride on his massive shoulders as he roamed around doing chores, and always wanted to hear about Skipper and Skooter's Astro Co-ed adventures, which he took even more seriously than the girls did.

"No no no," he might argue, "Skooter mustn't fall in love with Ricky if he is now a robot. What if he got switched off, like Mac on *The Jetsons*? Then Skooter would go crazy—like Rosie on *The Jetsons*. Unh-unh: she mustn't do it."

"She could switch him back on and *not* go crazy," offered Hayley, who made Skooter fall in love with Ricky every week.

"Like the kiss in *Sleeping Beauty*," Vicki added. "It'd wake him up in time for the happy ending."

“But the Sleeping Beauty was not a robot,” Junior protested.

“Then I guess Ricky can’t be one too,” Hayley sighed.

“He could be *brainwashed*,” suggested Vicki. “That’s almost like a robot. Talk like one and walk like one, but be a real boy—”

“—and then Skooter could dry out his washed brain!” said the romantic Hayley.

Junior mulled this over, biting the end of his mop handle. “Uhhhh...” he decided, “that might work.”

What didn’t work was Junior’s plea to help his father unfurl and hang a gigantic flag on the Saturday before Memorial Day. Mr. Hull wouldn’t even let him put the “O Beautiful for Spaceship Guys” record on their portable phonograph, which deeply hurt Junior’s feelings (and therefore Vicki’s and Hayley’s as well).

That same Saturday was significant because MomMom and PopPop brought Tricia for a visit, to see Baby Goofer for the first time. On this occasion the elder Volesters didn’t stay at a hotel but with their Schmelz in-laws, up in the northern suburb whose name always reminded Vicki of *The Poky Little Puppy*. Gran and MomMom had a lot of canasta to catch up on.

When Geraldine Volester had first met Ruth Schmelz ten years earlier, both felt the instinctive antagonism of Polish Catholic vs. Lithuanian Jew. Then each took the other’s measure, with Geraldine concluding that Ruth and her daughter were Real Ladies, while Ruth determined that Geraldine and her son had Good Hearts. Neither household was particularly religious, least of all Felicia Schmelz; so when she and Ozzie were married by a justice of the peace, MomMom only regretted the lack of any circumstantial pomp.

She herself was by no means a constant churchgoer. Following last month’s trek to The City and her night at the Conrad Hilton, MomMom did attend mass at Holy Name: “I hardly ever go two Sundays running—but who can pass up a cathedral?” (Which gave Tricia and Vicki the giggles since MomMom hardly went *anywhere* running, and “Holy Name” sounded like a place of worship for Robin the Boy Wonder.)

The previous Sunday, MomMom had gone to St. Stan’s in her home town of Bay City, where she’d done Easter Duty every year of her life. Still living in Bay City was *her* mother, Ozzie’s “Babcia Brygid,” the relic of sugar-beet refiner Casimir Kosnowski. Ten

years ago Babcia had denounced her irreverent grandson for marrying a “Jewess,” and one who didn’t even practice her own faith but tied the knot at a registry office. Two years later Ozzie’d brought the heavily-pregnant Felicia to see her, hoping for a reconciliation; it turned into a Scene that sent Fel into furious premature labor at Mercy Hospital. There Patricia Elaine was born—on a day that, in the distant future, would prove fateful—and there she remained for a touch-and-go while afterward. Everyone was shaken up by the ordeal, even Babcia Brygid, though once the crisis passed she demanded a formal christening at St. Stan’s. MomMom persuaded Felicia to yield on this point, providing a beautiful Kosnowski-heirloom baby gown for the ceremony; and Tricia herself supplied melodic yodeling throughout. The Schmelzes were prominently present, Gran decorously composed and Diamond Joel sizing up prospects. (“That your Studebaker parked outside, Padre?”)

Dime and PopPop had hit it off from the beginning. Every get-together was a chance for them to doff jackets and ties, roll up their sleeves, and enjoy long mechanical conversations under the hood of each other’s car. Ozzie often joined them there, all three getting begrimed and begreased. The week-old Christopher Blaine would soon be taken out for his first engine inspection and there, to the horror (but not surprise) of his mother and grandmothers, get his fuzzy orange fontanelle dabbed with motor oil.

“That’s how *men* perform christenings,” the ladies agreed, sending Vicki on the double for petroleum jelly and a wet washcloth.

*

Before the three Volester children were put to bed that significant Saturday night, everyone’s stock of film and flashcubes had to be exhausted. By then Vicki felt equally exhausted, not to mention dazed by all the flashes; but Tricia had to rearrange their bedroom’s furnishings to her satisfaction before either could retire.

“Here, help me move this.”

Vicki dragged her weary self over and obeyed. “Are you staying for good this time?”

“No—there’s two more weeks before school’s out. My class is throwing me a going-away party, I made sure of that.”

“I don’t *wantcha* to go back. It’s been *awful* here.”

“I thought you made friends with the little fat girl downstairs.”

“She’s not so fat!” Vicki said loyally. “But she *loves* Goofer—”

“Goofus,” insisted Tricia, a reader of *Highlights* magazine.

“—Goofus. She even says she’ll take him an’ keep him, but Mommy won’t let her.”

“Mmm,” went Tricia, collapsing on her bed (now shifted beside the window). “I *bet* she won’t. You know what him being a boy means—it’s move-to-the-back-of-the-line for us two.”

“Not *you!*”

“Yes, me! There’s a BOY in the family now. And you just have to look at him to see how impossible he’s going to be to live with, the older he gets. I wonder how soon we’ll be able to smack him around?”

The future promptly seemed nearer and cheerier. “Can we do that?”

“Hey, we’re his big sisters—it’s our *job* to do that. We’ll have to work together: you’re too little to do much yet, and I’ll be too busy to do it all. Maybe we can get your friend downstairs to help—take blame for things, stuff like that.”

Vicki (not for the first or last time) rode a great wave of adoration toward Tricia.

“Um... tonight, can I sleep with you? Please?”

Tricia started to give her the emerald glare, then softened. “When’d your toenails get clipped last? Let me feel your feet... Well—okay then. But just for tonight: you’re getting too big to fit with me in one bed.”

Flattered by this implication of maturity, Vicki snuggled down next to her and the two sisters started drifting off. Then—as usual, without warning—the police siren erupted next door:

WAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!

“Oh, for crying out loud!” went Tricia.

“Yeah, get used to that,” mumbled Vicki.

4

Shedding Tears

There were sisters and then there were sisters. Ozzie had one named Bonita who, when dumped by her callous college sweetheart John Johnson (from Wausau, Wisconsin) had sobbingly declared she was taking the veil. MomMom'd pleaded that she not "go overboard with the Faith"; but nowadays Aunt Bonnie was Sr. Agnes Volester OP, parochial schoolteacher.

Her pupils marked the semester's end by presenting her with a handmade certificate of blessed appreciation. "Which is a rich laugh," Aunt Bonnie observed in her latest letter, "considering how many rulers I've worn out on those scamps."

"How does she wear out rulers?" Vicki wanted to know.

"By whacking knuckles," said her father, gently showing how on Vicki's little hand. "Lots harder, of course, and with wood."

"Wouldn't that *hurt*?"

"You bet it would, Kitten."

Vicki's mother intervened to explain that SOME teachers used corporal punishment to make children obedient, but Aunt Bonnie was a Dominican Sister who opposed violence and merely joked about whacking.

"Bet she could do it, though," said Ozzie. "It was always Bonn who kept us boys in line—even Ted, and he was lots bigger'n her. She had this way of grabbing you by the ear and *twisting* it—"

"Oz!"

Vicki'd once overheard MomMom sighing about Aunt Bonnie, telling Gran Schmelz how lucky *she* was to have had one girl who could produce grandchildren. But Gran had responded with tales from the opposite extreme: about her younger daughter Francesca, whom everyone but Gran had always called Fritzi Ritz.

At sixteen she'd eloped with her boyfriend Bucky Fettermeyer, spending three months as his blissful bride before annulment in September and a nonchalant return to high school. "I married my first husband 'cause he had a name like 'Buck Fetter,'" Fritzi would drawl. "Unfortunately, it turned out he—didn't."

Then after a colorful decade as pin-up model, showgirl and chorine, Fritzi'd endured a few years with Andrew Massena (That Glassblowing Basket Case). Vicki was too young to remember Uncle Frenchy, but she associated him with a jardiniere in the Volester front room that he had sculpted and Vicki thought of as "the runny-colored flowerpot."

"He was a crock," Aunt Fritzi always said, "and I got nothing out of him except other crocks." Plus his surname, retained post-divorce when Fritzi opened her dance studio. "'Madame Massena' looks so much *chic*-er than Schmelz. I don't want people thinking I'll teach them to polka."

"Well, make sure they don't think you'll teach them the double shuffle, either."

"Honestly, Felicia!"

Vicki, even at the age of four, understood her mother regarded Fritzi with the same jumbled hodgepodge of love, envy and resentment that she herself felt toward Tricia; though in Felicia's case, *she* was the older sister. And would sometimes snipe "That's all the Fritzi in you coming out"—most recently when Tricia, arriving in The City for good, remarked "It's just like *West Side Story*!" as Puerto Ricans spent three days rioting on Division Street.

"*I like to be in Amair-eeek-ah*," Tricia sang. "*Ho-kay by me in Amair-eeek*—I need to learn the mambo!"

She got enrolled in the Massena Dance Studio's Summer Beginners course, whose minimum attendance age was seven. "Any younger than that and there's too much crying," said Aunt Fritzi.

These words were so many ruler-whacks on Vicki's emotional knuckles. Crying! That was something *babies* did. (As demonstrated by Goofus for hours at a stretch.) No

worse barb could be lodged in a four-year-old's heart than the awful slur of "baby."

There and then Vicki (wiping hot eyes) vowed that she too would learn how to dance, as good as Tricia and the sooner the better. Princess Smartysnoot traipsed home from her first lesson to sling a leg up on the windowsill, pronounce it an acceptable "barre," and evict Vicki from their bedroom.

"Why??"

"'Cause I've got to *practice*."

"Can't I just *sit* here?"

"No. You'd ask all sorts of questions, and I need to CONCENTRATE. Go play with your friend or something."

Vicki stormed over to Hayley's and introduced a furious innovation to the Adventures of the Astro Co-eds. They now took place on the planet Hullabaloo, where everybody could really shake 'em down and work it all, BABY—but none so well as the Astro Co-eds. Every adventure opened with their new theme song, adapted from "Sugar and Spice" by the Cryan' Shames:

Skipper and Skooter

they dance through space

having the time of their

lyyyy-eeeeves...

"I can dance too," offered Junior Hull one memorable day. "Look, I can do the Twist!"—and on a vast scale, still holding onto his bucket and mop. (Vicki would recall this as her first exposure to dirty dancing.)

The Munchkin Mayor, witness to the resulting splatter, dealt Junior a tremendous whack on the seat of his dungarees.

"Aw, Paw..." went Junior, and could speak no more.

Vicki and Hayley choked up with vicarious reproach; while Mr. Hull, quietly clearing his own throat, told Junior to "be a man" and re-mop what he'd sloshed.

No use crying over spilled slosh. The next time Vicki was ordered to go away so her sister could CONCENTRATE, she lingered humbly (though dry-eyed) on the threshold.

“I wanna watch you packtiss. I won’t say a word or ask a word. You can kick me out if I do.”

“It’s PRACTice. And not one *peep*,” warned Tricia. Yielding to her customary yen for an audience, she exhibited moves-in-the-groove that had beautiful names. The main move was called the *plee-ay*, which must be fancytalk for “please”—or possibly “thank you,” since it resembled a curtsy.

Vicki had to bite her lips to keep all the questions from bursting forth. She dared not cover her mouth with a hand, lest Tricia think she was stifling laughter; and that would be very wrong, for Tricia’s endeavors at the makeshift barre (or “sille”) were anything but silly.

Stand up tall—keep the back straight—tummy in—shoulders level—relax the elbows—turn out your toes—lift and stretch—lengthen and loosen—
—and, eventually, you can make your body do anything you want it to.

Even leave the ground and fly off like a bird.

Magically.

So Tricia spent that summer PRACTicing plee-ays and reh-luh-vays and day-gah-zhays, plus another move called the Batman Tawndoo (though it had no apparent link to TV’s Caped Crusader). And every step that Tricia took was replicated by Vicki and Hayley—or rather by Skipper and Skooter, who could be put through caper-cutting paces thanks to their “lifelike bendable legs.”

Finally, after eight weeks of Saturday lessons and continual exercise, Tricia and her fellow Beginners took part in a recital. *Everybody* was coming to watch this day-byew: Mommy and Daddy, Gran and Dime, MomMom and PopPop down from the Thumb, the Tamworths bringing Mrs. Partridge (to critique the accompanist’s piano) and the whole Hull clan. Goofus would be left at home with Candice and Corliss—you could never engage one Grusza as babysitter, the twins were a package deal—but Vicki, to her thrilled alarm, was assigned an actual role in the recital itself.

Tricia’d decided a bouquet should be presented to her, and that this would have the most dramatic effect if done by Vicki. Who got vigorously rehearsed beforehand in their bedroom, using a feather duster that had to be carried just-so and delivered just-so to Tricia, standing on her bed as if at center stage.

And then, at last, she *was*. “No more rehearsing or nursing a part, on with the show this is it!”—at the Joe E. Lewis Dinner Playhouse. Which wasn’t like any playhouse Vicki’d ever seen before; it was more like a HoJo with a raised platform where the ice cream counter should be.

The Massena Dance Studio occupied its second story, and Vicki jumped at the chance to go up and peek inside: marveling at the genuine barres and springy floor and wall that was one huge mirror. After that glimpse, though, the rest of the Joe E. Lewis Dinner Playhouse looked even less impressive, despite its footlights and slightly-plush seats.

But then the recital began. And Vicki was conscious of only the dancers.

Big girls aged seven or eight, wearing pastel leotards and frilly tutus and cunning little slippers as they performed their moves-in-the-groove. Tricia (of course) did each one perfectly: leaps and bounds and twirls of delicate grace. Some of the other Beginners, though, seemed less lifelike-bendable than the Astro Co-eds. Tricia’s partner Noreen, for instance, kept spinning too slowly and drifting too closely to Her Highness—who more than once had to thrust her aside.

Vicki could not help thinking that she herself could hop and skip as well as Noreen. How surprised they’d all be if she were to soar up onstage and shake ‘em down like a true Hullabalooer. How foolish Aunt Fritzzi would feel at not having perceived Vicki’s talent, insisting she be specially admitted for studio instruction.

“Madame Massena” was wearing a lowcut leotard and long chiffon skirt, both of deepest black. Her dark flip was scrunched back into a proper ballerina’s hairbun, and she conducted the recital with an ebony wand that normally had one end plugged by a cigarette. Now Fritzzi’s wand cued the dancers to make their closing reh-ver-ahnce; which was Vicki’s signal to take her carefully-clutched bouquet up to Tricia.

She stood, moved forward, and stumbled.

In front of *everybody*.

For one horrifying moment Vicki thought the flowers were going to slip through her fingers and disintegrate on the carpet, like last winter’s miniature snowman.

Somehow she made it to the stage. Somehow she managed to give her curtsying sister the bouquet intact. People in the audience might go “Aww” at the sight of her doing

this; yet all Vicki could see was Tricia's emerald glare.

Returning to her slightly-plush seat, she peered down at her deceitful feet in their tiny penny loafers. Suddenly they seemed massive, monstrous, the size of Junior Hull's hulking clodhoppers—utterly incapable of delicacy or grace.

She trembled to think what Tricia would say. But it turned out Her Highness hadn't even noticed the stumble, being preoccupied with annoyance at her laggard partner.

"That Noreen! She must've thought she was cast as a *snail*."

Vicki breathed a bit easier then. At least until stubbing a toe on the way out of the Playhouse; followed by tripping *twice* on the greystone stairs.

"Mommy, I think my feet are wrong!" she tried to say, over loud protests by Goofus at being retrieved from the Gruszas.

"What, Brownie? (For goodness sake *hush*, Christopher!)"

"I SAID I THINK MY FEET ARE TOO BIG."

"Oh no—don't tell me you need new shoes already, we just got those."

"Not my shoes, my *feet*—they're trying to make me fall down!"

"Put on your sandals, darling, I'm sure they'll fit—" and off Felicia rushed to deposit Goofus in his crib.

Changing into flipflops did make Vicki's tootsies feel cooler, if not smaller. And when she got a confidential opportunity to ask Tricia, "Do *you* think my feet are too big?" her sister just snapped "No, I think your *mouth* is too big."

Which was almost reassuring.

But not entirely.

*

Shortly after the recital, Tricia turned eight and her family celebrated with a birthday dinner at the Red Star Inn. There Vicki tasted Hoppel-Poppel for the first time, and took note that all the Red Star waiters looked as though *their* feet had gone wrong too.

Then Noreen sought forgiveness by throwing Tricia a second party attended by their dance class cronies. They went to see *Paradise, Hawaiian Style* and left it asking each other, "When did Elvis Presley get so FAT?"

Apparently it was possible to grow up too far or too much.

As if to test this, all three Volester children were taken to the pediatrician—Tricia for her annual checkup, Goofus for his three-month visit, and Vicki as a tagalong who wanted it made clear she didn't need any shots.

Dr. Dale Tober had been recommended by Hayley's mother, who sang praises not simply to his skill with children and support of the community, but also for "grinning and bearing it with that wife of his." Mrs. Tamworth could do a surprisingly tart imitation of "Pidge" Tober, who (it was said) detested Pfiester Park and was forever urging her husband to move their home and his practice to some Nice Northern Suburb. But Dr. Tober had grown up in the neighborhood, and enjoyed strolling the few blocks to and from his office in the Dewinter Avenue Medical Building. Which, as Mary Tamworth pointed out, was "a mere stone's throw" from Hardesty's Supermarket on Brunt Street; and Vicki figured if stones were being thrown, it must be handy having a building full of doctors nearby.

Dr. Tober was a handsome man and Tricia thought him suitable as her personal examiner. Goofus too kicked up minimal fuss, in spite of cutting his first tooth. Vicki was tempted to consult Dr. Tober about the state of her feet, but feared this might lead to him reaching for a hypodermic needle.

"So this is Vicki? How are you today?"

"FINE," she politely emphasized.

"I have a little girl just about your age. Her name is April—here's her picture—and she's starting at the XY Nursery School next month." To Felicia: "If you'd care to see their brochure..."

Felicia expressed quick and ominous interest.

"Uh," went Vicki.

It wasn't that she resisted the *idea* of getting an education. Vicki knew she'd be going to school someday, and that it was a necessary step from babyhood to big-girlhood. Part of her was eager to become an Actual Co-ed—so long as this could be achieved by gradual degrees.

"Is there dancing at nursery school?" she whispered to Tricia.

"Sure."

"Really?"

“Well—there’s music, anyway. In fact it’s *mostly* music.”

That sounded promising, as did the chance to escape from Goofus’s teething. Hayley had also been signed up as an “XY Zeekid,” so it wasn’t like she’d know nobody there. And April Tober (who looked exactly like a chipmunk in her father’s photo: so cute) might turn out to be a new friend—one more consistently interesting than others Vicki could mention.

This hope got quashed during the first minutes of school, whose doorway April had to be dragged through at the end of her mother’s arm.

“This place is *stupid*,” April declared in a disgusted chipmunk’s chirp.

“Now dearest, we must try to make the best of things,” pided Mrs. Tober.

“Hi,” Vicki ventured. “I like your dress.”

“It’s *stupid* and so are you!”

“Now dearest...”

Vicki was filled with misgivings that swelled as the day wore on. Or rather the Times, of which there were many: Hello Time, Indoor Happy Time, Story Time, Snack Time, Rest Time, Art Time, Outdoor Happy Time (weather permitting), Song Time, Tidying Time, Goodbye Time. The next day’s Times were precisely the same, as were each subsequent day’s.

Paradise, XYan Style.

Presiding over the Zeekids were Mrs. Eckstein, uncommonly large and always upbeat: “OH, aren’t we having *fun*?”—and Miss Wyatt, uncommonly lean and a habitual crosspatch: “Let us mind our P’s and Q’s!” These and similar points would be stressed with flourishes of a super-long ruler called a yardstick. Vicki kept a wary eye on this, frequently hiding her knuckles in her pockets or behind her back.

There were Times, though, when she wished she could borrow the yardstick and *do* a bit of whacking. The school was full of rowdy pushers and frantic shovers and irrepressible shouters-at-lungtops. One girl named Nancy always acted like she’d been stuck in an electric outlet and turned up as high as the ants in her pants would go. There were *three* rambunctious boys named Mark—one a tall loudmouth who constantly sassed the teachers, one a short glutton who spent every non-Snack minute racing and chasing, and one a dumb maniac who never uttered an intelligible word among his honks and brays and caterwauls.

“Sharing” and “taking turns” were seldom practiced by the pushers ‘n’ shovers. They inevitably grabbed all the good playstuff, indoors and out; hogging the swings, monopolizing the jungle gym, swiping the best crayons and moister clay right from under your nose.

So far as Vicki was concerned, she and Hayley could just as profitably (and a lot more comfortably) have spent these mornings playing by themselves at home. For outdoor fun they could’ve relied on Junior Hull or Beany Boy, both of whom were a lot better (and tamer) company than Noisy Nancy or the Three Marks.

Not that all the Zeekids raised constant cain—some were so quiet you hardly ever noticed them. The least noteworthy was a mislaid-looking little boy called Wernie Ball, who occupied the chair on Vicki’s other side when everyone sat down at the big round sticky-topped table.

Wernie Ball was very pale and slight and nervous, with strange colorless hair like cobwebs or dandelion fluff. Vicki and Hayley were curious what such hair must feel like, but neither intended to find out. They agreed that Wernie had all the earmarks of a paste-eater—too creepy to consort with.

“Do we need to blow our nose?” Mrs. Eckstein asked when Wernie drew attention to himself for once, sniffing loudly through an entire Indoor Happy Time.

“No’m,” he mumbled.

“I blew MY nose already!” boasted Tall Mark, snatching a Tonka truck right from under Wernie’s.

“Let us not bother our neighbors,” said Miss Wyatt and her yardstick.

“Yeah, Wernie!” chided Tall Mark, with a parting shove.

One day as the Zeekids assembled at the big round table for Song Time, the chair on Vicki’s other side was taken not by Wernie but a girl, and no less a girl than Mean Melissa. Who normally sat on the opposite side of the table. Which had been just fine with Vicki.

Every child at XY Nursery School knew by now that whatever Mean Melissa desired, nobody else was likely to get. She accomplished this without shouting, without sassing, without ever growing flustered or upset. Mean Melissa accepted instructions and then disregarded them; learned all the rules and was bound by none.

Melissa did her own binding.

Whenever Short Mark started to chase a girl, he would yell “Gonna getcha! gonna getcha!”—and the girl was supposed to squeal and run as fast as she could. Vicki had been obliged to do this on several occasions. Yet the first time Short Mark sought to pursue Melissa, she put her hands on her hips and said:

“Quit. It.”

Short Mark then tried to pretend he’d really been after Noisy Nancy, who dutifully shrieked and galloped away; but neither’s heart was in the hunt.

“I’m not playing with YOU today,” Melissa might inform this or that Zeekid during Hello Time. No reason would be given; nor could her snubs be casually shrugged off—they left too indelible a sting.

So in her presence Nancy would lower her voice (a trifle) and April Tober, to whom everybody else was *stupid*, would wear an ingratiating smile. Even the Three Marks tread as softly as they could around Mean Melissa.

You’d have to call her a pretty girl, prettier even than chipmunk-cute April. But Melissa’s was a face you dared not look directly at for long. She had the coldest eyes imaginable: they were a shining blue-gray and two different shapes, one (not always the same one) narrower than the other. Her upper lip was usually curled in a half-smile—now on the left side, now on the right—to reveal teeth like the contents of a refrigerator icetray.

Vicki, for all her experience of Tricia’s green glare and the chilliness of the Grusza twins, had never felt such caustic frigidity before. Certainly not from a child her own age, who shouldn’t be old enough to possess that much impact.

Once when Vicki was climbing out of the sandbox, she accidentally stepped on Melissa’s castle. “I’m sorry!” she hastened to say, but Melissa stared at Vicki’s feet and went “CLUMSY” in a voice like a subzero branding iron. It gave Vicki bad dreams every night for a whole week (and her mother additional fits when Vicki refused to wear those penny loafers again). The only worse epithet would’ve been “baby,” and Melissa applied that one to Hayley Tamworth—doubling the freezer-burn by adding “Huey.”

“Why’d she hafta say it so *mean*?” Hayley wondered over and over, after they were safely back on Walrock Avenue.

“‘Cause she *is* Mean,” was Vicki’s only answer.

Now she could think of no clue why Melissa had chosen to sit beside her for Song Time. Probably to make some stark remark about Vicki's ability to carry a tune, meaning she also lacked the delicate grace to *ever* be a ballerina.

She won't make me cry, Vicki swore to herself. *I won't ever let her make me cry—*

"Er'm..." said a hesitant voice. "That's my chair."

Wernie Ball, standing by the big round table, shifting from anxious foot to foot.

"So?" went Melissa, not even looking up. "*I'm* sitting here now."

It hadn't occurred to Vicki that a *chair* could be stolen, like clay or crayons or a Tonka truck. Name cards were hung on the back of every Zeekid's chair to resolve any confusion by student or teacher. Wernie stared in bewilderment at the card on his chairback, partly obscured by Melissa's long brown ponytail.

"But... that's my *name*."

Melissa turned half around, upper lip curling, to glance at the card in question. "What's that say? *Weenie*?" (Laughter from other Zeekids; honk and bray from Dumb Mark.) "Maybe it oughta say TEENY-Weenie." (General hilarity as Melissa flounced forward again.)

"*But...*"

Two words then, like banderillas planted in a quivering hide:

"Get. Lost."

Wernie wavered for a moment. Then dropped his jaw and started to sob.

"What's this, what's this, what's this?" beseeched Mrs. Eckstein, who till then had been engrossed with sheet music.

"She... she..." was all Wernie could manage.

Nobody else spoke up, except to giggle. Nor was there any explanation as to how a chair had gone missing, though everyone suspected one or more of the Three Marks.

Melissa tapped impatient fingertips on the tabletop while an adult-sized chair was drawn up and Wernie, still blubbering, got boosted onto it. Then Miss Wyatt's yardstick led everyone else in a rendition of "The Farmer in the Dell" that dissolved into scurrilous mirth, long before they reached:

*The cheese stands alone
the cheese stands alone
hi-ho the derry-o
the cheese stands alone.*

Most of the children rose to do the daily Happy March (segue from Song Time to Tidying). The pushers ‘n’ shovers provided their standard barrage of rowdy stamping and frantic crashing. Mean Melissa and April Tober paraded more genteelly, sharing a chummyish snortle.

Vicki, kiddycursing her feet as they tangled with the legs of her chair, found the way blocked by the adult-sized chair and its sniveling occupant. Who reminded her of Peter Rabbit, caught in the gooseberry net and dunked in the watering can.

Queasy pity churned Vicki’s stomach.

“(Don’t cry,)” she muttered at him while squeezing past.

He raised his head. Confronting her with startlingly red eyes in a pasty pallid face.

Vicki hurried after Hayley and the other Happy Marchers. Acutely aware with every awkward step that Wernie Ball was following her—those creepy-crawly eyes were upon her—their focus poised like a pair of wet crimson needles.

5

The Concrete Garden

Begin the walk to School by going up two blocks along Manderley Avenue—“up” meaning uphill, every step of the way. You and Hayley didn’t much care for Manderley Avenue, since its trees had twisty, gnarly branches that straggled low enough to flick even little-kid faces. But Tricia herded you up this street every weekday morning, so she could gaze between the trees at a grand and gloomy row of greystones and brownstones, much fancier than their own place on Walrock.

Which was “just a walkup,” according to Tricia.

Then “Hurry *up*,” you two!” she would grouse, as if YOU were the ones staring through the pointy-topped iron fence at what were probably haunted houses. But *up* you would hurry (getting your faces flicked en route) in the direction called “north.” Keep heading “north” and you’d reach Canada or even Eskimo Town; but down here you only got to walk across Yew Avenue. And why *Yew*? Why not “You” or just U? Or, better still, why not V?

“It’s the name of a tree no I don’t know why they call it that you should save up your questions for School,” said crabby Tricia.

Up you went again, this time to Sharp Boulevard: a much wider and busier street with shops and office buildings on either side. Here the trees (be they U’s or V’s) were few and far apart, looking like they’d been bought at a hardware store and screwed into sidewalk sockets. Maybe if you knew which leaf to pull, you could switch them on and use them as streetlamps.

“Turn right *here*,” Tricia ordered every morning.

Now you were heading “east,” the direction of Broadway and Times Square, for a couple of short peevish blocks. Crossing Danvers Avenue and Van Hopper Avenue, whose signs frowned down as though they suspected your hair and teeth weren’t properly brushed. This on top of repeated admonitions from the SHARP signs, reminding you how important it was to pay attention and get educated.

“Otherwise you could find yourselves working *here* when you grow up,” warned Tricia. Glaring emeraldly at Aaron’s Lanes & Lounge, the bowling alley on this side of Van Hopper. Which to you and Hayley sounded a lot more fun than turning left and waiting for the Safety Patrol to wipe his nose on his wrist before helping you span Sharp Boulevard.

And so you reached School.

Also known as E. M. Reulbach Elementary.

Some of whose pupils attended it for nine whole years without ever spelling the name correctly.

Tricia, of course, had gotten it right the very first time and every time since. When she’d enrolled here a year ago, she’d spent barely a week in third grade before winning promotion to fourth. Mommy had fretted awhile about Tricia’s being the youngest in her class—which was an absurd worry, since Tricia looked and thought and acted *way* ahead of the curve.

She’d carefully surveyed the other fourth grade girls before selecting a best friend who was not much older, almost as good-looking, and perhaps two-thirds as clever as herself. This was another Patricia, kooky Patty Kuchenesser, whose voice sounded like maple syrup mixed with lemon juice.

Patty always referred to you and Hayley as “small fry.”

(Some insults were inexcusable, even when uttered by a fourth grader.)

No, make that a fifth grader: this was a new school year. The small fry had graduated from XY Nursery and were now full-fledged members of Reulbach’s morning kindergarten. Which was why Tricia-the-fifth-grader escorted them *up* to School each a.m., keeping them approximately five yards ahead of her at all times:

*Stay where I can see you NOT that close quit dawdling we haven't
got all day don't step off the curb till I say you can oh I'm telling
Daddy this has GOT to be worth more than a quarter a week hey I
heard that Victoria! get back here right this minute—*

(You're not the only one who can "skip ahead," Smartysnoot.)

At noon Mrs. Tamworth would come fetch you and Hayley, or Mommy would bring Goofus in the stroller he kept scrambling out of, or all three might make an outing of it. Sometimes the five of you would go on to Brunt Street and rescue Hayley's dad from behind Hardesty's butcher counter, and then all six would enjoy lunch at Biff's Hot Dogs or the drugstore snackbar. While they ate, the girls were expected to describe their scholarly progress, and do so with mouths not full—a challenge at lunchtime. But a duty as well, in keeping with the dignity of being a Reulbach student.

Each day School was an imposing sight as it loomed against the horizon: a three-story fortress topped off by a crenellated cupola. (Always referred to as "the Tower," and inhabited—according to older pupils—by a bunch of stir-crazy detainees, whose groans could be heard if you listened hard enough.)

Kindergarten was on the second floor and had its own private outdoor balcony. Efforts were made to grow simple plants and flowers here, making the balcony a literal children's garden as well as recess-refuge from the brouhaha on big-kid playgrounds, where a five-year-old could get trampled without anyone noticing.

Indoors, the daily routine wasn't profoundly different from XY's ZeeTimes. But as Miss Evers reminded everyone, this was a *classroom* where lessons were taught and learned. Though kindergarteners didn't yet have the honor of using Big Chief tablets, their bookbags were loaded with academic supplies: #2 pencils, fat pink erasers, rounded-tip scissors, eight-color sets of Crayola and Prang. Other material provided by School got handed out by students serving as monitors—another duty not to be sneezed at. (Especially if you forgot to pack Kleenex in your bookbag, and had to resort to your wrist like the Safety Patrol.)

Miss Evers maintained fairly good order without resorting to ruler-whacks, despite Morning Kindergarten's containing Noisy Nancy Knopf and all Three Marks. Their

inclination to shriek and sass and chase and bray sometimes resulted in their sitting alone in a corner; while extreme naughtiness could earn a visit to the Principal, Orville W. Overland. (Known to a generation as “Old Overalls.”)

Even hapless Wernie Ball got sent to Mr. Overland’s office, for not just goggling at Vicki Volester (i.e. Yew) but being oblivious to the teacher’s request that Wernie “go to the corner” if he couldn’t pay attention and get educated.

Loud laughter from the rest of the class. Excruciating embarrassment from Vicki. Witty gibes from rotund Jimmy Maxwell, who could find amusement in every calamity. Even his own:

“Jimmy! What happened? Did the lid come off your Elmer’s Glue?”

“‘Fraid so, Miss Evers. Guess I gotta *stick to it* from now on.”

(Class-wide laugh riot, with Dumb Mark rolling on the floor.)

Absent from Morning Kindergarten were April Tober and Mean Melissa, both of whom attended the Afternoon session. April lived almost directly across the street from the Kindergarten balcony, in a house said to be Classical Georgian—a smartysnoot way of calling it “off-white.” During one recess, Vicki and Hayley saw April and Melissa playing in the Tobers’s front courtyard, looking in their direction and making what were probably very rude faces.

“They your friends?” asked Jimmy Maxwell.

“*Unh-unh!*”

“Well, I think I could fall in love with *that* one,” said Jimmy, twisting his Silly Putty face into a great big smooch. “HEY SWEETIE-PIE! MWAH-MWAH-MWAH!”

Melissa and April went audibly *Ewww* and ran inside the Classical Georgian.

“Yessir, I’m gonna *marry* that girl someday. What’s her name?”

“Which one?”

“Both of ‘em.”

“Well, the one in the purple jumper is April Tober. Her dad’s our doctor—that’s where they live. The other girl—”

“Doctor, hunh?” said Jimmy. “Great! If anybody falls off of here on his head and breaks it wide open so all his brains ooze out, we’ll know where to take him.”

“Ewww,” went Vicki and Hayley.

Turning away in disgust, they ran smack into Stephanie Lipperman. “Was Jimmy trying to kiss you two?” she wanted to know. “I bet he *did*. I bet he kissed you *both*. I bet you *wanted* him to.”

Vicki and Hayley had decided that Spiteful Stephanie must be descended from the Wicked Witch of the West, given her pointed nose and chin and cackles. Not to mention the greenish complexion that Stephanie claimed was “olive,” which Vicki knew must be a big fib since she herself had olive skin. Tricia had said so, just this past summer:

“It’s not *fair* that Vicki can tan while I burn! Why’d *she* have to get the olive skin?”

Envious Princess. Every time Vicki remembered that sunny day, she felt wonderful all over. And Tricia hadn’t called *her* skin GREEN: so nyaah to you, Stephanie Lipperman.

Not that a nyaah had much effect on her. When Stephanie wasn’t being spiteful she would *pretend* to be friendly, trying to wheedle secrets out of you; or she’d tell outrageous whoppers and make people believe them. Such as that Miss Evers was really truly Miss Beverly from *Romper Room*, moonlighting at Reulbach when she wasn’t on TV. Soon the whole Morning Kindergarten clamored to be shown the Do-Bees and Don’t-Bees and Magic Mirror, till Miss Evers had to go take a time-out of her own in the hall.

Hayley Tamworth fell for these whoppers again and again. One day she startled Vicki by announcing, “I’m mad at you!”

“Why??”

“You know why!”

“No I don’t!”

“You said I look fat in my new sweater!”

“I didn’t! I wouldn’t! You don’t!” (Actually she kind of *did*; but the sweater was a pretty color on Hayley, when it wasn’t balled up under her arm.) “Who said I said that?”

“Um... Stephanie...”

“*Stephanie*. And you LISTENED?”

“I’m sorry,” Hayley murmured, allowing Vicki to help her back into the sweater’s tangled sleeves. “I won’t ever anymore. Not even if we’re outside and she says ‘It’s raining’ and I get all wet, I still won’t believe her.”

But she *did*, of course; and similar scenes were staged over and over.

Then there was the Show & Tell when Kris Rawberry talked about her grandparents's farm in Clayton County, Iowa. Kris got to spend most of each summer there, and she hit eloquent heights describing how it was heaven on earth. But after Show & Tell came Questions & Answers, with Stephanie Lipperman wanting to know just how long *do* barnyard odors linger, and isn't there a soap strong enough to wash them off?

Later Vicki and Hayley approached the crestfallen Kris to say how much *they* had enjoyed her Showing & Telling. "Teacher says we'll be going on field trips," Hayley added. "Maybe we'll go see a farm field—that'd be fun."

"My dad liked the fields on the farm where he worked when he was a boy," remarked Vicki. "He says they smelled *good*."

"Well, they do—*some* of them," Kris said judiciously. "Like hay—that smells really sweet, 'specially when it's just been mowed. Course you might not think so if you got hay fever."

Kris Rawberry was proof positive that orange hair and freckles looked much better on girls than bratty infant boys. "I got a little brother with the same color hair as you," Vicki volunteered, "and his name's Chris too—sort of. We call him Goofus. Nice hair like yours is *wasted* on him, and you know what else? You could leave him out in a hayfield all night long, and he'd *never* smell sweet."

"Aw, he doesn't know any better," Hayley insisted. "Goofy's a *sweetheart*."

"*She* thinks so," said Vicki.

"I wouldn't mind having a little brother, no matter what he smelled like," sighed Kris. "All I got is a big sister."

"Hey, me too!" went Vicki; and they spent the rest of recess comparing sorority notes, with a few general-girlish observations so Hayley wouldn't feel left out.

The very next morning, as Hayley and Vicki emerged from Manderley Avenue and Tricia ordered them to "Turn right *here*," they encountered Kris coming to School along Sharp Boulevard. She was holding hands with a tall thin girl but snatched hers away at the sight of her new friends, who discreetly took no notice. (Tricia made them hold each other's hand while crossing streets.)

Kris's sister had chestnut hair and radiated an above-it-all serenity that Vicki immediately admired: nothing but breezes could ruffle Kate Rawberry. She was a sixth grader, so Tricia acted coolly deferential in front of her, only referring to Kate as "that giraffe" behind her back. Kate did have remarkably long limbs that flopped a bit as she walked, but moved with smooth precision whenever she ran or threw or caught or swung. Kris said she could even beat their dad playing basketball, and *he* was a policeman!

Vicki thought that growing up to be a giraffe might be a very fine thing. Certainly better than to be Bo-Peep's sheep, which is what she and Hayley felt like the first time they were allowed to walk home alone from School at noon. After the drippynosed Safety Patrol took them across Sharp, they managed Van Hopper on their own and started "west" (direction of Disneyland) with aplomb. But neither girl wanted to go down face-flicking Manderley, so they turned "south" (direction of Mexico) on Danvers Avenue and rapidly found themselves lost.

Danvers was not only an unfamiliar street but eerily disorienting, as though it *wanted* them to lose their way. The girls, arguing whether to go back or push ahead, stumbled onto good old Yew Avenue and didn't stop running till they'd reached Walrock. Vicki and Hayley figured not even the Astro Co-eds could've managed a more exciting walk home, even though no one there had realized they'd been missing.

Kris, whose mother always came to collect her from School, envied them both till the glorious morning when Mrs. Rawberry cracked a molar and had to make an emergency trip to the dentist. Kate was supposed to use her lunch period to take Kris home, but being serene (and hungry besides) she boldly called the Walrock greystone on the Reulbach pay phone to arrange for all three kindergarteners to go there.

"I'll come get you at dinnertime," said Kate. "Be careful and don't talk to strangers and maybe they'll let you do this every day. Have fun, kids."

"You sure are lucky having a sister like that," Hayley told Kris. "Vicki's would *never* tell us to have fun."

"That's for sure," Vicki agreed.

Kris brought all sorts of fun to Walrock Avenue. She could not only skip better than any girl in Morning Kindergarten, but do cartwheels and handstands and endless somersaults.

Kris taught Vicki the fundamentals of these, and between them they helped Hayley manage to stand on her head.

“I’m scared, you guys! Don’t let go of me!”

“It’s easy, Hayl! Pretty soon you’ll be able to hang upside-down on a jungle gym!”

“Well, not if she’s wearing a skirt,” cautioned Vicki.

She and Kris stepped back, Hayley wavered but remained upright, and acquired a magnificently crimson face that went extra well with her new sweater.

Though Kris preferred playing outdoors, at Walrock she acknowledged the advantages of indoor play when you had as many toys and games as Hayley Tamworth. She also joined the Goofus fan club, proclaiming him “darling as a piglet.”

“There, you *see*?” said Hayley.

“He *eats* like a little pig, anyway,” Vicki told them.

Soon she and Hayley received permission to accompany Kris home at noon. This was an extra-great adventure they never got tired of. You kept walking “west” on Sharp, trying to be conscientious and not peer in every interesting window you passed—barber and beauty and auto body shops, antique and appliance and wholesale carpet stores—telling each other “It’s *your* turn to say we’re gonna be late!”

Then you reached Hagenbush Avenue, where if you were lucky a train might rush past, heading “north” or “south” on the tracks atop a long straight narrow hill. This separated one side of Hagenbush from the other, meaning people who lived here couldn’t see their neighbors across the street. (Too bad it didn’t separate the kindergarten balcony from the Classical Georgian.) Short tunnels called vy-a-ducks allowed streets like Sharp and Yew and Walrock to penetrate the long straight narrow hill. Scurrying through the Sharp Boulevard vy-a-duck, you heaved big sighs of relief and turned right on Hagenbush’s far side. Then on up to Kris’s house, an authentic single-family dwelling with big shrubbery bushes flanking its front porch.

Every time you approached the Rawberry house, you were greeted by two things: Kris’s mother out on the porch craning her anxious red head, and an explosion of barks from the Rawberry bulldog. Hayley and Vicki were frightened at first by the latter, but Kris told them not to worry. “Soon as she knows you, she’s a great big happy slob. Don’t poke her,

though, or pull on her ears or tail, or stare straight in her eyes.”

This didn’t sound reassuring, yet Ness—so called because she *looked* untouchable—needed only to snuff at the back of your hand to accept you, and indeed demand your affection. Which sometimes got a tad messy, since Nessie was a champion drooler and slobberer.

Claire Rawberry was a lot neater and drier and did her best to make Kris’s friends feel welcome. Yet Vicki sometimes avoided staring straight into her eyes too: Mrs. Rawberry could be so tense she’d make *you* tense. It had taken joint persuasion from Kate, Kris’s dad, the Volesters and the Tamworths before she could permit her little baby girl (“MOMmy!” Kris agonized) to walk unprotected through the streets of The City.

“She’s a worrywart. Her real name’s *Clara*,” Kris explained.

“At least *your* mom doesn’t call you ‘Precious Puddin’,” Hayley confided.

“And you’ve got a great sister like Kate ‘stead of a Smartysnoot Princess,” Vicki chimed in. “But you know what else? I bet *Stephanie Lipperman* can’t walk home from School alone.”

(Triumphant giggles.)

To reduce maternal worrywarting about their comings and goings, each girl was given a cheap wristwatch. When they all remembered to wear *and* wind these, more synchronization took place on Sharp Boulevard (“Well, *my* big hand’s on the four!”) than in a fighter squadron prior to a combat mission.

They never did take a field trip to a farm pasture, but one day Morning Kindergarten trooped down to the School basement and there was shown the School furnace and School boiler by Mr. Coakley, the School custodian. Another time they entered the Cafeteria quietly-please-single-file and crouched under the tables; after which drill Vicki and Hayley said hello to the hairnetted lunchlady who lived in 1E.

“This here’s our friend Kris, Mrs. Frank.”

“Sure, I seenya rounda cuppa times. Gee, honey, da good Lordt really givya second helpin’ widda culyer crownin’ glory, dinnHe?”

“What’d she say?” Kris whispered on the way back upstairs.

“She likes your braids,” Vicki interpreted.

The same subject was touched on during Fathers Tell Us About Their Jobs Month. Ozzie Volester entertained the class with car sale tales, and Harry Tamworth charmed everyone except Stephanie as he discoursed on meatcutting. Kris's dad scored the biggest hit: Sam Rawberry wasn't just a bona fide cop but a police photographer, and hands shot up around the room for Questions & Answers.

"Yes, young lady?"

"What's your favorite color, Officer Sam?" asked the beaming Kris.

"Well now, I've always been partial to *copper*."

GROAN went Stephanie Lipperman (not quite under her breath).

"Must be those guys up in the Tower," said Jimmy Maxwell (not quite under his).

"Children!" admonished Miss Evers. "Go on, Officer Sam."

"Yes, you over there?"

"Do you take lots of pictures of dead bodies?" Tall Mark wanted to know.

Officer Sam, from whom Kate got her height and lanky serenity, turned somber. "I've had to photograph some very unpleasant things," he hedged. "Things I hope you kids'll never have to see."

"Like what?" shouted Short Mark; and the audience suggested various horrible sights till Miss Evers rechanneled Q&A into talk about How Policemen Are Our Pals.

*

The trio had their sixth birthdays that winter: Hayley in January, Kris in February, and Vicki on what would've been Leap Day had she been born in a year like this one. Each time the girls pleaded with their parents to let them celebrate by having a slumber party, only to be informed they weren't quite old enough yet. "*Much* too young," agreed Kate and Tricia, united in big-sisterly tyranny. And Patty Kuchenesser was even worse, talking about "small fry" she'd heard of who went to slumber parties too early in life and ended up sobbing their eyes out.

"For real! And now they're *blind*."

(Darn kook.)

It was so ridiculous. April Tober and Mean Melissa had bragged about their gala slumber parties all the way back in nursery school, before they were even *five*. How they

would sneer at the trio now! And suppose Spiteful Stephanie heard about it!

“We can’t let them keep wrecking our plans,” said Kris.

“Maybe we need *better* plans,” said Vicki.

“We could ask nicer,” Hayley proposed.

“How nicer?”

“Um... smile more?”

So the girls honed their Coaxing Nicely technique, evaluating each other’s presentations, and in the end their winning smiles had the last laugh: a slumber party was scheduled for the first Friday in April. Hayley would be hostess, having that solo bedroom; while Vicki would contribute two sleeping bags, her own for herself and Tricia’s for Kris. On Saturday morning they would be taken to a special matinee of *The One and Only Genuine Original Family Band*, in which the pretty girl and handsome guy from *The Happiest Millionaire* were slated to reappear. Then Mr. Tamworth was going to have his spring kickoff cookout, with all three families and the rest of 1710 W. Walrock invited.

Tricia announced that she too was going on a sleepover—*away* from the premises, which were bound to be shaken by kindergarten racket even with the trio stashed down in 2W. Tricia and Patty Kuchenesser would be enjoying the weekend at Aunt Fritzzi’s “modish little flat” on DeMora, around the corner from the Joe E. Lewis Dinner Playhouse. Fritzzi had a spare daybed just big enough for a couple of fifth-grade girls, so Tricia’s sleeping bag remained available.

“But I want it *washed* and *dried* when your gang is done with it. I better not find a single snag or stain, either.”

There was talk of billeting Goofus with Gran and Dime, giving Ozzie and Felicia a chance for their first significant time alone in years. But Diamond Joel came down with the same bug already being shared by the Grusza twins in 2E, so Goofus had to stay home. (Hence Tricia and Vicki’s stipulation that their bedroom door be kept closed and *locked* every second they were gone.)

Finally the great Friday arrived. Vicki and her “gang” were beside themselves with anticipation, whispering and tittering together in class to such an extent that Miss Evers had to deliver a group reprimand.

“I must say I’m surprised at you girls. I don’t want to have to tell you all to ‘go to the corner.’”

“Do we *got* three corners?” asked Jimmy Maxwell.

Nancy Knopf shrieked with laughter, Wernie Ball bit tormented nails and Stephanie Lipperman was in maleficent ecstasy; but the trio simmered down and tried to pay their normal level of attention. Miss Evers was saying something about a Doctor-King, Leader of Negroes, whom Vicki presumed must be African royalty—like Bumpo in the *Doctor Dolittle* books.

At noon the girls burst out of Reulbach and hurried down to Walrock. After lunch they spent the afternoon in the back alley with Beany Boy, who’d run fetch anything you threw for him—unlike Messy Ness, who preferred to lounge and watch *you* chase the ball yourself.

That evening the girls were scheduled to have a Classical Tamworthian feast, followed by Jiffy-Pop and staying up all the way to 10 p.m., watching *Tarzan* and *Star Trek* and *Hollywood Squares* and whatever might be on at 9 that looked good. Such were their expectations as they dashed upstairs... only to find things had gotten a trifle weird.

Hayley’s parents were acting far less jolly than usual. The TV was left on all during dinner, which Mrs. Tamworth seldom allowed; and the news program kept continuing and continuing and continuing.

“Hey, we still get to watch *Tarzan* ‘n’ *Star Trek* ‘n’ stay up till 10, don’t we? You promised!”

“...I’m not sure your shows’ll be on tonight, Puddin’.”

Well that was just *swell*. But never mind: Jiffy could still be Popped and taken into the treasure house that was Hayley’s bedroom, where EVERYTHING would be played with. The girls had pooled their 45s to stack on Hayley’s phonograph, and a lot of dancing got done to Annette Funicello and the Mills lady after whom Hayley’d been named.

Lights out at 10, followed by extensive chitchat (not quite under their breaths) and a modicum of shuteye. Up early for Saturday cartoons, having agreed on a lineup of *Spider-Man*, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, *The King Kong Show* and *George of the Jungle*—

—only to discover the news was STILL on. Bumping everything else off TV.

And if that weren't awful enough, Mrs. Rawberry suddenly appeared. Looking like she had another toothache and wished she'd never left the farm in Clayton County, Iowa.

"Krissy, get your things. I've come to take you home and we have to leave *now*."

The trio wrang their hands and stamped their feet and wailed about how unjust this was; while frazzled Claire conferred with the Tamworths in agitated undertones, alluding to fires and snipers and curfews and Kate manning the phone and Sam being in the thick of it with his damned camera.

Gasp went the girls at such a word coming from Mrs. Rawberry's lips. "Um," Kris quavered, "is Daddy okay?"

Of course he was, sweetheart. The trio needn't worry their little angel heads, they had done nothing wrong, this wasn't their fault—but the rest of the day's plans would have to be put off for awhile. Kris should change out of her jammies quick as possible and go with her mom, and Vicki's folks would doubtless be happier if she were upstairs with them in 3W, and Precious Puddin' shouldn't cry because this was just a brief postponement—very soon they'd all be having oodles of fun again.

Oodles? thought Vicki, lugging her sleeping bag up the greystone staircase. She didn't give vent to the sulks she was feeling since Mr. Tamworth was right behind her, carrying Tricia's bag. He was such a nice man, practically an uncle, and Vicki couldn't blame him—much—for how badly the day was turning out.

They reached the third floor landing, where Hayley's dad went "Jesus Christ!" at the sight of Mr. Hull loading an honest-to-goodness rifle.

"I intend to protect this building," declared the Munchkin Mayor. "A man's home is his castle, and I consider mine to be under siege."

"But *Baldwin*..." said Mrs. Hull.

"I'm telling you if anybody comes near this place with a Molotov cocktail, they will GET it—no questions asked! Come on, Junior."

His son emerged from 3E, taking terrific swings with a baseball bat that narrowly missed his father's head. "Okay, Paw! I will knock their blocks off if they come here, Paw!"

“Good boy! Nellie, you get inside and bolt the door—you too, little lady. Harry, I hope you’re prepared to lend a hand.”

“Well—I guess,” sighed Mr. Tamworth. “Lemme just—”

“What is going *on*??” Vicki demanded, figuring it must be a Martian invasion at the very least.

“Nothing, dearie, nothing,” said Mrs. Hull. “Don’t you worry now.”

Unworried yet forlorn, Vicki entered 3W (where the Philco blared forth even *more* stupid dumb old news) and was embraced by her mother, who’d been swilling cup after cup of strong black coffee. She and Mr. Tamworth traded a new set of agitated undertones, including Ozzie’s having gone to retrieve Tricia and her friend from Aunt Fritz’s place. “And he’s been away so long I don’t know *what* to think.”

“Want me to stay till they get here?” asked Mr. Tamworth—not too pressingly, since Goofus had gotten into the pots and pans and was improvising a cannonade.

Before Felicia could raise her voice to reply, the front door opened and in strode Ozzie Volester, angrier than Vicki had ever seen him. “You want to know where I found these two? Do you? About to take a joyride down to the Madison Street Armory!”

“Well, we wanted to see all the soldiers,” said Tricia. “Their jeeps are just *bristling* with machine guns!”

“And you know I always had a thing for men in uniforms,” added Aunt Fritz, unexpectedly following her in a sheer voile shirtdress. “Crossing guards—ROTC cadets—able-bodied seamen. Remember, Oz?”

Daddy turned a funny color and Mommy, who’d blanched and swayed at the mention of Armory joyrides, got extremely shrill. “Don’t you realize how DANGEROUS it is out there?? Patricia Elaine, you are *grounded*, young lady!—and as for you, Francesca, I’d phone Mother and have her ground YOU if I thought she could make it stick! *Look* how you’re dressed at this time of day—and don’t you even DREAM about lighting that cigarette in here!”

“Honestly, Felicia!” whined Aunt Fritz, tugging at her skirt.

Mr. Tamworth had long since retreated; Goofus had abandoned his pot and pan to loot other kitchen cabinets; and Daddy was departing to check on the Lot. “I might put up a

few ‘Soul Brother’ banners,” he said, sounding more like his usual self.

Mommy drained her coffee cup and poured it full again. “Did Patty get home all right?”

“Oh, that fraidy-cat,” sniffed Tricia. “She chickened out of coming in the first place.”

“Some poor souls have no sense of derring-do,” said Aunt Fritz, joining her in front of the Philco.

“Should I be scared?” asked Vicki, plucking at her mother’s sleeve.

“What? Oh no, darling, everything’s going to be—awp! WHO put this back under the sink where he could get his hands on it?” Mommy exclaimed, snatching the Clorox away from Goofus. “I thought I made it crystal-clear—”

“*Mine! Mine!*” roared her ungrateful son, lunging for the jug.

Vicki watched the news awhile with her sister and aunt. In between shots of burning buildings and shattered windows, the TV kept showing that Doctor-King whom Miss Evers had mentioned yesterday. Apparently he’d been killed—eaten by a lion perhaps, if he *was* African royalty, which Vicki now doubted since he wasn’t wearing a crown or fancy robe in any of his pictures.

She hoped he had a Doctor-Prince (or, better still, a Nurse-Princess) to take over caring for his people. But she didn’t understand what he had to do with all this fuss—least of all the ruination of a perfectly good slumber party.

6

Nobody's Watching

Riots and arson may have devastated The City's West Side, but their impact on Da Nordt (as the Franks called it) was mostly psychological. Old Mrs. LoCascio claimed her birds had been put off their feed by all the commotion. Junior Hull was disappointed at not finding any Bad Guys to clout. Mrs. Partridge in 2E swore she could "smell the smoke" for weeks afterward, and nearly fainted when the Tamworths held their belated kickoff cookout in the back alley.

Officer Sam survived the riots unscathed, though Kris said he now often had "insominex. That means he talks in his sleep."

"What's he say?"

"Mostly 'YOU'—like that, real loud. It wakes up my mom and she has to shake him a little to make him stop."

"Who's the YOU? Your mom?"

"We don't know. When he wakes up, he says he can't remember."

"Maybe he means *Yew*, like the Avenue."

"Maybe. Anyway, last night he woke up Ness, and she started barking, and we had to soothe *her* back to sleep, and—well, you know how she snores..."

All the Rawberrys looked kind of tired. Even unflappable Kate was caught yawning a lot. They were glad to get away to their Iowa farm after July 4th, the womenfolk (Ness included) for eight whole weeks, and Officer Sam joining them when he could.

Vicki and Hayley missed Kris so much they were almost sorry they'd become best friends with her. She'd tantalized them with talk of all the heaven-on-earth fun they could have on a visit—riding real live ponies, playing with lambs and calves, seeing new-laid eggs turn into fluffy little chicks. But Kris's grandparents said they didn't have accommodations for extra visitors, even a couple of six-year-olds who'd offered to sleep in the barn and earn their keep by nipping stampedes in the bud.

So Hayley and Vicki stayed home that summer. Except for the third week of August, which Vicki had to spend at a family reunion back in Michigan; which meant traveling 300-plus miles in the same Oldsmobile as two-year-old Goofus.

The trip should've taken six hours at most. Everybody enjoyed the first hour, thanks to Tricia's one-girl *tour de force* presentation of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. But lacking psychedelic special effects, she had to improvise a battle-royal finale between HAL the computer and an army of aliens—and Goofus spent the trip's second hour replaying this fracas at high volume. Then at the Howard Johnson's in Kalamazoo, he got so stoked on chocolate ice cream that he thwarted every effort to put him back in the Olds. His parents and sisters, all sweatily dyspeptic by then, had to let him boil off HoJo brio by *VROOMING* around the parking lot with arms outstretched.

"Will someone shoot him down, please?" Tricia finally demanded.

"—Christopher Blaine—" went Felicia.

"Ready!" Goofus announced, sounding proud of himself.

Ozzie wanted to swat his backside, but "No Daddy! remember he ate ice cream!" warned Vicki. So Goof's backside got prudently hauled to the HoJo toilet, after Ozzie convinced the staff that yes they *did* just dine there, why else do you think my boy has to go to the restroom NOW??

Once that was dealt with and they were back on the highway, Goof consented to take a nap. Unbelievable peace for the next thirty minutes. Disturbed only by his kicking *You're Something Else, Charlie Brown* out of Vicki's hands (twice: first with a lethargic right foot, then with a languid left).

"Quit it!"

"Shhh, let him sleep," cautioned Felicia.

“But he keeps kicking my book—”

“Look, we’re going past Battle Creek. Too bad we didn’t pack our boxtops, hunh?”

Whereupon Goofus boxtopped himself by unpacking the vilest kind of residual flatulence. It was so foul Ozzie had to pull the car off to the shoulder and let Vicki out to gag, her back to the traffic but still in full view of an Interstate.

“Daddy, everyone saw me almost throw up!”

“Now Kitten, nobody’s watching you. They’ve all got their eyes on the road.”

If so, they all would’ve seen Goofus attempt to gallop across it, and Felicia grab him on the very brink.

“Oz, I’m telling you, I don’t care how much it costs—next time we’re going by plane.”

“*Plane! Plane!*” Goofus agreed, trying to resume his *VROOMING*. Tricia took that as her cue to break into dramatic tears, and Ozzie hurt his foot by kicking what he took to be an empty can but turned out to be a heavy pipe.

In the end, they didn’t reach Uncle Ted’s till well after sunset.

*

It was worth it, though—a brand-new split-level on Tempest Lake near Pontiac, where Uncle Ted worked as assistant paymaster of a big auto plant. (PopPop joshed that he couldn’t be prouder of his oldest son for rising so high with The General, yet it was hard for an old UAW rank-and-filer like *him* to be palsy-walsy with management.)

Ted had inherited PopPop’s girth, disposition, and what both called a “hearty appetite.” After Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners they used to sprawl on the carpet like supine whales, while Ozzie and Uncle Jerry—younger and leaner but nearly as hearty—would squeeze themselves onto what little rug remained vacant; leaving MomMom and Aunt Bonnie to do all the washing up.

“As if we hadn’t done all the cooking, too!” MomMom snorted.

“That’s ‘cause you’d throw us out of the kitchen,” Uncle Ted placidly observed.

“Wouldn’t allow us through the door, not even to carry the eats to the table.”

“Too true!” chided MomMom. “Hand you a roast turkey and next thing I’d know, there’d be nothing on the platter but a few bare bones. Edith Ann! You’re a saint for putting

up with this bad boy!”

Merriment at the notion of Uncle Ted ever having been a bad boy; but gentle demurrals from Aunt Edie. “He means well,” she said, scarcely above a whisper.

Everyone always called Aunt Edie a saint. Vicki never did learn much about her background, other than she was a Callaghan from Kankakee and dependent on Roman Catholicism to sustain her through a cheerless childhood. “Edie, you would’ve made a crackerjack nun,” Aunt Bonnie once remarked. “Oh no,” Edie almost-whispered, “I wanted to have babies.”

A prayer fulfilled repeatedly: five kids so far and Number Six well on its way.

“What, *again?*” Tricia asked Cousin Barbara.

“*And* we just got Monnie out of diapers,” Barbara sighed. “I thought ‘There, we’ve finished with *that*,’ and we donated away the crib and stroller and everything, and then what happens but I find Mother upchucking. ‘For goodness sake, Mother,’ I said, ‘*please* tell me you’ve got food poisoning.’ But here we are *again*.” (Another sigh.) “Oh well—maybe it’s all for the best. We’d’ve never moved to Tempest Lake otherwise.”

“It’s an awfully nice house,” Tricia softsoaped. “You’re so lucky, living in a brand-new one.”

“And in a couple weeks I start at a brand-new school, just opened last spring—oh, it’s so mod.” (Lofty smile.) “Junior High, you know.”

Cousin Barbara was two years and ten days older than Tricia, and never let that fact of life be altogether forgotten. Yet with Tricia looking/thinking/acting so far ahead of the curve, they had a degree of parity; and Barb, when she took Tricia shopping in Pontiac, got better fashion advice than she gave. If not always the most practical:

“They’ll *never* let her wear those white vinyl boots with a Catholic school uniform,” Tricia predicted. (Loftier smile.) “Not even at a Junior High, oh-so-mod.”

Vicki didn’t care. She thought the boots looked fantastic and longed for a pair of her own. Being around Barbara gave her hope that she herself might someday be beautiful. Not like Tricia, of course, but there was a striking likeness between Vicki and Uncle Ted’s two girls; everyone kept exclaiming over it and lining them up for more photos. Same olive complexion, same reserved expression, same dark silky hair and almond-shaped eyes—

“Polish eyes,” MomMom called them. And being a Kosnowski she ought to know, although her own (like Tricia’s) were round and emerald.

Cousin Barbara had taken to piling her dark silky hair atop her head, Suzanne Pleshette-style, and was cultivating a deep smoky voice to match. Four-year-old Monica wore *her* hair in cute pouf-pigtails that quivered indignantly at Barb’s just-got-out-of-diapers quip.

“I been outta didies for *this* many!” she declared, wagging ten tiny fingers. “Hey Vicki, ya know where babies come from?”

“Um... where do *you* think?”

“Ya get ‘em outta the Caddy Log.”

“Um... out of—?”

“C’mon, I’ll show ya!” Monnie marched over and pointed to the latest Big Book from Sears Roebuck.

Vicki smothered a laugh. “What kinda baby do you wanna order?”

“A *girl* baby. There’s too many boys here already.”

“I wanted a little sister too,” said wistful Vicki, “but look what I got.” They peered out at Goofus wreaking havoc in the yard with his equally destructive cousin Barry.

“See?” said Monica. “Who needs more of *them*?”

“I’ll say... I wish *you* were my little sister.”

“Maybe we can swap! Goofy could come live here ‘n’ be *all* boys (‘cept Barbara) ‘n’ I could go be all girls with Tricia ‘n’ you.”

“Sounds like a good trade,” said Beaver Volester, barging into the kitchen to gulp Hi-C straight from the can. “I’ll even throw in Stanley—he’s practically a girl.”

Ted Jr. had been branded as “Beaver” from the day of his birth, which coincided with the premiere of the Cleaver sitcom. Nowadays he was trying to relabel himself as “T.J.,” particularly on the Little League team that dominated every summer minute not spent witnessing the exploits of Denny McLain. Middle brother Stanley disliked baseball, drank Hi-C from a glass, and spent as much time as possible off by himself with a sketchpad for company. T.J. said Stan might as well don lace panties and be done with it. Stan’s response was to call him *Beeee-ver* whenever others could hear, even at the risk of getting pummeled.

All told, there was a total of fourteen Volesters—fifteen counting Baby Number Six—assembled together under the split-level roof on Tempest Lake. The entire family, in fact, except for Aunt Bonnie (visiting Dominican missions in Peru) and Uncle Jerry (transporting jet fuel to Vietnam). This meant close quarters every night: Ted and Edie in the master bedroom, MomMom and PopPop in Ted’s den, Ozzie and Felicia down in the rec room, Barbara and Monica in the Girls’s Room, their three brothers in the Boys’s Room (two on bunk beds), Tricia and Vicki on a screened service porch that smelled of laundry starch, and Goofus on a cot that he dragged wherever he liked.

They had an official reunion picnic at the actual Tempest Lake, which Vicki thought a pretty puddle compared to the fog-trailing mist-creeping black-cat-stacking Lake As Big As An Ocean back home. Several hampers were unpacked and their “eats” distributed; but before the first bite could be taken, Aunt Edie asked everyone to bow their heads. And she almost-whispered:

*Bless us O Lord T.J. take off that baseball cap this instant where was I oh
yes Bless us O Lord for these Thy gifts which we are about to receive from
Thy bounty through Christ our Lord Amen Barbara would you please—*

Barb went over and twisted Beaver’s ear for starting a prayer with a cap on his head. Which caused her father, grandfather, and Uncle Ozzie to beam and say, “Just like Bonn!”

Toasts were drunk to Barbara and Tricia, who’d turned twelve and ten that month; then Dixie cups were raised in a general *na zdrowie!* to the continued good health of every Volester and General Motors. Then Beaver pitched a biscuit at Barb’s Pleshette bouffant; Barry and Goofus doused each other with lemonade; PopPop sneezed on the potato salad but agreed to eat it all himself; Monica announced she was a “sea slurpent” and had to be restrained from jumping in the lake; Stanley and his sketchpad wandered off and couldn’t be located for an hour; and Tricia, betrayed once more by Coppertone, acquired her latest tanless sunburn.

Aunt Edie, meanwhile, had lowkey “words” with Felicia over somebody called Hubert Humphrey. With a name like that, Vicki figured he must be a circus clown or TV comic like Soupy Sales; and Edie (who’d named her youngest son after Senator Goldwater)

sounded like she figured the same thing.

Felicia (who'd dutifully bowed her head with everyone else, despite her opinion of praying) was "in no mood to coddle Saint Edith Ann," as she told Ozzie afterward. "I just pity that poor baby, having to make room for the steel rod Edie keeps up her aaa—Vicki! how long have you been standing there??"

Ozzie told the other Volesters they had to be getting back to Pfiester Park. A big convention was about to begin in The City and they needed to beat the rush, so thanks for everything, it was a swell reunion, we'll have to do it again real soon.

"Till then, *go get 'em Tigers!!*" roared Beaver.

"Yeah, they're gonna *bite* ya 'n' *chew* ya with their fangs!" Barry told Goofus.

"Member our swap," Monica told Vicki.

*

Hayley, downcast by both her best friends being away, had been taken to the pony ride at the Zoo. There she not only tumbled out of her saddle and fractured her left arm in two places, but landed in a patch of what turned out to be poison oak.

"Besides that, how was it?" Vicki asked.

"Horrible," said Hayl, scratching aggravatedly with her right hand. "I hate ponies and I hate the Zoo and I hate this cast that's still gonna be on my arm when school starts 'cause I have to wear it for a whole month and it's not fair!"

"Well... at least with it on, you can't scratch that arm."

"Oh go away and leave me alone! AGAIN."

"Hey, I was just trying to help!"

"I know," Hayley grumbled, extending the cast in her direction. "You're supposed to write your name on it. Leave space for Kris to write hers when *she* finally comes home."

"I'm sorry you got hurt and itch," said Vicki, carefully printing **V I C K I** on the cast with Magic Marker.

"I'm sorry too," said Hayley. "I'm really glad you're back—'cept for right now."

The entire City seemed to feel the same way. A fresh set of riots broke out, some near the Zoo where Hayley'd had her accident. AGAIN the news was on constantly, AGAIN Mr. Hull and Junior patrolled Walrock Avenue with gun and bat. (This time Mrs. Partridge

swore she could “taste the tear gas” when the wind came out of the south.)

At the big convention a great many people discovered How Policemen Are Our Pals. “*The whole world is watching!*” went their chant; and Vicki knew this included the Rawberrys in Clayton County, Iowa, fretting about Officer Sam and his bad-word camera. Maybe it would bring them home early and Vicki’d have someone to play with who wasn’t hurt and itchy and inclined to snap your head off. Though Mrs. Rawberry probably wouldn’t let Kris come over while riots were going on, even if most of them were down near the Zoo.

Mrs. Tamworth, preoccupied with Hayley, deputized Felicia to make her rounds of the Walrock greystone. As usual, this mostly meant tending to Mrs. LoCascio and the birds that lived in or flew through 1W.

It was *their* fault the following incident happened.

It was Mrs. Lo’s for being unable to take care of herself. It was the birds’s for being so noisy and distracting. It was Mrs. Tamworth’s for being absent upstairs, and Hayley’s for being too graceless to ride a pony. It was Tricia’s for escaping with Patty Kuchenesser in search of a sunburn cure, and Daddy’s for going off to the Lot as though the whole world weren’t watching riotous turmoil, and Mommy’s for bringing Vicki and Goofus down with her to 1W, and—

—no. The whole incident was Goofus’s fault. His and nobody else’s.

Bad Mrs. Lo greeted them, demanding to know why Felicia was there and what was she doing and why had she dragged her nasty brats along and what were *they* doing and couldn’t she hear them upsetting her poor birdies and why didn’t anyone ever pay attention to a single word she said??

Mommy, bravely wheeling Mrs. Lo into the bathroom, answered each question in her patientest voice. Vicki lingered in the seedy cage-crammed newspaper-strewn living room, listening to Luigi the parrot croak “*Addio! Addio!*,” when she was reminded (for the thousandth time) to look after her little brother—

—so she looked—

—and didn’t see Goofus in the living room, or the dining room, or the kitchen—

—because 1W’s front door stood wide open, as did the greystone’s back door—

—through which Goofus could just be glimpsed, exiting all on his own.

“Mommy!” went Vicki.

“In a minute, Brownie.”

“But *Mommy*—”

“In a MINUTE, Victoria! I’ve got my (oog) hands full here!”

Look after your little brother.

Run after him, too. Vicki dashed out to find Goof already halfway up the back alley. This despite its being a *long* alley, paralleling the blocks on Manderley to the east and Cypress to the west. But its length did no more to discourage Goofus than Vicki’s commands to halt and retreat; so up the alley she had to race. Reaching Goof as he successfully tipped over somebody’s garbage can.

(“Oog” indeed.)

Vicki seized his small sticky hand and scolded, “Don’t wander off by yourself!”

“Stan does.”

“Cousin Stanley’s eight—you’re *two*. Now get back indoors before Mommy sees this mess you made.”

“*No! Leggo!*” went Goofus, planting small grubby feet amid the spilled eggshells and apple cores and coffee grounds. Vicki tugged and pulled and yanked before realizing, to her dismay, that Goof had grown too heavy for her to manhandle alone.

“Help?” she called experimentally.

If Junior Hull was within earshot, he’d be here in a hulking flash and her troubles would be over. Any of the Hulls would do, for that matter. Or the Franks or Mrs. Partridge or the Grusza girls—or best of all Tricia, forever reliable to get her own way. Though not to come home via the back alley, just when you needed her most.

“*HELP!*” Vicki yelled as Goofus wrenched loose, a grin of relish spreading over his speckled face and snouty nose and bristly orange crewcut. Oh good grief, he *was* a pig! A yucky runty porker edging his tricky piggy way along a wall under a NO TRESPASSING sign—

—that the whole world took far too seriously: there was not a single person in the alley but Vicki. And her loathsome little brother. Who took refuge behind a telephone pole, leering around it with a stuck-out tongue.

“You are in so much trouble, Christopher! Come here NOW!”

“*Make me!*” he parried, suddenly skinning off his T-shirt. “Hot out. *Too* hot. No shirt. No pants?...”

Vicki, in desperation, tried shouting all the profanity she knew. Expletives that at any other time would’ve brought a mob of angry adults on the run, but today: NOBODY. Just dead silence, except for Goofus gleefully echoing her no-no’s.

“Stop that! Those are bad words!”

“*You* said,” Goof accused. He started sidling northward, one eye on his sister and the other angling for a chance to flee.

So let him.

(Hunh?)

Let him run away. Up to Yew, up to Sharp, even as far as Eskimo Town. Or down to the Zoo and the riots and the poison oak. It would be sooooo eeeeeasy to let him go, leave him here, quit having to look after him. And when Mommy asks “Where’s your little brother?” you can tell her...

You could say...

You might...

YOU (real loud).

Vicki leaned against the wall and let tears well up. Never had she felt more inept, more forlorn, more abandoned—

—but not ignored.

Stirring in the shadows, dimly recalled: an awareness of Something or Other observing her. Scrutinizing her. A merciless Mad Man in the not-so-distant distance...

And next thing you know, there’ll be nothing left but a few bloody bones—

“C’m on, slowboat!”

She opened wet black Polish eyes like almond-shaped stars, and saw Goofus toddling homeward. Trailing his T-shirt through grit and debris.

Vicki had just enough time to snatch the shirt, give it a shake, and slip it over her brother’s head before Mommy stepped out of 1W and found them in the front hall.

“There you are! Oh, did you take Goofy for a walk?”

“Nice walk! *Big* walk!” went Goofus, giving Vicki another swinish leer.

“He—I mean we—in the, uh, alley—”

“Good girl! You should’ve asked first, but that was a smart thing to do—safer than the street. And *you*, mister” (nose wrinkling) “smell like you need a hot bath. Yes, I said bath, and it better be now since after a morning with old Mrs. Lo, *I* could use one too.”

*

That evening Daddy came back from the Lot wearing a very sad expression. He took Mommy aside and murmured something that made *her* tears well up. “Was it because of the fight we had?” she was asking when Tricia herded Vicki and Goofus to their bedrooms.

“You stay put,” she told Goof, who gave her no guff; and “I’ll find out what happened,” she told Vicki. Many apprehensive minutes later, Tricia returned with the news that “Aunt Edie lost the baby.”

Vicki sat bewildered. It wasn’t her, it was *me*—except I didn’t—only almost—so what’s it got to do with—

“*How?*” she asked.

Tricia explained that Number Six had died without ever being born. Vicki thought it the most tragic fate imaginable, as bad or worse than that of the unfallen Raindrop Julie. And now no hope remained for negotiating a swap to make Monica her little sister. So: catastrophe all round.

“Was it—was it a girl baby?”

“No,” said Tricia. “They think it was a boy.”

“Oh,” said Vicki. “Well... maybe it’s all for the best.”

7

Turn Out Your Toes

“My name is Miss Tinker,” said the first grade teacher on the first day of school, “and yes—I’ve heard all the funny ways to say it: ‘Miss Tinkerbell,’ and ‘Miss Stinker,’ and ‘Miss Tinkle’—”

(Shocked laughter from those pupils who used that word instead of piddle, wee-wee, or go-number-one.)

Miss Tinker was a regular comedienne, with a facetious beak of a nose like Biddy on *Here Come the Brides*, and Vicki’s trio felt deep relief at being assigned to her class rather than split up. Reulbach had shuffled last year’s Morning and Afternoon Kindergartens and cut the deck anew. So Noisy Nancy Knopf went over to Mrs. Jantz’s class next door (you could still *hear* her through the wall) as did Short Mark and Dumb Mark and Gretchen Digresso (whose family used the oddest-odor’d soaps and detergents) plus Brainwashed Larry (who couldn’t or wouldn’t remember anything from one day to another) and the girl known only as Where’s Wanda, who’d spent kindergarten playing solo hide-and-seek.

Vicki, Hayley, and Kris decided theirs must be the “smart” class. Miss Tinker allowed them to pick their own desks that first day; Mrs. Jantz, it was rumored, *told* her kids where to sit. The trio clustered together by the cloakroom, Hayl and Vicki side by side, Kris in front of Hayl and able to swivel around for whispered conversation.

Stephanie Lipperman was against the opposite wall, over by the windows. Even at that distance her eyes glistened with interest at the sight of Hayley’s arm, still in its cast and sling; fortunately she was busy sounding out her front-row neighbor, an earnest-looking little

girl who already wore glasses.

Jimmy Maxwell was also in Miss Tinker's room, as were Wernie Ball and Tall Mark. To keep the latter company, a *fourth* Mark had been added: one so unremarkable heightwise, speechwise, or behaviorwise that he had to be called Ordinary Mark. With him from Afternoon Kindergarten came skinny Billy Goldfarb, who could make up all kinds of songs right inside his head. He, Jimmy, and Tall Mark formed a trio of their own in the back row, from which they'd serenade the class and offer humorous commentary.

They let out a collective wolf whistle when April Tober entered. Cuter than ever in a wine-colored jumper and cotton-candy tights, she gave the boys a disgusted grimace and said, "I *told* you they were gonna act stew-pid!" to the girl following her in.

Who was no less than Mean Melissa.

Whose back-to-school outfit outshone even April's: a sky-blue double-knit turtleneck dress with a gold-colored chain at the waist, and WHITE VINYL BOOTS.

Which got devoured by Vicki in her dirndl skirt, Perma-Prest blouse-slip, and new but dowdy brown slip-ons.

Melissa's frigid gaze raked the class and came to a halt when they saw Spiteful Stephanie. Who visibly stiffened when Melissa sauntered past and sat directly behind her. April took the next desk, behind the earnest girl in glasses. Melissa leaned over to murmur in April's ear; they both snortled; and Vicki's trio nudged each other, knowing Stephanie wouldn't put up with *this* forever.

After Miss Tinker introduced herself, she went around the room asking each first-grader to say his or her name and answer an Interesting Question. The bespectacled girl specified that she should be addressed as "Sarah-Jill"—both names, every time, with a dash between them.

"And what was the most fun you had this summer, Sarah-Jill?"

"I got my library card and read lots of books."

(Unadmiring rustle from the rest of the class. Snortle from Stephanie, beating April and Melissa to the punch.)

"And what is *your* name?" Miss Tinker inquired.

"Stephanie Lipperman."

“‘Scuse me,” said Melissa, with a raised hand and reproving tone. “Did she say *Stuffy* Lipperman?”

(More nudges by Vicki and Hayley and swiveled-sideways Kris.)

“No—I said Steph-ah-nee.” (Each syllable dagger-edged.)

“Ohhhhhhh. Well, *my* name is Melissa Denise Chiese and when *I* grow up *I’m* going to be a United States Senator like Margaret Chiese Smith from Maine—oh ‘scuse me Miss Tinker, I meant to say ‘Chase’—Margaret ‘Chase’ Smith—from Maine.”

“Well... good for you, dear,” said Miss Tinker.

The girl sitting in front of Vicki kept her right index fingernail permanently attached to her teeth. She identified herself as “—mmmmEileen Agnew.”

“Agnew? That’s a name in the news, Eileen.”

“—mmmmIdunno.”

“Is the Governor of Maryland a part of your family, I wonder?”

“—mmmmIdunno.”

“Well, if he *is*, you can be extra proud, because he’s running for Vice President.”

“—mmmmIdunno.”

(Jimmy Maxwell would soon dub Eileen “Myda-No,” and Billy Goldfarb would compose a *Music Man* takeoff that he, Jimmy, and Tall Mark would croon: “*Myda-No, I’m home again though / without a FINGER in my mouth...*”)

Kris and Vicki answered their Interesting Questions without any fuss or muss, Vicki mentioning her trip to Tempest Lake and Kris that she had an older sister in seventh grade. But then came Hayley’s turn, and the trio tensed up: they *knew* Miss Tinker was bound to ask how her arm had been broken. They also *knew* Hayl couldn’t utter a believable fib to save her life—meaning the whole pony ride debacle was about to get blurred, and oh! how the mean girls would snortle then!

“We see you hurt your arm, Hayley. Does it feel like it’s getting better?”

“Yes’m,” Hayl smiled. “Doctor says the cast can come off in a couple weeks.”

What a nice teacher Miss Tinker was! How lucky the girls were to have her and not Mrs. Jantz, who probably would’ve made a Safety Example out of Hayley’s arm.

At 10:30 they had their first official Reulbach recess, out on the playground where they could glance up pityingly at the baby balcony and its new crop of Morning Kindergarteners. (Who at least got to *play*, while the first graders had to hear a lecture about recess regulations.)

Trooping back indoors and upstairs, Stephanie suddenly appeared at Hayley's elbow. "So," she said, eyeing the cast, "what *did* happen?"

"I fell is all."

"What, down the stairs? You can get *crippled* doing that."

"No, it was at the Zoo," Hayley mumbled.

"Aw c'mon," interjected Tall Mark, "you can tell us, Hayl—you were one of them hippies that got beat up by the cops, werntcha?"

"HEY!" went Kris on behalf of The City PD; but her indignation was overridden by Melissa Chiese. Sweeping past with April Tober, the future Senator said: "Hippie? You mean *hippo*. Fell down and broke her own arm trying to pick herself up."

(Snortles from April, from Stephanie—grudgingly—and from Eileen Agnew, trailing behind with her nail in her teeth.)

"You leave her alone!" demanded Kris. At whom Melissa cast one narrow blue-gray ice cube without breaking stride. "Didn't know one face could have *that* many freckles on it," they heard her tell April.

"Why dontcha keep your big mouth shut, Melissa Kee-razy??" Vicki was about to shout, when her dowdy brown slip-ons slipped on the top step to the second floor. Causing her to sprawl on the landing with her rear in the air, and an uncomfortable idea that her dirndl skirt wasn't doing its job behind.

Mercifully, none of the mean girls saw this happen. Kris came back to help Vicki stand up, while Hayley offered a hanky for wiping off her hands. But then Wernie Ball brushed by, the last to come upstairs, with his pallid pinkish eyes so carefully averted Vicki had to figure he'd seen a lot more than the tops of her kneesocks.

First day of first grade. Not even 11 a.m. yet, and life might as well be over.

Yet more carnage was in store.

They spent the rest of that morning getting reacquainted with Our Friend the Alphabet, while Sarah-Jill Shapiro strained her hand-raising arm trying to answer every question. She compounded this by smuggling her arithmetic workbook into the Cafeteria to get a head start during lunch. She compounded *that* by plunking down at the lunch table staked out by Melissa, April, and nail-nibbling Eileen.

“Uh—‘scuse you?” went Melissa.

“About what?”

“You’re at the wrong table. Go sit at that one.”

“Yeah, *Sarah*,” chirped April.

“It’s Sarah-*Jill*. With a dash.”

“Well then, whyncha just *dash* over there?”

The flustered Sarah-Jill got up to go, and Stephanie boldly took her vacated stool.

“Don’t forget your book, Brainiac,” she said. “Oh I’m sorry: Brainy-DASH-Ack.”

(Involuntary snortle from Melissa Chiese.)

“And you’re wrong if you think those glasses don’t make you look *stew-pid*,” added April Tober.

Sarah-Jill peered bewilderedly around the Cafeteria till Hayley beckoned her to the trio’s table.

“Am I supposed to eat here? When did Miss Tinker tell us where to sit? I didn’t hear her!”

“That’s ‘cause she didn’t tell,” explained Kris. “Melissa’s making up dumb rules.”

“Just like she did in nursery school,” said Hayley.

“And if you got in her way, she’d stomp all over you,” said Vicki.

“Well, that’s not very nice,” Sarah-Jill observed.

“You know what’s even *less* nice?” mourned Hayley. “I bet she and Stephanie are gonna be friends now.”

“You *know* they are,” said Kris. “And I was hoping they might have a fight.”

Furtive peeks at Stephanie and Melissa having a guarded parley over Eileen’s head.

“They still might fight,” Vicki predicted. “But I bet that won’t stop them acting mean to *us*. They’re not happy till they make you cry—”

—on which note Vicki spilled her miniature milk carton, dousing her sandwich and apple and Perma-Prest blouse-front. At the exact moment when everyone at the other table happened to be glancing her way.

“That isn’t Vicki Volester,” declared Melissa in a voice like a snowplow. “Her real name’s *Klumsy Klutzer*.”

Followed by the cruelest group snortle ever heard in the Reulbach Cafeteria—during that particular lunchtime.

*

Four weeks later, Melissa Chiese bestrode the first grade like a pint-sized titan. All of Miss Tinker’s students and most of Mrs. Jantz’s knew her repute. They’d heard about her fancy kulda-sack house off Bohnsetter Avenue, and her brother Chad who was assistant drum major of the Pfiester High School marching band, and their mother who core-donated the ticket office down at the Friendly Confines baseball stadium. It was thanks to Mrs. Chiese’s guidance (so said Melissa) that the Boys in Blue won their last five games in a row, finishing way up in third place rather than back in the cellar.

(Jimmy Maxwell’s trio claimed they’d heard Mr. Sunshine, the superstar infielder, personally thank heaven for Carmel Sanborn Chiese.)

Melissa’s gang acknowledged themselves as the coolest, grooviest, with-it-est in class. Certainly they stood out in their colorful minidresses and go-go boots, like the Sour Grapes Messenger Girls on *The Banana Splits*. Yet just as certainly, they didn’t act like each other’s friends; and that made no sense to Vicki’s trio, struggling to understand as they played croqminton in Kris’s back yard.

“I mean, why do they pick on *Eileen*?”

“—mmmmIdunno—”

(Giggles.)

“Well, she acts like she wants to be Melissa’s *slave*. That’s why Melissa picks on her.” (*Thunk*.) “OH, so close!”

“You’re miles ‘n’ miles away!”

“Am not!”

(*Thunk*.) “Are now! Anyway, Eileen *thinks* Melissa’s her friend.”

“April Tober thinks so too. That’s why April picks on her.” (*Thunk.*)

“Miles ‘n’ miles ‘n’ *miles*—”

“Inches! Inches!”

“INCHES? You don’t know your medgerments!”

“I don’t *have* any medgerments, I’m only six!”

(Time out called so three of the players could shriek with hilarity, while the fourth drooled calmly on the grass.)

Croqmonton was a lawn game invented by Kate Rawberry. Clotheslines served as baselines and jump ropes denoted goals. Kris and Vicki took turns whacking the ball with their mallets—not too hard, since you forfeited if the ball touched the house or fence. (Especially the house: a rule added by Mrs. Rawberry.) Hayley, her arm out of its cast at last, was Vicki’s goalie, while Ness the bulldog served as Kris’s. (Ness took no interest in the ball, but effectively blocked shots.) First one to score a goal won the game, which sometimes took several days.

“We do so have medgerments. They medger us at the shoe store, don’t they?”

“Oh don’t talk about shoes, I HATE mine. I wish I was big enough to wear Tricia’s.”

“You want big *feet*?” (*Thunk.*)

“Okay, I wish Tricia’s shoes were *little* enough to fit me.” (*Thunk.*)

““But then your mommy won’t buy you any boo-oots,”” sangsong Kris and Hayley, causing another giggle-filled time out.

Stephanie Lipperman, while accepting the dictum to wear Sour Grapes minidresses, drew the line at donning go-go footwear—and held out regardless of April’s teasing and Melissa’s half-curved upper lip. Then Hayley overheard Melissa telling Eileen that “Stuffy’s mommy won’t buy her any boo-oots” (“mmmMine will, Melissa!” Eileen replied). Vicki’s trio made sure these words reached Stephanie’s ears—along with exactly how Melissa’d rolled her bright cold eyes, and the face that Eileen made around her nibbled fingernail.

Since then, Stephanie had outspited herself trying to undermine Melissa’s booted footing. She backbit, insinuated, spread rumors—and gained considerable headway with April, who was annoyed at Eileen’s overeager cozying-up. Any day now the trio expected April to aim a *stew-pid* at Melissa’s glossy, bouncy, Breck Shampoo’d noggin.

“You guys, let’s never act like them,” begged Hayley on the croqminton lawn. “Say we’ll always be best friends.”

“Well,” said Vicki, “I hope Kris’ll still be our friend after I *score this goal*—”

It was against the rules for Kris to push or drag her teammate around the yard, so she could only try using her voice. “Block her, Nessie! Block that shot, Ness!”

“No, Nessie, stay where you are!” yelled Hayl. “Sit! Lie down! Roll over!”

Ness, unwilling to roll, rambled over to flop in front of Vicki and lay an affectionate paw on her mallet. Vicki tried to claim interference, but was laughing so hard she couldn’t be understood (according to Kris) so the match got called on account of slobber instead.

*

Shortly thereafter, Cathy Rigby won the Little Darling competition at the Mexico City Olympics, and juvenile gymnastics became all the rage. Demand for lessons led the Pfiester Park Y to announce a course for girls starting in January, which sent Kris into lunar orbit before any of the Apollo astronauts. She could hardly wait to get her hands and feet on a real-life balance beam or parallel bars, and talked of almost nothing else even during Christmas vacation.

Naturally her best friends were expected to join her. Hayley, who still couldn’t stand on her head unaided, wasn’t so sure about this.

“You *need* gymnastics,” Kris insisted. “They’ll help build up your arm.”

“What about my *other* arm? I don’t want them to not match!”

“They’ll build up *both* your arms, silly. Can’t you just see yourself swinging on a trapeze?”

No, Hayl couldn’t, unless she was granted superpowers beforehand.

As for Vicki, she found her mother suspicious of the Y and what Felicia called its “underlying motives,” which sounded like they took place in the basement. So the trio agreed that Kris should scout out the first gymnastics session, and report to Vicki and Hayley how it (and anything underlying) went. If the class proved to be as much fun as Kris *knew* it’d be, the other girls could then lobby their parents for a belated sign-up.

But Kris left that first session in furious tears, telling her mother the Y was full of horrible people who did horrible things and she never, ever intended to return there. Mrs.

Rawberry wanted Officer Sam to raid the place and close it down; but Kate, a veteran Y-goer, ascertained the fault lay with Kris's fellow minigymnasts.

One above all.

"That Me-lis-sa Chi-e-se!" Kris grated. "I was sure I was gonna be first in line an' everything, but She was there already with April and Eileen! And *They*—*bossed*—*everything*."

"April and Eileen too?" asked Hayley.

"Bet they just stood beside Her while She did the bossing," said Vicki.

"*Zackly!* An', an' She said all the usual stuff about me" (Kris was "Fern the Freckly Farmgirl" in Melissaspeak) "an', an' they made fun of my turquoise leotard!"

(Hayley hugged Kris while Vicki stroked her braids.)

"*She* said only *She* could wear blue. An' I said 'It's a free country' an' *She* said 'Not for ORANGE-heads it's not,' an' then April laughed an' Eileen laughed an' I wanted to, to—I dunno, SLAP their dumb old faces, *Hers* first and most! But I just stood there an' couldn't think what to say, while *They* just stood there waiting for me to cry, an' I hadda hold my breath to keep from starting before Mom came to take me home!"

(This time Vicki did the hugging and Hayl the braid-stroking.)

"*She spoiled it*," Kris moaned. "I was looking forward to gymnastics for *always* an' She RUINED it. Like STEALING from me. And for *NO* reason."

"'Cept being the Meanest Girl in the World," said Vicki. "We gotta find some way to get even—"

"Oh, what can *we* do?" went Hayley. "We're just Hippie Hippo and Klumsy Klutzer to Her!"

"An' Fern Farmgirl," Kris whispered communally.

"Well it's not fair! SHE gets away with everything—"

"—if any of *us* said anything mean about anybody, Miss Tinker'd make us 'pologize in front of the whole class—"

"—like she made Stephanie do last week. 'We're waiting, young lady'—"

"—never thought I'd feel sorry for 'Stuffy.' But she hadda do it—"

"—with Me-lis-sa sitting there, GRINNING at her—"

“Eww!” went Kris, wiping her eyes. “That was like a million times worse than what happened at the Y! Thanks, you guys, I feel a lot better... And Dad said he’d buy me a trampoline for my birthday. A *big* one, that he and Kate can use too. We can have all sorts of fun on a big trampoline.”

“Where you gonna put it?”

“Well, that’s the problem—we’ll prob’ly have to wait till spring. Can’t leave a big trampoline out in all this snow, and indoors the ceilings aren’t high enough.”

“That’s it!” said Vicki. “We’ll get *Her* on a trampoline inside a house, and first time she jumps on it—”

“—*She’ll bonk Her stupid head!!*”

“Stew-pid,” added Hayley, à la April Tober; and the trio regained their ability to giggle-shriek.

*

In February Vicki had one of those adventures that take permanent residence in your heart and soul. Aunt Fritzzi invited the “Schmelzettes,” Vicki and Tricia and Mom and Gran, to the Civic Opera House for a performance by Ruth Page’s International Ballet.

There was “Romeo and Juliet,” and there was “Bolero,” and there was “Carmina Burana,” and there were Vicki’s eyes drinking it all in from first note to last.

Kick. Twirl. Leap. Dive.

Hop. Spin. Pounce. Sway.

Skim. Glide. Float. Soar.

And the backdrops. And the costumes. And the *music*...

Lights up for intermission. Her hand clutching Gran’s beside her.

“You find it entzzantzzing, Victoria?”

Entrancing? Enchanting? Both true, so nod yes.

“Not bad,” Gran allowed; as if this were a courtesy due to the director’s being, like Gran, a Ruth. “But *I* hev’v seen denncing that this kennot compare to. My sister Raytzzel—”

Babble rising on Vicki’s other side. Fritzzi and Tricia discussing how *they* would’ve choreographed things. Mommy wanting to hear more about the insurance salesman Fritzzi’d started dating.

“*Kvailas*,” sighed Gran: unintentionally à la April Tober.

Darkness again. And there was “O Fortuna!” experienced for the first time, crashing like waves on the Lake As Big As An Ocean. Turning great wheels and vibrating great strings that could vanquish winter under the changeable moon: making us merry, making us joyful, carrying us unchained to be reborn—

I want to dance. I want to be a dancer.

Then you must learn how, Miss.

Springtime then, melting away The City’s ice and snow. Rejoice at turning seven, despite temporarily having no front teeth; you can keep your lips locked (with many nods and smiles) as you’re FINALLY enrolled in the Beginners class at the Massena Dance Studio above the Joe E. Lewis Dinner Playhouse.

No front teeth but two best friends. Hayley was initially uncertain about ballet, till the Tamworths said how Precious their Puddin’ would look in a tutu, so why be left out? No chance whatsoever of Melissa & Co. being “caught dead at Klutzy’s old aunt’s dancing school.”

That inaugural Saturday: Hayl precious in pink, Kris triumphant in turquoise, and Vicki in lucky-V violet. Surprised to find the Beginners superintended not by Aunt Fritz but Miss Sandy, whom the trio recognized as the Miss Steinfeldt who taught third grade at Reulbach.

“How can you be two kinds of teacher?” Kris wanted to know.

“Sometimes I wonder, dear.”

Miss Sandy was equally recognizable as the heroine of the *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle* books. She lacked the big-lump-of-magic on her back, but had the same sparkling eyes and sugar-cookie aura and ingenuity at behavior modification.

“Some of you girls may have dressed up like witches on Halloween. You may have put on a scary mask and tall pointed hat, and carried a broomstick. But suppose you didn’t have a mask or hat or broomstick, and still wanted everyone to know you’re a witch. How would you stand, and walk, and hold yourself? What would make people *know* you’re a witch, if you had no mask or hat or broom?”

“Cackle?” suggested a Beginner.

“You could cackle,” Miss Sandy agreed, “or say ‘*I’ll* get you, my pretty!’ But we’re going to do it without saying a word or even making a sound. We’re going to use *shapes* and *movement*. First we’ll find our witch’s shape; then we’ll need to keep that shape no matter how we move. Whether we’re stirring up some witchy brew in a pot over a fire, or inviting Hansel and Gretel into our gingerbread house, or even if we’re MELTING! MELTING! after Dorothy throws a bucket of water over us. No matter what, we mustn’t forget the shape our witch starts out in.”

Hayley thought this was delightful roleplay; she quickly excelled at it and got singled out as an Example to Admire. Kris took on the shape and movements of an athletic witch, mincing across an invisible balance beam with twisted claw-hands and freckle-squints.

Vicki, trying to comply, felt puzzlement that verged on dissatisfaction. If not alarm that this *couldn’t* be the way to learn how to Dance. But she trusted Miss Sandy, enough to seek a private conference and ask, “Is this really how ballerinas get started?”

“Some of them, yes. And *all* of them have to know how to tell us stories using just their bodies. Even when they wear fine costumes, the body does the real work. And it has to SHOW us in so many different ways—quick and slow, large and small, thick and thin. Always based on shapes and movement.”

“Bending and stretching?” Vicki ventured.

“That’s right, dear.”

“Yes! When Tricia that’s my sister was a Beginner she all the time practiced these plee-ays and reh-luh-vays and day-gah-zhays and still does so how soon will *we* get to start them?”

Sparkle-cookie smile from Miss Sandy. “Why, now that you’re an official dance student, you can certainly try those exercises—IF (and hear how big an ‘if’ that is) you have your sister keep an eye on you, at first. Would she do that?”

“Um. I can ask.”

“You’ll need a little watching-over till you get the hang of it. Even then you’ll want to take each step with care, just like you do on an icy sidewalk. It’s so very easy to *hurt* yourself if you go too fast. Always remember to warm up your muscles before you start, then cool them back down when you finish. Do that every time, Vicki, and your muscles

will be your buddies.”

“I will, Miss Sandy,” she vowed, and threw her warmed-up buddy-muscles into SHOWING both shape-sizes from *Land of the Giants*.

*

Tricia stalked into their bedroom, kicked the door shut, yanked off her sweater-vest and bellbottoms, marched over to the mirror, and gave her undie’d self the emerald glare.

“I cannot believe that Patty Kuchenesser’s started growing boobs. She’s only eleven! I’m *almost* eleven!”

Yeah sure, you will be next August. “Tricia? Will you tell me if I’m doing this right?”

“What?” went Tricia, not looking.

“This.” Humbly holding onto the sille: PLEE-ay. PLEE-ay. PLEE-ay.

Eye-jab from the reflection. Moment of suspense.

“Stand up straighter. Feet together. Turn out your toes—and remember to use Ben-Gay. Believe me, you’ll need it.” Green glare switched back to reflection as Tricia went up on extreme tippytoe. “I cannot believe Aunt Fritzzi doesn’t think I’m ready yet for pointe class.”

Now to practice practice practice, a little every day. Mommy demonstrated how to pin her hair back into the proper bun, while trying unsuccessfully not to SHOW how “darling” she thought Vicki was acting.

But this was serious stuff, truly requiring the Ben-Gay Tricia hadn’t joked about. All the warm-ups and cool-downs didn’t make Vicki’s muscles feel the least bit buddylike. Even her *hairbun* ached sometimes.

Infinitely worse than the ache was the fear that she wasn’t getting it.

The delicacy. The grace.

Every bend she made, every step she took, had some obstinate wobble.

You could practice till you walked like a *duck* with your toes turned out, toes about to blister on your poor sore feet. Idiotic feet. Enormous stumblebumming Godzillafeet that could never do anything right—just trip and lurch and stagger till you wobbled into bed and cried yourself to sleep—

Except that she wouldn't.

'Cause *They* would know it if she did.

Kris could hold her tears back; Hayley had a knack of transforming hers into a runny nose. Vicki couldn't let the trio down.

So lie tearlessly awake in the dark, clutching an old stuffed cat. Several of whose fluorescent teeth had flaked off over the years. (Welcome to the toothless club.) But its grin—no, its *smile*—still gleamed at her beneath the covers.

You are not a Klumsy Klutzer.

And your best chance of proving that was like Miss Sandy said: you had to SHOW Them.

Return to the sille.

Plee-ay. Reh-luh-vay. Day-gah-zhay.

Arms in front—arms straight out—one arm *up*—both arms *up*—and turn; and turn; and turn. Taller. Straighter. Shoulders leveler. Tummy innier. Toes pointy-outier. Lift and stretch. Lengthen and loosen. With a will; with a way. And, one fine day—

—each step Vicki took was wobble-free.

Her feet hardly feeling like they touched the carpet.

Tricia was with her in the bedroom at that moment, doing some sort of exercise that required muttering *fuss* and *muss*—or was it “must” and “bust”? But she glanced over long enough to notice Vicki hovering giddily by the sille.

“Good,” said Tricia.

No bouquet could have been better.

Except the slow clapping Tricia did when Miss Future Ballerina gave her an unwobbly reh-ver-ahnce.

“My sister, Vicki Volester. ‘A star is born.’”

8

Peachblow

“Goofus! Do I have to swat you?”

“Well,” he told Tricia, “ya don’t *hafta*.”

“Vicki! Get out here and put Goof back to bed.”

“Hey, you’re supposed to be the babysitter.”

“I—am—on—the—PHONE.”

“*There’s* a big surprise,” Vicki murmured to Hayley, who was up in 3W while both sets of parents were at Reulbach’s Open House. The girls, studying for tomorrow’s spelling test, had their workbooks conscientiously open and Tricia’s radio coincidentally on. If they tried to harmonize when “Aquarius” or “Sugar, Sugar” played, that didn’t mean they weren’t focused on words with short-U vowels.

“*Truck*. T-R-U-C-K. With a C, like ‘trick’ and ‘track’—”

“Vicki woke me up,” declared Goofus in the front room. “She was *singing*. Oh so loud! *‘LETTTT THE SUNNNNSHHINE...’*”

“Christopher, you’re such a little snitch!”

“Vicki, do I have to swat *you*?” Tricia inquired. “Come—get—him—NOW.”

“Oh, I’ll do it,” said Hayley. “I’ll tuck him in so snug he’ll fall asleep right away.”

“I’ll conk him on the head if that doesn’t work,” Vicki grumbled.

In the front room she made a face at Tricia, who didn’t glance up from her “What did he say then?... what did she *say* he said?... she did *not* say he said that!” conversation. Some babysitter. Meanwhile Goofus, who couldn’t even ask for a drink of water like a

normal kid, was demanding a full glass of Fresca.

“Just a mouthful,” Hayley cooed at him, carefully pouring it into a tablespoon. Goofus schlurped this as grossly as possible before consenting to be beddy-byed, giving Vicki a repellent gloat as Hayl led him away.

“Gotta go, Patty, the Establishment’s back,” Tricia told the phone, hanging up as the knob turned and the door opened and in walked the Volesters. Each of whom gave their daughters a decidedly quizzical look.

Hayley, tiptoeing out of Goof’s room, got one as well.

“Your folks are waiting downstairs, Hayl,” Felicia said drily.

“Uh—okay,” said Hayley, fetching her workbook and tablet and favorite pencil.

“See you tomorrow—I hope,” she whispered to Vicki.

Ozzie closed the door after her. “Princess, let’s you ‘n’ me have a chat,” he told his eldest.

“WHAT?” went Tricia, following him into the master bedroom. “What’d Mrs. Lundgren say about me? Daddy, that woman *overreacts*, she does it all the time...”

“Is Tricia in trouble?” Vicki asked her mother, trying not to sound pleased.

“Not yet. She just thinks she’s a teenager a couple years too soon... Let’s have a little chat of our own, Brownie.”

“Am *I* in trouble?”

Steady maternal gaze. “Should you be?”

“*I* don’t think so.”

“Well then—no, you’re not either. I was right, though: your teacher *is* the same Mrs. Kling that Aunt Fritz and I had for second grade, back in Adrian Square. She recognized me right away, too, before she even read my name tag. BUT—she didn’t quite seem to know who *you* were, Vicki, and you’ve been her pupil for a month now. Any guesses why that might be?”

“Mom, she’s so *old*. I bet she was old when *you* had her.”

“Hmmm. Well, she didn’t seem young then, and that was—never mind how long ago.” (Rueful sigh.) “I was in her class when Pearl Harbor was attacked.”

“The black lady on TV?”

“Um, no, that’s Pearl Bailey—”

“But somebody hurt her??”

Felicia offered brief reassurance as to Pearlie Mae’s well-being and praise for Vicki’s racial empathy before returning to the point. “Do you raise your hand when Mrs. Kling asks questions? I hope you’re not still playing Shrinking Violet.”

(That was Vicki’s role in last spring’s dance recital. Kris had portrayed a Jazzy Marigold and Hayley, with touching pathos, a Begonia who wanted to be a Forget-Me-Not.)

“Now I know you always do your homework like a good girl, and study hard before your tests—you *did* tonight, right?”

“Yes, Mom!”

“Okay. But do you speak up whenever your teacher calls on you?”

Decidedly quizzical look from Vicki. “She doesn’t call on me much.”

*

Nor did she—at least not by name.

Fifth week of second grade, and Mrs. Kling’s students could not agree whether she was seventy or a hundred *and* seventy; whether she was due to retire or had in fact died years ago; and, if so, whether it was her ghost or zombie quavering by the blackboard.

“*Mud*,” she (or it) said. “Rain turns the earth into *mud*.”

M-U-D. They had two spelling tests every week: a so-called easy one on Wednesday and a no-kidding harder one on Friday. Even “easy” words could cause trouble, as happened during Monday’s drill when Tall Mark insisted that *But* had two T’s.

“That’s how I spell mine, anyway.”

“You take yourself down to Mr. Overland’s office, young man!” Mrs. Kling had shuddered. “You, young lady, see that he goes there right this minute.”

“It’ll be my pleasure!”

The actual phrase out of Melissa Chiese’s actual mouth. And if she was fibbing, you couldn’t have told by the expression on her frighteningly pretty face.

“But—” Tall Mark had protested; “Enough!” Mrs. Kling had said; and away Melissa had marched Tall Mark’s two T’s to be locked up in the Tower. Or so everyone figured, since he had never come back.

“*Rug*. We covered the floor with a *rug*.”

R-U-G. So far so good; not a single surprise. If you couldn’t be a teacher’s pet like Sarah-Jill Shapiro (or a teacher’s hatchet man like Melissa Chiese) you could still ace every word on a test.

“*Dumb*,” intoned Mrs. Kling. “Helen Keller was blind, deaf, and *dumb*. Silence, if you please!” as an indignant ripple rose and fell. That was a Friday word and this was a Wednesday!

Vicki was appalled that a TEACHER would call anybody dumb, right out loud. Particularly some poor girl who couldn’t see or hear! How could Helen *help* but be dumb? How could she go to school? And if she went, what kind of terrible pranks would be pulled on her?

“*Bunch*. Bananas come in a *bunch*—I told you children to be silent! Must you all be punished? Very well: pass your papers to the front, and then everyone put his-or-her head down on his-or-her desk!”

Louder, longer ripple.

Hastily scribbling D-U-M-M and B-U-N-T-C-H, Vicki passed her paper up to Stephanie Lipperman (who rudely peeked at it with an uncalled-for snortle) and lowered her head onto folded arms. Though not before seeing Melissa pass not just her test to April Tober but also a note, on bragged-about robin’s-egg-blue monogrammed stationery. The sort of act that would land anyone else in trouble.

But *She*, of course, only made trouble for others.

Vicki imagined April resolving not to read the note. Then being unable to resist. Then finding it contained more “helpful advice” regarding her new front teeth. April’s permanents had come in with a prominent overbite, sealing her fate as a chipmunkette. For which Melissa heaped her plate with supersympathetic nods and charitable suggestions:

“Press your lips together when you smile. I mean, you can *try*.”

Said with a bright cold display of perfectly straight Chiese choppers.

To which April dared not retaliate. Ditto Stephanie, except with occasional petty snipes; while Eileen Agnew lapped up everything *She* dished out and clamored for more.

Just last week at the drinking fountain, Vicki'd found Eileen standing behind her.
Being egged on from a distance:

"Go on. Ask her," said a bright cold voice.

"—mmmmWhat church do you go to, Vicki?"

(Sigh and mouth-wipe.) "I don't go to any."

From a distance: "See? I told you."

"*OmmmMMMM*," went Eileen as she backed away, unwilling to schlurp from the same spigot as an unabashed heathen.

That evening Vicki asked her mother, "Why don't we go to church?"

"Time enough for you to deal with that when you grow up. I only ask, darling, that you'll think for yourself with an open mind and heart."

Which made hardly any sense. Tricia, when appealed to, explained that "the Volesters are Catholic, the Schmelzes are Jewish, Mom thinks they're both silly, Daddy goes along with Mom, you and I like to sleep late on Sundays, and Goofus would worship the Devil if we let him."

"So why did Eileen go '*OmmmMMMM*' at me?"

"Probably she's Buddhist, they go *OM* all the time. Now quit asking questions, I'm busy."

Another big surprise. Also relief that Goofus couldn't spit fire or carry a pitchfork, like Hot Stuff in the comic books.

"Come come," said Mrs. Kling. "Sit up straight now, we mustn't waste any more time."

Everyone sat up straight and found their teacher looking vaguely lost.

"Er... what was it we were doing last, children?"

Jimmy Maxwell raised a respectful hand. "You were gonna tell us more about Helen Keller. Could she play a mean game of pinball?"

*

Lacking arcade devices, the girls of Reulbach spent recess playing hopscotch or foursquare or freeze tag or jumping double dutch. All these activities were scorned by the newest girl in class, who was also the tallest and widest and oldest. (Beating Stephanie to the

latter honor by a few days, thus earning a bushel of spite.) New Girl wasn't the fattest—Hayley remained the leading contender for that title, no matter how many desserts she attempted to skip. But certainly New Girl carried the heaviest chip on her shoulder.

Her name was Brenda Pomerantz. From her back-corner desk she'd glower truculently with eyes that could snap and crackle and even pop with belligerence. As they did the day that Melissa brought a leather-bound photo album to school, its contents devoted to a Pomeranian puppy called Foxyface.

Everyone gathered round to *ooh* and *ahh* at the puppy-pictures, marveling that Melissa could own anything so innocuous. Even Brenda deigned to take a gander, and when she did Melissa said: "*Pomerantz*—that's a name like Pomeranian, isn't it? Too bad SOME dogs can't ever be cute."

Everyone's head pivoted from Melissa to Brenda.

Who let it be known that such gab was all well and good inside a classroom, but things would be very different out on the playground. Away from adult supervision. Where they could *talk*.

"Fine," said Melissa.

"Fine," said Brenda.

Snap-crackle glower met radiant frostbite with an audible *clang*.

By after-lunch recess, news of the impending confrontation had reached every ear in second grade. Nancy Knopf and Gretchen Digresso came over from Miss Moran's class to see the fight, as did rambunctious-as-ever Short Mark. Dumb Mark didn't (presumably he was off playing pinball) but Mrs. Kling's boys were there in force, eager for girl-on-girl mayhem.

Jimmy Maxwell and Billy Goldfarb each bet a dime that Melissa would prevail. Not so Keith Vespa, who'd allowed Brenda to take part in dodgeball games and could testify she didn't throw *anything* like a girl. (Unlike, say, Wernie Ball, who despite his name had no affinity for spherical objects.)

"See this bruise on my leg?" said Keith. "Brenda socked me here *three days* ago. I bet Melissa won't even show!"

She did, though, backed up by the terrified nail-gnawing Eileen, plus Stephanie with her bushel of spite, and April demonstrating pressed-lips solidarity.

They gathered by the Julyan Avenue fence, not far from April's Classical Georgian home. ("Get ready to call your dad for an ambulance," Jimmy suggested.) No adult was in sight: Mrs. Kling's nerves, as usual, were being steadied by a cigarette in the teachers's lounge, while Miss Moran was trying to prevent Brainwashed Larry from mangling himself on the jungle gym.

The adversaries faced each other: Melissa in a splendid Day-Glo outfit (sapphire predominant) and Brenda in a plain beige shift, rubbing one palm with the other hand's knuckles.

"So," said Melissa. "Here we are. Out on the playground."

"Yeah," growled Brenda. "Got anything else you wanna say about me?"

"Sure do. You call that a *dress*?"

(Gasp from half the girls; snortle from the rest.)

Brenda took two steps forward. "My MOTHER made me this dress. What about it?"

Melissa didn't budge. "Just this. What GUNNY SACK did she make it out of?"

Two more steps: "You better watch yer yap, Muhhhh-lissa!"

Standing firm: "Why? You wouldn't hit a *girl*, would you?"

Brenda closed the gap, grabbing a clump of glossy bouncy hair with one fist and drawing back the other, poised for action. "I might hafta *yank* one a little!"

(Gasp throughout the crowd. Anguished *mmmm* from Eileen.)

Melissa refused to flinch. "Just try it, POOCHIE," she said in a voice of arctic venom. "Try it and *SEE* what'll happen to you."

Infinitely fraught moment.

Then the bell rang. Onlookers let whoosh a mass exhalation and rushed back to class. Brenda unclenched both hands, shoved Melissa aside and strode away. Eileen produced a hairbrush and tried to fuss over Melissa, who shrugged her off and strolled schoolward at a leisurely pace. Keith Vespa, claiming the fight had ended in a draw, ignored Billy and Jimmy's pay-up demands.

And Vicki's trio, simultaneously shaken and frustrated, did their best to keep out of *Her* eyeshot for the rest of that day. Nor did anyone risk a back-corner glimpse of Brenda Pomerantz.

The trio had arranged to spend the afternoon at the Walrock greystone, but took their time leaving school so as to avoid exposure to further fallout. They went so far as to depart via the east doors instead of their regular western exit. Kris, as the bravest of the three, went out first to verify the coast was clear.

"You guys," she hissed, "come look."

They found Brenda skulking alone in the parking lot. Acting exactly like Ness did when her doggy feelings were hurt.

"I'm gonna talk to her," Kris announced. "Um—you guys better come too. Just in case."

Halfway over, Brenda raised her head to glower at them and Kris threw up her hands. "Don't be mad at us! We hate Her too!"

"Don't say 'hate,'" Hayley chided. "Are *you* okay?"

Brenda ducked her head again, giving the asphalt a listless kick. "Can *I* say 'hate'?"

"Um—I guess."

"Okay then: I *hate* this school. I wish we never moved here."

"It's not such a bad school," Vicki said timidly. "Just has bad *people* in it... Um—where'd you live before?"

Another sluggish kick. "Adrian Square."

"Hey, that's where my mom and aunt grew up!"

"Yeah?" went Brenda. "Anywhere near Constantine Avenue?"

"Um... maybe."

"Man, I wish I was back there."

"Whyja move to Pfiester Park?" asked Kris.

"Leashes," said Brenda. "Our bakery lost its leash and we hadda get a new one."

"Bakery?" went Hayley, before Vicki could ask why such a place would need a leash. "You have your own bakery, Brenda?"

“Yeah.” One more asphalt-tap. “Uh... you guys wanna come see? Just a couple blocks away.”

En route there Hayley said, “I think that’s a *nice* dress. Does your mom make all your clothes?”

“Aw, she *bought* me this thing—I just wasn’t gonna tell *Her* that. I think it’s so dumb we always gotta wear dresses.”

“Well, I wouldn’t wanna wear boy’s clothes,” said Vicki.

“They make pants for girls! C'mon: when it’s cold out, do you like the wind blowing up inside your skirt?”

(Titters from the trio.)

“I bet Melissa likes it,” Kris quipped.

Brenda slowly shook her head. “I’ll say this for that skag—she’s got guts. Lousy ones maybe, but *guts*.”

“I still wish you’d yanked her hair out,” said Kris.

“Yeah. Me too. This is it—we live upstairs.”

A small storefront on Brunt Street. *Kalács Bakery* read the sign in the window.

“Kuh-LACKS?”

“KAW-lahtch,” Brenda enunciated as they headed on in. “Hey Ma. Hey Eva.”

“Didn’t I tell you?” demanded a large woman in a large apron, coming around a large glass display counter. “Didn’t I *say* you’d make new friends? And here you are bringing three home at once.”

“For the luvva Mike, Ma! They’re just some kids from school.”

Who were inhaling deep ecstatic breaths.

“*You* look like you enjoy good pastry, my dear,” Mrs. Pomerantz told Hayley.

“Oh, I do!”

“So do we!” chorused Kris and Vicki.

“Well then, how about—but wait: do your mothers know where you are?”

“...um...”

“Do you all know your telephone numbers? Good! You shall call your mothers and tell them you *will* be home in time for dinner, *with* your appetites unspoiled.”

(Three faces fell.)

“Unspoiled perhaps,” Mrs. Pomerantz continued, “but! A *taste* of something helps to WHET the appetite. Eva! Some samples of poppyseed roll—”

The trio thought this meant a bun like at Biff’s up the street, into which a beef frank and mustard and onion and peppers and tomato wedges and pickle spears and celery salt (but never, *never* ketchup) got crammed. Instead they were given bites of sweet bread filled with a black goo so delicious it seemed like a dream come true. Hayley savored hers so visibly she was awarded a *taste* of chocolate buttercream *dobostorta*, and then a tissue to blot her blissful tears.

“Oh Brenda, you’re so lucky! I’m so glad you moved here! I hope you never lose your leash again!”

“Hey, watch the leash talk,” said Brenda. “No ‘Poochies’ allowed.”

*

The trio took home flyers for *The Kalács Bakery* / “*A Little Slice of Old Budapest*” / *Now Open at 7010 N. Brunt*, and contrived to drop by as often as possible. They got to know Brenda’s cousin Eva, whose eyes popped (without snap or crackle) and stared as though they’d never seen so many second-graders before. They met Brenda’s older brother Jumpin’ Jack, on whom Kris developed a throbbin’ crush despite his inclination toward classmate Tricia Volester (she airily dismissing him as That Thug). They were introduced to Mr. Pomerantz, a taciturn colossus who drove the bakery’s delivery van; and the men who worked the ovens, Gergely and Fulop, known to the younger Pomerantzes as Gurgles and Flophouse.

Brenda in turn visited the Walrock greystone, and at the Rawberrys’s exhibited quick mastery of trampoline and croqminton mallet. She even consented to jump double dutch, showing off Constantine Avenue variations the trio hadn’t seen before; and Ness the bulldog acknowledged her as a kindred spirit.

Despite all this, Brenda acted furiously embarrassed one day in November when she thrust three envelopes at the trio. “Here,” she mumbled, “my mother’s inviting you to a birthday party.”

“Whose?”

“Mine!”

“Oh cool,” said Kris. “Will Jack be there?”

“I dunno. Prob’ly.”

“OH MY GOSH,” went Hayley. “I bet you’ll have the greatest cake ever!!”

That Saturday, Kate Rawberry’s eighth-grade circle went to a football game at Lakeside Central University. The trio commissioned Kate to buy them a Yellow Jackets shirt, cap, and mug, squabbling as to who should present Brenda with what, and ultimately amalgamating the gifts into a group effort.

The party was scheduled to begin at 1 p.m. on Sunday the 9th. Hayley arrived early, and found Mrs. Pomerantz having a conniption. By the time Kris and Vicki got there, the conniption was advancing to a fit. Eva hadn’t shown up with the hidden gifts and party gear; Jumpin’ Jack and Mr. Pomerantz had cleared out, ostensibly to find Eva or more paraphernalia; Brenda’s mother was slamming things in the family kitchen (“She’s gonna make the cake fall,” Hayley fretted); while Brenda and her guests sat stiffly around a small table, empty except for five *Yellow Submarine* party hats.

The trio, each in a neat acrylic A-line dress, strove not to laugh at Brenda’s frilly confection of appliqué ruffles. Or at Brenda seething at having to wear it. Not least because Sarah-Jill Shapiro was there in the very same (though much smaller-sized) frock.

“Are you two friends?” Vicki managed to ask with a straight face.

“I’ve been helping Brenda with her subtraction,” replied Sarah-Jill.

“Sheesh! Tell everybody, why dontcha?”

Tongue-tied silence for awhile.

Kris cleared her throat. “Um—happy birthday.”

“Yeah, thanks... So, uh, I s’pose you guys all come here from church, hunh?”

Oh no thought Vicki, scrunching down in her chair.

“Yeah,” said Kris, “we go to the Methodist church on Dewinter.”

“Us too,” said Hayley. “I mean *we* go to the Baptist one on the same street. My mom sings in the choir.”

“My family attends the Unitarian church,” Sarah-Jill offered. “Today in Sunday school we heard all about Hindus.”

“Hunh,” went Brenda. “Next year *I* gotta start Sunday school, to learn Hebrew. Is that the same thing?”

“I don’t think so. Hindus are Indians.”

“Oh, you mean like the Happy Hunting Ground, that sorta stuff? Hunh. What about *you*?” to Vicki, who scrunched down even further.

“She isn’t anything,” Hayl explained.

“*Hey!*”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Hayley added, reaching over to squeeze Vicki’s hand.

“But, y’know, you *aren’t*—when it comes to church.”

“I know,” said Vicki in a still small voice.

“So what does your family do on Sunday mornings?” Sarah-Jill asked.

“...eat breakfast.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Brenda. “HEY MA! You need help bringing in the food? Anything’ll do, we’re starving here!”

“Nonsense!” slammed Mrs. Pomerantz. “You sit, you’re the birthday girl!”

“Well, pretty soon I’m gonna start eating this birthday dress!”

“We could put on these hats,” said Kris. “Who wants which?”

She selected the Flying Glove, Hayley chose Old Fred, Brenda took the Beatles (with John making a funny hand gesture) and Vicki ended up with the Boob. Not catching anyone’s eye, she watched Sarah-Jill don the Chief Blue Meanie.

“Hey, you guys...” Vicki remarked, “does that remind you of Melissa Chiese?”

Broad smiles broke out around the table, alarming Sarah-Jill, who snatched off her hat and looked at it. And emitted a shrill giggle.

“It *does* look like her!”

“In that stew-pid new blue maxi coat—”

“—and that stew-pid stocking cap with the twin tassels—”

“—just what she is, too: a Blue Meanie—”

“—what they *all* are; they’re *all* Blue Meanies—”

“—the perfect name for Them: *the Blue Meanies!*—”

“—tomorrow we gotta start calling Them that!”

Which they did. And were promptly counterlabeled, one and all, as Pooches.

*

Tuesday afternoon after school, the five held a council of this-means-war.

It was supposed to take place at Hayley's apartment, but her mother had to accompany Mrs. LoCascio to an unplanned orthotic fitting, and left a note telling the girls to go up to 3W. Where they barricaded themselves in Vicki's bedroom and took turns guarding the door against Goofus, whose diabolic obnoxiousness knew no bounds.

"Mommy says ya *gotta* lemme in!"

"She just now told you to leave us alone! We all heard her say it!"

"Well, *robbers* grabbed her an' ya gotta lemme in, or they're gonna *murder* her!"

"MOM! Goofus is being horrible!"

"—Christopher Blaine—"

Momentary quiet.

"What we need," Brenda resumed, "is a name of our own. Like a *team* has."

"How 'bout the Yellow Jackets?" Kris suggested. "Kate could get us more shirts and caps. Or we could all wear, y'know, a yellow jacket."

"Oh, I don't like wearing yellow—it makes me look sick," sighed Hayley.

"Besides, people'd just think we're Lakeside Central fans. We need a name that means *us*."

Namely, the good guys pitted against the Blue Meanies. Meaning they belonged in Pepperland (Sarah-Jill reasoned) so how about the Five Little Peppers?

"Aw, no one'll take us serious if we say we're 'Little.'"

"Well some of us *are* little, Brenda."

"What's *that* s'posed to mean??"

"Why not just the Five Peppers?" Kris intervened.

"Um, it's awful close to 'Poopers,'" Vicki pointed out. "Even worse than Pooches."

Hayley thought the Bang-Shang-a-Lang Gang had a nice ring to it, but the others said that sounded more like a musical group than a heroic resistance movement.

THUMP on the door.

"Go *away*, Goofus!"

“My—name’s—not—GOOFUS. Would you *mind* opening this immediately?”

Vicki fell over her friends to do so. Emerald glare flooded the bedroom.

“What,” said Tricia, “is going on in here?”

“We’re trying to think up a good name for our team. The mean girls are calling us”
(whisper) “Pooches.”

“Simple. Call yourself ‘Peaches,’” said Tricia. “And go do it somewhere else; I’ve got to change.”

Like *that* was ever going to happen. But what a great name! The freshly-dubbed Peaches went out on the landing to exult in it. Peach, according to Sarah-Jill, was the complete opposite of blue on the color wheel, and Hayley said that wearing peach clothes would make them look healthy. Kris came up with the brilliant idea that everyone should bring a peach to school and, at a signal, throw them at the Blue Meanies.

“Ripe peaches—no, *rotten* ones!” said Brenda.

“Oog!” went Vicki. “’Member, we don’t want to get *us* in trouble—just Them. Or at least Her!”

“We will, too!”

“With Peach Power!”

And there on that spot, the five girls piled their hands atop each other’s like regular teammates.

“We could have a secret handshake.”

“And a secret salute! Like pledging to a Peach flag!”

“That gives me another idea,” said Kris. “Didja see what those black guys did at the Olympics last year?...”

*

Friday, November 14th: a day that would go down in history. A moon rocket got launched *and* struck by lightning—yet that was just an hors d’oeuvre.

Flurries might be falling on Pfiester Park, but Mrs. Kling believed in children getting “plenty of fresh air,” so recess was still held outdoors. Where (as Brenda’d forecast) a refrigerated wind blew off the Lake and up all the girls’s skirts.

They compensated as best they could with overcoats of various lengths and thicknesses; none so lengthy or thickly as Melissa Chiese's new blue maxi. In it she moseyed through the snowflakes with Eileen Agnew tagging along in a subdued twill. Following a few steps behind were April Tober in a hooded pile coat, and Stuffy Lipperman in a hideous plaid rag with a lamb collar *dyed* to look like raccoon. Even so, that was more acceptable than the pea jackets and benchwarmers and—what was that, some sort of rain slicker?—worn by the pitiful quintet marching toward them.

"Look who's come to see us!" said Melissa, giving her stocking cap's tassels a toss. "Why, it's the Froot Loops!"

(Snortles from her adherents. But, from the quintet:)

NO MORE OF YOUR BLUE MEANIE SPEECHES!

WE ONLY LISTEN TO US PEACHES!

Five clenched fists, thrust straight forward: "WE ALL *PUNCH*—"

Five sets of index and pinky fingers extended: "WITH A *PEACHY*—"

Five pairs of admonitory horns, waggled side-to-side: "*NEC-TA-RINE!!*"

"*Peachy nectarine! Peachy nectarine! We all PUNCH*—"

"Oh. That's. It," barked Melissa. "I'm telling!"

And off she loped to the classroom, to drum enraged heels as she waited for Mrs. Kling to finish getting plenty of fresh air (filtered through burning tobacco). Finally the teacher tottered in and beheld her prized executioner honing an intangible hatchet.

"Mrs. Kling, Mrs. Kling! Those girls were making the sign of the Evil Eye at me! My grandma told me all about that sign and how *vulgar* it is! Also they were *chanting*, Mrs. Kling, chanting like witches! They're acting like a bunch of *witches*, and Halloween was over two weeks ago!"

Now Brenda and Kris were on their feet, objecting noisily, with Vicki and Hayley adding vigorous nods of support.

"Girls! Girls! Stop this, do you hear me?" exclaimed Mrs. Kling. "We must all of us behave like young ladies!"

CRASH of Jimmy Maxwell falling off his chair. “‘Scuse me,” he gargled. “Dropped something.”

“They were *all* doing it, those five there,” Melissa asserted. “Even Sarah-Jill Shapiro!”

(Startled reaction from the whole class, including Jimmy on the floor.)

“Get up and take your seat, sir,” Mrs. Kling told him. To Sarah-Jill: “Is this true, young lady?”

Sarah-Jill raised brows over glinting glasses. “Partly,” she said.

“Explain yourself, please.”

“My friends and I did *point* at Melissa.”

“What? Knowing it’s bad manners to point, you did this?”

“Yes we did, Mrs. Kling.”

“And why, may I ask?”

“Because Melissa said she was going to tell you we were ‘acting like witches.’”

“I *NEVER* said that!!” Melissa exploded.

“Excuse me, but you did just now,” Mrs. Kling retorted. “Enough! *Everyone* take his-or-her seat, if you please. I don’t want to hear another word about pointing *or* calling each other foolish names.”

Dumbfounded for the first time in anyone’s memory, Melissa goggled popeyed at the Peaches like Eva at the bakery. It would have been so cool if she’d yelled “Sarah-Jill told a lie!” and Mrs. Kling ordered her to go to Old Overalls’s office and Melissa screamed “I WON’T!!” and Brenda volunteered to *take* her down and Melissa resisted in a frenzy so even big Keith Vespa couldn’t budge her and Brenda had to run fetch Jumpin’ Jack and other seventh-grade thugs to come *drag* her away, carried shoulder-high, with the wind blowing up her skirt in front of the entire school, to be locked in the Tower alongside Tall Mark.

That would have been *SO* cool.

But Melissa simply took her seat and shut her yap and closed her ears to the snortles of April and Stephanie; and life went on.

Though not unchanged.

Early in December the Kalács Bakery hosted a gathering of Peachy families, and there Sarah-Jill's father made a presentation. Morris Shapiro was a jeweler, which meant intricate work with tiny soldering irons rather than living in a palace encrusted with rubies. But Moe, in collaboration with his fellow parents, had fashioned five small peach-shaped pins, colored appropriately. Brenda was given hers as a Hanukkah gift and the rest got theirs as early unstuffed stocking stuffers.

Everyone's mother took photos of the pinned quintet lining up in order of size, like Bugs Bunny's Overture parade: Sarah-Jill, Vicki, Kris, Hayley, Brenda. And by way of thanks they performed their latest team cheer, composed with help from Billy Goldfarb:

*The butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker,
The cop and car dealer, not one is a faker!
Say "Boo!" to Blue Meanies—beside us they're weenies!
'Cause we are the Peaches—far out is our reaches!
G-O-O-O-O-O PEACHES !!!*

9

A Star Is Borrowed

When the Peaches became Miss Sandy's third-grade students at Reulbach, it was agreed (without anyone saying anything aloud) that they wouldn't make a big deal out of having been in her dance class for the past year or so. Nevertheless, a lot of just-between-us glances got bandied between Miss Sandy—that is, Miss Steinfeldt—and the quintet.

Sarah-Jill had joined Vicki and Hayley in Ballet, while Kris now preferred Tap (which Vicki found too deafening), but all five girls enjoyed Jazz—even Brenda, though she maintained this was due to its being good exercise.

They always wore peach leotards to the dance studio. Their mothers remarked darkly that back in *their* day, black was the only leotard allowed; but they didn't understand that *this* was the Age of Aquarius, when Jupiter had a lion on Mars (or something) and Miss Steinfeldt—that is, Miss Sandy—encouraged Free Expression. Which enabled the Peaches to squint wryly at any girl in a lesser-colored leotard.

Still: it wasn't those other girls's fault they weren't blessed with Peachiness. They, like the quintet, could count themselves lucky to be taught dance by Miss Sandy—and double-lucky if they were assigned to Miss Steinfeldt's room as well.

Just as Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle lent magic to chores like dishwashing or bedmaking, so too did Miss Steinfeldt turn third grade into some kind of wonderful. Even onerous tasks—such as standing at the blackboard doing multi-digit math problems with everybody watching—could be an Enjoyable Challenge that you almost looked forward to.

Genuinely anticipated was the Chapter of the Day. Miss Steinfeldt read this aloud after lunch, taking each Chapter from a Slightly Advanced book that fourth or even fifth graders might not have gotten to yet. Each book—*The Borrowers*, *The Cricket in Times Square*, *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*—seemed to tell about characters who’d run away or been carried away or had to stay in hiding, and Miss Steinfeldt kept you eager to hear what happened to them next. The Book of the Week was always checked out of the school library, so you couldn’t peek ahead and find out on your own, but only speculate whether the museum guards would catch Claudia and Jamie hiding atop the toilets.

Free Expression, Enjoyable Challenges, and Literary Conjecture didn’t appeal to *some* people at all. Her Blueness, for instance: Melissa Chiese sorely missed her position as teacher’s hatchet girl. She couldn’t outdo Sarah-Jill at perfect cursive penmanship or memorizing multiplication tables, and even her claim to be the fairest (looking) in the class was eclipsed since disgruntlement suited April Tober so much better.

These days Melissa devoted most of her attention to the new boy in class, thus proving she’d lost her grip. Boys their own age were icky-britches—everybody knew that. A suitable crush had to be on an older guy like Jumpin’ Jack Pomerantz or Brian Minsky (he of the Ultra Brite smile) or a practically grownup TV star like David Cassidy.

Not on Dunk Gunderson.

Who wasn’t big and handsome like Keith Vespa, or big and funny like Jimmy Maxwell, or skinny yet clever like Billy Goldfarb. Or even just an average kid like Ordinary Mark Welk.

Dunk Gunderson had the face of a toad. Not a comical *Wind in the Willows* Toad either, but hard and unchanging as stone. His thick toad-tongue would emerge to slide along stony toad-lips, generally just before Dunk spoke. Which he did in a startlingly deep voice, as though it were lodged down around his stomach rather than inside his throat.

“*URRRRRRRRRPPPP*,” he’d belch every recess as he set foot on the playground. Jimmy and Billy would clutch the school walls, pretending a bomb had exploded or an earthquake had struck, or “Godzilla really cut one that time!”

(Icky-britches.)

Dunk Gunderson never smiled at their wisecracks; he took all playground activities dead seriously. His idea of an Enjoyable Challenge was to turn kickball or dodgeball into mortal combat, while Free Expression meant chewing out the other combatants. Briefly, but carnivorously.

Lefty Levitch was a frequent Dunk-target. Skinnier than Billy and less impressive than Ordinary Mark, Lefty ladled out more playground pep talk than anybody else; also more excuses whenever he muffed a kick or bobbled a throw (both more often than not). Jimmy said Lefty must have superhero vision, since he was the only kid at Reulbach who could get the sun in his eyes on an overcast day.

Dunk's comments were pithier and pungenter. Especially after he found out Lefty's real first name:

"Quit trying to catch it with yer butt, Fayyyy-bian!"

Even that was downright cordial compared to some of the things he called Wernie Ball.

Vicki's own opinion of "Teeny-Weenie" hadn't changed a whole lot in the four years since Melissa made him cry by swiping his chair. Queasy pity then; queasy pity now. Same little cobweb-headed paste-eater. It was not a fun surprise to discover he'd taken the desk directly behind hers in Miss Steinfeldt's room. Nor was it a happy adventure to sense him huddled back there, exhaling whatever ailed him at any moment.

Wernie-bugs... Wernie-germs... Wernie-cooties...

The fact that Vicki hadn't had to stay home sick from school for a single day this year meant nothing.

She suspected Miss Steinfeldt felt sorry for Wernie, since he was always being included in activities and encouraged to take a prominent part. Such as when the class chose a scene from *The Borrowers* as their routine for the "Reulbach Revels." This variety assembly, scheduled for the week before Thanksgiving, was going to be put on at night with tickets and programs and everything. The director was eighth-grade teacher Mrs. Polonious, who'd once been an understudy in a Waa-Mu Show and to whom the glamour of greasepaint continued to cling. As well as the awesome burden of picking nine or ten "Revels" out of all the acts submitted by the student body.

Melissa had suggested an acrobatic display, with Dunk Gunderson flinging her up in the air and catching her coming down. Dunk expressed greater interest in stomping on Wernie Ball's lunchbox and tossing its crumpled contents into a tree. Mrs. Polonious nixed both schticks, so Melissa was an early dropout from any "Revels" participation. (And Wernie had to go lunchless that day.)

The other third-graders decided to do *The Borrowers* chapter where Arrietty's parents let her venture out from beneath the kitchen floor, into the gladdening sunlight where she encounters the giant Boy. (Represented by a big flat Styrofoam eye that Billy Goldfarb hoped to make blinkable.)

Most of Miss Steinfeldt's pupils would help Billy create and manipulate the oversized props and scenery. Only five acting parts were available, and Jimmy Maxwell's "round currant-bunny sort of face" made him a shoo-in for the role of Pod. Everyone expected April Tober to be cast as Arrietty, but Miss Steinfeldt said there had to be *some* competition; so Kris dared Vicki to try out and Vicki dared Kris ditto. Not that it mattered—toothy-cutie April went first and seemed to ace it right off:

"*SURELY you don't think there are many people in the world YOUR size?*"

Kris, going next, got the giggles and quit midway. Vicki, carrying on for Peachy pride, threw in a few "light and dancey" steps such as Arrietty took in the book, running through the petals in her soft red shoes. That's how you'd behave if you saw a flowering cherry tree for the very first time: *bouffée* toward it and *glissade* around.

Pirouette twice and find yourself anointed as Arrietty.

"That was so *stew-pid!*" April groused to Stephanie Lipperman.

"I'll say! The casting was *fixed!*"

Stephanie had begun planning what to wear as Homily, and was already being called "Hot Lips" by stage husband Jimmy (who swore he'd gone to see *M*A*S*H* all by himself). But at the audition Stephanie lost out to Hayley Tamworth—*Hayley*, of all people! Who didn't even have Homily's bony nose! Just all that extra poundage from hanging out at bakeries! And so *what* if she was "deft on her feet" and could dance like Vicki Volester?? Their true identities were and always would be Hippy Hippo and Klumsy Klutzer!!

Hayley, too nice to nyaah, did a *changement* here and *battement* there while making funny scolding gestures and attempts to tidy her hair. *Et voilà*—Hayley was cast as Homily. The Peaches went on to score a hat trick when Sarah-Jill steamrolled Eileen Agnew for the Narrator’s assignment.

That left only the Voice of the Boy, which Miss Steinfeldt allotted to Wernie Ball. Maybe because she felt sorry for him, but it made sense too: in the book the Boy had rheumatic fever, and Wernie always sounded sick. The Boy was said to have a “cold shadow”; Vicki often shivered when Wernie was nearby. Which happened more frequently as rehearsals began for *The Borrowers Ballet*.

On one occasion the actors were told to “take five” while Billy and his crew struggled with the Boy’s Styrofoam eyelid. Jimmy went over to assist by offering flippant remarks. Sarah-Jill wandered off with her script, learning the whole thing by heart so she could prompt others if necessary. Hayley discreetly disappeared to the washroom, since even rehearsals made her “so nervous.” Wernie opened a paperback and started to read; Vicki, idly peeking at the cover, saw it was *My Side of the Mountain*—their latest Book of the Week, missing as usual from the school library.

“Where’d you get that?”

“It’s mine,” said Wernie, not glancing up.

“You shouldn’t read it ahead of the rest of us.”

“Why not?”

“Well... ‘cause then you’ll find out what happens next too soon.”

“I know what happens next.” Lick of thumb. Turn of page.

“Oh. So, um... does Sam ever get his flint and steel to start a fire?”

“With help.”

Vicki bit her lips. Vexed in spite of herself that Wernie wasn’t seizing this rare chance to *look* at her while they talked—

Then he did. And she went back to wishing he wouldn’t.

Same rheumy-red eyeballs as in XY Zeedays. Same prickly-pinpoint focus, like the tight little claws on Mrs. Lo’s birds.

“This is what I want to do,” said Wernie, juggling his book. “Go away from here. Far away, where I can’t be found. You don’t understand. *He* moved in across the street from my house. Sometimes *He* waits for me. Just stands there, waiting. Here too. Follows me. Says things. Does things—or says *He*’s going to. Don’t know why. Just what’ll happen next. If I don’t run away.”

(Blink.)

Focus abruptly detached, like a bird hopping off your finger into its cage.

“You don’t understand.”

And back went the pallid face into the paperback.

Profound discomfort welled up in Vicki’s throat. As if eggplant parmigiana was on her dinner plate and she couldn’t sneak it into her napkin.

She understood who “*He*” must be; also the sensation of being a target. But with girls it was different—even one so cruelminded as Melissa or spiteful as Stephanie would never stoop to wrecking a lunchbox. (Not when they could tease you to pieces for having one.) Boys, on the other hand, stooped all the darn time. They were so ridiculous with their “Code of Having a Thingee,” as Brenda memorably phrased it. She and Sarah-Jill, wise to the foibles of older brothers Jack and Garrett, had clued in the rest of the Peaches with plenty of useful (if awful) information.

Hence Vicki knew it would be futile for Wernie to appeal to Miss Steinfeldt or Mr. Overland for protection, and least of all his parents: even a girl wouldn’t resort to that. You might as well regress to wearing diapers.

Wernie didn’t have a full-of-foibles older brother to intimidate Dunk Gunderson into backing off—and Dunk would probably be tougher than this older brother anyway, or trump him with one of his own. No, the Thingee Code gave Wernie no other recourse than standing up to Dunk. Which meant getting beaten black and blue; which no doubt would happen twice daily, both coming to school and going home; and in ways that a parent or teacher or principal or policeman or ambulance driver couldn’t readily detect.

So Wernie was right: he’d have to run off somewhere. Unless...

“You oughta do what we did—get together as a *group*. It’s a whole lot easier when you’ve got a group of friends—”

“Like *who*?”

Oog again. With profound relief that Hayley wasn’t there to say, “*We’ll* be your friends!” Vivid recollection of a winter afternoon in first grade, when Hayley’d made Vicki and Kris help chase Wernie for two whole blocks *through the slush*, just to restore a mitten he’d let fall on the playground. As if he hadn’t noticed one hand was bare in that weather. “Maybe he dropped it on purpose, so you’d notice *him*,” Kris had wisecracked. “Notice *this*,” Vicki’d replied, hurling a slushpuppy at her.

Enough. She went back to rehearsal, thanking goodness none of the Blue Meanies were around to witness this conversation. But they found out about it even so, and teased Vicki to pieces the next morning with a grotesque burlesque of a Peachy chant:

Wedding at The City Hall!
Where the bridesmaids stand and call,
“This is Mrs. Wernie Ball!”
All in all in all in all—

No, not a fun surprise. Nor a happy adventure.

*

A thousand times Vicki’d heard her sister declare, “I’ve got to change!” Over the past year, though, Tricia’d gotten SERIOUS about this; and by her twelfth birthday she’d blossomed every which way, winning all the privileges pertaining thereto.

Pierced ears. Shaved legs. Full makeup. Amnesty for monthly moodiness. And, most important, a drawerful of tricot brassieres “gently contoured” (according to the ad) “with 1/8-inch lining of Wonder-Fil spun polyester.” Which sounded terribly sophisticated to Vicki, stricken with awe whenever Tricia thrust her cups at their bedroom mirror or flanked it in profile.

Ozzie Volester feared his Princess had jumped puberty’s tracks and been transformed too soon, too quickly, and much too far. Why else would she—the youngest girl in her class—be able to outstrip most of the others?

Felicia, though far from thrilled at recent developments, said not to worry. “It was just the same with my sister. Fritzi got out of bed one morning and honestly, it was like

she'd grown up overnight."

"And I shouldn't *worry* about that??"

"Oh Daddy relax, I'll always be your little girl," Tricia reassured him. To prove it she elicited a \$15 allowance-advance to buy a pair of suede pumps, the crowning acquisition of her back-to-school purchases. Felicia, exhausted by this binge, said Tricia could lug all the shopping bags upstairs herself. Starting with the greystone's front stoop, which was being swept by Junior Hull.

"Junior, would you be a sweetie and carry these up for me?"

"Sure thing, Tricia! I will carry them right now, Tricia!"

"Patricia Elaine! You are perfectly capable—"

(Yes she was; yes she was.)

"All right, *this* is where I draw the line!" Ozzie ranted a few weeks later. "Eighth grade or no eighth grade, you just turned twelve last month and that's not old enough to go out dating! End of story! Case closed!"

"Now Daddy, don't be silly, this isn't a date at all. Just a simple sockhop in the school gym, we don't dress fancy or anything (I'm going to wear my new monogram dress that *you* said I look so nice in), we dance and chat for a couple hours, then *you* can pick me up and bring me home safe and sound. Oh and Patty'll probably need a ride too."

The only word Ozzie heard clearly was "couple."

He spent the sockhop's first ninety minutes pacing as he pictured his daughter at the mercy of pubescent wolves; and the last half hour devouring Lucky Strikes in the Reulbach parking lot.

Tricia seemed to confirm the worst by exiting the gym in a monogrammed snit.

"So. Good time?" coughed her father.

"Patty *won't* be needing a ride home," Tricia informed him. Without the further explanation that Patty Kuchenesser, her very best friend, had monopolized Brian Minsky's Ultra Brite smile for practically the entire sockhop. While Tricia'd shuffled around with Jumpin' Jack Pomerantz and Randy Knopf (Nancy's equally noisy brother), neither of whom belonged on her bedroom wall among the posters of Peter Fonda and Elliott Gould.

Then came “Revels.” Mrs. Polonious’s class would close the show with its biggest and longest act, a medley of tunes from *The Boy Friend*. For which Patty (a mere A-cup at thirteen) was cast as Polly, the star, who got to sing a duet while being embraced by Brian. Tricia was relegated to the soubrette chorus. With a song of her own, but sure to be drowned out by *her* partner, Randy the Mighty Mouth Knopf.

Patty, of course, was invited to come with the Volesters to Gran Schmelz’s for costuming. Gran was as expert with needle and thread as she was concerning manners and deportment. Her husband’s expertise lay in postponing retirement, solely so he could unmake deals-in-the-making—or so it seemed to Ozzie, who’d expected to take over running the Lot by now. But last weekend as he pitched a good used Chevy to the Grusza twins, what did Diamond Joel do but barge in and push them toward an Alfa Romeo “just like that Graduate kid drove.” Which caused Candice and Corliss (who found Dustin Hoffman repugnant) to clam up and leave.

“They’ll be back,” Dime said blithely. “They know we won’t be undersold—twenty-four years at the same location!” And anyway, why should those two *tsatskes* buy a risky Chevrolet while the UAW was striking against GM?

(Tactless reference to a sore point in the Volester family, one that put PopPop and Uncle Ted at unaccustomed loggerheads.)

So Ozzie stayed home to watch Monday Night Football with Goofus, while Fel took Tricia and Patty and Vicki and Hayley up to the northern suburb whose name still reminded them of *The Poky Little Puppy*. There the Schmelzes lived in a stucco cottage painted salmon (“lox-colored,” Diamond Joel called it) with rose bushes out front and rhododendrons beside the garage.

“Man on the floor!” said Dime, peering into Gran’s crowded sewing room. “Not for long, though—meeting Charlie Marley at the club. I’ll leave you ladies to your clucking and your squawking—eh, Dillydoll?”

“Go,” Gran told him. “Be so good as to *not* light that cigar till you are away from here.”

“Listen to her! Cackle cackle in the henhouse—”

“Go, I say!”

“Bye Dad,” went Fel; “Bye Dime,” went Vicki; “Bye Mr. Schmelz,” went Hayley. Tricia was silent as Patty Kuchenesser resumed gabbling about whether she should play Polly all sweet like Julie Andrews or sock-it-to-me like Judy Carne, or just be her usual kooky self like Goldie Hawn.

“Mmm,” went Tricia, studying a photo of Louise Brooks. “Did they wear miniskirts in the Twenties, Gran?”

“I did not. But then I was no flepper. You sssould essk your Grenndmother Volester; I’m certain sssee would know. Hold still please, Miss.”

“Sorry,” said Hayley, nervous even during a fitting.

“At least they didn’t wear *midi* skirts,” groaned Felicia. “I can’t believe those are popular again. I hated wearing them in the Fifties... Um, Mother, I don’t suppose Dad’s mentioned anything lately, if he’s been thinking when he might...”

“What? Retire? I, his wife, would be the first one to know?... Very good, Hayley: a long tzzeckered dress with puffed sleeves and bibbed apron. Now you, Victoria: how many petticoats will you be wanting?”

“Is seven too many? That’d really make my skirt flare out like a tutu.”

“Oh my,” said Fel. “Remember crinoline, Mother? It always felt so scratchy.”

“Thett was the tulle. For Victoria, starched cotton will do nicely.”

“And look so romantic,” added Hayley.

“*Brian’s* the one who looks romantic,” said Patty in her maple-syrup-and-lemon-juiciest voice. “I bet you small fry will never meet a guy with teeth so perfectly white.”

Maybe when I’m old and they all wear DENTURES, thought Vicki.

Even then, you will find they are seldom WHITE.

Glance up and into Gran’s eyes, regarding her steadily. With the same starry black glitter as Vicki’s own.

They waited for Tricia’s reaction to Patty’s glop, and were just realizing she wasn’t in the sewing room when Tricia returned. Breezily.

“You were right, Gran—MomMom knows all about flapper clothes. Don’t worry, I called her collect.”

Felicia stared aghast. “Do you mean to say you made a long-distance call on your grandmother’s phone without asking permission??”

“Don’t gape, Miss,” sighed Gran, and Fel shut her mouth.

“It was Gran’s idea, and you were busy talking about Dime. It only took a minute, I called collect like I said, and MomMom promised she’d bring me some things I need for the show. She says ‘hi’ to everyone, by the way, and thinks Patty should play Polly very prim and proper.”

“Ooh,” went Patty. “That’ll be hard to do, with Brian’s arms around me.”

Gran heaved a deeper sigh. And said: “You are a smart girl, Patrissa.”

“Thanks!” Patty and Tricia replied.

*

Shortly before dress rehearsal, Wernie Ball came down with tonsillitis and had to miss a week of school, including “Revels.” Which was just fine with his castmates, since Wernie’s breath had gotten really bad.

It was decided the Ballet should end when the giant Styrofoam grassclumps were drawn apart to reveal the Boy’s giant Styrofoam eye. Arrietty would freeze, the eye would blink (Billy promised) and the Narrator would intone: “If you want to know what happens next, you’ll have to read *The Borrowers*.”

This pleased Sarah-Jill, since she now got to do all the talking. Mrs. Polonious and Miss Steinfeldt were pleased, since the show needed tightening and the third-grade number now had sharper concentration. Dunk Gunderson and Melissa Chiese were presumably pleased by Wernie’s woes, out of malice aforethought.

Vicki knew she ought to feel sorry but she too was pleased, having escaped for a week from creepy-crawliness. (*Tonsil-bugs... tonsil-germs... tonsil-cooties...*)

“Revels Night” in the Reulbach auditorium, and even more people were pleased: Gran because the costumes met her own high standards, and Dime because he’d won a bundle playing liar’s poker with Charlie Marley, and MomMom and PopPop because the UAW strike was finally over, and Ozzie because he’d persuaded the Grusza twins to not only babysit Goofus but come take another look at that good used Chevy.

Up creaked the curtain, and pleasure dimmed with the lights.

An opening ode to Thanksgiving by the morning and afternoon kindergartens was inaudible beyond the front row. This was followed by the first grade's re-enactment of Squanto saving Pilgrims (whose buckles fluttered off their hats) and the second grade's *Lancelot Link, Secret Chimp* routine (in plastic raincoats and ape masks).

Then Miss Steinfeldt's troupe took the stage, under a blue filter suggesting the Clock family's hidey-hole. Sarah-Jill explained their situation to the audience; Jimmy and Hayley raised laughter with their antics as Pod and Homily, pantomiming *How can you speak so!* and *Upstairs is a dangerous place* and *If all's clear, I'll give you the sign*. Then Arrietty was allowed her first glimpse of the wide-open world outdoors (under an orange filter) and Vicki got to do her solo dance.

Oh, glory! Oh, joy! Oh, freedom!

Pirouettes. Arabesques. *Bourrées* and *glissades*. *Piqués* and *brisés* and *pas de chats* in shoes that skimmed across the stage. Seven petticoats a-flaring while the pianist played "Out of My Dreams" and the unseen crew, Kris and Brenda and Keith and Ordinary Mark, made their giant grassclumps sway to and fro, to and fro—

—and then, at the cue, sweep suddenly left and right.

"It was an eye," proclaimed Sarah-Jill, "the color of the sky."

Whose lashed lid did its down-and-up duty, more smoothly than Billy'd ever achieved at rehearsals.

Applause for *The Borrowers Ballet* was the loudest and most sustained of the evening so far. Unmatched by any for the fourth grade ("Gitarzan" skit, using a swiped ape mask) or the fifth (girls doing the Frug to "Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head") or the sixth (dueling drummers causing Excedrin Headaches) or the seventh (dirgelike rendition of "You've Made Me So Very Happy").

But then came *The Boy Friend Medley*.

Patty and Tricia and three other soubrettes singing "Perfect Young Ladies." Patty and gleaming-grinner Brian Minsky in each other's arms for "I Could Be Happy with You." Two eighth-graders feigning middle age for "The 'You-Don't-Want-to-Play-with-Me' Blues." A beachside scene for "Sur la Plage," warbled by the ensemble led by Tricia and

Randy Knopf: *What a luv-uh-lee day, what a luv-uh-lee day, for a dip! IN the sea!*

The other girls and boys didn't change costume, but Tricia and Randy shed theirs to reveal Twenties-style bathing suits (devised by MomMom and brought by her from Beansville). Randy's looked amusingly baggy; Tricia's was a tad snug. Especially in the seat. Which she turned and wiggled at the footlights every time the boys warbled.

"The suit was SUPPOSED to be form-fitting," Tricia explained afterward to a stupefied Ozzie. "It's hardly my fault if everything I wear rides up, Daddy. That's just the way I'm *built*."

"Fritzi Ritz all over again," observed Diamond Joel.

At any rate Tricia stole the scene, the show, and incidentally Brian Minsky away from Patty Kuchenesser, when Brian took exception to Patty's sour-lemon curdled-syrup accusations of blatant upstaging.

All in all (in all in all): an accomplishful night for the Volester sisters.

"Did you see any of my dance before you had to go backstage?" Vicki asked in their bedroom that night.

"Why sure. Didn't you hear me cheer?" said Tricia, again admiring her profile in the mirror. "You did those *jetés* better than I could have, back when I was your age."

Vicki basked in this accolade, worth more than anyone else's. "Um... will Patty stay mad for keeps?"

"Poor Little Pierrette? Her own fault if that happens."

"Right. I never liked the way she talked. And why'd she wear her bangs so long?"

"Like a sheepdog! I kept hinting and hinting about that, but she just wouldn't listen."

Vicki went over and inserted her reflection next to Tricia's. "So," she asked, "when do you think I'll start to grow *my* bosoms?"

10

Passing Over

Eventually Aunt Fritzzi would blame her third marriage on the Prime Minister of Canada, a middle-aged swinger who'd ended his trendy bachelorhood by wedding a flower child (and so caused Canadian schoolgirls to lower their flag to half staff).

This rakish paragon was emulated by a host of lesser lotharios, including twice-divorced insurance agent Douglas "C'est Si Bon" Carlisle. Like the PM, Doug sported a silk ascot while driving a Mercedes roadster after decking his lapel with a red, red rose. He also wore a brown, brown rug and had skin the color and texture of a buttered cigar, on which he believed you could never splash enough Brut.

Fritzzi was gaga over him. She did a *grand jeté* at Doug's suggestion that hey, since Pierre tied the knot with Margaret and went on a ski-slope honeymoon, why not do likewise? So what if this was the third hitch for them both? Therein lay the charm!

Wire briar limber lock

Three geese in a flock

One flew east, one flew west—

—and the third got married in the cuckoo's nest that had been Madame Massena's Dance Studio. Fritzzi was relocating to Doug's turf, the state capital, which meant this ceremony would be the studio's coda—its swan song and final hurrah—with the reception conveniently staged downstairs in the Joe E. Lewis Dinner Playhouse.

"Well," sighed Felicia, "at least *this* wedding's indoors."

(As opposed to a high school elopement, or windblown nuptials at the Lakeside Central Sculpture Garden.)

It was also the first wedding where Fritzzi got given away by her father. Diamond Joel had hated Bucky Fettermeyer's guts, and felt only contempt for glassblower Andrew Massena; but Doug Carlisle was a dream son-in-law come true. Who else invited Dime to a bachelor party at the ex-Knickerbocker Hotel, recently converted to the Playboy Towers? Nobody but bunny-club-keyholder Doug! Who'd gotten Dime and Gran the most affordable deal on pre-need burial coverage? Nobody but Doug the *macher chassen!*

"So sure am I that my baby girl's in the best hands you could hope for, that breathing easy is now at last possible. So to take a cue from Frank Sinatra, I say it's my turn to retire! 'Sunrise, sunset, swiftly fly the yeeeeeears—you ain't seen nothing yet: the best is yet to come.' MAZEL TOV!"

"Mmm," added Gran.

One-man standing ovation by Ozzie Volester. He too had nothing but kudos for Doug Carlisle (and a few extra crinkles in his own butter-and-egg smile, following that bachelor bash). As for little Goofus, he'd begun wearing a bandanna round his neck to approximate an ascot, and was saving stray nickels to buy a Mercedes.

Yet Fritzzi's fellow Schmelzettes were quietly appalled. Felicia kept her mouth shut about the groom, lest Diamond Joel rethink his retirement. Gran's enmity had been earned the first time Doug swiped one of her prize roses to stick on his lapel. And the girls labeled him "Gross Uncle Doug" after he demonstrated his feeling for young female cheeks, lower as well as upper. (Vicki's merely got patted; Tricia's were definitely pinched.)

As far as the girls were concerned, the only good thing about their aunt's marrying G.U. Doug was the appearance of fourteen-year-old Cousin Miles Carlisle. Who had the fleeting good fortune at that particular moment to be a dead ringer for pop star Bobby Sherman.

Miles set off endless muffled giggles among the Peaches, who'd all been invited to the wedding reception. Their table was loaded with the state capital's native dish, horseshoe sandwiches (thick toasted sourdough topped with a slab of ham—the "shoe"—drizzled with cheese sauce and surrounded by fries—the "nails"—served on a hot steak platter or "anvil").

On which even the Pomerantzes were chowing down, since they only kept kosher at Passover and that was still a week off. Brenda sat stolidly munching on hers, despite the other girls's efforts to haul her into Miles's dead-ringer vicinity.

The Peaches knew all about Bobby Sherman thanks to Tricia's teenybopper magazines, which they were forbidden to touch and so had to smuggle stealthily over to Hayley's apartment. One day Kris caught Brenda staring unblinkingly at a Bobby Sherman photo in *Tiger Beat*, and when kidded about this Brenda didn't scoff it away but blushed and stammered. After that, even fear of her wrath didn't stop the other Peaches from moaning in soulful unison when "Julie, Do Ya Love Me?" or "La La La (If I Had You)" came on the radio and Brenda was nearby.

"I swear, you guys, I will break each of your arms and legs..."

"Who, us? We like the way he *sings* is all. It's not like we got a *crush* on him or anything—"

Growl from Brenda then; same (through a mouthful of horseshoe sandwich) now.

Not that it mattered—Cute Cousin Miles was being monopolized by Bridesmaid Tricia. To the point of being led off, by the hand, on a tour of the Joe E. Lewis Dinner Playhouse dressing rooms, while everyone else (except Vicki's quintet) witnessed Gross Uncle Doug toasting Aunt Fritzi with a bottle of Seagram's and a Tom Jonesish serenade.

"*Whoa whoa whoa she's a layyyy-dee*," he crooned, as Tricia and Miles disappeared.

*

"We are *not* splitting up! We're just gonna be—doing, y'know, different things. In different places. Some of the time."

So insisted Hayley at Sarah-Jill's spring vacation sleepover.

The Peaches were grappling with the loss of their dance studio and regular Saturday sessions. Miss Sandy had urged Vicki to apply for Level Three entry at the exclusive Olivia Fischel Academy of the Ballet: *two* lessons every week and not cheap ones either, though her parents said it wouldn't be a problem now that they were part-owners of the Lot.

Hayley, despite similar encouragement, was afraid the Fischel Academy wouldn't think she "looked right," and its bound-to-be-haughty students would jeer at her.

“They *have* to take you if you can pay the fees—and can dance, of course,” said Vicki. “Which we know you can do.”

“Yeah, well, maybe...” Hayley wishywashed. “I’d feel a lot better if the rest of you guys were going there too.”

But Sarah-Jill wasn’t interested in dancing more than once a week; Brenda’s folks were doing well enough on Brunt Street to afford ballet-free membership at the Jewish Community Center; and Kris was about to re-tackle the Y. Superconfident with the power of Peachiness, she had the extra cachet of being kid sister to high school Y star Kate Rawberry. So any Blue Meanies that tried getting in Kris’s way *this* time had better watch out or they’d be sorry!

Yet this *didn’t* mean their quintet was dissolving into five soloists. Obviously they’d still have school together, presuming they remained in the same class for fourth grade and beyond. No matter where any of them might go, they would always be Peach-pinned sisters of the Nectarine sorority. And in the meantime they were on a spring vacation sleepover: pass the Filbert’s root beer and don’t hog the Screaming Yellow Zonkers!

(Such fare was practically contraband at Sarah-Jill’s, thus all the more delicious.)

The Shapiros lived on Favell Avenue, a side street between Brunt and Van Hopper, in a house with many shelves on the walls and books on the shelves and artwork hanging on any remaining open spaces. Vicki came over here a bit oftener than the other Peaches, since her mother and Sarah-Jill’s had become close friends. Millie Shapiro was a very intent, serious-minded person with even less sense of humor than her daughter (to whom you sometimes had to explain jokes); but “she’s the sort you can really have a cup of coffee and *chat* with,” according to Felicia. They drank many intent cups and had many serious-minded chats, here and at the Walrock walkup and even—to general Volester astonishment—at the Unitarian church every Sunday morning.

“It’s not like organized religion at *all*. No dogma, no superstition, just a rational chance to hear good profound talk about issues and ethics once a week. *I* find it inspiring.”

Vicki fell asleep the only time she was inveigled into accompanying her mother. She dozed off during a sermon on the dangers of nuclear testing, delivered by a big bald Unitarian who grabbed far less attention than the bigger, balder, professional wrestler who

played an atomic mutant in *The Beast of Yucca Flats*. Which the sleepover girls were currently watching on a TV in the Shapiros's enclosed sunroom.

"Look," said their hostess, "even if Russian spies *could* get that near to a bomb blast, there's no way it'd make them want to go around strangling people."

"It was in the olden days. Radiation did funny things to people."

"Probably Russians most of all."

Kris, imitating the narrator: "*Kill, just to be killing.*"

(Laughter.)

"Okay then, why'd he carry that lady into the desert after he choked her?"

"She's gonna be his lunch. He's a *cannibal* atomic mutant."

"Ewww..."

Stomp stomp stomp on the sunroom ceiling. Which would've caused high-pitched shrieks had the movie been scarier, or the stomper some unknown potential maniac instead of Sarah-Jill's brother Garrett. Whose bedroom was right above the sunroom, and in which he was trying to play chess with an equally uncrushworthy chum.

But the Peaches were unbudgeable. They intended to spend the entire night in the enclosed sunroom, despite the changeable April weather. Snow one day, seventies the next: not so much spring as "springlike." Both cotton and flannel PJs had been recommended, and the girls might end up burrowed into sleeping bags or sprawled carefreely atop them. It was practically like camping out.

Bored with *The Beast of Yucca Flats*, they snapped off the TV and turned on the radio, at a volume calculated to irritate Garrett but not provoke more stomps. The "Theme from *Love Story*" filled the sunroom, making the girls decide to tell each other's romantic fortunes if they could figure out how.

"I wish you had a Ouija board. I shoulda brought mine."

"Those things are so phony," said Sarah-Jill. "What we need is a deck of Tarot cards. Those are *scientific*."

"Oh are not!"

"Are too! I've read about them—they 'tap into your subconscious mind' and can show you future influences you don't even know you have yet."

“Well,” said Vicki, “I hope they don’t show any of us marrying anyone like my Gross Uncle Doug!”

(Laughter, squeals and *ewws*.)

“How ‘bout your Cute Cousin Miles?”

“Don’t everybody look at *me*,” Brenda growled through a mouthful of Zonkers.

“The only future influence *I* want is to make me a ballerina,” Vicki continued. “Or some kind of dancer, anyway.”

“Whoops!” went Kris. “After you get all curvy like Tricia, who knows *where* you might dance! I might have to raid the place when I’m a policewoman!”

“You know your mom’ll never let you be that,” said Hayley as Kris ducked a Vicki-flung pillow.

“She might if I can dress nice—y’know, like Eve on *Ironside*. I’ll be a detective in slinky outfits that’ll solve more mysteries than Nancy Drew.”

“With Nessie as your Scooby-Doo!”

“Then *I’ll* come to the prison and probe your criminals’s brains,” said Sarah-Jill.

“You wanna be a *shrink*?”

“They’re called ‘psychiatrists,’ Brenda.”

“But that’d mean hanging around crazy people all the time,” Vicki objected.

“Well, if they’re dangerous, they’d be kept behind a glass wall so I could observe them from a distance.”

“Um...” said Hayley, “are all the windows in here locked? I thought I heard a noise outside just now.”

The girls leaped up and peeked behind the sunroom curtains, half-expecting to see an atomic mutant scrabble at the windowpanes.

“Anyway,” said Kris after this menace was dealt with, “we’re surrounded by crazy dangerous people every day at school. Dunk Gunderson sure belongs behind a glass wall.”

“Him and that water pistol he fills with *spit*.”

(Louder *ewws*.)

“Him, that water pistol, and Melissa Chiese too. You could probe their brains and maybe find a pill or shot to cure their evilness.”

“Or just suck out the air and let them suffocate.”

“You guys,” Hayley chided. “Well, when *I* grow up—I know this doesn’t sound Women’s Liberation-y—what *I* really wanna be is a wife and mother, with lots ‘n’ lots of kids. But” (brave wobble-voice) “if that doesn’t happen, I’d like to be a teacher like Miss Steinfeldt. I’d still get to work with children—and get a fresh new bunch every year.”

“Hunh,” went Brenda. “Whatever kind of job *I* get, it’s gotta make me lots ‘n’ lots of *money*. I’m serious! With that, you can buy pretty much anything else you want.”

No sooner said than Bobby Sherman began singing “Cried Like a Baby” on the radio, and four of the sleepover girls let out a single soulful moan.

“So help me, you guys, I will fracture all your jawbones!!”

“*Keep it down down there!*” shouted Garrett from on high.

“*Down doobie-doo down down,*” Kris responded; and the rest of the Peaches rose to help bellow “BREAKING UP IS HARD TO DOO-OO” at the sunroom ceiling.

*

Next morning Vicki was surprised to be collected from Sarah-Jill’s by her entire household, in the Olds Eighty-Eight whose trade-in was slated to be Ozzie’s very first act as Leader of the Lot.

“Are we going someplace? I haven’t really washed yet.”

“Yuggggh, I can tell!” went Goofus, mock-recoiling against Tricia, who shoved him back Vickiward and said, “Gran’s freaking out.”

“Patricia Elaine, that is not true,” remarked Felicia. “Your grandparents are simply having a minor disagreement—”

“‘*Minor,*’” went Ozzie.

“—that we’re going over to help straighten out. So I would appreciate no more of that talk.”

“(You two—trade places)” Tricia told her siblings. An order promptly executed, though not without *yuggghs* by Goofus and a “*You’re* the one who needs a bath” from Vicki. Who then breathed “So what is it?” in Tricia’s ear, and got murmur-told that Diamond Joel wanted to sell the lox-colored cottage and buy a condo on Fiddler Key, down on Florida’s Gulf Coast. Not a syllable of which Gran agreed with or would open purse strings to enable.

“They’re gonna *move*?”

“Gran *won’t*,” whispered Tricia. “And if she doesn’t, Dime *can’t*. And if *he* doesn’t...” Significant green eye-roll toward the front seat, in which Ozzie was very silent.

The lox-colored cottage looked the same as always. Too early yet for Gran’s roses or rhododendrons, but the yellow forsythias were in bright blossom. They found Diamond Joel crouched beside his garage workbench, polishing a collection of vintage hood ornaments.

“*This* far away I’ve gotten,” he informed them. “By the end of the year I’ll maybe reach the end of the block.”

“Where’s Mother?”

“Where do you think? Where else would she be? Never leaving the house, she says. ‘In a box you’ll have to carry me out, Sssmelz,’ she hisses—”

“Dad, please! Not in front of the—”

“The hood ornaments. There you are right, Funnyface: why should *they* have to listen? You, Boychik, climb up on that stool and I will show you objects of wonder from cars that are no more. The rest of you, see what you can do. Just say that otherwise I START SHOPPING FOR A BOX TO CARRY HER OUT IN!”

“Please, Dad...”

“She loves roses so much, I’ll carry her to Rosehill!”

Which was a place from which you were not carried back.

Into the cottage then: Vicki seeing her father wrap an arm around her mother’s waist. Hearing her barely-audible lament, “He hasn’t called me that in years.” Taking an obedient seat in the empty living room, on what Gran always referred to as the *cowtzz*. Sensing a gentle knock on the sewing room door; a tentative twist of its knob; a minor-key opening-creak.

Trying to engage in further speculation with a tuned-out Tricia. Watching her flip through *Look* magazine and glance at her watch again and again. Deciding to go have a good scrub in the bathroom, at the same pink-sink site of her early hygiene education:

Wasss your hands first, Miss, then they will be clean when you wasss your face.

Doing a thorough job on both. Wringing out cloth and towel borrowed from the mint-condition linen cupboard. Hanging them carefully over the rod to dry. Heading out to

be confronted by emerald glare in the hall.

“You try,” said Tricia.

Glancing left and right. “Where’s Mommy and Daddy?”

“He’s out in the garage. She’s lying down on the couch. You go talk to Gran. You were always her favorite.”

This was news to Vicki, who started trembling.

“Hey!” (Brief shake of her shoulder.) “Where’s my brave little sister?”

“...here...”

“*Who’s* my brave little sister?”

“...I am...”

(Absent pat.) “So go talk to her. And don’t take all day about it—this is supposed to be spring vacation. If they do move to Florida, we can go visit them; remind her of that.”

Trudge to the sewing room on brave little wobble-feet. Knock three times, like the song said: therein lies the charm.

“Gran?”

“Good morning, Victoria.”

There in her customary chair, needle and thread in hand, tending to the mending.

“Are—are you okay, Gran?”

“I would say *well*, Miss—not ‘okay.’ Come sit here by me, and drape thett sweater over your sssoulders if you feel a tzill.”

“A tzill?”

“Why else would you tremble? Emm I so scary an old lady?”

Vicki tried to think calming thoughts. “Um... does Dime really want to move to Florida?”

“Your grenndfather *thinks* thett’s what he wants. It is a pleasant place to visit—in the winter—with lovely flowers we kennot grow here. But he does not need to see them all the year round.”

“So... will you talk him out of it?”

“Oh, he *will* go—there is no question about thett. His mind is made up, and there will be no tzanging it. Never once, not since I first knew him, when he won me.”

Confused image of a raffle prize. “He what?”

“Won me. Why, I do not know. Not then—not now. I was thirty, and not a beauty. Not like Raytzzel, my sister. Espesssily when she denned.”

(Needle, thread, mending set aside.)

“How I wisss you could’ve seen her, Victoria—like a bird ssee could fly. You, I think, may do the same someday; already you do a little. I watz you on the stage, and sometimes see Raytzzel when ssee was young.”

They sat quietly awhile, watching feather-lightness scarcely touch the ground.

“When... when was the last time you saw her for real?”

(Needle and thread back in hand; buttons back on shirt.)

“Forty years. My femmily said: ‘If you marry this Galitzer, you are dead to us.’ I did not believe it. He hedd won me, so—! I did marry him. Waited awhile, then wrote letters. All returned unopened, so—! I wrote no more. Heard no more. Did not essk.”

“Um... what’s a Galitzer, Gran?”

“Old country foolisssness. ‘Litvak’ nonsense. Many things they could hev said against your grenndfather, but *that* was what they tzose? Absurd.”

(One shirt finished; another taken up.)

“What thett menn does to his buttons... Your mother came in just now, a little girl again: ‘Dedd called me ‘Funnyface.’ When *I* was a girl, Raytzzel was ‘the pretty one’—I, ‘the smart one.’ Then when I hedd daughters, I said this would not heppen to mine. But no use telling your grenndfather thett: to him your mother is always ‘the smart one’—

Frenntztesca, ‘the pretty one.’” (Heavy sigh.)

“‘N’ now it’s me ‘n’ Tricia,” Vicki said forlornly. “‘Cept she’s the smart *and* pretty one.”

Fierce turn upon her then, with eyes like speeding bullets.

“Never believe thett, Miss! Never let me hear you say those words again. You are too smart a girl, Victoria, to think sutz things.”

Wan wobble-smile from Victoria. “What about too pretty?...”

Enfolded in her grandmother’s arms. Or arm, till the needle and thread and button and shirt were discarded; then arms.

Not too. Just right.

I don't want you to go!

Whatever happens, I will not. When you are a grown-up lady, and have worries or problems or doubts, tell yourself that "Gran can see what I see, and hear what I hear." And then you will know what to do.

I will. I promise.

As do I, my darling.

After awhile they sat apart, and made use of handkerchiefs from Gran's ample supply.

(Another sigh.) "I suppose we must start to think about pecking."

Renewed confusion. "Peck—packing? You mean to move? Are you sure, Gran?"

"Now I emm. We all need to cry a little from time to time. It clears the head like rain does the air."

"Oh... Tricia said I should remind you we can come visit you, in Florida."

"Mmm. Your sister Patrissa *is* a smart girl. But *you* are a *good* girl, Victoria."

They looked slowly round the sewing room.

"I believe I heard your grenndfather offer to go sssopping for boxes. Let us see how many we kenn make him buy! If I must go to Fiddler Key, I intend to leave nothing behind. Nothing," she reiterated, her starry black eyes resting upon Vicki.

*

A couple of Passovers later, Diamond Joel brought Ruth Sennmann Schmelz back from Florida to The City, and buried her in Rosehill on a springlike day.

11

The Less You Spend

“Everybody say *success*,” Ozzie instructed his wife and children, lined up behind the ribbon marking the change from Diamond Joel’s Auto Sales to Volester Motors. “*Success!*” went everybody (Goofus drawing out the first syllable) and FLASH went Charlie Marley’s camera as Felicia snipped the ribbon. That photo, blown up and hung on the Showroom wall, made Felicia shake her head for years, while Tricia always said: “I bet I could still fit into those hot pants.”

Everybody felt successful in the family’s new car, a Cadillac Eldorado that looked sparkly-tan but was in fact Almond Firemist. It had cruise control, climate control, power door locks, and best of all an 8-track tape player. Tricia regarded this dream-mobile as her own thirteenth birthday present (six weeks early) and was jealous when Ozzie took it anywhere without her.

“You ought to start teaching me to drive the Caddy *now*—then I’ll be an expert when I get my license.”

“I expect it’ll still be waiting for you in a couple more years, Princess.”

“But ANYTHING might happen to it by then! Promise you’ll be sooooo careful, Daddy—don’t let it get scratched or dinged or pooped on!”

“I promise you can supervise the boys in Service if they have to depoopify it.”

“Now Daddy, this is *serious*—”

Which Ozzie must have taken to heart, because he looked and sounded serious for the rest of that summer. Even at home he’d act preoccupied, hunched with Felicia over a

briefcase full of papers, often with the phone pressed to an ear. Which displeased Tricia (since Brian or Randy or who knew who else might be trying to call) but she was canny enough to keep Vicki and Goofus quiet at such times. Once or twice she even took them down to the corner grocery and treated them to ice cream, singing show tunes there and back:

Could it be? Yes it could! Sumpten's coming, sumpten good...

And sumpten arrived in the form of a franchise. Volester Motors was going to start selling Hondas—not motorcycles, but new subcompact cars.

“Get changed, kiddies, ‘cause we are heading out to celebrate! You can order anything you please!”

(Well, they could always use another Dove bar.)

Down on Fiddler Key, Diamond Joel sang no songs about this deal. He considered Japanese automobiles to be cheap teakettles powered by Erector Set whirligigs. But his 48% of the Lot was matched by Ozzie and Felicia’s 48%, and outvoted by Fritz and Doug’s 4%. Fritz had taken no interest in the Lot for the past two decades, ever since her father swore he’d never hire another handsome young mechanic. But Gross Uncle Doug, won over by Ozzie’s arguments, offered to buy some of the Schmelzes’s share and so “lighten their risk.”

“Nothing doing,” said Dime. “Go on then, peddle your Nip tin cans. Just be sure you unload ‘em by the dozen—and never let yourself be undersold!”

Louder objections came from PopPop and Uncle Ted. If Ozzie wanted to sell new subcompacts, what the hell was wrong with GM’s Vega? Engine durability and fender corrosion, Ozzie retorted. As for other domestics, the Pinto had problems with suspension and brakes, while the Gremlin was nothing more than a chopped-down Hornet. And all of them lacked the Honda’s chief selling point: *fuel efficiency*.

“Bull!” went Uncle Ted, so loudly everyone in the apartment could hear him over the phone. “It’s un-American is what it is! You’re taking the food out of your nieces’s and nephews’s mouths!”

“Bull yourself, Ted!” went Uncle Jerry on Ozzie’s kitchen extension. Making a rare visit to the mainland, he was the youngest of the brothers and also the tallest and thinnest. “Beanpole Volester” they’d called him growing up; but he took none of their guff then and

even less now. For the past year he'd been shipping natural gas from Alaska to Tokyo, and could testify firsthand how hard the Japanese were pushing to reduce pollution—such as by demanding high quality in their economy cars. “And you know what that means, Teddy boy? Honda's in competition with Datsun and Toyota—*not* Detroit! Like Iacocca says, they're gonna eat you alive!”

(Whereupon the three-brother conversation got even louder and full of sailor's language.)

A couple days later Ozzie bounded upstairs to herd his household down to the alley and there introduce them to his very first Honda 600 Coupe.

“You didn't trade in my Caddy for *that*, did you??” Tricia gasped.

“No, Princess, it's safe at the Lot. I brought this home to show you what we're gonna be selling, and give you all a test spin.”

“Not all at once you're not,” said Uncle Jerry. “No way can you squeeze more'n two adults in that dinghy.”

It was the cutest little car, thought Vicki; you could almost tuck it inside the Eldorado's trunk. To Goofus it looked like a life-size version of his many Matchbox vehicles, and he scrambled up on the hood to peer hungrily through the windshield.

“Christopher, get down from there!” Felicia ordered. “Your father can't sell it if you go and wreck it!”

“Don't you worry about that,” said Ozzie, smacking the top with an open palm. “This baby's *durable*.”

“Long as you don't play chicken with a Lincoln Continental,” said Uncle Jerry.

“Nossir, the Honda Coupe handles like a sports car—its front-wheel drive'll pull you round a corner lickety-darn-split. C'mon, lemme show you what it can do.”

“I wanna sit on the front-wheel drive!” went Goofus.

“I'll wait till you take it back to pick up the Caddy,” said Tricia. “Right now I'll get dinner ready while the rest of you have your spin. Uncle Jerry can stay and help me.”

“Sure thing,” said Jerry. “There's a pizza parlor in this neighborhood, right?”

Ozzie grumbled about spoilsport naysayers, while Felicia found the Coupe's back seat too cramped for her liking and so commandeered shotgun.

“I could sit on your lap,” Goof counteroffered.

“Why, just last week I tried to put you on my lap and you said ‘Big boys don’t do that!’”

“I was *wrong*, Mommy! I’m zackly right for that!”

“You can sit in front when Daddy drives Tricia to the Lot,” Vicki suggested. “She’ll sit in back and pretend this is a taxicab.”

“An’ I’ll be her bodyguard!” Goofus enthused, brandishing an imaginary pistol.

Ozzie started the Honda, whisked them up through the alley and lickety-darn-split onto Yew.

“My, this *is* sporty,” said Felicia.

“Toldja!” Ozzie smiled, and began the spiel he’d be using on prospects. “Good basic car... perfect for commuting in The City... finds parking spots you didn’t know existed... won’t let you down on the Expressway... up to forty miles per gallon on regular gas... meets or exceeds all federal safety standards... available in orange, yellow, blue, and olive green... gotta expect that in a car this size—”

(As they hit a potholey stretch of Bohnsetter Avenue, and the Coupe pitched up and down like a dinghy on the Lake.)

“This is the best toy *ever!!*” Goofus shouted. “When do *I* get to drive it??”

*

Time ticked on. Nowadays it was Vicki the fourth-grader who had to escort Goofus to Morning Kindergarten. Actually it was Vicki and Hayley Tamworth, happily willing to hold Goof’s hand—and tightly, too: they dared not let him loose for a single second en route.

One day Hayley had to stay home with tummyache, so Vicki made Goofus wash his hands under her supervision just before they left. Even then he managed to exude a layer of mucilage that contaminated Vicki’s pure clean fingers all the way to Sharp Boulevard. There Kris Rawberry was waiting at her usual post by the stoplight, but even she who loved barnyards declined more than a brief touch of Goof’s dooky duke.

“From now on we’ll hold his *sleeves*,” she told Vicki.

Goofus wasn’t the only little kid they had to look after that year. Fourth-graders were the unofficial bosses of the whole second floor, expected to Set a Good Example and so

forth; and their classroom's being at the other end of school from kindergarten seemed to illustrate the long road they'd traveled to reach this plateau.

"Illustrate" was a favorite word of their teacher, Miss Durbin, who also made frequent use of "questionable" and "unsatisfactory." She received the news of Hayley's tummyache with all the skepticism shown toward fulsome courtiers by Glenda Jackson as *Elizabeth R*.

Miss Durbin was quite young and quite tall and quite striking and extremely strict. Her students got loaded up with homework every night; each was called on in class at least once a day; illustrated explanations *might* be deemed adequate, but excuses were always questionable and vagueness absolutely unsatisfactory.

For pupils used to Miss Steinfeldt's indulgence and Mrs. Kling's doddering, this was a plunge into academic boot camp. Some preferred such a regimen: Melissa Chiese and Sarah-Jill Shapiro both thrived on rigor, and chose front-row-center desks directly in front of Miss Durbin's to thrive that much more.

Their classroom was long and narrow, with desks four across. When told the first day to "Take a seat NOISELESSLY, please," the Peaches ranged themselves side by side behind Sarah-Jill, and the Blue Meanies did likewise behind Melissa. Two boys occupied the front row corners: Wernie Ball on the left, nearest the door and escape; and Swede Swedebach on the right by the flag, which meant he had to lead the Pledge of Allegiance more often than not. (Called "Harold" by Miss Durbin, Swede Swedebach was an importee from Minnesota, who didn't seem to enjoy City life or being asked "How's your Badasssss Song?" every day.)

Vicki, in a reversal of last year's situation, found herself seated right behind Wernie Ball. Kris and Hayley had NOISELESSLY offered to swap desks, but Vicki decided it was marginally better to sit in the one place Wernie couldn't peek at without breaking his neck. (Whenever new worksheets were handed out, though, Vicki would take hers from the middle of the stack to minimize contact with Wernie's creepy-crawly thumbprints.)

Jimmy Maxwell surprised everyone by grabbing a third-row seat between Brenda and Stephanie. It was highly unusual for him to sit that far forward, but Jimmy claimed he'd fallen in love with Miss Durbin and couldn't admire her properly from any further back. While she paced up and down beside the blackboard, tapping one hand with a javelin-length

pointer (that awoke knuckle-whacking fears in Vicki's memory), Jimmy would heave an admiring series of Sir Walter Raleigh sighs.

"That will do, James," Miss Durbin would say, gaveling her desktop with the javelin if anybody snorted.

That autumn passed in a welter of punctuation, sentence structure, fractions and decimals, voyages of the explorers, ecology and recycling and photosomethingsis: all of which had to be learned at once.

Then came a January morning when Hayley stayed home with the sniffles. Vicki and Kris lugged Goofus to school (by his sleeves, though everyone wore mittens), deposited him in kindergarten and went down the corridor to their own room, where an upheaval of more than sighs was going on. Principal Overland stood there, hands gripping lapels as if he were about to address an Assembly. With him was Mr. Coakley the custodian, holding a spare desk and chair—both dilapidated even by Reulbach standards. And by their side lolled a person at whom the entire class stared openmouthed.

She was simply the most beautiful girl-their-own-age any of them had ever beheld, outside of TV or a movie screen. A blonde gypsy infanta in paisley peasant blouse and triple-tiered skirt, who gazed into the distance through half-open eyes.

"A new student for you," Mr. Overland intoned. "This is Nina Gersh."

"I see," said Miss Durbin, giving Old Overalls a queenly off-with-your-head smile. "Welcome, Nina. I'm not certain where we can put you—"

"Don't forget Hayley's only sick for *today*," went Brenda Pomerantz, waving one hand for clearance while laying the other protectively on Hayl's vacant desk.

"Thank you, Brenda, I *am* aware of that," said Miss Durbin. "Well, Mr. Coakley, perhaps you could fit an extra desk into that far corner—"

Jimmy Maxwell surged to his feet. "She can have *my* desk, Miss Durbin! I'll take the 'new' one—it's not near good enough for a girl to sit at."

"Not *nearly* good enough—here now, James! What do you think you're doing??"

Seizing the not-near-good-enough desk and thrusting it into a nonexistent space between his old one and Billy Goldfarb's. "Spread out, ya morons!" Jimmy advised those

seated behind him, forcing Billy and Lefty and Keith and Ordinary Mark to all shift backward with many scrapes and skreeks.

“You boys, lift up them desks when you move ‘em,” admonished Mr. Coakley.

Miss Durbin raised the javelin, but Mr. Overland stayed her hand. “Quite understandable,” he remarked leniently. “They’re getting to be *that age*, you know.”

He smiled at Nina Gersh; Mr. Coakley smiled at Nina Gersh; Billy and Lefty and Keith and Ordinary Mark smiled at Nina Gersh. Jimmy was wreathed in Nina-directed smiles as he scooped everything out of his ex-desk into the dilapidated one (whose lid came right off its hinges) and gallantly held his ex-chair for Nina as she sat. For which he was rewarded by a languid gypsy infanta smile that made all the male smiles redouble.

Every female eye in the room observed this disbelievingly.

“*Thank* you Mr. Overland, Mr. Coakley,” went Miss Durbin. “James Maxwell, since you’re being so helpful today, you may remain indoors during recess and put *all* our furniture in proper order. Nina, I would like you to stay in also—”

(NOISELESS “OoooOOOOooooh” from the class.)

“—*so that*,” their teacher frowned, “I can bring you up to date on where we are in every subject. And now, IF we may, let us proceed with our regular timetable. Harold, please lead us in the Pledge of Allegiance.”

(Disgruntled loss-of-smile by Swede Swedebach.)

When the recess bell rang, the girls took their time putting on coats and caps and scarves, giving Nina long loitering backward glances—before dashing on down to the wintry playground, heedless of Setting a Good Example for littler kids. Outside they all huddled together for once, like penguins adrift on an ice floe:

That hair is BLEACHED—and lookit the way she’s dressed!—yeah, flaunting herself like that—aw what’re you talking about?—you saw her! she’s acting like a slut!—like a WHAT?—don’t tell me you don’t know what a “slut” is—well go ahead and EXPLAIN it to us, Melissa—oh look it up in the dictionary if you’re so innocent—I bet you can’t even BE a slut at our age—you can sure ACT like one, though—that’s right! nobody talk to Nina, not ever!—aw c’mon, give her a chance!—yeah, she might turn out to be really nice—let’s see who she

sits with at lunch, and what she eats—and how she eats it: my mom says you can tell all about a girl by her table manners—oh that is so STEW-PID—you’re the one who’s STUPID, April—hey, you shut up!—no, YOU shut up!—

Breaths smoking as the bell went C-L-A-N-G.

Back to class for science hour. Open your book to page 140; learn more about the solar system. Between Mars and Jupiter is a belt of asteroids...

And between Brenda and Stephanie now sat Nina Gersh. At whom Brenda and Stephanie’s eyes were being strained sideways, while her own stayed half-shut. Which absolutely guaranteed Miss Durbin would keep calling on her, first day or not:

“What do we find between the planets Jupiter and Mars, Nina?”

“Belt.”

“A belt of *what*, please?”

“Rocks.”

“And what are those rocks *called*?”

Shrug from Nina. Hands flung up and flailed around by Sarah-Jill and Melissa—and also Stephanie Lipperman, who triggered a storm of mirth and javelin-raps with her enthusiastic “ASSTeroids!”

“Not quite so illustrative, please,” said Miss Durbin.

Come lunchtime Nina was late getting to the cafeteria, having to take some forms to the office first; so she was still at Mrs. Frank’s steam counter while her new classmates assumed battle stations. At stake was which table Nina picked to sit at, and whether its occupants would snub her approach.

For the Blue Meanies that should’ve been automatic, but they’d never spurned anyone with Nina Gersh’s allure, and suppose a rebuff were to backfire? As for the Peaches, they knew Hayley would want them to befriend a put-upon newcomer; but Hayl was absent and suppose this newcomer *did* turn out to be a ten-year-old slut?

Four Peaches and four Blue Meanies watched Nina head their way with a tray of meatloaf, green beans and Jell-O. All eight saw Jimmy’s elbow jab Billy Goldfarb’s ribs—then Jimmy’s hand slide inside Jimmy’s shirtfront and make it palpitate like a beating heart—then Jimmy stand and bow and say, “We saved ya a stool, Nina!”

(Snortles from every guy at that table.)

“Kay,” said Nina.

Taking the proffered stool without the slightest hesitation, and sending shockwaves across the cafeteria.

“She’s *sitting* with them!” Vicki hissed. “She’s sitting with *boys* and eating LUNCH with them!”

The boys seemed equally flabbergasted. None more so than Jimmy himself, who flopped down and tried to put a sandwich into his shirt instead of his mouth.

“Oh. That. Does it,” pronounced Melissa Chiese. “She’s a slut for sure!”

“I *always* miss all the good stuff,” Hayley sniffled that afternoon when Vicki delivered a blow-by-blow recap of the day’s events, along with the day’s homework assignments.

*

That same month, Felicia started going to the Lot with Ozzie every morning. At midday she would pick up Goofus from school, feed him and drop him off at daycare. Too much havoc got wreaked when he spent afternoons at the Lot; and things there were in enough disarray as it was.

The Honda franchise had brought Volester Motors not only Coupes and Sedans but also a ton of paperwork. Felicia helped with the bills of lading and customs triplicates and import tax documents, while Ozzie stood at the Showroom window staring out at the Longest Street in The City if not the world.

Yes, the new Hondas were moving.

No, not at the rate they’d hoped for by now.

Still, every person who came by to check them out was a potential future buyer.

Even when, for the moment, they laughed and left or asked about used Buicks.

If only they’d give the Hondas a chance—take that test drive—see how the little cars *performed*—Ozzie knew sales would improve. They HAD to: this was the wave of the future, and the Volesters were going to ride it like a surfin’ safari.

But, for the moment, answer the phone please and take another message if it’s from Dime or PopPop or Uncle Ted.

Vicki was also instructed to help out more with 3W's housework. Hayley and Mrs. Tamworth chipped in, and Tricia provided supervision; but the best assistance came from Tricia's new best friend at Pfiester High School, Cynthia Dollfuss.

She had an elastic clown-face like Jimmy Maxwell's, though hers (being a teenage girl's) was much more winsome. Cynthia could make its expression look so lost or hurt you wanted to rush over and comfort her—but then, in an instant, she'd switch to gotcha! glee. And start to giggle, giving way to a joyous horselaugh followed by “Yeah!... *yeah!*” and, usually, clapping. (Go see any comedy movie in Pfiester Park, and you'd know if Cynthia Dollfuss was in the audience.)

She won Vicki and Hayley's hearts by saying “Aw, let ‘em stay” whenever Tricia tried to evict them from 3W's bedroom or living room or kitchen. Hayley idolized Cynthia for admitting to a similar struggle with weight and appetite, confiding: “You know the good thing about being kinda plump, Hayl? You're gonna have boobies before any of your friends! Hee hee *hee hee* HAW HAW HAW!! Yeah!... *y-e-a-h!*” (Clap clap clap.)

She and Kris Rawberry were already friends-in-law, since Cynthia's big sister Jennifer was best-buddy teammates with Kris's sister Kate. Whenever Cynthia attended their games at Pfiester High, she'd replace her *yeahs!* with *yays!* that could be heard all over the gym or fieldhouse.

Despite wearing precocious C-cups at age fourteen, Cynthia was still devoutly wedded to the world of make-believe. “I'm bored with these Freshman Speech topics,” she told Tricia one day. “Let's pretend me ‘n’ you are filming a commercial for your dad's car lot! I'll be you ‘n’ you be your dad!”

Tricia firmly reversed those roles, but took Cynthia's idea and ran with it. In a twinkling they had a script and props and four folding chairs arranged to mock-up a Honda, plus a semi-reluctant audience of Ozzie and Felicia (“We don't really have time for this right now”) plus Goofus and Vicki and Hayley and her parents.

TRICIA

Daddy, is it true that the less you spend on a car, the more you can spend on other things?

CYNTHIA AS OZZIE

[with all his inflections and mannerisms down pat]

It sure is, Princess! Here at Volester Motors, we have the new Honda Coupe—it gets up to 40 miles a gallon and 75 miles an hour, while costing *you* under \$1700!

TRICIA

That *saves* a lot of money and *makes* a lot of sense! What about the Honda Sedan, Daddy?

CYNTHIA AS OZZIE

It's the best car bargain today, Princess—with fuel efficiency that sends gas station attendants running for cover! You'll love the Honda Sedan, and your wallet will, too!

TRICIA

[climbing into the mock-up and smiling at the “camera”]

I can't *wait* to get my license! Everyone who's *got* one, come see what we have waiting for you at Volester Motors!

Cynthia sang the Lot's address with a jaunty butter-and-egg grin on her winsome kisser, and the actresses bob-curtisied to somewhat stunned applause.

“Careful, honey,” said Harry Tamworth. “You don't want your face to freeze like that!”

“Aw, Cinderelly'd just *laugh* my face off!” said Ozzie, hugging his mimic with one arm and Tricia with the other. He himself looked much more like himself than he had for weeks. “Girls, that was pretty near good enough to be a real commercial.”

“Which is why I called Charlie Marley,” Tricia informed him. “He says you and I can tape it next Saturday.”

“Now whoa whoa whoa, let's hold our horses here—”

“Aw *please*, Mr. V,” coaxed Cynthia, laying a lost/hurt head on Ozzie's shoulder. “We'll get school credit and Trish'll get screen credit, and I can coach you how to act like

me acting like you till nobody'll know the difference!"

"Yeah, Daddy," Tricia cajoled, appropriating the other shoulder. "We want to move the merchandise, don't we? And not get any more postcards from Uncle Ted?"

(One had arrived from Tempest Lake that day, with a photo of a Volkswagen on one side and *Wanna try these next?* on the other.)

"Help! They're double-teaming me, Fel!" said Ozzie.

"Well," Felicia mused, "we'd have to go over that script with a blue pencil. And *I'd* have the final say on what you'd wear, Blondie. I'm telling you right now it won't be hot pants."

"Oh for heaven's sake, Mother! Nobody wears those anymore."

Instead, Tricia donned a "sizzle dress" (essentially a short tunic buttoned down *over* hot pants) and her first pair of platform shoes, bought for the occasion though scarcely visible onscreen.

Ozzie, now playing himself, urged Cynthia to still make an appearance. "Go stand next to Tricia, honey, and give us that big smile."

"Nahhhh, nahhhh," she blushed.

"You *know* she'll crack up the minute we start," said Tricia. Which caused Cynthia to jump the gun, guffawing at the mere thought of doing so. She finally ran and hid in the Showroom till taping was finished.

"We're not putting this on the air without Cynthia," Ozzie insisted.

"She can sing our address at the end," Tricia proposed, and Cynthia (on the seventh take) came through like a voiceover trouper. "*Y-e-a-h!*"

In March the first Daddy & Princess commercial made its TV debut; and by the end of April, Volester Motors could boast sales of six new Coupes and seven Sedans, both monthly records. Tricia was convinced she had "rescued the Lot," and began wearing celebrity sunglasses at all times—propped up on her forehead, lest she not be recognized.

*

Meanwhile Nina Gersh maintained her fourth-grade celebrity status. With no particular effort she fascinated boys who, till then, had found girls only worthy of grossing out. To Miss Durbin's questions she gave monosyllabic replies, making Eileen Agnew's

mmmm *Idunnos* sound loquacious; yet enough were correct to keep Nina gliding along.

But in Melissa Chiese's glacial eyes she was an unending irritant. Any other girl would respond to Blue Meanie treatment with tears or rage or tummyaches or *something* understandable; yet Nina Gersh just blinked already-half-shut lids and regarded you with an eloquent "?"

"She's an AIRHEAD," Melissa decided. "All that bleach must've seeped through to her brain! She doesn't belong with us."

Each of Miss Durbin's girls was told to sign a sheet of paper that Melissa called a petition, requesting that Nina be transferred to Mrs. Sheckard's dim-and-disruptive class. "She'll feel more at home over there, with Nancy and Gretchen and Larry Hersenspoel—her sort of people."

"Turn that thing in and you might end up over there yourself," warned Brenda.

"I know this is too complicated for you to understand, POOCHIE, but we're trying to do Nina a *favor*."

"What, by calling her 'Nina the Ninny' behind her back? Don't think Miss Durbin won't hear about that! She's likely to say you're acting 'unsatisfactory.'"

"I tell you what," Kris interjected. "Let's cross out Nina's name and write in Dunk Gunderson's!"

"Yeah!" said Brenda. "We'd be happy to transfer *him* to Mrs. Sheckard—he's belonged with that gang since he first came here! C'mon, gimme a pen—"

Huff went Melissa as she flounced away; but nothing more was heard concerning petitions.

Brenda was rewarded for this good deed a week later when she discovered Nina gliding alongside her in the Jewish Community Center pool.

"Hey, Nina! (Glub.) It's me, Brenda from school!"

"Hi," went Nina.

"So you like to swim, hunh?"

"Sure."

"So do I, it's real good exercise. How's your diving?"

“?”

“Um, y’know—like jumping in, off the board?”

“Oh,” went Nina. “S’fine.” She smiled and paddled off, leaving Brenda to ponder whether Melissa might not be right about bleach-seepage.

The other Peaches had other inquiries:

“What kind of swimsuit d’she have on??”

“‘N’ how’d she look in it??”

“D’she wear a bathing cap??”

“Oh, for the luvva—” went Brenda. “She had on a green suit ‘n’ cap ‘n’ looked like a chick! *Sheesh*, you guys!”

After some debate the Peaches agreed to cultivate Nina’s acquaintance. As Vicki said, it would be very wrong to dismiss anyone as an airhead for being blonde and gorgeous—just look at Tricia the Brilliant Lot-Rescuer.

“Yes, but your sister doesn’t sleepwalk through school,” said Sarah-Jill, who might’ve signed the transfer petition had anyone but Melissa circulated it.

Hayley, of course, felt otherwise. “C’mon, I bet she’s only *shy*. It must be awful having boys stare at you all the time when you’re only *ten*. No wonder Nina hardly ever says anything.”

“Besides,” said pragmatic Kris, “think how we’ll rub those Blue Meanie noses in it by making her one of us! *Let* her keep her mouth shut, we’ll do all the talking. Nina can just sit there and go—”

Vivid demonstration of the Cynthia Dollfuss Method, as Kris transformed from freckly imp to Sleepy-Looking Beauty.

“Gee!” went Vicki. “Keep doing that and we won’t *need* Nina Gersh.”

“Aw, that’s sweet,” said Kris.

“We oughta make friends with her ‘cause we want her to be our *friend*,” Hayley murmured.

“Well that too,” said Kris. “But don’t forget—next fall we move up to the third floor, with *teenagers*. If Nina’s our friend, it’ll make *us* look cool when we get up there!”

Privately Vicki thought it'd make the rest of them look like pooches. Still: better to have a girl like that on your team instead of against you. So the Peaches forged ahead with Operation Win-a-Nina, but their cordial overtures garnered only smiles and nods and blinks. Nina still dined every day with the boys, who continued showing off as Tom Sawyer did to Becky Thatcher, till it made you want to lose your own lunch.

Sarah-Jill (impatient now as well as dubious) recommended that Brenda press her individual advantage with Nina at the JCC pool, "away from the rest of us."

"What can she do there that we can't do here?" asked Hayley.

"Swim, for one thing," said Brenda, and over the next couple of weeks reported great progress being made. She'd taught Nina how to do an inward dive tuck. She and Nina'd begun sitting together in Hebrew class at Temple Beth Mordecai. Wait and see: before the other Peaches knew it, they would be just like (crossed fingers) *that*.

"You two sit together in *our* class and she doesn't act like you're just like *that*."

"Don't WORRY," said Brenda. "Everything's going smooth as a baby's bottom."

That simile put the Peaches in stitches, and Brenda kept them there by describing Stephanie Lipperman's attempts to play spy at both Center and Temple.

"Secret Agent Stuff! Her head keeps peeking around things or popping up behind things. And if she stretches her ears any harder to overhear us, they're gonna be Dumbo-sized and flap her away like the Flying Nun."

"In Hebrew school?"

"Well, let her try," said Brenda. "*We're* gonna sign this draft pick, and there's nothing *she* can do to skunk the deal!"

Words that quivered in the springlike air.

Stephanie came to school the very next day with hard-stretched ears hidden by a spiffy new shag cut—courtesy, she casually reported, of Muriel (Mrs. Seymour) Gersh.

"Of course that's Nina's mother. She has this practically private salon on Pockhardt Avenue."

("She's a hairdresser in a beauty parlor," Brenda growled. "I'da gone there myself if I'da wanted to look like the Brady Bunch's mom.")

Miss Durbin marched through the morning announcements, javelin jabbing here and there to illustrate this and that. Finally she jabbed it at Stephanie, who came to the front of the room with a sheaf of papers and took on the teacher's imperious tone.

"Boys and girls" [splutter from Jimmy Maxwell] "our classmate Nina Gersh is gonna be competing next month in the Little Miss North Side pageant! As you *may* know already, she's done this sort of thing many times and won a whole shelf full of trophies. Show 'em one, Nina."

"Kay," said Nina, holding a small loving cup aloft for all to see.

"And that's for winning which contest?"

"First alternate, Miss La Petite, when I was six."

New shockwave: never had Nina strung so many syllables together in one sentence.

"Class! Class!" Stephanie scolded. "Now then! I'm managing a sponsorship drive for Nina, and have these forms (pass them down, please, everybody take one) to ask your parents to be her patrons, or buy an ad in the official Little Miss North Side program. Half of all the purse seeds will go to deprave Nina's expenses—"

"*Proceeds*," Miss Durbin emended, "to *defray* Nina's expenses—"

"—and there's gonna be plenty, too. Mrs. Gersh says 'Never cut corners at a pageant,' so Nina's gonna need a new party dress and sportswear and a talent coach—"

"THANK you, Stephanie, I'm sure we all wish Nina the best of luck," said Miss Durbin. Her Elizabethan frown swept the room to quell any note-passing or comment-whispering, but Vicki saw the back of Melissa's head fulminate thunderbolts. As well it might, given how wickedly-witchedly Stephanie had just rained on her parade.

Not to mention Brenda Pomerantz's. Vicki swiveled catty-corner and found Brenda radiating atomic mutancy at Nina, who paid her not a smidge of attention. And barely a smidge-in-passing to Wernie Ball, whose spindly neck was craned to peer over Kris's head and so catch a glimpse of Little Miss Just-Like-*That*.

SHEESH!

The only Peach who made an effort to drum up pageant patronage was Hayley, and her only serious donor was the equally goodhearted Cynthia Dollfuss. Who told Tricia, "We *gotta* go see this! There's a category for girls our age that offers big fat moolah-scholarships

we can check out! You could enter next year, Trish, or wait till you're seventeen and hit it full blast."

That was sufficient incentive for the Celebrity Princess of Volester Motors. She, her sunglasses, and Cynthia took Vicki, Hayley, and Kris to a bona fide ballroom at the Scrimpton Inn hotel, which would've had a splendid view of the Lake if it were twenty stories taller, with more thoroughly washed windows. In fact every surface in the ballroom seemed to have a tacky patina to it, not unlike Goof's bare hands.

"Remind me not to have our Junior Prom here," Tricia told Cynthia.

Witnessing the Little Miss North Side finals was quite enough. Muriel (Mrs. Seymour) Gersh had, indeed, cut no corners in prepping Nina's entry. Her party dress was a crushed velvet evening gown; her blonde coif was styled into a superchignon; and her beautiful face was adorned with every Studio Girl product in the Helene Curtis catalog. If only the pageant judges had been deaf, they would've given Nina the tiara without hesitation. However, they could and did hear as she belted out the song "Being Alive," at a considerable distance from being on key:

Summmbuddeeee sit in my CHAIR, and ruin my SLEEP, and make me uh-WHERE??

(Better stop payment on the talent coach's check.)

In stark contrast was a rival contestant called Prudence, like the kid on *Nanny and the Professor*. She wore a plain white leotard and plain white tights, and did an interpretive gymnastic dance while "One Less Bell to Answer" played over the P-A system. As Tricia said afterward, that should've been godawful. Yet Prudence made you believe there *was* no more laughter, no more love, since somebody told her goodbye. And how could anyone leave Prudence? So effortless were her moves, so otherworldly her dance, she glimmered like an elf-maid seen by moonlight—on an ordinary rubber mat in the Scrimpton Inn's slightly tacky ballroom.

Vicki, Hayley and Kris clutched each other during this performance. They *yaaaay'd* even more loudly than Cynthia, and led the acclamation when Prudence was crowned Little Miss North Side. Nina Gersh came in second runner-up, with half-closed eyes burning laser-holes into Prudence's scalp as the tiara descended upon it.

“Well,” said Kris, “I don’t know if Nina’s an airhead or even a slut. But I bet you she’ll be a Blue Meanie from now on.”

“That is so sad,” sighed Vicki. “And I used to think she might be really nice.”

“I wish I could always miss all the sad stuff,” mourned Hayley.

12

Creepy-Crawly

Death came to Walrock twice that summer. First to go was Beany Boy the Mighty Beagle, aged seventy in dog-time but only ten by the people-clock. Which disturbed Vicki and her friends (who'd been born the same year as Beany Boy) and caused Kris to lavish tearful caresses on her own dog Ness (who wasn't getting any younger, or less droolish).

A memorial service was held in the Walrock alley. The girls gathered round Junior Hull to console him and quiet his sobs so Mr. Frank's eulogy could be heard:

"When da good Lordt whistles, ya gahda hafta go over by dair. Troo rain or snow or sleet or hail, right uptada endada line. Dat" [*choke*] "dat was our little Beany. No gloomada night could stay *him* from compleeeetin his appointed rounds!"

(Amen. Let his Mighty Beagleness endureth forever.)

Not so the lifespan of old Mrs. LoCascio, which sputtered to a close after so many false endings that everyone was skeptical she'd finished the job. She had, though, Bad and Good Mrs. Lo alike; and got deposited beside her long-gone macaroni-maker husband.

The Franks ended up inheriting all her birds. (The ones in cages, at least; Junior had to shoo the others out the window.) Mrs. Frank, bereaved of Beany Boy, came out of mourning as she tended to Luigi the ageless Amazon parrot; and before summer vacation was over, she had him croaking *Wanna sahsidge sammitch?*

Apartment 1W got a fresh lick of paint and a new pair of tenants as the Grusza sisters moved downstairs. Candice and Corliss had graduated from high school and been hired by Braniff as airline stewardesses, so they (like the birds they replaced) flew in and out and

were gone for days at a stretch. Their grandmother, left on her lonesome, invited a brother-in-law's widow to share 2E and divvy up its piano lessons. And maintain its twinniness, despite the two ladies only being related by marriage into the Partridge family (as it were) and so having no business looking like grown-old Gruszas. Which was especially eerie since you never quite saw both of them at once.

Hayley, who'd quailed at auditioning for the Fischel Ballet Academy, proved to be happily nimblefingered at the piano—until the Mrs. Partridge seated with her on the bench opened her mouth to say something, and the words came from the *other* Mrs. Partridge out in the kitchen.

"Well... maybe they're throwing their voices," Sarah-Jill suggested. "So they can teach ventriloquism too."

"All I know is it scares me," said Hayley. "Yesterday I was trying to practice 'Für Elise,' and I got so spooked it turned into 'I've Been Working on the Railroad!' 'Cause the one that *wasn't* there told me to concentrate, while the one that *was* there's lips moved! And how COULD I concentrate, after a thing like that??"

*

How could anyone not feel spooked when the new school year began? Life was intimidating up on Reulbach's third floor. Enter the washroom and find it dominated by eighth-grade girls with bulging chests, who not only hogged the sinks and mirrors while slapping on cosmetics, but casually flicked lighters and ignited cigarettes right there in front of you.

The Blue Meanies (or BMs, as Brenda bluntly abbreviated them) took this as a sign it was time to abandon childhood. No more playing with dolls, wearing little-girl outfits, watching Saturday morning cartoons—all were now babyish, fit only for the second floor, to be strictly eschewed from now on.

The Peaches could see logic in some of this. Their mothers, however, were unanimously opposed to "getting too big for your britches," and seldom bankrolled the purchase of anything remotely mature. (Unlike BM moms, who filled their daughters's fancy purses with spend-as-you-like money and chic-as-you-please catalogs.)

“At least we get to *wear* britches this year,” said Brenda. Reulbach’s dress code had relaxed to the point where she could defy the elements in plain denim dungarees. More fashion-conscious Peaches wore varicolored hip-huggers—floral, striped, jacquard—on days they didn’t don skirts (that were never as mini and always more “kiddy” than those sported by Blue Meanies).

Whether or not you wore jeans to school, fifth grade tolerated no slacking off from fourth. On the contrary: instead of Miss Durbin (young and dynamic, though strict) they now had Miss Slagle, who was strict *and* elderly *and* immobile in her judgment. As she demonstrated during her first roll call:

“Eileen Agnew.”

“MmmmHere.”

“Ruby Agnew’s sister?”

“...mmmmYes?”

Gimlet squint by Miss Slagle. Transferring Ruby’s outstanding debts, *in toto*, to the luckless Eileen. Ditto *in toto* for the rest of the class—“Chad Chiese’s sister? Skip Goldfarb’s brother?” Frankie Levitch’s, Jackie Maxwell’s, Kate Rawberry’s, Garrett Shapiro’s, Peg *and* Glenn Vespa’s, Tricia Volester’s—each older sibling pinned conclusively to the pigeonholed younger.

Alphabetical was the rule with Miss Slagle. She started *everything* with Eileen Agnew; while Vicki Volester, Ordinary Mark Welk, and the rest of the tail-enders (which just sounded rude) had to bring up the rear (equally rude-sounding) from now till next June. That did keep them at a distance from Miss Slagle’s gimlet squint, but also meant peering around Keith Vespa to see what was going on. And Keith, already big, seemed to grow bulkier by the hour and block even more from Vicki’s view.

Fortunately all the Peaches had P-to-V names and so sat toward the back of the room. The Blue Meanies, befitting their big-britchiness, mostly sat up front. The exception was April Tober, tucked between Keith and Hayley Tamworth; and while she didn’t appreciate Hayley as a neighbor, April seemed to relish being set apart from the other BMs. Which reflected her present status in their pecking order.

Melissa Chiese, for as long as Vicki could remember, had repulsed every challenge to her supremacy as Meanest of the Mean—till last spring. Then came Stephanie Lipperman's recruitment of Nina Gersh, and things went from eenie-meanie to even-steven. Now it was Stephanie & Nina vs. Melissa & Eileen, with April as tiebreaker. If not queenmaker. If not gloating-satisfaction-taker, as she played one twosome against the other:

My-mother-told-me-to-pick-the-very-best-one-and-YOU'RE-not-IT-you-dirty-double-dishrag-you!

Curry April's favor, or get pided.

That was the Peaches's impression, at any rate. If you eavesdropped too openly, all five BMs would dry up and give you dirty (double dishrag) looks. One of them would lob a snide wisecrack, the other four would snortle, and then they'd resume their latest brouhaha with lowered voices. Which you could still overhear during a heated debate—such as which Osmond Brother the new boy in class most closely resembled:

"I say he looks like Alan!"

"And I say he looks like Jay!"

"You're both wrong," April overrode them, through a mouthful of tuna noodles. "He looks *most* like Rick Springfield" (an Australian crooner who'd begun throbbing hearts in *16* magazine).

Vicki, though not consulted, thought Rick Springfield an even stew-pider choice than the Osmond Brothers. Anyone with the slightest collection of ballet posters on her bedroom wall *knew* the new boy looked most like Rudolf Nureyev.

His name was Jonathan Dohr. He always wore a dark brooding-mystic expression to go with his dark flowing-aloof hair. When the school year began, this hair was longer than any other fifth-grade boy's, and Miss Slagle almost sent it and the rest of Jon to the Principal's office. But she didn't, after he outstared her with dark dreaming-somber eyes; and now most of the boys were noticeably shaggier.

Jonathan had even less to say than Nina Gersh, which was saying something. He could communicate fluently without uttering a word. As was borne out that same afternoon, after Wernie Ball barfed up tuna noodles over his own desk and Eileen's beside it. Eileen dissolved into hysterics (*"Is it on me?? Did he get any on me??"*) so Miss Slagle asked

Melissa to take her to the school nurse, while Jon escorted Wernie—after slithering their befouled desks into the hall for Mr. Coakley to decontaminate.

“Thank you, Jonathan,” exhaled Miss Slagle.

Don’t mention it, expressed Silent Jon.

He was the only one of the four to return within the hour, tacitly persuasive there were good reasons for this. Melissa Chiese supplied them when she popped back shortly before the final bell rang:

“Teeny-Weenie didn’t just lose control of his *stomach*.”

“You mean...?”

One cold lip curled into half an icicle smile. “It was like when we had to housebreak Foxyface. Except a *lot* more disgusting. Drip-drip-dribble, all the way downstairs—they’ll have to condemn the whole school!”

Jonathan Dohr, referred to for corroboration, turned crypto-pensively away.

That enigmatic stillness—even more than the Nureyev face and hair—landed Jon on Dunk Gunderson’s list of “flaming twinkleturds.” Wernie, of course, was a charter member of this index, as were butterfingered Lefty Levitch and thickwitted Lawrence Hersenspoel. (Whom Vicki would always think of as “Brainwashed Larry,” even after his upgrade to Miss Slagle’s room.)

A few non-athletes had always managed to get along with Dunk. Jimmy Maxwell and Billy Goldfarb went so far as to test this abnormal lenience with one of Billy’s sporting ditties, chanted to “A Horse With No Name”:

We’re out on the playground in a kickballin’ game

It feels wet when we play in the rain

On the playground, you take a whole lotta blame

When your kickball rolls all the way down the drain—

La-la-la LAH la-la-la (splash) la-la-la LAH lah...

Dunk’s only response was an extraordinarily mild-mannered (for him) “Pipe the hell down, ya buttwipes.”

He chose Billy and Jimmy to be on his team for the big indoor Guts Frisbee game that November, along with Swede Swedebach and Brainwashed Larry (the latter to serve as scapegoat in case of defeat). Keith Vespa, captain of the other squad, took Ordinary Mark along with Lefty, Wernie, and Jonathan Dohr. The boys lined up opposite each other while the girls formed two rooting sections on either side of the gym.

"I don't see why *we* only get to play volleyball," groused Brenda on the Peach side, miming a Frisbee-throw with guillotine momentum. "I'd love to de-head a coupla BMs!"

"That couldn't actually *happen*, could it?" Hayley murmured.

"Guess we'll find out," said Kris. "Betcha Wernie gets knocked down, at least. At least *twice*."

A wager swiftly won: Dunk's first throw bowled Wernie off his never-steady feet, and his second sent Lefty lunging full-tilt *into* Wernie, depositing them both on the floor.

"Okay—double-or-nothing he pukes again," Brenda offered. "And that Eileen has another fit when he does."

"(You guys,)" tutted Hayley.

Dunk's third throw, the most tremendous one yet, was aimed squarely at Jonathan. Who neither blanched nor flinched as he plucked it from mid-air.

"OoooOOOOoooh," went the rooting sections.

Jon sent the Frisbee skimming back to be bobbled by Jimmy and dropped by Swede: point for Keith's team. Swede's return throw got batted from Ordinary Mark to Jonathan, who caught it cleanly. He zoomed it over in Dunk's direction, yet the disc swerved like a spitball to carom off Billy's skinny chest: another point scored.

Dunk Gunderson thereupon lost his head and spent the rest of the match trying to lop off Jon's. Again and again he launched a rocketing throat-level buzzsaw; sometimes Jon tipped it over to a teammate, but more often he simply reached out and made another catch. As impassively and detachedly as though he were off on the sidelines, watching with the girls—down whose spines he kept delivering shivers. Not creepy ones, either.

"He's like a matador," the shining-eyed Sarah-Jill said to Vicki. Who could sort of see what she meant: Jon sweeping a masterful red cape past an infuriated, hard-charging bullfrog. Dunk the Toad of Dunk-Toad Hall! Through whose flippers the elusive Frisbee

slipped, scoring the 21st and final point for MataDohr & Co.

“Man, can you ever play Guts!” Keith informed Jon, clapping him on the shoulder; while Dunk gave Brainwashed Larry’s a rancorous punch “for standing there like a dumbass and losing us the game!” He hurled the Frisbee across the gym, where it struck Wernie in the stomach and caused him to gag but not retch.

“MmmmEWW,” went Eileen anyway.

“Aw c’mon, that was close enough for double-or-nothing!” said Brenda.

“Nope—just for double-dishrag,” said Kris.

*

In January all the teachers in The City went on strike for two full weeks. “Don’t even *think* that means you get to loll around in bed all day,” Felicia warned her indignant daughters. (As if they ever lolled!) No, their education must go on uninterrupted, with or without formal trappings. (Goof’s too, which required more of a steel-jaw trap.)

Hayley was semibrokenhearted that her birthday fell during the strike, meaning no acknowledgment of it at school; but also no insults from Blue Meaniedom. Plus she still got cake and presents at her regular party, during which the Peaches agreed to let Sarah-Jill tutor them—so long as she wouldn’t be too *dry* about it.

“Hey, I can make it enjoyable!”

“Course you can!” said Brenda. “I hardly ever fall asleep anymore when you explain long division.”

If nothing else, their parents would have to admit they’d made an *effort*. But leave it to Sarah-Jill to have a lesson plan all syllabussed when they gathered at her house for the opening seminar. Nor were they surprised that she’d brought all her textbooks home when the strike began, or that each was neatly covered with an ex-grocery bag still as undoodled-on as it’d been last September.

On the *outside*, that is.

First subject, as in Miss Slagle’s class, was Social Studies. Sarah-Jill opened her book to a chapter on 19th Century inventors and handed it to Vicki, who promptly fumbled it shut.

“Wow! How scary *are* the pictures?” Kris wondered aloud.

Vicki stuck out her tongue, re-opened the book—and found the inside paper cover decorated with hand-drawn initials in various styles, simple to elaborate. All of them *J.D.*

Sarah-Jill gasped. So did Vicki, when she realized *J.D.* didn't stand for John Denver. Hayley, Kris, and even Brenda gasped when they clustered round to see what Vicki saw. After which no one dared be the first one to say anything—though the same word leaped unbidden into everybody's mind:

“*MATADOHR??*”

Four of the Peaches then begged pardon for rocking the room with laughter; but Sarah-Jill remained in a Slagle-like snit for the rest of the day.

Other instruction during the strike came, with gusto, from Cynthia Dollfuss. She conducted what she called “pre-teen rap sessions” in Vicki and Tricia's bedroom, with no subject off limits if kiddy-bashfulness allowed its being broached. Thus the Peaches learned a great deal about Becoming a Woman, and the challenges life posed to attractive high school sophomores.

Tricia, lolling on her bed as she did her nails, contributed an occasional nod or “She's telling the truth” or indulgent eye-roll when Cynthia embarked on a giggle-jag.

“Growing up isn't *all* fun and games,” Tricia warned while Cynthia paused for breath, midway through an anecdote concerning a hamfisted guy and a brand-new bra.

“Oh, but it should be!” Cynthia smiled. “You gotta *make* it be, girls! Otherwise you'll be left crying over busted underwear.”

*

The strike, to Sarah-Jill's relief, ended in time for Reulbach to prepare for its annual Science Fair. This was the first year Miss Slagle's students could participate; till now they'd only been permitted to watch respectfully from the second floor.

Miss Slagle, mellower than usual after two weeks on a picket line in near-zero weather, suggested they split themselves up into groups of five for project-planning. They could even ignore the alphabet, so long as both girls and boys were in every group. The class, offended by this stipulation, bargained it down to *one* boy endured by *four* girls, and vice versa.

Vicki won Sarah-Jill's forgiveness for revealing her *J.D.s* by accepting a trade to Keith Vespa's group, in exchange for Jon Dohr joining the Peaches. April Tober asserted her independence by swapping over to Dunk Gunderson's group, from which Brainwashed Larry got booted to the aghast BMs.

"This," Melissa seethed, "is going to be the horriblemest Science Fair ever!"

Vicki couldn't help suspecting she was right. The boys in her group, inspired by a recent TV episode, wanted to do their project on what happened to a girl's nose when a football struck it.

"You leave my nose out of this!" she told them.

"S'not a problem," said Keith, quoting one of Jimmy's oldest jokes.

Yet Vicki had nothing against Keith other than his sightblocking size. She went along with his other idea for a science project—"Our Friend Breakfast Cereal"—since it was Keith's favorite food; the Vespa cupboards were stocked with every kind of Krispie and Freakie and Pebble and Critter. Though not with Sir Grapefellow, which turned milk a revolting shade of purple and reeked like a bad Halloween. Goofus consumed a bowl of this every morning and mailed in enough proof-of-purchase seals for three Sir Grapefellow biplane gliders (all quickly wrecked).

Vicki collected and organized nutritional information about all the cereals. Keith did the taste-testing, assisted by Ordinary Mark and hindered by Lefty Levitch, who (as always) tried too hard, too often, too noisily, and with too many excuses.

Which was still a lot closer to success than Wernie Ball generally got.

(Sigh.)

"It's—it's nice out today," went a timid stutter at Vicki's elbow. Exactly like the White Rabbit: anxious peek into her face, then over his shoulder, then up on tiptoe. "Is— isn't it?"

"How should *I* know?" snapped Vicki.

Melancholy little sigh. This time like the Gnat's, since it seemed to heave Wernie wholly out of sight.

Vicki hated to hurt his feelings; but Wernie Ball did too much heaving altogether.

Meanwhile the April-less BMs were deadlocked on how to pursue their survey of “You and Your Skin.” (And the effect of cosmetics upon it: a perfect opportunity to slap on makeup in the third-floor washroom.) Brainwashed Larry agreed with whichever side spoke to him last, and both sides when they jabbered simultaneously; thus ongoing stalemate.

“So,” Vicki asked Hayley and Kris with exiled diffidence, “what’re *you* guys doing?”

“It’s called pair o’ psychology—y’know, ESP and stuff.”

“Howdja get Miss Slagle to say *that* was okay?” Vicki began, before joining in on the obvious answer: “Sarah-Jill! Is there anything she can’t talk a teacher into?”

“Sure,” said Kris. “Less homework—extra lunchtime—doughnuts every Friday—”

“Oh don’t,” moaned Hayley, struggling with another diet. “I haven’t been by the bakery for nine whole days.”

“Better keep away from cereal too,” Vicki advised. “Even flakes that aren’t frosted come with sugar in them.”

Hayley moaned louder.

“Wouldn’t it be cool if they had *hot dog*-flavored cereal?” said Kris. “It’d be like going to Biff’s for breakfast—”

“PLEASE stop!”

“We’re sorry, Hayl. Maybe Sarah-Jill can find a mental-blocky-type thing so you won’t keep thinking about food.”

“I hope so,” said Hayley. “Cept I’d rather it made me think grapefruit tastes like French fries.”

“This isn’t about *hypnotism*,” scoffed Sarah-Jill when appealed to. “We’re investigating *psychic phenomena*s.”

As she described in detail when the fifth-grade classes presented their Science Fair projects out in the third-story corridor. Parapsychology, she announced, was the science of clairvoyance and mental telepathy, and had been recognized *as* a science by the American Association of Science three years ago. (So there.) Sarah-Jill cited astronaut Edgar Mitchell’s use of Zener cards in outer space; Kris, Hayley, and bored-looking Brenda held these cards up on cue. Circle, square, star, cross, wavy lines—Kris caught Vicki’s eye with a wavy-lined smirk, and Vicki had to smother laughter with a fake coughing attack.

After waiting reproachfully for her to recover, Sarah-Jill proceeded to the group's own psychic experiments, all of which (colossal surprise) revolved around Jonathan. Whose reserve turned to stricken foreboding as he suddenly backed away, unnoticed by the Peaches, and "went through himself" (as Jimmy always said when Jon Dohr entered a washroom).

Vicki tried to snag Sarah-Jill's attention without further interrupting her, but got no more than a brief pinched frown. (Well fine then: do your own realizing.)

"He's gone to throw up," said a voice in Vicki's ear.

Mental telephathy? No: Wernie Ball, in a hurried nervous whisper.

Vicki recoiled from his lips. Enough with the vomit already! Hadn't they just watched Mr. Coakley mop up the model volcano Dunk's group had overfueled with vinegar and baking soda? (April, clairvoyantly anticipating the stew-pidest outcome, had taken shelter behind Jimmy and Swede before *that* eruption.)

"And now," Sarah-Jill declared, her glasses glinting coquettishly as she turned to where Jon wasn't standing, "all will be revealed—"

—as Dunk Gunderson, crawling under the display table, reached up and yanked down Sarah-Jill's flares. Demonstrating the drawback of their having an elastic waistband with no belt.

Also, more scientifically, how shock can drain color from a face and make eyes look as inert as the lenses propped before them.

It happened so quickly, so unexpectedly, that there followed a very long moment of very dead silence.

Broken at last by a fresh eruption: this one of Blue Meanie belly laughter. "*Gray panties!*" shrieked Melissa and Stephanie. "She's wearing GRAY PANTIES!!"

Vicki lunged forward to help Kris shield the spectacle as Sarah-Jill collapsed in Hayley's arms (sobbing "They're s-s-silver, I thought they were p-p-pretty") while Brenda overturned table and display in furious pursuit of Dunk.

"Children! Children!" went the faintly-heard Miss Slagle.

"Hey, I just dropped my pencil is all!" Dunk objected as he got collared by Mr. Brown, a sixth-grade teacher who (though balding) was tall and male and strong enough to ward off Brenda with his other arm, as he hauled Dunk away to the Principal.

Brenda advanced instead on the BMs, now half bent over with raucous glee.

“Oh yeah? oh *yeah*? I s’pose you’re USED to him pantsing *YOU*, hunh Chiese??”

Melissa straightened up like a shot and spat out a word missing from fifth-grade vocabulary lists. Brenda, not needing to consult a dictionary, clenched both fists and would’ve employed them had nearby boys not been sent in to impose order. (It took both Keith *and* Swede to hold Brenda back; Lefty Levitch tried grabbing Melissa and got smacked upside his sorry head.)

“For this we went on strike,” Vicki heard Miss Slagle mutter to another teacher.

“Eleven days on the picket line in January, for this.”

Principal Overland was kept busy for the rest of that day and the remainder of that week. Vicki, who’d never set foot in Old Overalls’s office till now, had to do so all by herself and provide testimony. She was the only girl who’d properly witnessed the Incident, since the other Peaches had been beside or behind Sarah-Jill, and the Blue Meanies claimed Dunk couldn’t be held responsible if Sarah-Jill was too scrawny for her double-knit britches.

Dunk got formally suspended, a distinction he took pride in despite its small-potatoes cause: “She ain’t got nothing worth looking at nohow.” His parents, however, hit the roof. They both worked at the Pfiester Park Y, Mr. Gunderson as a fitness instructor and Mrs. Gunderson in member services; and both considered their Duncan to be the quintessence of Muscular Christianity. According to them, Duncan was so engrossed with the Science Fair that he *had* dropped his pencil—coincidentally near a child who, unwisely, wore oversized clothing. The Incident would’ve been avoided had that child’s parents sent her to school in a sensible dress, as God intended.

The Shapiros hit several roofs when this theory was hypothesized. Millie and Moe demanded a special meeting of the Reulbach PTA, seconded by other Peach parents, though a couple of fathers hinted they should keep their cool.

“I mean, it wasn’t like he pulled up her skirt and, y’know, ‘tried’ anything,” Ozzie told Felicia.

“And just suppose it was *Vicki*’s slacks he ripped off?”

“I’d a KILLED the little punk bastard!”

This was thrilling to hear (with ear pressed to wall) but Vicki worried that now she'd have to re-testify in front of the whole PTA, and so be branded for life as a snitch. Leaving herself wide-open for retribution—and suppose it *was* forcible strippage? Maybe not just of her jeans?

She would have to kill *herself*.

And how could you accomplish that, when you were only eleven?

Maybe by getting bored to death at a special PTA meeting. Neither Vicki nor any other student was invited to contribute. Plenty of parents had plenty to share; but this year's PTA president was Carmel Sanborn Chiese, unmistakably her daughter's mother, who wielded the gavel as though hammering nails. She cut off every speaker before they got anywhere near full flow.

"Pantsing a girl is *assault*," insisted Millie Shapiro; POUND POUND POUND went Carmel's gavel.

Not even the Gundersons were permitted to say their piece in its entirety, despite Melissa's rumored pre-teen familiarity with Dunk's Christian muscularity.

"Take a breath, people!" Mrs. Chiese commanded. "Let's keep touching base here."

Which reminded the fathers that she had an enviable job in the Friendly Confines box office, and maybe they should ask her about ticket deals since baseball season was imminent.

*

That night, just before bedtime, Felicia got off the phone after a long conversation during which her expression had gone from dismay to disbelief to masked amusement. She took Vicki aside and put an arm around her.

"There's nothing to fret about, darling. Sarah-Jill's going to be fine."

"Why? What happened??"

"Well—long story short—she got her first period."

Vicki's alarm yielded to consternation. "But... she's younger'n *any* of us! Her birthday's not till JULY."

"I know, I know, but it's perfectly normal. Except that her parents were, um, kind of flustered, and rushed her to the hospital."

Hoot from Tricia, ostensibly not listening across the room.

“Patricia Elaine—”

“You’re right, I’m sorry, poor kid. (Wait’ll I tell Cynthia...)”

“It wasn’t their fault! They’ve all been under so much stress, nobody was expecting this to happen, it’s not like they went through it with Garrett, poor Sarah-Jill was so frightened Millie lost her head—well, any mother would—and you *know* Cynthia wouldn’t find this funny.”

“MUTH-er.”

“Well okay, but she’d be *sweet* about it.”

Vicki was torn between concern for her friend and the idea that Someone Somewhere had cheated on a major test. Of course Sarah-Jill would never dream of doing such a thing. But still: why should having her underpants exposed (and they were *so* gray, *not* “silver”) let Sarah-Jill skip to the head of life’s line? So she could gaze with pitying condescension—not just on Blue Meanies but also her fellow Peaches—as a Newly-Become Woman? When she was still only *ten*? FOUR-AND-A-HALF MONTHS younger than you?

No more explicable than the now-you-see-one but-hear-the-other Mrs. Partridges.

Chalk it up to psychic phenomena. And speaking of which: why had Jonathan Dohr gone off and thrown up a couple minutes before the Incident occurred? And why’d Wernie Ball been so aware of this that he felt compelled to whisper about it in Vicki’s ear?

She couldn’t believe they’d been clued in ahead of time. No, not by Dunk Gunderson, who was as liable to pants them as he would any girl. But if there really was such a thing as parapsychowhatsit, and Jon had ESP’d about the Incident—

—why wouldn’t he have tried to *prevent* it, like a brooding-mystic gentleman?

Whose initials were all over Sarah-Jill’s inner book covers?

Only one conclusion was possible.

ALL boys—be they tall or short, strong or weak, handsome or repulsive, extrasensory or extrastewpid—were naturally creepy-crawly.

And at next year’s Science Fair the girls ought to do a project about *that*.

13

The Spurning Point

Several times a year Felicia took her daughters downtown to the Cathedral of All the Stores. One excursion was to do Christmas shopping; another was for Ozzie's birthday and Father's Day, which always fell close together and so had to be doubly fussed over. Goofus they could fob off with Montgomery Ward or the Sharp Avenue Toy & Hobby Shop; but for serious womenfolk's needs, only the Cathedral would do.

Tricia and Vicki's most critical needs came at the start of Back-to-School season. Tricia made significant acquisitions by herself, or accompanied by Cynthia and other friends, yet she wouldn't skip out on these early-August pilgrimages with her mother and sister. Every year they'd prime themselves with an ice cream sundae at the Cathedral's Crystal Palace. Every year the girls would persuade Felicia to buy something frivolous for her own wardrobe, she saying "Well just this once" as per usual. And each year Tricia would look more beautifully grownup as she modeled autumnwear, graduating from children's to juniors and now misses.

This year Tricia wasn't the only one on the upward move, as she demonstrated by taking Vicki and a selection of 28AAAs into the fitting room. Vicki expected to be scarred for life by her mother shouting, "*No, SHE DOESN'T NEED A BRA YET! NOT MY LITTLE BABY GIRL, VICTORIA LORRAINE VOLESTER OF 1710 WEST WALROCK AVENUE, APARTMENT 3W!!*"

But Felicia heaved a wistful sigh and took a pensive poke at the selection.

"Even a black one?..."

"Trust me," said Tricia. "She's ready."

And that was that. No need to plead or coax; no *Are You There God? It's Me Margaret* embarrassment. Just another great wave of big-sister adoration for Vicki to ride, plus a ripple of gratitude toward a momentarily discreet mother.

In mid-August came the family trip to Canada. Volester vacations were always scheduled after Back-to-School shopping, and funded (Ozzie liked to kid) by “whatever’s left in the bank.” This year, however, money was less of an object. Honda’d brought out a new model called the Civic whose top-notch fuel efficiency was going to make them all rich. Gasoline had gotten so expensive that this Canadian trip was likely to be their last in the Eldorado, which (according to Ozzie) could only manage twelve inches per gallon.

Tricia posed no objection to bidding the old boat farewell. She now had her eye on something sporty, like a Porsche or Corvette Stingray, and was ready to accept the keys to either at her semi-sweet fifteenth birthday dinner in Beansville. No such luck; yet she acted sufficiently pleased by her actual presents. These included a pair of fancy-dangly earrings (for which Vicki’d spent several future allowances) that Tricia not only said she liked but even wore in public.

The good times kept on rolling, into Ontario and up through Quebec. Tricia flirted in French with teenage garçons in Montreal. Goofus made a determined effort to enlist in the Royal Canadian Air Force (whose exercises he admired) and was officially turned down for being an American citizen—*not* because he was seven years old. And on Prince Edward Island, Vicki got initiated into the wonderful world of legshaving.

“Just think! I’m doing this in the very same place Anne of Green Gables did *hers* for the first time!”

“I doubt *she* ever shaved her legs,” said Tricia. “Back in those days, y’know, they wore long skirts and bloomers and so on.”

Vicki felt a pang on Anne’s behalf. Imagine going through life with *hairy* skinny orphan-legs.

That night she had a dream where Gilbert Blythe yanked her own fine dark leg-fuzz into thick red carrots. Vicki was searching for a slate to break when Tricia shook her awake.

“You are *writhing* all over this bed!”

“He was a mean, hateful boy!” Vicki lamented. “How dare he?”

“Oh for Chrissake,” went Tricia.

From that point on, the trip home went steadily downhill. Tricia’s good mood evaporated; Daddy griped nonstop about the price, availability, and Caddy-demand for gas; Mom donned her wit’s-end expression; Goofus behaved like Goofus.

And Vicki felt increasingly constricted, even on the Caddy’s wide back seat. Even though she did daily stretches to keep limbered up; even joining Goof in his Royal Air Force morning workouts. It wasn’t that her new bras were too tight, or her Lady Shick’d legs were too chafed—yet the claustrophobic sensations continued.

As did Vicki’s fidgeting.

Which did nothing to improve Tricia’s spirits.

“Take a couple more aspirin,” Felicia told them both in her wit’s-end voice.

Aspirin didn’t help.

Nor did arriving back on Walrock to find the Cypress corner grocery had gone out of business in their absence, and was already festooned with graffiti. It hadn’t been forced out by Hardesty’s Supermarket, said Mr. Tamworth; sales were down there too, since people were having to spend so much on fuel.

“Don’t look at *me*,” said Ozzie. “*I* gotta find someone who’ll buy a guzzling Eldorado. Think the Coast Guard could use it to sop up oil spills?”

*

On Labor Day Vicki tried on innumerable combinations of Back-to-School garments, seeking the perfect outfit for her sixth grade debut. Jerry Lewis’s telethon played on the old black-and-white Philco (consigned to the girls’s bedroom after being replaced by the big color Magnavox) and Buddy Hackett ogled Vicki as she stripped back down to her undies.

Start all over again. Smocks were popular this fall. Smocks as dresses and jumpers and tops to be worn over pants or jeans—or body suits, also in vogue: Vicki had a zip-front one and a pucker-knit one and a turtleneck one that’d be too warm for a City classroom in this weather.

Whatever else she wore tomorrow, Vicki knew what would be on her feet: these red patent-vinyl platform shoes with ultrachunky heels. “Step into the stratosphere!” the ad had said, and Vicki’d gone up-up-and-away when she tried them on at the Cathedral. Rising

from 4'8" to practically 4'11"—let any Blue Meanie try to look down on her now!

She slipped the lightest-weight smock dress over her head, smoothed it into place, and sat to tug on the platforms. Which for some reason started to pinch her toes. As they hadn't done at the Cathedral a mere month ago.

Vicki wrestled her feet out of the shoes and reached for an old pair of Hanes. Nice sleek nylon would help—except that here too her toes were getting squished. And not just her toes. These pantyhose must've *shrunk* somehow; why else couldn't she fit her rear comfortably inside them?...

(Rasping laughter from Jerry Lewis.)

"Hey Mom?" Vicki quavered through the bedroom door. "Couldja come here a moment? *Now*, please??"

"What's the matter?"

"Mom, look!"

Felicia came and looked and creased her brow, and went to fetch the tape measure. Which confirmed that Vicki's hips—not quite 30" pre-pilgrimage—were spanning closer to 32. And no, her feet weren't swollen by the Labor Day heat; they simply needed a larger-size shoe.

"But I never got to wear *these*, and they're my favorite!" wailed Vicki.

"Brownie, you're just growing up is all."

Vicki gasped and grabbed new highrise flares (in a memorable plaid of forest green, rusty orange, and butterscotch). She was able to haul these on and close them at the waist, only to see the mirror display a gaudy tartan half-globe jutting past (*way* past) her smock-skirt.

"*Mom!*"

"Darling, it's nothing but a perfectly normal growth spurt—"

"MOM! Eww eww ewwww!... I *can't* go to school looking like this! I'll hafta wear baggy *old* clothes—I'll be the only girl wearing *old* clothes on the first day! I'm gonna look like a FRUMP! With a humongous fat RUMP!"

"Take off the pants," her mother said briskly, "and let me see you in just the dress... now then! You look fine and pretty."

Vicki dismally checked both profiles and over each shoulder. “Still got a big behind...”

“Well,” Felicia murmured, “some boys like that...”

“*Mommmmmmm!*... And what’ll I do about shoes? I can’t wear sandals to school.”

“Maybe you can fit into Tricia’s now. Or Hayley might have a pair you can wear.”

(Oh great. She and Hayl could be Bigfoot Berthas together.)

“Give me everything we need to exchange,” Felicia continued. “See why it’s best to save every receipt? And before you know it, we’ll have you all squared away again.”

“Squared away” wasn’t the appearance Vicki’d been aiming at. Still, it definitely beat having a basketball-sized bottom. Glance down at your unchanged bustline: oh no, you couldn’t start growing up where it *meant* something. Probably be stuck at 28AAA forever.

“Red platforms,” she told her mother. “Please? I really, really, really want these in red. Will you remember that?”

“I think I can,” Felicia said drily. “And I’m sure they *will* have red ones a size larger in stock.”

But, of course, they didn’t; so Vicki had to settle for black.

*

There was graffiti on the walls of Reulbach too that September. Mr. Coakley had retired, and his successor custodians invested less in caring for the building. Enrollment was down this year so some classes got combined, packing the rooms and reducing the wherewithal per student.

“All the more reason for us to excel,” Mr. Brown told his sixth-graders.

Like his boy-detective namesake, “Encyclopedia” Brown was a mastermind who could memorize entire libraries. Unfortunately he expected *you* to do all the mystery-solving, a whole chapter’s worth every day in every subject.

“You will turn in reports that are complete—not incomplete; legible—not illegible; and when they are due—not overdue. I have made myself clear.”

“Clear as mud,” grumbled Brenda Pomerantz.

Mr. Brown resembled a computer programmer, with a weighty forehead rampant on a prematurely balding cranium. He laid a lot of stress on “brainstorming,” which meant filling

out index cards with notes that you then rewrote into a paper report. (Complete, legible, and turned in on time.)

The sixth grade had to brainstorm through a solemn-frills election for Student Council Representative. Here Melissa Chiese revealed her political aptitude for the first time: she bought off rival Keith Vespa with a carton of Bub's Daddy bubble gum, which came in foot-long ropes of flavors like sour apple and watermelon.

"Wha'?" went ex-candidate Keith through an immense mouthful. "I like gum! Hey check this out—" as he blew a bubble that almost reached basketball-size before it kablooe'y'd.

Brenda's campaign as the Peach nominee did likewise, after she lost her temper when goaded by Melissa during their solemn-frills debate. The only other candidate, Brainwashed Larry Hersenspoel, was ruled ineligible by Mr. Brown for thinking Watergate had been caused by stopped-up storm drains; so Melissa won in a landslide.

"The sixth grade has spoken," she declared, "and I will be its Voice."

"Hooray for laryngitis," whispered Kris Rawberry.

Melissa swiftly formed a coalition with two other Representatives: hardnosed seventh-grader Roxanne Dowell, whom even adults found formidable, and Mitzi Freund, who'd been born a week too late to make the sixth-grade cutoff and consequently tyrannized the fifth. Together their triumvirate pretty much ran the Student Council, disregarding its eighth-grade officers.

"We" (Melissa announced, meaning the triumvirate) "are raising money for a Halloween dance, and EVERYBODY'S expected to contribute."

Abrupt nod to Eileen Agnew, who scurried around passing out lists of stuff for sale: candy corn, popcorn balls, saltwater taffy, and Bub's Daddy bubble gum.

"We must all of us strive to make Reulbach a better place," Melissa intoned, "to show our school spirit and good citizenship. And that means placing your orders early and often, so we'll have the funds for a superfun Halloween dance!"

"*Strive*," snortled Brenda.

"*Superfun*," snortled Kris.

“I have made myself clear,” proclaimed Representative Chiese, with a smugly mischievous glance toward Mr. Brown.

*

Gahd! (thought Vicki as she boarded a big green westbound bus)—what could be stew-pider than sixth-graders at a school dance? Girls would loiter on one side of the gym; boys would hang opposite, grossing each other out; only teenage-types would do any dancing. If you could dignify their jigging gyrations with such a term.

Vicki was on her way to do some *real* dancing. As she did every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon and Saturday morning, at the Olivia Fischel Academy of the Ballet. Level Five this fall, with an extended Saturday session to prep for pointe work. Strengthen those feet and ankles! Build up that flexibility and form! In six months she’d be evaluated and then (if wishes came true) receive her first pair of genuine satin toe shoes. Level Six would follow, dancing *en pointe* four times a week; and at age thirteen she could audition for the professional Norrway Company.

Ballerinahood: her dream of dreams.

Olivia Fischel had danced for Ruth Page, been praised as a virtuoso, and knew no fear when dealing with artists, patrons, critics, or stage mothers. “If you are not prepared to accept my guidance and advice,” she’d always say, “there are of course *other* schools.”

Her Academy was headquartered along with her Company at the Norrway Theater on Toronero Avenue. It was exactly the sort of setting where true dance should take place: elegant, atmospheric, covered with designs called “Art Deco” that Tricia said were all the rage again. Making you believe that Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers might waltz out of the wings at any moment.

Vicki was proud to belong here, to be in her third straight year here, the only girl her age from Pfiester Park admitted to the Fischel Academy. Which was as expensive as it was exclusive, so thank goodness for Honda Civics and their valuable fuel efficiency. (Mr. Brown made them follow the Yom Kippur War day by day, and brainstorm the Arab oil embargo.)

She toted her canvas dance bag into the Academy dressing room and plunked down beside her friend Connie Tang, who was vigorously shaking her head.

“Hi Vicki. I *hate* my damn hair.”

“Oh please,” scoffed Vicki. Connie’s long black coif hung perfectly straight without needing to be ironed, but it did fight back when she tried pinning it up into the requisite bun. “I’ll help you after I change. I hate my damn *butt*,” Vicki added, wriggling out of plaid flares and into pink tights.

“Oh please,” scoffed Connie. “Would you rather have a butt like mine, all skin and bones? It’s as flat as this bench. What I wouldn’t give for foam-rubber butt-falsies.”

“Do they make those?” asked Vicki, pulling on her black leotard and immediately having to extract its seat from her hindcleavage. “Arrrrgh... maybe we can split the difference. Like, I could donate you one cheek.”

“Like the Old Lady in *Candide*!”

Vicki didn’t understand the analogy but laughed anyhow.

It was so cool having a Chinese friend—though of course Connie Tang was no more Chinese than Vicki was Lithuanian. She’d been born in The City and lived her whole life in Greenfield, the nice neighborhood west of Bohnsetter Avenue. Which was where Melissa Chiese woulda/coulda/shoulda been the Voice of the Sixth Grade, had her mother not picked a cul-de-sac on the wrong side of the street.

Except that Connie Tang woulda/coulda/shoulda been more than a match for Melissa’s stew-pid Voice. Whenever well-meaning strangers spoke very c-a-r-e-f-u-l-l-y so Connie might comprehend what they were saying, she’d respond in an Irish brogue or Ozark twang or with frantic sign language. The only thing that really ticked her off was being asked if she were related to Connie *Chung*, the TV reporter on Channel 2.

“Yeah, she’s my daughter-in-law,” Connie Tang would snap.

Vicki got their hair bunnified and the girls headed for the studio. “Oh, I forgot to tell you!” said Connie. “Guess who’s teaching our class today.”

“M.O.?” asked Vicki, meaning Ms. Olivia.

“Nope. Think hairier-chestier.”

“Not—not J.J.?”

“The one and only. Try not to sweat both our cheeks off, *chica*.”

Around here “J.J.” wasn’t some skinny black kid yelling *Dy-no-MITE*, but the Norrway Company’s principal male dancer: Juodas Jautis. Who’d started out as a prizefighter before studying ballet to improve his boxing technique, and was still as brawny as he was strapping as he was robust. Ferocity showed in every move he made, onstage and off; it stood him in excellent stead last spring when the Company performed *La Belle et La Bête*. To denote his Beastly state, J.J.’d needed only a fur chapeau that was easily (though brilliantly) discarded when he resumed Princely form.

Now Juodas Jautis was sauntering with a panther’s tread along the line of Level Five students, issuing commands and corrections in a voice like a cattle prod—but whose accent reminded Vicki of Gran, and so was weirdly heartening.

“FOCUS, ladies! Leave all distrekssons outside! Even if scenery colleppses around you, a True Denncer must appear ree-LEXXED! You there—yes you—do you think you are Ettless, holding up the world with your *port de bras*? REE-lexx! No hunching! Do not confuse Esmeralda with Quasimodo! Becks straight, ladies! Necks long! *You* there—”

—oh no he’s looking at me he’s talking to ME—

“—yes you,” confirmed J.J., with a surly-burly scowl at Vicki’s derrière. “THETT is meant to be sett upon, not to be sticking out! Pull it in, miss!”

—or your rear may not fit inside your pants—

Petrification alone kept Vicki from bursting into shaky giggles. Never wince! Never flinch! But do your Level Five best to retract your backside without protruding your tummy. Keep absolutely straight, and positively long, and move so any spectator would believe you were ree-lexxed.

J.J. prowled away to the end of the line, there to pamper Sonya Medved. Vicki (who breathed again) and Connie beside her (who went “Phmph”) were both in loathing awe of little Sonya. Just ten-and-a-half, the minimum age Ms. Olivia allowed to prep for pointe, she was viewed by everyone as a future prima ballerina—the next Gelsey Kirkland—if she didn’t blow it by ignoring guidance and advice. As had Paulette Schoop of melancholy Academy legend, who’d recklessly squandered her talent, scuttled her promise, and ruined her health.

“The last I heard of Paulette Schoop,” M.O. would say darkly, “she suffered from stress fractures—tendinitis—hammertoes—shin splints—and long-term bunions. Take heed,

my dears.”

Everyone at the Academy coddled Sonya Medved as though she were a gosling destined to hatch golden eggs. Her height and weight were charted weekly; her tiny feet were inspected to gauge their growth plates and bone development. *Nobody* at Norroway was allowed to don toe shoes till Olivia Fischel pronounced them ready for that honor—but readiness could be encouraged as well as anticipated.

And Sonya already possessed a soloist’s attitude. She never took notice of other girls in class, except to brandish angelic potential and Goldilocks nerve. Yet Sonya could rise to almost any challenge, as she proved again when J.J. asked her (ASKED her!) to demonstrate a five-step combination: *glissade, pas de bourrée, jeté, temps levé, assemblé*.

Done without error or apparent effort, by the Prima Baby Swan.

Then with wobbles and conspicuous exertion, by Vicki Volester.

Juodas Jartis produced and made use of a duck call. “You may *walk* like a duck, you may *quekk* like a duck—but in this cless you will not *dennce* like one!”

*

Brenda insisted the Peaches boycott Melissa’s Halloween shindig and Vicki was happy to comply, though this meant she had to take Goofus out trick-or-treating. But that wasn’t so bad: she and Hayley dressed up Junior Hull as Frankenstein’s monster, with Goofus riding his shoulders as Igor and the girls escorting them as two mad scientists. They scored a respectable candy-haul along Walrock Avenue, and Kris did equally well along Hagenbush as the Ghost of the Sixties (in a tie-dyed sheet).

At school the next day, Stephanie Lipperman reported that the only sixth-grader who’d been properly danced with was Nina Gersh. No great surprise, since Nina looked at least fourteen and emphasized it with a cheerleader costume. Keith Vespa, as Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon*, had blown a Kung Fu-worthy Bub’s Daddy bubble that unfortunately popped onto April Tober’s Fifties-chick bouffant. And Jimmy Maxwell, who’d come as the Devil, stepped on all the girl-feet he could reach (including Melissa’s, heavily) while repeating “I made *myself* do it!”

“I wouldn’t’ve missed that,” smiled Stephanie, “for all the green-apple gum in the world.”

*

November was harsh. Classwork at the Fischel Academy intensified till every adagio felt like an allegro. Most grueling were the pre-pointe sessions: to earn your toe shoes you had to be able to hold a *passé* on each leg for thirty seconds, balance on each foot for a full minute, do at least four *piqué* turns on both sides, plus a couple dozen *relevés* in the center without taking a break. All this while arching your insteps like there was no tomorrow. Even on *demi-pointe* in soft slippers it could be torturous.

“I didn’t even *wanna* take ballet,” Connie Tang moaned in the dressing room. “But my mom said it was either that or play the cello. And who wants to practice sitting down all the time?”

“Right now I wouldn’t mind so much,” groaned Vicki.

“Well, at least *W.W.*’s coming up,” said Connie. “That’s always fun.”

The final two weeks of every autumn course were spent rehearsing the Norrway Company’s annual production of *Winter Wonderland*. All the Academy students were featured in its Toy Shop sequence: Levels One and Two as stuffed animals, Three as rag dolls, Four as wind-up figures (replacing the original tin soldiers—too warmongery) and Five as marionettes, with Level Six as the Toy Shop elves.

Last year Connie and Vicki’d had a ball imitating R&B robots on *Soul Train*: “WIND US UP ‘CAUSE WOMAN’S GOTTA HAVE IT!” Vicki still treasured the rock-‘em-sock-‘em echoes of audience laughter and applause.

This year they were bound to be even better: *fantocinni* dancing on imaginary strings! And even if infantile Sonya Medved *did* do it better, that didn’t mean Vicki Volester couldn’t do it almost just as well.

Except that as things turned out, she couldn’t do it at all.

The turnout came on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. *W.W.* rehearsals were set to begin that Saturday, and of course the Academy would be closed on Thursday; so this was effectively the last class of the fall.

But to Vicki it felt like the first one of the year. Or of her *life*—all her ballet muscles seemed to have lost their memory simultaneously.

(What the hell?...)

She'd done hundreds of *relevés*, maybe thousands of them, without wobble or teeter. She KNEW how to do each and every one: it was a trained instinct by now, second nature, force of habit.

Yet on this Very Bad Tuesday her weight kept shifting as she rose onto her toes, edging over to the pinkies where it had no business being. Quit it! Do the next one *right!* But her off-kilter body resisted re-centering, got more and more unbalanced and unstable, even as Ms. Olivia strode up and ordered her to slow down, "You're sickling, YOU ARE SICKLING—"

—which was the awfulest word ever uttered so Vicki tried to slam on the brake but stepped on the accelerator by mistake and that made her left ankle go

WAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!

just like newborn Goofus.

And.

Oh.

The.

Pain.

Of.

The.

Sprain.

Exploded in her brain...

*

Rest.

Ice.

Compression, with an Ace bandage.

Elevation, higher than your heart.

(Easy to do, given how down your heart was cast.)

I am not a Paulette Schoop.

I listen to instructions. Remember my corrections. Do everything I'm supposed to and nothing that I'm not.

One supinated ankle, rallied round by its friends. Connie phoned from Greenfield, using all her comic dialects. Hayley encouraged the appetiteless ankle-owner at their Thanksgiving dinner (“You *gotta* eat, or else I can’t have seconds”). Kris and Cynthia came to visit the ankle, and brought their big sisters along. Kate Rawberry and Jennifer Dollfuss were in training for the Lady Giant Killers (Pfiester High School’s new track team) and recommended several exercises to promote range-of-motion recovery.

“The important thing,” said Kate, “is that you don’t *limp*. Once you start limping, your foot’ll forget how to walk right, much less run. Or dance.”

“The IMPORTANT thing,” said Jennifer, “is not to overdo your ankle till the ligament heals! Otherwise it’s gonna go and get chronic on you!”

“Which is why she doesn’t want to limp,” Kate serenely added.

“I *don’t* want to limp,” Vicki agreed.

“Well, you WON’T limp if you roll the soup can with your foot and flex it with the towel like we showed you!” ranted Jennifer. Whose bluster was mostly just for effect, like bugging her eyeballs out of their sockets for minutes at a time. This not only rattled sporting opponents and grabby-handed dates, but scared the tar out of trick-or-treaters (as Jen had done last month, playing ogress/hostess at the Dollfuss house).

Authentic bluster was something you’d expect from Brenda Pomerantz—“Get up, run on that leg! There’s no pain in that leg!” But Brenda was visibly squeamish around any injury that couldn’t be walked off, and kept her gaze averted from Vicki’s ankle.

Sarah-Jill, on the other hand, wanted to psychoanalyze the ankle and deduce why its sprain *really* happened. (Since her own Incident last spring, she’d been seeing a female shrink once a week, which for Sarah-Jill was like E-tickets at Disney World.)

“It’s a little twisted, no big deal,” Vicki told her and Brenda and everyone back at school. Adding a nonchalant “We’ll see” shrug when the Blue Meanies oh-so-sweetly asked if she could possibly be patched up in time for *Winter Wonderland*.

But of course there was no hope. Ms. Olivia had expressly forbidden her to set foot in the Norroway Theater till that foot could bear her weight unaided, *and* Vicki had a doctor’s note testifying to it.

Dutifully she did her exercises. Took no step for granted. Can-rolled, towel-flexed, limp-avoided. Cautiously yet successfully accompanied Tricia and Felicia to the Cathedral of All the Stores for Christmas shopping on the first Saturday in December. A week after that, Dr. Tober awarded her ankle a clean bill of health—and her amnesiac muscles a benign prognosis:

“You’re just growing up is all.”

My mother told me the exact same thing three months ago.

Still, it didn’t hurt to hear this said by a handsome licensed physician. Even if he was snobby April’s father.

That evening the Volesters attended *Winter Wonderland* at the Norroway. Vicki sat numbly in the audience while Sonya Medved sprang through the air, twirling as though truly suspended on threads: a manipulative marionette who could do quadruple pirouettes.

Ooh and Ahh and Bravissima! went the crowd.

More endurable (for Vicki) was the main sequence, starring Olivia Fischel as the Snow Queen and Juodas Jautis as the Wayfarer lost in a Blizzard (represented by the *corps de ballet* in spangled tutus). M.O. and J.J.’s *pas de deux* was more sensational than ever, capped by a jolly coda where two dancers came rollicking on in a St. Bernard suit. The Wayfarer, having charmed the Snow Queen into sparing his life, toasted her and the theater with the St. Bernard’s brandy flask; and down rang the curtain.

Up rang the ovation.

Twang went the strings of Vicki’s heart.

She’d intended to go backstage, congratulate the Company, give Connie a beribboned jar of instant Tang as a joke bouquet.

Instead she told her folks she felt too tired. Could they go home now?

All the way there she stared upward, looking for a visible star. But the usual heavy clouds obscured the sky, so Vicki had to make do with the side alley’s streetlight: casting its same old shadows into her bedroom when she pulled the curtain aside.

Streetlight so bright first “star” I see tonight I wish I may I wish I might have the wish I wish tonight...

Ms. Olivia received her at the Academy the following Tuesday afternoon. Ballet coursework was finished and Vicki had the dressing room to herself. It was kind of spooky, changing in here all alone—yet every bench and locker was an old acquaintance. And would continue to be. Yes, she'd probably have to start Level Five over again. Sure, she'd fall even further behind Connie and Sonya and the other girls in pursuit of toe shoes. After three weeks on the disabled list, it was bound to take a couple months just to get back into shape. But that was okay: she would spend every minute of Christmas vacation exercising. Do everything she was supposed to and nothing that she shouldn't.

I am NOT a Paulette Schoop.

(Wish I may wish I might wish I may wish I might)

Olivia Fischel greeted her in the studio and for a long while kept Vicki at the barre, running through the familiar steps and moves. *Demi plié; grand plié. Battement tendu; battement fondu. Battements glissé, jetté, frappé. Rond de jambe à terre; rond de jambe en l'air.* Rest your leg upon the barre—stretch it out—bend your head forward—touch your brow to your knee.

And wonder, for one hideous moment, whether you'll be able to straighten back up without help.

"Phmph," went Ms. Olivia. "To the center floor, please. Let me see an *arabesque*... a *chassé passé*... *pas de bourrées*, over and under... *pas de basque glissé*... *pas de basque sauté*... now three *grands jetés*."

Run run run *leap* (thud).

Run run run *leap* (THUD).

Run run run *leap* (THUD).

"Six *relevés* in first position; repeat in second position."

I am a butterfly: I float, I glide. I do not wobble. I don't, I DON'T, I DON'T—

Ms. Olivia stood silently, a hawk in human form: piercing eyes, aquiline nose, predatory cheekbones.

You can demote me to Level Four, I won't mind I'll be such a good example to littler girls of never giving up no matter how long it takes I'll do it I will I promise oh please—

M.O. sighed. "Your sprain did not result from an isolated fault."

—I'm just outta shape is all gimme a couple months and—

“You’ve had difficulties all through the autumn. You are—what?—eleven going on twelve, and for all intents and purposes you have a new body with which you are not in tune. Rapid growth can dramatically alter proportions, weight distribution, flexibility and strength. Coordination is lost, and with it control over placement, alignment, movement patterns.”

She sounds like Mr. Brown this must be a bad dream I'm gonna wake up from it NOW—

“We shall refund your mother’s check for the next course. During the winter you may be able to adjust and adapt, but I strongly advise that you not practice without supervision. There are, of course, *other* schools. If you remaster the basics and regain true form, we would welcome your applying for readmission here.”

“Are... are most girls able to adjust, Ms. Olivia?”

Dramatic hesitation. “It is not impossible. But whatever happens, my dear, I hope dance will always be part of your life.”

Even if scenery collapses around you.

Vicki nodded. Stepped back. Made a deep wobble-free *reverence*. Went into the dressing room, changed out of her sweaty ballet clothes. Unpinned and shook loose her hair bun. Departed from the Norrøya Theater, away from its Art Deco elegance, to huddle at the Toronero Avenue bus stop. Boarded a big green vehicle that was very late and very full of coughers, sneezers, noseblowers. Transferred to Walrock with her own case of sniffles that had nothing to do with recent events. Shuffled up the street—up the stoop—up the several flights of stairs to 3W.

“Where’s Daddy?” Felicia asked her.

“Um... at the Lot?”

“You were supposed to call him for a ride! You knew we didn’t want you coming home by yourself with your ankle in the dark.”

“Um... sorry. I forgot.”

“Oh... so what did Ms. Fischel say?”

“Um... I need to practice more.”

“Well, that’s not so bad. Go get ready for dinner; I’ll phone Daddy and tell him you’re here. Tricia’s at Cynthia’s and Goofy’s with Bink, so it’ll just be the three of us.”

Shuffle-sniffle into your room. Kick off your sodden clogs. Look with disgust at the feet you’d never liked: massive, monstrous clodhoppers. Make that cloghoppers, blotched and calloused from all those years of lessons. And yet, until just last August, they had done exactly what you wanted them to do. Sometimes even more: feats you hadn’t thought yourself capable of performing.

Now, with a terrible clarity, Vicki saw that however long or hard she might practice, she would *never* regain True Form. Never become a True Dancer—a professional ballerina—what she had wanted to be, wished over and over to be, more than anything else in the world.

So.

No point keeping Rudolf Nureyev above her bed.

Reach up to untape the poster. Detach its top left corner from the bunches-of-gray-grapes wallpaper that Mr. Hull pledged every year would be replaced the next. Take care to do this cleanly, not mar the poster in any way.

And then rip it right across as a sudden *achoo!* tumbled her backward onto her caboose. Correction: her gargantuan fat ASS that, along with those huge ugly awkward feet, guaranteed she’d be incapable of delicate grace her whole life long.

Melissa Chiese had told the truth—had perceived it all the way back in first grade.

Her real name wasn’t Vicki Volester.

It would always, *always*, ALWAYS be Klumsy Klutzer.

*

Her folks learned the tearful truth before the end of that evening, and incidentally diagnosed Vicki as coming down with flu.

She refused to be confined to bed till all her dance-related possessions were boxed up for holiday donation. Everything must go: leotards and tights and legwarmers, the collection of Degas postcards, the Drina books and Streatfeild books and illustrated biographies of Pavlova, Tallchief, Fonteyn. Even the Petrushka music box that played *Une Jambe de Bois* while the Moor chased the Clown chasing the Dancer in a constant circle.

“But Gran gave you this,” Felicia objected.

Gran can see what I see, and hear what I hear.

So?...

Remember last spring. Hayley resolutely purging her room of all its kiddy stuff—only to chase Junior and his stack of weighty cartons down the stairs and out to the alley, to retrieve Skipper and Skooter (and all their outfits). Even if they hadn’t played Astro Co-eds for years and years, and never would again.

Petrushka went back atop Vicki’s bureau.

Tricia spent that night with the flu-free Dollfusses, so Vicki had to sleep solo—or would have, had she been able to sleep. Instead of being racked with symptoms, coughing and sneezing and swabbing her nose with bushels of Kleenex. And rerunning her post-mortem with Connie Tang through a sugar-plumless head.

It had been a secondhand post-mortem: Felicia, not letting Vicki near the phone, relayed the call to and fro like an interpreter. Vicki’d wanted to invite Connie over sometime; the two girls had never seen each other outside the Academy, but Connie deserved first dibs on the ballet giveaways. And maybe she’d quit the Academy too, saying it’d be no fun there without Vicki. Maybe they could find something else to do together (learn to play the cello?) and go on being friends, even though they lived in different neighborhoods and went to different schools.

But no invitation got extended. Vicki felt suddenly ashamed of crummy Pfiester Park and the shabby Walrock greystone, and her bedroom with its faded bunches-of-grapes-that-had-probably-never-been-purple. Nowhere near up to Greenfield standards.

So she simply told Felicia to tell Connie “See you on *Soul Train*,” and Connie told Felicia to tell Vicki “Oh please” and “I’ll miss you.”

And that was that.

Turn your congested face to the wall...

Until the following morning, when Vicki—feeling damp in a place that was supposed to stay dry—threw back the covers and found a small pajama-lap puddle of blood.

Her *Godfather*-like screams brought her mother on the run. To stare and say:

“Oh my darling Brownie—this just isn’t your month, is it?”

14

Not Bad

Basically it was the worst Christmas ever.

A blizzard struck beforehand, causing a power outage that gave Mr. Hull munchkin-sized chest pains as he struggled with the generator in the greystone basement. Since the electricity kept faltering, Felicia wouldn't let Goofus go out to play in the snow, so he rampaged through the candle-lit apartment and almost set three separate fires. Then when the power came back and stayed on, they found a ceiling leak had sprung just above the decorated Christmas tree, meaning it had to be moved out of its corner—the only spot in 3W where it wasn't in everybody's way. (They tried replacing the topmost star with a saucepan to catch the drip, but even alligator clips couldn't keep the pan from tipping as it filled.)

Vicki wished she were in Rosehill, buried beside Gran.

Or at least that's what she would've wished, if she still believed in wishes.

In the meantime, try to comply with Tricia's request that you not be such a pain. Pretend to react appropriately while opening gifts, even if you don't really notice what you receive. Pick at the holiday food, leaving even MomMom's *rogaliki* unfinished. And slump in front of the TV staring at programs you never glanced at before, like the Roller Derby Game of the Week:

"C'mon down and see all the jams 'n' slams at the INTernational AMPHitheatre! You won't find a more sensational, action-packed sport in the world today!"

What made it mildly interesting was both teams (heroic Gangbusters and dastardly Renegades) having a girl-squad that skated half the game. Vicki watched them zip around

and around the track, jostling and walloping each other up against or even over the rail. During postgame interviews, a tall pretty Gangbuster called Kashka and a short cutie Renegade called Tonette kept shoving and insulting each other, with a mutual challenge to skate one-on-one in a grudge match race.

“You heard it here first, fans!” went the announcer. *“These two lovely combatants will be battling next week at the INTernational AMPHitheatre! Get your tickets in advance by calling this number—”*

Vicki almost thought about reaching for the phone.

But she had next to no money, and even less inclination to get up and go out.

*

Regrettably, getting and going had to be done when school started again. In pitch darkness too, thanks to an untimely resumption of Daylight Savings—in *January*. How this was supposed to ease the energy crisis would probably be a brainstorming topic; but to Vicki it was just another sign that the world as she knew it had come to an end.

Some of her classmates jumped to the same conclusion when they found they’d been joined by a boy whose pigmentation resulted from heredity rather than exposure to sunshine, sunlamp, or Man-Tan.

“A *colored* kid?” Keith Vespa boggled at Swede Swedebach. “Don’t tell me they’re letting *coloreds* in here now!”

“Not if WE got anything to say about it,” vowed Swede.

Mr. Brown, however, did not ask for their opinion. The little newcomer was invited to stand up and introduce himself, which he did with a bound and a bow and palms pressed together in front of his chest.

“*Namaste* my friends, that is ‘Greetings’ from where I used to live, oh how glad I am to be here in this wonderful City with you in this beautiful school, so clean and good-shape and uncrowded everything is than my old home, please excuse any mistakes I am making in speech as I will be trying so hard to soon talk the best American way, and among you here with Mr. Brown to instruct I am certain you will not tell any difference!”

Eagerly burbling lilt, like an oboe crossed with a Mixmaster.

This was Yash Pramanik, whose parents were reopening the grocery on the corner of Cypress and Walrock. Those who'd heard about it had assumed from the name that the Pramaniks would be Russian—"A very great amusement but untrue," said Yash, embarking on a detailed comparison (historic, geographic, and religious) of West Bengal with East Pakistan/Bangladesh.

Melissa Chiese rose unasked to formally welcome Yash to Reulbach Elementary on behalf of the Student Council, and incidentally shut his yap.

Through the next two hours Keith and Swede exchanged clandestine nods and showed each other surreptitious fists. At morning recess they were going to teach the New Colored Kid that anyone thinking this school, neighborhood, and City were clean, uncrowded, and in good shape needed a few more holes in his skull.

But their trepanning plans kept getting put on hold by Jonathan Dohr. Who'd grown significantly taller in recent months, with shaggier hair than ever, while wearing a billowy black trenchcoat whose only spot of color was a lapel button that said SABBATH BLOODY SABBATH.

Jon took no heroic stands, made no defiant speeches. He merely played his effective game of Guts: be where you're needed and intercept incoming. Whether on the playground (as Yash chattered about how he'd never seen so much snow before) or in the cafeteria (as Yash chirruped about how curry powder would work wonders on Mrs. Frank's coleslaw) or walking home to the Cypress corner grocery, Jon loomed perpetually by Yash's side—trailing Wernie Ball behind them like a washed-out lookout.

Now, Keith Vespa considered himself "an open-headed sorta guy." His mother was Irish, his father Italian, one aunt had married a Greek Orthodox while another had turned Quaker. Keith even included actual Jews among his personal schoolchums. He wasn't sure whether Jonathan Dohr was an actual Jew (befriending coloreds seemed like a Jewish thing to do) yet Keith had great respect for Jon's Guts, and wanted to impress upon him why this guardian-stunt was a serious mistake.

Except that it was hard to talk to Jonathan sometimes.

Mainly because Jon wasn't much for replying. At least not aloud—he'd *stare* at you with these kind of spooky eyes, deeper-set than in the average sixth-grade head: eyes that

made you think he could tell what *you* were thinking. (Girls seemed to like this about Jon. Which was extra weird, given how much they squawked about keeping secrets and not letting guys look up their skirts.) So Keith hesitated to take the next step and strike the first blow. As did Swede Swedebach, a born follower who never led anything but the Pledge of Allegiance.

“I never seen such a coupla pussies as you two,” Dunk Gunderson informed them.

He was a toad, and toads have no compunctions about devouring bugs. Just instinct, craftiness, and anticipation of a good after-dinner *URRRRRRRRRPPPP*; all of which Dunk possessed in abundance. Particularly instinct. Of the killer variety.

(Toad-tongue sliding over toad-lips.)

“Hey Hadji—that sister of yours: she the same color all over? Hunh? Hey Punjab—that sister of yours: didn’t she get bare-ass naked in *Oh! Calcutta*? Hunh? Hey Injun Boy—that sister of yours: how much she charge to go in the back room of your store?”

Hunh?

Rupa Pramanik (that sister of Yash’s) was the same age as Tricia Volester, and had much the same clean-good-shape. But she took bodily measurements into a whole other dimension, by way of the gypsy infanta groove Nina Gersh had been working for the past two years. Except that Rupa’s groove made Nina’s seem like a minor juvenile *crease*.

Nina and Stephanie Lipperman paid a special afterschool visit to Cypress Avenue to behold this for themselves. And Rupa, having changed out of ordinary City clothes into a chiffon *salwar kameez*, obliged by entering the store as if to dance a catchy item number in a Bombay musical: batting languorous eyes at the sudden gathering of boys and men.

“Am I able to help you, sirs? Would you not care to try these very nice mangoes? They are *soooo* mouth-wa-ter-ing.”

“HUNH,” went Nina Gersh.

“Yeah, but she’s out there in her *jammies*,” snortled Stephanie. “And didja see that big red pimple in the middle of her forehead?”

All the susceptible males saw was *chai*-tinted jailbait. Yet Rupa kept her clean-good-shape carefully uncrowded, with a Pramanik parent always onsite to prevent Calcutta (as it were) from getting Oh!d.

Nevertheless, Rupa's *chai* had enough *masala* for Dunk to mold it into mudpies. Which sent Yash from bewilderment to incredulity, and finally into a contretemps.

"You have smirched the honor of my sister, Dunk Gunderson!" he announced one recess on the playground.

"So whaddaya gonna *do* about it, wogbreath?" asked Dunk, giving him a dastardly-Renegade shove. Jonathan Dohr was on hand to catch and steady Yash like a hard-flung Frisbee; but Yash rebounded on his own, tugging up a coatsleeve to brandish a threaded bracelet in Dunk & Co.'s hooting faces. (Bracelets on a guy! What'd be next, earrings?)

"This is a *rakhi*," Yash told them, "given me by my sister as a symbol that I am protecting her from evil harm all my life. If you do not apologize, Dunk Gunderson, but prefer to fight, say the place and the time and I shall be there!"

"You gotta hand it to the little shrimp," said Brenda as she recounted this scene to the Peaches. "He acted just like what's his name—y'know, that Gunga Din character. Shoot him dead and he'll still bring you a drink."

Hayley and Sarah-Jill wanted to run tell Mr. Brown right away to save Yash's blood from being shed. Kris, though, said it was a romantic risk that a true brother had to take, while Brenda intended to witness the combat front-and-center—near enough to step in, if Jonathan didn't, before Yash got *too* slaughtered. What did Vicki think?

(Vicki had nothing to add.)

The fight took place Sunday afternoon behind the service station at Sharp and Brunt, which like most stations was closed on Sundays during the gas crisis. Dunk kicked things off with a fresh round of taunts; Yash responded with positive proof that Hindus, when it came to martial arts, did not behave like the Amish. Thin and slight as he was, Yash had been taking Sarit Sarak lessons and proceeded to chop-socky Dunk's block off.

The spectators stood back and watched him do this till a man in the Aaron's Lanes parking lot realized what was happening. Cops were called, bystanders scattered, and the only one who got in immediate trouble was Wernie Ball—for lingering to pelt Dunk's prone body with ice clumps.

Vicki barely took note of this. Or of subsequent events: how no one but Dunk's parents believed his claim that he'd been mugged by a gang of black men; how Yash proudly

admitted everything to the authorities, and got off with a slap on his *rakhi*'d wrist; how Gunderson outrage wasn't quelled by Dunk-had-it-coming-to-him-so-get-the-hell-over-it; how a midnight brick smashed the Pramanik grocery's front window, but the neighborhood rallied round and pledged to make "our Bengalis" their exclusive source for mangoes and coconuts and Darjeeling tea.

Some of the neighborhood, anyway. Plenty in Pfiester Park harbored deep misgivings about the Indian presence and its impact on the future. It was all very well for Harry Tamworth to quip that at least they wouldn't peddle cow meat, but suppose others of That Sort *did* move here? take over local businesses? send their children to our schools??

The Northside Chamber of Commerce thought this would be splendid, given the current state of the local economy. Already there was talk of a Pramanik cousin opening a fabric emporium in a vacant store on Sharp Boulevard. And wouldn't a nice little *tandoori* restaurant bring a boon to Brunt Street?

The Pomerantzes weren't convinced of that. Who needed *samosas* when *kifli* was readily available at the Kalács Bakery? Yet even they could feel a juggernaut being set, ever so gradually, in unstoppable motion.

It was trampling out Dunk Gunderson's wrathful vintage when he hobbled back to Reulbach and found himself isolated. Most of the sixth-grade girls had adopted Yash as a sister-defending mascot; Keith and Swede were enrolled in Yash's martial arts class; Jimmy Maxwell and Billy Goldfarb now gravitated toward Jonathan Dohr's company.

Mr. Brown asked Yash and Dunk to shake hands in front of the class.

Dunk went to kamikaze toad-pieces instead.

Billy would later compose an epic ballad about the ensuing bedlam, which he enhanced in the telling till "a hundred lives were lost / that *Exorcist*-y hour." In reality, Mr. Brown apprehended Dunk near the start of his outburst and physically ejected him from the room, with Dunk contributing several new vocabulary words en route.

"READ THE NEXT SOCIAL STUDIES CHAPTER TILL I GET BACK!" Mr. Brown shouted over the uproar.

Bang went the door. Stunned went the silence.

“Hey,” went Jimmy after awhile, “remember Tall Mark? You suppose he’s still up there in the Tower?”

“Nobody ever saw him come down,” said Keith.

“Nobody *ever* comes down from the Tower,” observed Kris.

“Wasn’t Mr. Brown wonderful, how he handled that?” Melissa sighed dreamily. As if “that” hadn’t been the boy she’d been fooling around with, to a greater or lesser extent, since the age of eight.

Eileen Agnew, though freaked by the chaos, turned her quiet crying into an obedient “MmmmYes.”

“What is undergone in this Tower you speak of?” asked Yash.

“Just desserts,” said Brenda, smacking satisfied lips.

“But that is not *fair!*” Yash exclaimed, picturing Dunk being served a big dish of *halwa*.

Then a noise came from the far side of the room, a kind of NUFF NUFF NUFF that made everybody’s flesh go creepy-crawl. They turned and looked, and saw Wernie Ball expressing audible enjoyment.

At the desk in front of him, Jonathan Dohr slowly shrugged and spookily smiled.

Mr. Brown strode back in, dusting off his hands. All but two pairs of student eyes were quickly riveted to the next chapter in the Social Studies book.

One exception was Melissa’s blue-gray ice cubes, rapidly thawing as she trained them on her teacher.

The other was Vicki’s black almonds, focused—as usual—on nothing in particular. Tumult or no tumult, creepy NUFFS or no creepy NUFFS, she remained apathetic about what seemed like a leftover episode of the recently-cancelled *Room 222*.

She couldn’t imagine any scenario in which Goofus would fight for her honor. Nor one where anybody even bothered to “smirch” it. Just the opposite, in fact: yesterday they were studying about Ancient Rome, and a reference to Vestal Virgins sent the boys into muffled convulsions. “Oh, so *that’s* what the initials ‘V.V.’ stand for,” Stephanie’d wickedly whispered—bestowing a new epithet on Vicki, to tuck beneath her pillow alongside “Klumsy Klutzer.”

For a moment she'd considered challenging Stephanie to a grudge match race.

But that much thought took too much effort.

No, better to just keep slumping. And slouching. And scraping along...

*

"Go wash up," said Tricia.

"...it's Saturday..."

"I—am—AWARE—of—that. Just do it, please. Scrub gently but thoroughly, including your eyelids. Then rub in plenty of moisturizer."

I know how to wash my face, Vicki retorted. To herself, as she went off to comply like a dumb old guinea pig. Serve Tricia right if she took all day...

"Do I have to come in there and do it for you?"

Dumb old Princess Smartysnoot. Acting all snappish because Mr. Merton had cast Mindy (That Bitch) Dowell as the lead in the Pfiester High School Spring Operetta. Solely due (everybody knew) to Mindy being a deep-bosomed senior. Not to mention obstinate, like her sister Roxanne and all the other Dowells; deaf to every sensible proposal about the Jacks & Jills Drama Club made by Tricia, a mere singing nurse—one of the mere singing nurses—in *South Pacific*.

(Rub her out of the roll call and drum her out of your dreams.)

Mr. Merton had compounded this folly by persuading Rupa Pramanik to play Liat. Yes, she looked ideal for the part; but Rupa (unlike Tricia) was a non-grade-skipping sophomore who ought to be kept in the chorus till she'd paid a few more DUES. If Rupa wanted applause, let her keep bagging pistachios for horny lechers at the corner grocery.

Then, as if Tricia's snit needed further aggravation, Cynthia Dollfuss went and lost her mind. Cynthia would've made a wonderful Nellie Forbush—every bit as buxom as Mindy Dowell and infinitely more lovable, plus a natural-born knucklehead. As she proved by falling for varsity wrestling phenom Fred Minerich, The Crushin' Croatian.

(For crying out loud.)

Now, Tricia Volester had done her fair share of jock-dating, but there were limits to how far you should *consort* with that sort of guy. Parking on Bluff Drive was acceptable; MOONING your sweet ass out a car window at hated rival Hartnett High School—well, that

was too gruesome to contemplate. Let alone actually *do*, cheek-to-cheek with Fred Minerich's *grosseus maximus*, and then *boast* about it.

But would Cynthia listen to reason?

Not when it pertained to Da Crusha.

Regardless: here was Patricia Elaine, star of "The Civic Hatchback: It'll Get You Where You're Going" and other Daddy & Princess commercials for Volester Motors. Here was Tricia the Patiently Encouraging, about to hone her skills applying makeup to other people, while giving her guinea pig of a little sister a special treat.

"Okay. Sit there. Face the mirror and pay close attention. I'll do your left side, then *you're* doing your right. And when we're finished you'll know how to put on your own makeup every day, and do it right every time!"

Vicki's face had been painted (by others) for Fischel Academy performances, and slathered with glitter as the dancing robot in *Winter Wonderland*. But not once had she ever embellished herself with cosmetics, unless you counted chapstick. Or the occasional furtive experiment when Tricia was safely absent, leaving her vanity stockpile undefended.

"(Sigh.) Mom'd never let me wear makeup every day..."

"Oh yes she would," said Felicia, entering with a tray of additional Revlon and Max Factor. "It was my idea. Call it an early-birthday makeover—oh honestly, you girls! There's no law against making your beds on Saturday!" She handed Tricia the tray and started stripping their mattresses.

Vicki shrank from the mirror like a good Vestal Virgin, but Tricia's juggernaut began to roll:

"Take a look at yourself. Go on, now. Do you know how lucky you are to have that olive complexion? Cherish and treasure it! You'll hardly ever need concealer, if you don't get zits. Just a light dusting of powder—we put it on with this big soft brush—start at the top, continue down the face, blend it from the center out... like so. *You* do the other side, the same way. All along your jaw and down your neck—don't leave a border—that's right. Now check for anyplace that isn't blended enough. Remember, you want to end up with a *natural* look. Attagirl! Okay now, the eyebrows. You don't want to get drastic with tweezers—just pluck out the *stray* hairs that grow where they shouldn't. Like this one,

and these two here—”

“—ow. Ow. Ow—”

“You do your real shaping with the eyebrow pencil. Black’s too harsh, so we’re using taupe. Take the brush end, smooth out your brows, turn the pencil around, start from the middle, work your way up to the arch with small gentle strokes, following the natural shape and filling it in—NOT LIKE THAT!”

“...sorry...”

“S’allright, my fault,” said Tricia before Felicia could intervene. “We were going too fast. Remember, it’s always easier to add a little more than get rid of too much. Clean it off and we’ll try again. It’s something you have to practice.”

Packtiss rang a faint bell in the back of Vicki’s head, as she was coached further on how to adorn its front. With eyeshadow (green/gold blend) and eyeliner (dark purple) and mascara (jet black) and blush (plum/bronze blend) and lipgloss (vibrant raspberry) carefully blotted, and—

Tricia smiling at her in the mirror.

“Not bad,” she said. “Not bad for almost twelve.”

Vicki quit focusing on individual features and took in the whole. Along with her breath. Which she let out with the clichéd yet heartfelt question, “Is that really me?”

“I should hope so,” said Tricia.

“*Oh*,” went Felicia, dropping a pillowcase to get all weepy about *My Two Beautiful Daughters*, who in turn had to give hugs to *Our Beautiful Mother*, while Vicki stared over their beautiful shoulders at her unaccustomed reflection. An image belonging to someone else, a half-familiar almost-grownup, as though Cousin Barbara had dropped by out of the blue. And into the raspberry/bronze/plum/jetblack/darkpurple/gold/green.

With pounding heart in powdered throat she went to present this new image to her father, hoping he’d neither laugh at it nor look as though he *wanted* to. But Ozzie, after a very dry swallow, said:

“Well... you sure are lovely today, Kitten. More and more like your Mom every time I see you... Uh, Fel, I need to ask you about that thing we were talking about earlier.”

“What thing earlier?” went Felicia as Ozzie led her into their room, shut the door, and declared in an energetic undertone that *I DO NOT WANT HER GOING OUT LOOKING LIKE THAT, BOYS’LL THINK SHE’S A TEENAGER!*

Well, she will be next year, Oz, and—

I’M TALKING ABOUT NOW! SHE’S NOT READY YET, DOESN’T KNOW WHAT BOYS ARE CAPABLE OF—IN FACT I THINK I BETTER TELL HER A FACT OR TWO ABOUT REAL LIFE, RIGHT THIS VERY MINUTE! SEND HER IN HERE—

Felicia came out (looking very much as though she wanted to laugh) and gave the eavesdropping Vicki an encouraging kiss. “If you have to, pretend you’ve got cramps,” she whispered: a crypticism quickly understood as Ozzie delivered a sermon so ambiguously euphemistic that no censor could have connected it to adolescent hormones or the perils of young lust.

“Hope I haven’t upset you too much, sweetheart,” he concluded.

Vicki (clutching her stomach) managed to convey how much she loved him and would always be his little girl, before escaping into the bathroom (“these darn cramps”) to shriek quietly in a towel that got coated with most of her makeover. Which Vicki was able to restore fairly well on her own, despite recurrent laugh-spasms that made her applicators tremble.

She ran downstairs then to show Hayley, who burst into tears.

“It’s not *fair!* Now you’re gonna be gorgeous, and I’ll just be your fat friend!”

Vicki chose to accentuate the positive. “C’mon up and we’ll have Tricia do you too! With your complexion I bet she can make you *glow.*”

“Really?” Hayley sniffled, and began to get excited just before her mother ripped that notion out by its roots. It was Mrs. Tamworth who came on up and got a glow on by having a few “words” with Felicia, who responded with a few of her own.

From that moment a certain coolness arose between the Volester and Tamworth households. Felicia had planned to restrict Vicki’s makeup usage to lipgloss and a little mascara; but on Sunday, overriding Oz, she gave Vicki express permission to go to Kris’s birthday party fully cosmeticized.

Reaction there was mixed.

“Aw, whaddaya wanna get dolled up like that for?” said Brenda.

“Superficiality’s not a good way to handle depression,” advised Sarah-Jill.

“Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!” shouted Kris, framing Vicki’s new image with her prime birthday present, a Minolta reflex camera. Officer Sam had begun teaching her photography, how to take the best pictures and develop them herself in the Rawberry basement darkroom. And Kris (to her father’s pride and mother’s relief) had decided to pursue this as her life’s work, rather than become a slinky-dressing lady detective.

The Peaches had chipped in to buy Kris a fancy leather-bound photo album, like the ones Melissa Chiese was forever bringing to class—the latest one full of Lauren Huttonish poses in half-unbuttoned blouses, which “accidentally” got left behind on Mr. Brown’s desk.

“Like is she trying to kid herself, or what?”

“It’s just her usual Brown-nosing.” (Giggles.) “‘Cept now she’s trying to do it with her *chest*.”

“Mr. Brown doesn’t really think about things like... chests. Does he?”

“Not a *sixth*-grader’s, anyway. Well, maybe Nina’s...”

“But you know something? We’ve never heard about Melissa having a father—”

“Hunh! I bet she ‘n’ her mother chiese’d him a long time ago.”

“No, listen: girls who don’t have a father are exactly the sort who fixate on older men as they grow up.”

“*Fixate*?”

“Ooh, Mr. Brown, *fixate* me there again...”

(Giggles and a chiding “You guys” from Hayley.)

“Hey,” Kate Rawberry said to Vicki, seated slightly apart from the others. “How’re you doing? Ankle okay?”

“Oh yes, it’s fine thanks.”

For Kris’s party, Kate wore her usual Pfiester High sweatsuit and not a trace of makeup; but she sported the unflappable aplomb that lent her lankiness its own kind of beauty. “You might wanna take up jogging,” she suggested. “Keeps you trim and toned from top to toe—that’s how my track coach puts it. You can jog with people, or just as easily on your own.”

Vicki blinked beaded lashes. “Well, you know, it’s wintertime...”

Kate smiled. Less spookily than Jonathan Dohr, but with the same incisive glint. “All I’m saying is, no matter how many friends you have or how good a team you make, sometimes the best you can be is by yourself. Doing your own thing. Unless, of course, you start to *limp*.”

“Hey Vicki!” Kris went just then, “think fast!”

As her Minolta gave another FLASH.

*

“We—are—going—to—SCHOOL,” Hayley said through gritted teeth on Monday morning. “*Not* a party!”

“Look,” replied Vicki (wearing lipgloss, mascara, and a touch of blush), “I’m sorry your mom won’t let you. I’m sure she will soon—”

“Maybe I think she’s right! I mean, I’m only twelve! *You’re* only—”

Tongue bitten then, to leave unmentioned that Vicki would still be eleven years old for another eighteen days. Which only a Blue Meanie would twit you about, aloud. (Along with the fact that all the BMs had been wearing makeup to school for at least six months.)

The girls said no more as they passed the Pramanik grocery and hiked up Cypress. They no longer escorted Goofus to and from Reulbach; these days he went with his friend Bink, glorying in second-grade independence.

Kris was waiting for them at the stoplight on Sharp, hopping around to keep warm and also with anticipation. “Wait’ll you see what I’ve got here!” she proclaimed, waving a fat tan envelope. “After you went home I spent hours in the darkroom! They hadda *force* me to go to bed, and even then I couldn’t sleep!”

She refused any peeks till they reached school, climbed to the third floor, and hung their outerwear in the cloakroom. Only then did Kris spread the envelope’s contents over their desktops.

“Oh wow,” breathed Hayley.

“I know!!” exulted Kris.

“Hey, who took these pictures?” demanded April Tober, before doing an unfeigned double-take at Vicki’s face. “Check *you* out! And these pictures too—they’re something

else!”

Black-and-white 8x10s. Some were of the Rawberrys, Claire and Officer Sam and glint-grinning Kate and Ness the noble (if slobbery) bulldog. Some of Hayley and Brenda and Sarah-Jill, self-conscious about being captured on film by a peer. A few of Kris herself, carefully taken to keep the FLASH from getting mirrored.

But the most striking ones, the standout memorable ones, were of Vicki Volester as half-familiar almost-grownup. With last autumn’s traumas etched into her stance and expression: how she held herself as she was caught by the lens.

For the first but by no means last time in her life, Vicki realized something fundamental.

Pain became her.

“You look nice,” offered Nina Gersh, who’d scarcely ever spoken to Vicki before.

Melissa said nothing. Nor did Stephanie Lipperman. Jimmy Maxwell, however, went “Allow *me*, señorita,” as he flung down a sweater (belonging to Lefty Levitch) so Vicki need not sully her feet on the slightly-slushy floor.

*

That Thursday was Valentine’s Day, for which the Student Council had been marketing heart-shaped cinnamon suckers (despite many remarks from boys as to their function). You placed your order, including an endearment to be squeezed onto a tiny attached card, and on Thursday the suckers were delivered more-or-less anonymously to your designated recipients.

Nina, April, and Melissa (of course) reaped the largest sucker-hauls among the sixth-grade girls, while Yash Pramanik scored highest among the boys. (“These sweets are highly gratifying,” he thanked his donors.)

Vicki might have made the top threesome had she not been too astonished to count the number of suckers heaped before her. She herself had made only four last-minute orders for the other Peaches, plus a contribution to the supersized group sucker for Mr. Brown. (Presented to him by Melissa Chiese in a half-unbuttoned blouse. Mr. Brown privately asked Eileen to alert Melissa about her overexposure, which meant he’d *noticed* it and so tickled Melissa pink.)

Vicki swept her uncounted cinnamon valentines under her desk-lid, not daring to read their tiny cards. But then in the Cafeteria she was cornered by Kris and April, who'd spent the past week yakking together about fashion photography and April's plans to become a chipmunk-cute runway model.

"We were thinking since your birthday's next," said Kris, "and you've gotten so ahTRAHctive and everything, that *you* should be the first one to have a boy/girl party."

"ME??" Vicki gaped. "*How?*"

"Easy! Just invite everybody in the whole class."

"But—they wouldn't come. *Boys* wouldn't."

"Sure they will!" said April. "Even if they act all stew-pid about it, invite them right and their mothers'll *make* 'em."

"But... I don't have *room* for everybody. Not in just an apartment."

"That's the other part of our idea," said Kris. "We saw this ad and clipped it out of the paper—show her, April."

YOUR FEET HAVEN'T LIVED UNTIL THEY'VE GROOVED ON SKATES AT THE PIVOTAL.

"See? A private roller rink party! Get your parents to reserve the rink on a Monday night. Everyone you invite buys a ticket instead of giving you presents. With the ticket they get rental skates, a slice of pizza, and a small pop."

"Small?"

"Well, they can pay extra for refills if they're thirsty. You do have to bring in your own cake and ice cream, and the ice cream has to be in Dixie cups. But they'll play you 'Happy Birthday' on the Pivotal's pipe organ."

"And that's it? No presents?"

"Vicki, you get all the *glamour*. None of us has had a boy/girl party since back in kindergarten."

"And *that* didn't count," said April. "So it's practically organized already. The only thing you have to worry about is Malinga's Stew-pid Council trying to take over—which is why *your* birthday party makes it perfect! She'd never even *consider* going to that."

"Malinga?"

“That’s what *they* call Melissa!” said Kris with frecklehappy glee, meaning the Blue Meanies. “I only wish *we’d* thought of it first.”

“Why Malinga?” asked Vicki.

“Haven’t you ever noticed when Eileen’s sick at home, Melissa doesn’t come to school either?” said April. “Not because she’s playing nurse for Eileen—hardly! More like staying in bed on her maid’s day off. So Stephanie started calling them ‘Aileen and Malinga.’”

Chipmunk-squint over toward Rox Dowell’s seventh-grade lunch table, at which Melissa’d wangled a seat. From which she directed a brief suspicious icicle-dart their way.

“So,” went Vicki, “when you say ‘everybody’ll come,’ you mean—”

“Every *guy*. If you invite them right.”

As Vicki evidently did: on the first Monday in March, the Pivotal Roller Rink was populated by the entire male half of Mr. Brown’s class. Well, not Dunk Gunderson (of course) but Jimmy and Billy and Keith and Swede were there, plus Yash and Lefty and Brainwashed Larry and Ordinary Mark. Even Wernie Ball, though he couldn’t skate and wouldn’t try. But Jonathan Dohr could and did, swooping around the rink with his SABBATH BLOODY SABBATH shag distorting around his head.

Goofus was allowed to bring Bink, and Hayley kept an eye out to ensure they caused minimal chaos. Cynthia pried herself off Da Crusha long enough to come as Tricia’s guest, spreading her much-missed sunbeams over the party. Jennifer Dollfuss and Kate Rawberry came too, gearing up like Gangbusters for the Lady Giant Killers’s first track meet. Kris and Brenda were right behind them, vying on mock-behalf of the Y and JCC. April Tober, the lone Blue Meanie present, allowed one boy after another to clasp her hand in skating partnership. Yash Pramanik, however, stuck close beside the blushing Sarah-Jill, who’d sought him out for tutoring on Hinduism and now needed his help to maintain equilibrium as the Wurlitzer shook the building with “Baby Elephant Walk,” “The Mickey Mouse Club Song,” “Yellow Submarine,” and the Pivotal’s own theme tune: “Where You Bump Into the Nicest People.”

Vicki required no bump to be swept off her feet and onto her rump (whose curvature didn’t serve too well as crash-cushion). So she spent most of the party playing hostess,

doling out slices of cake and pizza and Dixie-cupped ice cream, while fending off Wernie Ball's small-pop refill-offers.

Her classmates did drag Vicki out of the snack bar and back on the rink to sing "Happy Birthday" to her: boys and girls together in a near-operatic tribute, their voices turned vibrato by the throbbing organ pipes.

Not bad for just-turned twelve.

*

But it wasn't till a month later that she did any swooping.

Having cheered on Kate and Jen and the LGKs at a couple of their meets, Vicki steeled herself to go for a little jog. She owed it to her top and toes, she figured, to get them trim and toned again after the winter's discontent.

No big deal.

Nice springlike day, though. Pull on ordinary gym shoes (no one in The City ever called them "sneakers") over ordinary socks. New pair of shorts (last year's no longer fit) and a hand-me-down T-shirt that'd shrunk so much Felicia forbade Tricia to wear it in public. No such worries yet for Vicki; but the shirt was a nice shade of violet that went well with her cherished-and-treasured skintone. Not to mention the dash of gloss she added to her lips because, after all, you never knew what nice people you might bump into.

Here she was on the Esplanade in the actual Pfiester Park, after which the rest of the neighborhood had been named. Its Esplanade ran alongside a shallow pond, like a teardrop shed by the Lake As Big As An Ocean a mile or so to the east. Pfiester Park's pond got nastily stagnant by August, but here in early spring it was refreshing to stand by—or splash in, if you were a bird.

What cheer! what cheer! hollered a wet cardinal. And look: there went a couple of butterflies. Hovering for a moment in front of Vicki, as if waiting for her to get a move on.

Okay then. Jog already. Hup two three four. Lift those knees, move those arms, steady that breathing. Watch out for pavement cracks that could cause a klumsy-klutzer stumble.

Wheet wheet wheet wheet shrilled the cardinal, like an oddly-timed alarm clock—that woke up every muscle in Vicki's body, all at once.

And made them regain their memory. Not so much of ballet (*my gal is a fancy stepper*) as of basic rhythmic forward motion (*ginger with salt and pepper*) that could make you skim, make you glide, make you soar, make you SWOOP over the Esplanade.

She heard a whistle then and took it at first to be a starling, like the ones Old Mrs. Lo used to feed in 1W. But no, it came from a guy—an older high-schoolish guy—a not-at-all-bad-looking guy, who didn't even know her. Whose whistle wasn't meant to be satiric, but appreciative—at the sight of Vicki Volester jogging.

He must think I'm a teenager.

She flashed him a smile but quickened her pace. Suppose he started to follow her. Suppose he'd fallen in *love* with her (it could happen) and wanted to ask her to a prom! She'd have to break his heart by admitting she was still too young, as yet, to go out on a serious date.

Vicki decided there were lots worse things to worry about when you went for a jog. No, make that a *run*. Lengthen your stride till the wind's in your face and your hair streams behind like a dark silky banner as you run. Yeah: run.

15

Ritz of Passage

“It’s all choreography,” said Aunt Fritz, lounging on Ozzie and Felicia’s bed.

“*Shoes*,” ordered Felicia, sitting in her slip before a semi-antique dressing glass, with Vicki helping to put her hair up into a superchignon.

Fritzi indolently kicked off a pair of high-heeled slingbacks. “‘Hangin’ up my dancin’ shoes’... But like I was saying: a party planner does practically the same thing as a choreographer. So much goes on behind the scenes; so much depends on split-second timing; and when it’s over, you’re more exhausted than the performers. But Mr. Sauerteig singled *me* out for congratulations on a ‘job well done.’”

Mr. Sauerteig was Gross Uncle Doug’s district manager at Maidwright Insurance, down in the state capital. Fritz’d organized their annual awards luncheon, “*allegedly* with a committee to help, but the others just sat on their hands. *I* had to buckle down and do it all—plan the program, plan the menu, send out the invites, order the plaques and trophies—oh, everything.”

“If Mother could see you now! She always said she had to chain you to the sink to make you wash dishes.”

“*Tzzain* me, you mean. To *wasss dissses*.”

Felicia and Vicki smiled sadly at each other in Gran’s legacy dressing glass; but Fritz (ever Diamond Joel’s girl) shook her head.

“So anyway: Doug and I were thinking, why shouldn’t I do this full time? Arrange banquets, wedding receptions, political conferences—who knows, maybe even a governor’s

inaugural ball! I've already got the ideal name for my business. Are you ready? 'Puttin' on the Ritz.'"

"On the *Fritz*, did you say?" went Felicia, and Vicki tried not to giggle around a mouthful of bobby pins.

"You heard what I said," grouched Fritzzi. "I wish you'd be just a trifle supportive, for a change."

"I have ALWAYS—"

"Hold still!" Vicki intervened, pushing in the last pin and spraying the result with White Rain.

"Well!" said Fritzzi. "You have a dab hand, Miss Vicki."

"Is that good?"

"*Very* good," Felicia agreed, rising to take two dresses out of the closet. "Okay, Party Planner, which goes best with the new 'do? I know I can't compete with your Joan Collins look, but—"

"Who's Joan Collins?" asked Vicki.

"Who's—!" exclaimed Fritzzi. "Why, she was Great Britain's answer to Liz Taylor, that's all."

"*And* the idol of your auntie's heart, back in the day. So which dr—"

"*Land of the Pharaohs*, darling! I remember every line. 'This slave girl is insolent and slow to obey!' 'Only *gold* feels like something to be caressed!' When I saw that movie, Vicki, I wasn't much older than you are now—"

"Awp!" went Felicia. "You were *nineteen*!"

"—hush—and I knew then that I too was destined to be Queen of Egypt!"

"So she ran out and found a job as a chorus girl," Fel concluded, rustling the dresses. "C'mon now, which?"

"That was just my first step down the royal path," Fritzzi replied. "Wear the tent—*not* the pleats. I won't charge you for this consult, seeing that we're both Schmelzettes and all."

The ruffly tent dress was carefully lowered over Fel's superchignon, and the Schmelzettes made a grand entrance to *rowrowr* catcalls from Ozzie and Gross Uncle Doug. Vicki tried to loiter in the kitchen, keeping her cheeks out of G.U. Doug's reach, but got

called forth to receive a long list of cautionary instructions. Tonight would be her very first professional babysitting gig, even if it was only Goofus. The grownups were heading downtown to dine at Flaming Sally's and see its "Girls à la Carte" review.

"Start with the clams casino," Doug advised (grossly) as they started downstairs.

"Clams casino?" said Ozzie. "'Too much—for one James Bond!'"

"Remember," Felicia called from the landing, "Mrs. Hull's just across the hall."

"I *know* that, Mom. Have a good time and keep looking great."

"I always do both," Fritz remarked as the adults exited.

"Psst!" went Junior Hull, his huge ballcapped head poking out of 3E. (He'd never liked Doug Carlisle and hid whenever that G.U. visited Walrock Avenue.) "Is the coast all cleared up, Vicki?"

"Yeah, they're gone," she told him, standing aside so Junior could join Goofus in front of the Magnavox. "Howdy, Joo-nee-or!" said Goofus; "Howdy, Goo-fee-er!" said Junior; and they settled down to watch the Boys in Blue dig themselves deeper into the baseball cellar.

Vicki provided them with a large bowl of popcorn, two towels for carpet placemats, and bottles of Filbert's with stern injunctions against any spillage, shakage, or high-volume belchage. Goofus might've defied her, but docile Junior would help keep him in line—so long as they didn't start pitching kernels into each other's mouths.

Vicki heaped cushions on the bay window seat and laid herself atop them, holding a transistor radio permanently tuned to The Big 89. Every night in bed she covertly listened through an earphone to *Boogie Check, Boogie Check, OOH-AHH*. Most nights she could've listened openly, since Tricia was usually off testing the limits of her summer curfew; but Vicki liked the sense of contraband intimacy that an earphone brought.

Tonight Tricia'd pounced on Cute Cousin Miles and spirited him away to "show him around." (Bobby Sherman might no longer be *au courant*, but lookalike blue eyes, white teeth, and cleft chin never lost their appeal.) Since the newly-licensed Tricia had taken the Volester Civic, and done so clad in short-shorts and haltertop, Vicki figured a lot of the showing-around would take place while parked on Bluff Drive.

Laaaay-daaaay! When you're with me I'm smyyyy-leeeng began Vicki's favorite song, by a local group called Styx. Silently she harmonized with them, imagining C.C. Miles telling Tricia *You're my laaaay-daaaay of the morrrr-NEEEENG*—except that in this reverie it wasn't Tricia being serenaded, but Vicki herself.

Miles had come to The City with his folks to check out universities he might apply to. Tricia's college sights were set on the performing arts program at Ann Arbor. Kate Rawberry and Jennifer Dollfuss had graduated last spring from Pfiester High; Kate was off to Iowa State and Jen to Wheaton. Cousin Barbara would be attending Aquinas in Grand Rapids, where (theoretically) Aunt Bonnie could keep an eye on her.

Everything was changing. Richard Nixon, who'd been President almost since forever, had recently resigned. Mikhail Baryshnikov had defected from the Bolshoi Ballet and sought asylum in Toronto (which made him sound crazy). The Grusza girls no longer lived in 1W; rumor had it that Corliss had stolen Candice's fiancé without his even noticing, and now both twins were gone. The two Mrs. Partridges feared they'd never speak to each other again.

Vicki could not fathom such estrangement.

Maddening as Tricia might occasionally be, her total absence from Vicki's life was unthinkable. It'd be bad enough when she left for Michigan a year from now, even if that meant Vicki'd have the entire bedroom to herself. (Though possibly not *here*: Mom had begun "thinking aloud" about a house of their own, maybe in some Nice Northern Suburb such as Pidge Tober yearned for.)

Pink Floyd's "Time" began its opening cacophony of ticks and chimes and alarm-clock clanging. Usually Vicki enjoyed this song, but tonight it made her shiver: all those lyrics about fritter and waste, shortening breath, sinking suns. Things you shouldn't have to think about when you weren't even thirteen yet.

If you ever *did* get a boyfriend to sing "Lady" in your ear, Tricia probably *would* be able to steal him—but why would she want to? No: twenty years from now, you and Tricia would be like Mom and Aunt Fritz were today. (Hopefully with no younger version of Gross Uncle Doug in either of your lives.)

Hear the softly spoken magic spell through the transistor earphone.

“Quit it, you guys!” Vicki commanded as the song ended, the spell was broken, and popcorn kernels began to fly.

*

Back in the olden days (say six months ago) she and Hayley might’ve inveigled Brenda over without telling her Miles Carlisle was there, to find out if she’d still get all stammering in his presence.

But that was then and this was the Age of Everything’s Changing. Vicki didn’t see that much of her friends nowadays—neither over the summer, nor when seventh grade started. She and Hayl still walked to school together in the morning, and they’d chat about homework or what had been on TV last night, but they no longer hung out in each other’s apartments. Hayley was busy every afternoon and weekend with the youth group at her Baptist church, blissfully looking after littler kids, and Vicki was pleased for her but not overly interested in hearing about it.

They seldom encountered Kris at the Sharp stoplight anymore. She and April Tober were now best friends, to the point of getting braces from the same orthodontist on the same day. Kris remained her usual impish self and April was more amiable than ever, but they turned every conversation around to photography. April had launched a genuine modeling career with Kris in tow, and while their descriptions of catalog shoots were fascinating at first, they soon verged on monotonous.

Which was unusual in an Age of Everything’s Changing.

The Gundersons had left Pfiester Park, to universal good riddance; the Gershes were gone too, their gypsy caravan rolling away to universal anguish among Vicki’s male classmates. Jimmy Maxwell and Billy Goldfarb (who told everybody to start calling them “Jim” and “Bill” this year) crooned a Nina-elegy set to John Denver’s “Annie’s Song” that featured eight different synonyms for breasts.

A water pipe behind Reulbach’s gym wall had burst during summer vacation, flooding the gym and ruining its floor, with no funds in the budget for quick repair. Which was a gold-plated opportunity for Roxanne Dowell and Melissa Chiese, this year’s Student Council President and Vice President, who started a fundraising crusade with maximum personal publicity. Until a new gym floor could be installed, there would be no school

dances; the kitchen staff had threatened to strike if the cafeteria was used, refusing to believe any student clean-up committee would live up to its title. Which was fine with Melissa (who couldn't have generated half as much hype advertising sockhops) and her mother, Carmel Sanborn Chiese (who was campaigning for a seat on the Northside School Board and "happy to ride my little girl's coattails").

(Which sounded like a really weird thing to do.)

A side benefit of all this was Melissa's frequent departures from the classroom, given official leave to go do another interview or appear before some potential benefactor. Eileen Agnew kept faithful track of her regular assignments—ghostwriting most of them, everyone suspected—and spent her meager free time with Mitzi Freund, Melissa's detestable sixth-grade protégée. They acted like the last upholders of the Holy Blue Meanie standard.

Which should've been laughably pathetic.

Except that the Peaches were pretty much over and done with, too.

Brenda seemed the most upset by this. Despite being the oldest, she went around with a palpable air of "Doesn't anybody wanna *play*?" till Kris (reproached once too often for getting palsy-walsy with April) told her to grow up already. Then Brenda withdrew into the truculent glower she'd exhibited as a solitary New Girl.

Vicki was sorry about that; sorry for the end of quintet camaraderie. She invited Brenda to go jogging on the Esplanade, but Brenda got too competitive about it—wanting only to race, gloating when Vicki couldn't beat her.

"Life isn't always about who's fastest!" Vicki declared.

"Aw, you're no fun anymore," said Brenda.

Did that mean Sarah-Jill would end up as Vicki's best friend? You couldn't ask for a better study-buddy; but if Kris and Hayley were a bit boring these days, Sarah-Jill was downright tedious. She *still* needed jokes explained to her, too often, and preferred to go visit Yash and Rupa at the Pramanik grocery.

"There's more to life than zither music!" Vicki informed her.

"Do you mean sitar?" Sarah-Jill inquired. "They're both stringed instruments, but Indians play the sitar—a type of long-necked lute. Zithers are central European, though

when they're chorded they're called autoharps and played by American folk musicians—also bluegrass.”

“Um, yeah, okay,” mumbled Vicki.

Who, six months ago at the Pivotal, had been the toast of the class.

Now she felt like toast gone cold, fallen butter-side down, tossed to the birds.

An Age of Everything's Changing ought to be for the *better*, right? Not bummerdom at the same old school with the same old people you'd known almost since forever. Boys might act more aware of you than before, but they expressed interest in the same old immature ways—Wernie Ball most persistently. With Dunk Gunderson gone, he strutted around like a liberated hostage and was all the time acting like Snoopy as Joe Cool.

Oh my GAHD.

Had *she* started doing that, last March? And been punished by drifting apart from the Peaches into you're-no-fun-anymore isolation?

Forget toast. All she wanted was someone she could hang out with, *without* feeling time tick dully away. A girl her own age to go shopping with, see movies with, trade gossip with—have *fun* again with. A new friend, if not a best friend—though a new best friend would be nice. Then maybe she'd stop hearing Pink Floyd remind her about hanging on in quiet desperation, every night and every day.

That was what Vicki would wish for, if she still believed wishes could come true.

*

“This is absurd,” said lugubrious Mrs. Lundgren. “Yes—it is *absurd* to try educating seventh-graders this way, in this day and age. You should be in a proper junior high setting, with a teacher and classroom suited for each particular subject. Instead, you continue to be treated as though you were seven years old—sent out twice a day to a *playground*, when you could be spending that time applying yourselves in a proper study hall. Absurd! We are defeated before we begin.”

Her pupils applied their rear ends to shifting uneasily, in one-size-fits-all seats behind juvenile schooldesks in the single classroom they occupied from eight till three—a room scarcely different from their first-to-sixth-grade rooms, other than its posters being less cuddlesome.

“Nevertheless,” Mrs. Lundgren continued (before Jim Maxwell could propose they call it a day for the rest of the year), “we must carry on as best we can, despite everything. I shall endeavor to conduct class in a manner befitting a proper junior high setting—difficult as that will prove.”

For instance: Reading and Spelling were now called “Language Arts,” and promoted to multimedia status by the class being divvied up into teams of two and sent in pairs of four to the “Resource Center” (i.e. school library) for an hour per day. There the teams were expected to collaborate on 500-word book reports containing at least three illustrations, one of which had to be in color.

Mrs. Lundgren would not permit them to choose their own partners—she’d already had to separate Kris and April, following nonstop braces-flashing chatter—and girls were not allowed to link up with boys, lest Language Arts be reduced to a hankypank hootenanny.

So Vicki found herself teamed with (of all people!) Stephanie Lipperman. She turned to swap grimaces of dislike with this old adversary, who didn’t even glance her way

It occurred to Vicki that she’d barely noticed Stephanie this September. Normally there’d’ve been all manner of snipes and snortles and malicious observations, but lately Stephanie only spoke when called upon—and then in a cloggy congested way, as though afflicted by hay fever.

(Stuffy Lipperman.)

They were one of the first teams sent that afternoon to the Resource Center. Vicki took her time collecting ring binder and purse, so Lefty Levitch and Ordinary Mark Welk would leave the room ahead of her. (By now she knew too well that guys would yield precedence not to be gallant, but for a chance to watch her tush wiggle as she walked.)

Stephanie just stood there in the aisle, not so much waiting as spacing out. She wore nondescript jeans and T-shirt, hardly any makeup, and a shag cut gone split-endy. Only her greenish facial tinge was the same as ever—and that might be due to today’s lunch of chop suey and wax beans.

They trailed Lefty and Ordinary Mark down the corridor, Stephanie still acting distant and closemouthed. Vicki, with a multimedia book report in jeopardy, decided to break the ice.

“Hear anything from Nina these days?”

“NO.”

Well! How rude, thought Vicki. *Excuse me for pretending to take interest—*

Stephanie choked back a big fat phlegmy sob.

(Oh Gahd.)

They were passing the third-floor girls’s room, so Vicki darted in and dragged Stephanie after her. It being safely vacant, Stephanie clutched a sink and gave way to all-out blubber.

Oh GAHD! Should I run for the nurse? Vicki wondered. If Brenda or Melissa were here, they’d be hurrying to spread the news that “Lipperman’s cracking up! Come bring your Instamatics!”

“Um,” said Vicki, “please don’t cry.”

“—you didn’t know her—” (sob) “—none of you knew her—” (sob)

“Um, Nina’s okay, right? I mean, she really did move away, didn’t she?”

(Sobs.)

The washroom door swung open and a mouselike fifth-grader entered, hall pass in hand. She goggled at them—clearly wanted to retreat—just as clearly needed to *go*—so plunged into a stall and slammed its hatch closed.

“Oh sh-h-h-it,” wept Stephanie, “Janine Agnew! Sh-h-h-e’ll tell Eileen, and it’ll get all over sch-o-o-ool.”

Vicki rapped on the stall.

“S’taken!” went a scared little voice.

“Janine? I’m in seventh grade with your sister. Forget everything you saw just now. If you tell Eileen or anyone and I find out, you’re gonna be in a whole lotta trouble. Understand?

Scared little “MmmmYes.”

“Okay then. Finish your business, wash up, and keep your yap shut.”

Flush. Janine emerged with eyes averted, thrust her hands (including the hall pass) under a faucet, and scuttled away.

“Think that’ll work?” Vicki asked.

“Scared the hell outta *me*,” said Stephanie.

She dried her tears, rinsed her face, declined Vicki’s offer of mascara, and led the way down to the first floor—where she stupefied Vicki by striding through the east doors. Out to the parking lot, leaving school before the final bell had rung, heedless of whether any adults might see.

OhmyGahd she HAS cracked up!

Stephanie paused while still visible. Looked back and jerked her head to the left.

Was Vicki expected to come too? What would happen if she didn’t? Might a life be at stake, not to mention traffic if Stephanie threw herself into it?

On the other hand, ditching meant detention if caught by The Heinie—aka Mr. Heinzerling, Assistant Principal & Security Guard, who packed (it was said) an actual gun under his suit jacket.

Stephanie’s head jerked again, more insistently.

Vicki, feigning abstraction, sidled out and around to the cafeteria dumpsters. Anticipating confrontation by The Heinie, or Old Overalls, or the Northside School Board, or Mrs. Frank personally disposing that day’s garbage. (Though the dumpsters smelled like that’d been done already, and not so long ago.)

Stephanie leaned against the wall, digging a Bic lighter and half-empty pack of Virginia Slims out of her shoulderbag. *You’ve come a long way, baby...*

“Want one?”

“Um, no thanks. I’m in training—that is, y’know, I wanna go out for track in high school, so...”

Sardonic eyebrow hoist but no commentary. Stephanie lit up, took a deep coughless drag, exhaled at smoky length, and began to talk.

Yes. The Gershes *had* moved away. Last June, to one of the western suburbs. Nina’d promised to call with her new phone number. Three months had passed since then.

“Did—did you guys talk a lot on the phone, before?” Vicki asked.

“We really *were* best friends. I didn’t make that up.”

“I know, but—I mean, she was always so quiet.”

“Nina was bashful. She was! She loved being *looked* at, but never knew what to *say* to people. When guys, y’know, like flirted with her, she’d grab my hand and make me do all the talking. I was good at that. Sometimes they’d flirt with me, too... But when it was just us, me ‘n’ Nina, she’d talk a lot. She was my best friend. She said so...”

Deep sniffly inhalation.

“We better go in,” said Vicki.

Idle kicks of heel against bricks. “I hate school this year. Nothing’s like it used to be. Nobody gives a damn.”

“I know,” Vicki sighed.

“...she coulda called, at least...”

“Yeah, well. C’mon. We still have to choose a book to report on.”

“Oh, I got the perfect one already,” said Stephanie, taking a hardcover out of her shoulderbag. *Mirror of Danger*, by Pamela Sykes.

“Why’s it perfect?”

“Tell you why after school.” (Casually tentative:) “Wanna go to Biff’s?”

For an appetite-spoiling hot dog and fries? This was one of Goof’s PeeWee football practice afternoons, which Felicia would spend splitting a pot of decaf at Millie Shapiro’s. Vicki’d been given her own set of keys to the greystone and 3W, so she could go home anytime before five o’clock. And she’d only picked at today’s chop suey and wax beans, whose remnants were perfuming the atmosphere.

“Okay,” she said.

Stephanie got them back indoors without encountering The Heinie or any other grownup. Heading upstairs, they ran into Ordinary Mark and Lefty Levitch.

“Hey, where’d you two go?” asked Lefty.

“For some girl talk,” Vicki retorted. And from Stephanie came a concurring snortle.

*

Mirror of Danger turned out to be spine-tingling. Lucy, an orphan who’d been raised by an old-fashioned aunt, was sent to live with distant cousins after her aunt’s death. The cousins were well-meaning but boisterous and ultramodern, so Lucy hid from them in their old-fashioned attic. There a dusty mirror showed not only her own reflection but that of a

girl named Alice, who urged Lucy to come join her in the same house—a hundred years earlier. Then Alice’s invitations became demands...

Vicki thought this a good straightforward ghost story. Steph suggested it might all be happening in Lucy’s head, with Alice a disordered figment of her lonely imagination. Vicki argued against this interpretation, noting that one of the noisy cousins actually bumped into Alice.

“That was a mistake,” said Stephanie. “The writer should’ve left it up in the air, y’know, so we wouldn’t be sure.”

Like happened in this other book, a famous one by a man with two first names, where a governess suspected *two* ghosts were possessing the children she looked after—except maybe *she* had turned screwy (hence the title) and begun hallucinating. Either way, one of the kids wound up dead.

“Where’d you find a book like that? It sounds awful.”

“Does not! It’s lots better than *The Exorcist*. And I found it in the library—not the ‘Resource Center’ but the *real* library—where I go when I wanna READ.”

“Well, I didn’t think you went there to play the CLARINET.”

(Pause.)

(Tension-easing snortles.)

“Well anyway,” said Steph, “mentioning that book’ll score us *mucho* points with Old Lady Lundgren.”

Vicki hesitated, afraid of being called babyish, then proposed an additional parallel: the “Bad Wednesday” chapter in *Mary Poppins Comes Back*. Stephanie clapped her hands, saying she’d racked her brain for weeks trying to remember that story and where it came from. They reread “Bad Wednesday” and found it amazingly sinister—Jane getting trapped in the Past, unable to go home because it hadn’t been built yet, her parents hadn’t even been born; she was stuck with that horrible Great-Grandfather and his cackly *Heh! Heh! Heh!s*.

(Maybe it wasn’t so bad if everything *did* change, once in awhile, and you could go with the flow.)

The bell rang. “I gotta take my little sister to the movies on Saturday,” griped Stephanie. “She wants to see *The Castaway Cowboy*, but no way am I sitting through a

Disney film. So we're going to *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*."

"The what of who?"

"That cute guy from *American Graffiti*—not Ronny Howard, y'know, the other one."

(Diffidently offhand:) "Wanna come too?"

They agreed to meet on the platform at Pfiester Park Station. There Vicki was briefly shocked by Stephanie's having shrunk down to third-grade size, looking ready to re-audition for "Hot Lips" Homily in *The Borrowers Ballet*. But then present-day Steph materialized next to her former self.

"This is Danielle."

"*Didi!!*" went her little sister. "I wanna carry my own el tokens!"

Stephanie cuffed the back of her head.

"Owwwwwww, you *murdered* me! I'm telling."

"She's a regular vampire," Steph told Vicki. "I keep killing her but she won't crumble into dust."

"*You* crumble," said Didi, making a couple of index-finger fangs, then scowling over them at Vicki. "Is your brother Christopher Volester? Eww, he's GROSS! You have a GROSS brother!"

"You're right. Imagine having to *live* with him."

"*Ewww!*"

"Eat meals with him—share a *bathroom* with him—"

"*EWWWW!*"

Didi begged to hear worse things about Goofus, squeezing herself between the big girls when they boarded the train and rattle-clattered away to the Silbergeld Theatre. Whose cut-short marquee boasted it contained "More Stars Than in the Milky W"—meaning the walls and ceiling were spangled with bits of glitter like chintzy constellations.

"What a dump!" went Didi.

"It is not!" Steph retorted. "Me 'n' Nina saw *The Great Gatsby* here, and *Daisy Miller*. She loved the outfits they wore back then."

Oh enough with the Nina nostalgia, thought Vicki. *I'M here now, aren't I?*

Yes she was. And quickly dumbfounded that no usher came to haul her and the Lippermans out by their neck-scruffs. They were way too young for this PG-rated film, especially Didi who commented on every PG-itude:

“That horse is pooping!... That man *stepped* in it!... That one said ‘hell’!... He said ‘balls’!... He said ‘pecker’!... *He’s* got a hairy chest!” (This in disgust at a shirtless Richard Dreyfuss.)

“Not so loud,” whispered Vicki. Filling in as big sister since Steph’s attention was riveted to the screen, particularly during the bizarre “Happy Bar Mitzvah, Bernie!” film-within-a-film: “*Even more intricate than a snowflake—the BAR MITZVAH!*” Followed by shots of marching soldiers, dancing Africans, bloody razor blades.

And jagged cackles from Stephanie: “*Heh! Heh! Heh!*”

Vicki began to wish she hadn’t come to this so-called comedy. Steph lapsed into silence that lasted through the trip back to Pfiester Park Station, where Vicki couldn’t wait to say bye-bye and vamoose.

But Didi seized her arm and started tugging her down off the platform. “C’mon!” she said, “you hafta come home with us!”

“No she doesn’t,” Steph blurted.

“Yes she *does!*”

“There isn’t enough time for her to visit—”

“There’s *plenty* of time! You *wanna* come, dontcha Vicki?”

“Um. Is it far?”

“Not far enough,” rasped Stephanie.

The Lippermans lived on Tendone Avenue, a long narrow street between Hagenbush and Bohnsetter. Their house (like its inhabitants) was a greenish shade of white and had sharp pointy edges. Vicki could hear the inhabitants from halfway up the block. By the time they reached the house and squeezed inside, she could guess why Steph thought *Mirror of Danger* was the perfect book; also why Steph went to a library when she wanted to READ.

Acid flashback to XY Nursery School—small rowdy frantic children everywhere. Pushing and shoving through the rooms, racing up and chasing down the stairs, tumbling out of an open (ground floor) window, grabbing and throwing and dropping and spilling. Some

could only toddle or crawl, but they too contributed shouts at their lungtops. A harassed-looking dog crept around the melee; two disdainful cats sprang from one upper level to another; and an extremely pregnant lady (with hair in more curlers than one head should safely accommodate) ignored it all while engaging in a filibuster over the phone:

“Kindly remind her that *I* am this year’s recording secretary, and as such am prepared to stay on this line till *Chelm* freezes over!...”

Didi got carried off by tiny disputants seeking arbitration. Vicki lingered just inside the front door, sensing Steph at her elbow but not daring to catch her eye. She focused instead on a pair of huge crossed swords hanging above what was probably a couch, under layers of jumbled hodgepodge.

What could Vicki say?

What *wouldn’t* cause Stephanie to grab one of those swords and start using it?

“Next time,” she tried to murmur, then had to yell confidentially, “NEXT TIME YOU TAKE DIDI TO THE MOVIES, I’LL BRING MY BROTHER GOOFUS—BUT LET’S NOT TELL ‘EM THE OTHER ONE’LL BE THERE, TILL THEY *GET* THERE AND FIND OUT! OKAY, STEPH?”

“Yeah,” went Stephanie, after awhile.

*

She called her parents Herman and Lily, like the Munsters. Herman was a traveling salesman, covering a wide territory for Derente Cutlery: knives, scissors, pinking shears. “First thing he does every time he comes home is knock up Lily again.” Not all the children Vicki’d seen were Lippermans; some were neighborhood acquaintances, others showed up out of nowhere. Homes had to be found for them afterward, as if they were a litter of kittens that couldn’t be drowned.

Stephanie was the firstborn bonafide Lipperman. Like Jane in “Bad Wednesday,” being The Eldest meant having to get out of bed earliest and eat lumpy porridge. She’d worked hard in recent years to foist most of The Eldest’s housekeeping/childminding duties onto the next two in line, her brothers Phil and Kip, with Didi champing at the bit to gain a share of accredited bossiness. Meanwhile, “Tiger Lily”—when not occupied inside a delivery room—was bent on gaining and maintaining big-shot status at the JCC and in the Temple Sisterhood.

“And it’s not like we’re superJewish! I mean, do we run home before sunset on Fridays? No! Do we have different dishes for meat and milk? You’re lucky to find enough dishes that aren’t broken to feed everybody at one meal! And maybe we *don’t* eat porkchops or lobster, but who the hell could afford lobster with all those brats in the house??”

“Take it easy,” urged Vicki.

They were on the train coming back from *Airport 1975*. Didi (who’d thought she was going to see *Benji*) had proclaimed her life ruined by Goofus’s appearance, and he (wild to watch anything with potential crashes) had staggered around clutching his throat: “Arrgghh, I’m breathing her *smell!*” Now they were sharing a train seat and vying to do the cruelest imitation of Karen Black:

“There’s no one left to fly the plane! Help us! Oh my God, help us!”

“Don’t yell ‘Gahd’ on the train,” Stephanie ordered. Her mood was still sour-apple-y after having to help lead the Young People’s Congregation that morning. “OhmyGahd, I am gonna quit Hebrew school right after my Bat Mitzvah! That *minute*. That *second*. Tiger Lily can hoot ‘n’ holler all she likes. It’s bad enough she’s been on my ass for a whole freaking year about *having* a Bat Mitzvah, and not just any Bat Mitzvah but one that’ll ‘make a splash.’ Like I’m supposed to have it at the beach.”

“That’d be kind of cool,” said Vicki, who’d heard about these ceremonies but never been to one.

“It would,” Steph admitted. “Like they’d really *let* me, though. Even after Lornette Koch made such a gahdam cannonball with *her* ‘splash.’”

Lornette—a sprinkling from the Veruca Salt shaker—had compelled her parents to shell out for a KOCH: SHE’S THE REAL THING reception. Its theme came complete with chamber orchestra and multiracial chorus to render “I’d Like to Teach the World to Sing (in Perfect Harmony)” on an artificial hillside at the Scrimpton Inn Ballroom.

“Now Lily wants to *outdo* the Kochs. As if we had their kind of bread in the bank! We’ve gotta have the fanciest caterer, hardest-to-book band, most expensive of everything. But if I needed braces on my teeth? Forget it—nothing that can’t later be a hand-me-down. Even the *boys* wear my old clothes!”

“You *don’t* need braces, do you?” asked Vicki, peering at Steph’s mouth.

“No, thank Gahd. Otherwise April Tober’d call me a copycat. And Melissa’d hold a gahdam news conference to say I had *broccoli* caught in ‘em—‘So that’s why we need your donations—’”

“—for our new gym floor, *now!*” Vicki chimed in. Suddenly recalling an age-old taunt (*Stuffy’s mommy won’t buy her any boo-oots*) that brought retroactive shame.

Speaking of Bat Mitzvahs, Brenda Pomerantz’s was scheduled for the week after Stephanie’s, despite Brenda being a few days older. For a long time it’d been uncertain whether Brenda would even have one, partly because of the expense (fewer pastries sold during the recession meant less bread in the bank) and partly Brenda’s difficulties in mastering Hebrew. Which not only had to be read backwards, but was “crammed with all these drippy little dots ‘n’ squiggles”—i.e. vowel points, germination marks, and cantillations.

“None of them will appear on the actual Torah,” Mrs. Pomerantz said reassuringly.

“THAT DOESN’T MAKE IT ANY EASIER, MA!”

It was Brenda’s fault that Vicki experienced reverse déjà vu while running on the JCC’s indoor track. Stephanie had objected to her jogging through City streets (“You’ll get yourself mugged or raped on every block!”) and brought her here on a family guest pass. Vicki found the Jewish Community Center almost identical to the Unitarian church—same bunch of talkative gesticulatory people, quaffing the same pungent coffee out of white styrofoam cups—except the JCC had more mezuzahs.

And a familiar head, popping up behind things and peeking around them at her. Secret Agent Stuffy rides again! Only this time, Brenda was the one playing spy.

Before she could hide more effectively, Vicki ran over. “Hey Bren! Fancy meeting you here!”

“Hunh,” went Brenda, gripping a basketball. “Running, hunh?”

“Yeah! Wanna join us for a few laps?”

“Don’t think so.” To Stephanie: “Finish your *Chesed* project, Simmm-cha?”

“Ages ago,” said Stephanie. “Written your speech yet, Tzzzzil-la? Don’t forget it’s gotta be memorized.”

“Baloney! You don’t hafta memorize the speech!”

“Oh no? Sure about that?”

Brenda gave her a snap-crackle *aynhoreh* and the basketball a vicious bounce. “I’ll call *you* tonight,” she warned Vicki, and stalked off dribbling.

“WHAT A BITCH!” seethed Steph.

“Now don’t start,” Vicki said soothingly. “Don’t let her get to you... What’s a Simmmcha project?”

“*Chesed*—not Simcha. *I’m* Simcha—that’s my Hebrew name. A *chesed*’s an ‘act of loving kindness’—not that POOCHIE’d know anything about that!” She pressed her hands to her face and mumbled through them. “Lily signed me up to do I forget how many. Nursing home. Soup kitchen. Collecting soap for the homeless.” Hands dropped; wan smile attempted. “Got any Irish Spring you don’t need?”

*

“How the hell can you hang out with that skag?” Brenda demanded over the phone.

“Oh c’mon,” sighed Vicki. “We’re practically teenagers now—you two especially! And Stephanie’s not so bad anymore. I mean, it’s not like I’m hanging out with *Melissa*.”

“Hunh! Well, me ‘n’ you go *way* back, right? ‘We are the Peaches—far out is our reaches,’ remember?”

“Course!”

“Okay then. I need you to find out everything you can about Lipperman’s Bat Mitzvah. We’re gonna show her that NOBODY can outparty the Pomerantzses!”

“Oh Brenda, don’t even try. Steph’s mother’s sworn like this oath to outspend Lornette Koch’s parents, even though *they* live in one of those Greenfield condominiums and drive a Mark IV. Didja hear about the bash they threw for Lornette?”

“Yeah,” Brenda said grudgingly. “But dammit, Vicki! I can’t let my folks try their best and still look cheap! That’d just about kill Ma.”

“Well, here’s an idea. ‘Member my Aunt Fritzi? She’s started this party-planning business. I bet she could think up ways to make your Bat Mitzvah special—unique even—that wouldn’t cost all that much. Let me give her a call.”

“I’d’ve *loved* to have a Bat Mitzvah,” Fritzi exclaimed from the state capital. “The reception, that is—I was never into the religious part. Hmmm... Do you know, ever since your mother jogged my memory about *Land of the Pharaohs*, I haven’t been able to get Egypt out of my mind? What could be a better theme for a Bat Mitzvah banquet? Pyramids, camels, mummies, the Sphinx! Israelites too, of course—Moses and the bulrushes, that sort of thing—oh, I know! We can do the parting of the Red Sea when Brenda makes her entrance! Carrying an *ankh* staff in one hand like Cleopatra, and the Ten Commandments in the other!”

“Um, Aunt Fritzi? Brenda’s folks can’t really afford all that.”

“Darling, have you forgotten our dance recitals? It’s all about *illusion*. Costumes, lighting, props—choreography! No matter how big (or small) the budget, Puttin’ on the Ritz will produce a SHOW!”

“I cannot *believe* you, Vicki Volester!” Stephanie exploded a few days later. “I thought we were friends now, real friends—best friends, even! But do you tell *me* about your aunt the party planner? No! I hafta hear about her from Brenda Gahdam Pomerantz! Who you *do* tell so *she* can have the coolest Bat Mitzvah of the year! Thanks a whole lot!!”

Vicki backed away from Steph’s jutting chin. Powerfully reminded of Alice the ghost (or figment) in *Mirror of Danger*: so shrill and fierce and inclined to pinch. So hungry for companionship, yet twisted with mistrust.

Ever since that first afternoon by the dumpsters, Vicki’d been on guard with Stephanie. It was hard to forget the years of snipes and snortles, all the way back to kindergarten when little Steph would fake friendliness while wheedling secrets and telling lies. But these days she volunteered confidences, such as the hidden crush she’d had on Bill Goldfarb since she was Didi’s age. And if Steph still tended to concoct whoppers, it was now for creative entertainment and to make Vicki laugh.

Last week at the drugstore: Stephanie lugging a giant economy-size package of Kotex off a bottom shelf. “I bet I could walk outta here with this under my arm, and nobody’d say boo! Do you dare me to do it?”

“No!”

“I’ll take that as a yes. C’mon—”

“Steph! Don’t! Put it back!”

“Don’t put it back? Yes ma’am!”

Loitering by the handsome teen cashier (Keith Vespa’s big brother Glenn) till he blushed and asked, “You girls gonna, uh, pay for that or what?”

“Certainly not!” Steph giggled haughtily. “We wouldn’t *stoop* to use this brand!”

Life with Stephanie Lipperman might be capricious, unpredictable, even occasionally hazardous—but never, never dull.

“We *are* best friends,” Vicki told her.

“Coulda fooled me!” (Sniff.)

“Seriously—would your mom have even *thought* about hiring my aunt? She’s just getting started with her party business, and before that she ran dance studios. I was doing her a favor, and Brenda’s parents a favor. *Your* Bat Mitzvah’ll be the one everybody talks about! I mean, you said there’s even gonna be champagne snowballs!”

“Jeez, Vicki, those aren’t like snowcones made with wine! A champagne snowball’s this really dumb slowdance where you keep changing partners after getting slobbered on by nerds. Every Bat Mitzvah has one and they’re always disgusting.”

“Well,” said Vicki, “maybe we can get you slobbered on by Bill Goldfarb.”

Steph brightened at the thought. “Did you really mean it, about being best friends?”

“Course!”

“Okay then—find out everything you can about what your aunt’s *really* planning for Brenda’s reception. You’ll do that for me, won’t you Vicki?”

*

She came alone to Temple Beth Mordecai and stood irresolutely outside it. The only time she’d ever been in a synagogue was for Gran’s funeral, which didn’t make her crave an encore visit. Plus this was the corner of Danvers and Graveling, two streets that always made Vicki feel inept and unwelcome.

But she needed some spiritual guidance.

From Felicia? “Organized religion is used as a club when it isn’t being used as a *crutch*.” Ozzie? A sweet but unhelpful axiom like “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Tricia? “Don’t let people walk all over you, for Chrissake.” Mrs. Lundgren? Vicki didn’t

think she was allowed to ask *her* religious questions (unless in a strictly historical context) and doubted whether Mrs. Lundgren would spread more enlightenment than melancholy.

Thus: Temple Beth Mordecai.

Frowning down upon her, like every other edifice on Danvers Avenue. *Your hair is not brushed, that skirt is too short, you do not belong here, go away.*

But where else?

Gran can see what I see, and hear what I hear...

“Can I help you, Miss?”

Vicki nearly leaped out of her skin, which sent the man beside her staggering against a mailbox. As they recovered and apologized, Vicki wondered where she’d seen him before—a middle-aged man, husky-voiced, with a big leather flatcap pulled low over a bulbous nose and moustache of many colors. One of Diamond Joel’s younger pinochle cronies? No—he looked like the actor who played Duddy Kravitz’s father; that was it.

“Shall we try again?” he asked. “*Can* I help you?”

“Um—I’d like to talk to a priest.”

“Would a rabbi do? I’m Rabbi Dreifinger.”

“Oh! I’m sorry, I didn’t—I mean you don’t have a beard, or one of those yermarbles.”

“Perhaps you are meaning a yarmulke? I wear this cap outdoors because it’s getting colder and I’ve gotten balder. Shall we go in? You’ve picked the best time to see me—before anyone realizes I’m back from my errand-running. As for the beard, my wife objected to its turning gray while such hair as is left on my head is still brown. We compromised on the moustache, which as you see has a little of everything. After you, my dear.”

He escorted her through an imposing door and an impressive vestibule, down a more ordinary hallway and into a not-very-large, altogether-cluttered office. The rabbi removed books from a chair so Vicki could sit, hung up his coat and flatcap, wedged himself behind a desk, and tucked a yarmulke onto sparse brown curls.

“Better? Now then, how may I help you, Miss—? I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure.”

"I'm Vicki Volester."

"As in Volester Motors?"

"That's right! That's my dad and sister Tricia in the TV commercials. But no, um, we don't go here. I mean my mom's a Unitarian."

"Ah."

"*Her* parents were Jewish, but I guess they didn't, y'know, light candles or spin dreidels or anything. At least not around me."

"Well, Vicki Volester, if your grandmother was Jewish that makes your mother Jewish (as well as Unitarian) and you and your sister Jewish also. It's something you inherit, like talent on a violin, even if you don't practice it. So, speaking as one Jew to another, what can I do for you?"

"I've got these two friends, see—I mean really I do! neither one of 'em's me—and they're both having their Bat Mitzvahs here—"

"You don't *have* a Bat Mitzvah," Rabbi Dreifinger gently interposed. "You become one; you are one."

"Oh. I'm sorry. *They* say 'have.'"

"I'm not surprised. *You* may be, though, when I mention that you too became a Bat Mitzvah on your twelfth birthday. Another of our automatic benefits."

"Really? I thought you had to be thirteen."

"Boys do. Girls mature faster."

"Well maybe," said Vicki, and explained the ongoing feud. She was careful to name no names, but the rabbi said: "By any chance are we discussing Simcha Lipperman and Tzila Pomerantz?"

"Um, yes. Except I call them Stephanie and Brenda."

"I see. There *has* been shall-we-say 'friction' between those two, for quite a long time now. They are not precisely kindred spirits."

"*That's* for sure."

"However, it has also been noticed that both are now enthusiastic about their upcoming ceremonies. I would say much of that is thanks to you, Vicki."

"Me? Oh, um, well..."

“Becoming friends with someone you mutually disliked for so long—that is a very fine thing. Staying loyal to an old friend after you’re no longer so close—that also is very fine. Best of all is being concerned about both girls at once. These are steps toward adulthood, as well as signs of a kind and loving heart.”

“Acts of loving kindness?” Vicki ventured.

“Well, an *act* might be more like sponsoring a senior-citizen mah jongg tournament. (That takes a *lot* of loving kindness.) I would call them *mitzvoth*, the plural of *mitzvah*: good deeds you do for others, without expecting any gain for yourself. Other than the knowledge that you can look at yourself in a mirror and say: ‘Today I am a grownup, because I *behaved* as a grownup.’ And that, my dear, will be a daily rite of passage for the rest of your very long life.”

He rose, so Vicki rose too, and they clasped hands.

“But how do I get them to quit fighting—and dragging *me* into it?”

“Ah. We’ve been seeking an answer to that one for several millennia. If you find a solution, I’d appreciate your sharing it with me. But never give up trying, Vicki. As Bette Midler tells us, ‘You’ve got to have friends.’”

“Oh I like her! She’s Jewish too, isn’t she?”

“So I believe,” said Rabbi Dreifinger. “We do our best to be likable. Call it another *mitzvah*.”

16

Smile

Tiger Lily vetoed *The Great Gatsby* as Stephanie's Bat Mitzvah party theme, saying "Never wear white after Yom Kippur." Silver was much more suitable, so why not shoot for the moon? Deck the JCC social hall with paper moons, harvest moons, moons over the mountain and Miami and a river wider than a mile! Steph could wear a silver lamé gown with a beaded overlay, and make her entrance while the band (hardest to book on the North Side) played "Moonlight Becomes You."

"Gag!" kvetched Stephanie. "More like 'Moonshine Be-glugs Me.'"

But since Mrs. Lipperman's *why not* meant an emphatic *will be*, Steph had no choice but to grin and bear it. Except that her mother did the bearing, quite spectacularly, as she pre-empted the bandleader's "You're all dressed up to go dreaming" with a Boogie Checkworthy *OOH-AHH*. After having suppressed pains all day, Tiger Lily went into labor right there in front of the crowd.

("Talk about making a splash!" Stephanie remarked to the scared-stiff Vicki.)

There was no time to get her to the hospital, since *she* was rapidly becoming *them*. Several doctors were present but none was an OB/GYN, so they began a group consultation while the Temple Sisterhood ran around clucking and squawking and Lily bellowed: "I HATE YOU, HERMAN! AS SOON AS THIS ONE'S OUT, MY TUBES ARE GETTING *TIED!!*"

Wellwishers tried to comfort Steph throughout the party-pooing delivery, but she was over the moon. "I never thought I could be this happy!" she told everyone, long before the earsplitting arrival of Benjie Lipperman—named after the final child of Jacob and

Rachel, not (as Didi claimed) in honor of the Hollywood dog.

Attendees noted that while Stephanie might not be the prettiest girl in Pfiester Park, who knew what a wonderful smile she had? Indeed, her pointy *punim* was split by a *shmaykhel* that wouldn't fade for weeks.

"It's like I blew out all the candles," she beamed at Vicki, "and every damn wish I ever made in my life came true!"

*

A week later, Brenda's Bat Mitzvah was celebrated in the same (thoroughly scoured) social hall. Though they couldn't outshine a live birth, Brenda did get carried in on a litter borne by four muscular male dancers, each handpicked by Fritz Carlisle. They were costumed as Egyptian slaves and Brenda as Pharaoh's Daughter in a Nefertiti headdress.

"This better not make me look dorky," she warned Vicki beforehand.

"I'm *sure* it won't," Vicki quickly replied.

And in fact the gaudy regalia gave a decisive polish to all that was commanding in Brenda's personality. Watching her preside over the festivities with stately grandeur, Vicki recalled Brenda's longtime ambition to "make lots 'n' lots of money—and not by marrying any old millionaire, either." Seeing her here as Empress of the Nile, you could tell she was going to generate her own millions one day—and use them to have muscular slaveboys bring her food and drink with bows and scrapes.

"Will there be anything more, your Highness?"

"That'll do for the moment," Brenda drawled. "You can fetch me another glass of this in, say, ten minutes."

"Very good, your Highness," replied the hunk.

"Hey!" called Kris. "If you're done with that one, can he come dance with us?"

"Do It ('Til You're Satisfied)," Brenda decreed, taking a noble swig of Manischewitz, and the band struck up a B.T. Express cover with funk to spare.

*

Brenda's masterful attitude lasted a lot longer than Stephanie's wonderful smile, though Steph tried hard not to let the former dim her latter. This despite Brenda's new habit of laying a weighty hand on your shoulder and saying, "Yeah—I'm gonna need you to" take

this or that action, for reasons she didn't always present in detail, yet with a clear signal it would be in your best interest to play ball.

She even used this approach with Mrs. Lundgren and Mrs. Frank the lunchlady. Brenda'd resolved that all the girls in seventh grade, regardless of religious affiliation, should receive a public acknowledgment of their turning thirteen. And since traditional birthday get-togethers had gotten too juvenile (not to say awkward, as old alliances disbanded) why not make use of the school cafeteria?

Mrs. Lundgren and Mrs. Frank, with their shoulders imperially occupied, expressed willingness to let ball be played.

The first birthday to be observed in this fashion was Hayley Tamworth's. "Yeah—" Brenda informed her classmates, "I'm gonna need *you* to collect money from everybody, and *you* to go buy a card for everybody to sign, and *you* to get a gift certificate with whatever's left over, after *I* pay for the torte I'll bring from the bakery. The rest of you I'm gonna need to set everything up, then throw it all away afterward. That's what Mrs. Frank's most worried about, and we don't want her to worry now do we?"

Stephanie kept her smile glued on (most of the time) and contributed to these proceedings by dubbing them "Not Mitzvahs."

Vicki's assignment was to circulate Hayley's card and solicit inscriptions, even from the seventh-grade boys. Sarah-Jill had the even harder job of raising money, though she called it "a practical lesson in economics." By implying that more Hungarian pastry would be available than Brenda was likely to provide, Sarah-Jill got a pile of pocket change out of the boys—plus several offers to help transport the pastry to school.

When the torte reached the Cafeteria, Jim Maxwell grabbed the stool next to Hayley's so as to serve as her (and the torte's) guardian angel.

"Angel?"

"You're welcome," said Jim. "You never know when some crazy homeless wino might barge in here with a crazy homeless sweet tooth, and go on a SPREE."

Hayley was flustered by his and everyone's attention, most of it welcome but some of it un-, particularly from the odious Mitzi "I'm-Just-As-Good-As-Anyone-In-Your-Lousy-Class" Freund. Who conveyed formal regrets from Melissa Chiese (sitting two tables away,

well within earshot) that she couldn't be there to wish Happy 13th to whoever's birthday it was, anyway.

They presented Hayley with a gift certificate for the Cathedral of All the Stores, and the seventh-grade girls (plus Mitzi Buttinski) exclaimed over this, though everyone but Hayley knew about it already. Jim Maxwell, around a somewhat guarded mouthful of torte, urged Hayl to spend it on a sweater: "One of those snugglish-wugglish ones, y'know? I like to see my women looking *zaftig*."

Beet-red blush from Hayley, who nevertheless did invest in cashmere, which she thought a far more romantic choice than the magnifying loupe Kris put *her* Not Mitzvah certificate toward a month later at the Central Camera Company. A month after that, Vicki converted *hers* into a pair of Adidas running shoes: her very first, top of the line, though not exactly snugglish-wugglish. (Actually the certificate paid for only half of one shoe, so she—like the other girls—had to use grandparental gift cash to cover the rest.)

Vicki's becoming a teenager was also marked by a family chowdown at Lou Malnati's Pizzeria. Stephanie was invited too, but had to be kept in the dark as to why Ozzie stewed and fumed through dinner.

"(What is eating your dad?)"

"(Oh, this nasty customer at the Lot said street salt made his bumper rust off.)"

The true reason had to remain a secret, at least for the time being.

Felicia's number-one New Year's resolution had been to study up on real estate and then, at last, find the Volesters a house of their own. She and Ozzie had stumbled across The Most Perfect Place Imaginable, a four-bedroom Colonial (which sounded like a very old log cabin) in suburban Willowhelm. But its owner backed out on what Ozzie considered a handshake deal, since the Volesters wouldn't be moving till June at the earliest—unlike a ready-this-minute claimjumper whom the fickle owner did close with.

Thunderation from Ozzie: "Where I come from, a man would sooner *chop off his hand* than welch on an understanding!"

"Yes, darling, I know. But he said that handshake was a polite goodbye, not a binding agreement—"

“Polite my hairy white backside! Why, if I shook hands with a *dog* after showing it Gravy Train, then by Gahd that dog would get a bowlful of Gravy Train! Where I come from—”

“Daddy, *please* don’t go on about this at Malnati’s! I haven’t told Steph yet we’re thinking about moving.”

Ozzie vowed not to spoil Kitten’s Special Day, and shook Vicki’s hand to prove his point. Yet here he was growling round the Pizzeria: stewing, fuming, grumbling into his mug.

“(Did it?)” whispered Stephanie.

“(Did what do what?)”

“(Did the nasty guy’s bumper rust off?)”

“(Oh of course not—just a little, y’know, corrosion.)”

There’d be time enough to break any news to Steph when—and if—it became actual reality. Fortunately Goofus was an inattentive little twerp who didn’t know about the family plans either; otherwise he’d be extorting a hefty percentage of Vicki’s allowance to keep the beans from being spilled.

Right now he watched with morbid fascination as Tricia kept nodding off over her City-style deep-dish pizza slice. Fel would give her a gentle nudge; Tricia would wake up blurting “Oh but it’s terrible, Reverend Mother” or “Well, God bless what’s-his-name”; Goof and Steph and Vicki would laugh and be subjected to the emerald glare; an angry nibble would be taken from Tricia’s pizza; and then, eyelids drooping, the nod-off would resume.

Pfiester High’s Spring Operetta was imminent and its rehearsals consumed every moment, waking and sleeping, not devoted to meeting deadlines for the senior class (of which Tricia was Treasurer) or the *Magic Harp* yearbook (of which she was Clubs & Activities Editor).

Not just slumber was being sacrificed for all this, but Tricia’s social life as well. Two unprecedented weeks had passed since her last date, and that one was just to the Winter Sports Dance where she and Brian Minsky could practice their *ländler* for *The Sound of Music*. Brian and his teeth were playing Captain von Trapp, while no one but Tricia could possibly have been cast as Maria (and lived to tell about it).

The Sound of Music BELONGED to Patricia Elaine Volester.

Ever since she first saw the film version at the age of six, it had been her exclusive star-turn dream. She'd spent a decade preparing for the role of Maria, and the past few months bulldozing the Jacks & Jills (of which she was this year's President) into making that dream greasepaint-and-crowd-roar reality.

But obstacles kept cropping up. Mr. Merton had picked Rupa Pramanik to play Liesl, which was just plain silly. Liat in *South Pacific*, okay; Tuptim in *The King and I*, that'd be understandable; Mei Li (or Linda the stripper) in *Flower Drum Song*, no argument. But LIESL VON TRAPP?? With a skintone that set her waaaay far apart from her little siblings?? Instead of *I am sixteen going on seventeen*, would Rupa have to sing *I am suntanned going on sizzled brown*??

(Be calm. Breathe deep. We can deal with the matter cosmetically.)

Then there was the bigger problem posed by Tricia's dearest friend. Cynthia Dollfuss was *supposed* to have co-starred as the Baroness, portraying that *rivale d'amour* with all the slinky jealousy and poignant jeopardy she was capable of. And NOT waste those talents on a Crushin' Crudification like Fred Minerich, with whom Cynthia had wisely broken up at the end of last summer. Dramatics had followed, as Fred announced he would pulverize any guy foolhardy enough to ask Cynthia out, or even look too steadily in her direction. Seeing what an eyeful she was, most guys couldn't help but do just that; and when they did—

“WHAT THE HELL YOU STARING AT, PENCILNECK??”

GEEEEEEEEK would go the unhappy Cynthiawatcher, through a neck constricted to pencil-width by a tremendous Crusha forearm.

Taking Tricia's advice, Cynthia'd mounted a tag-team counterattack with Spaz Schwauble, the brilliant but “challenged” youth who'd always yearned for her while assisting with homework. Together they staged a makeout session right outside the boys's locker room door; and when Fred came charging through it like a maddened rhino, Spaz dropped to the ground and simulated a fit. “*Stop it, Fred! You're KILLING him!*” Cynthia screamed, with Tricia and other enlisted girls adding to the clamor. And by the time it subsided, Da Crusha had not only been put on suspension but warned that one more lapse of any sort (except academic) would mean ejection from the varsity wrestling squad.

Fred, alarmed and bewildered by having no memory of giving Spaz the forearm choke, seemed to undergo a complete character bodyslam. He offered Spaz a public apology; voiced no further objection to Cynthia's dating other guys; began volunteering his immense strength for benevolent purposes—and gradually wooed Cynthia back.

Tricia told her to forget him, you can't rehabilitate a turd. Yet Cynthia paid less and less attention to the Jacks & Jills and more to the Pep Club Grapplingettes, who kept score at wrestling tournaments and boosted team spirit while mopping sweat, drool, and occasionally blood off used mats.

"Why are you DOING this??" Tricia kept wailing at her.

"Aw, they're such cuties when they grunt 'n' groan," Cynthia kept replying.

Then Fred had nominated her for Winter Sports Queen and invited her to the dance with quaint Croatian courtesy. He even pinned an orchid to her ample décolletage without trying for a feel. And their evening went splendidly till Cynthia finished first runner-up to Jumpin' Jack Pomerantz's girlfriend, Annie Haeckel (the Human Freckle). Cynthia whooped and gave Annie a big hug; Da Crusha approached Jumpin' Jack and picked a big fight. Which was taken outside and conducted in the parking lot, till Cynthia administered a piledriver to the fightpicker:

"That is *it!* We are *THROUGH!!* Forever and *THEN SOME!!!*"

If only she'd saved such passion for playing the Baroness. If only she hadn't settled for being Sister Berthe, Mistress of Novices.

Even that minor role gave her a couple of effective scenes, though, and that was what truly mattered at the moment. Not some passing heartbreak over an unworthy fartbucket.

"Bring us back to *Do oh oh oh*," Tricia blurted at the Pizzeria, as Felicia gave her another gentle nudge.

*

Now it was Operetta night in Pfiester High's auditorium. The elder Volesters had come down from Beansville for the great event, and PopPop no sooner got seated than he started fumbling for his bandanna. Tricia's performances always brought tears to his eyes, and *The Sound of Music* was bound to make them spill; being a sentimental Austrian, "Edelweiss" alone could cause a deluge. Vicki, seated beside PopPop, checked her purse for

Kleenex in case the bandanna needed backup.

Stephanie should have been on Vicki's other side, but she'd spotted a vacant place next to Bill Goldfarb and dashed three rows forward to snag it, turning to shoot Vicki a stealthy yet jubilant leer.

Vicki wished her silent luck. And the same for herself, since she'd been left with a flank exposed: what if someone creepy took that empty seat? What if he pressed his creepy leg against hers during the entire Operetta? Suppose it was Wernie Ball! She craned her head around, hoping for a buffer she could beckon to. Her glance was caught and held by a guy in a thick black mackinaw who came sauntering down the aisle. He turned into Vicki's row, slouched onto the seat to her left, and awarded her a startlingly white smirk:

"Savin' it for me, were ya?"

OhmyGahd! This was Murray Minsky, Brian's cousin (witness the choppers) and a hotshot eighth-grader, one of the hot-shottiest!

Vicki'd only seen him from a distance before now. Up close he had tight curly hair like a *Brady Bunch* man-perm, and tight swarthy skin that cried out for conjunction with a motorcycle, and mile-wide lips that managed to be full *and* tight. All of which earned him a scowl from PopPop, suspicious of any white-smirk advances toward a granddaughter, especially from somebody who looked Italian.

The Minskys actually came from Mazovia by way of Memphis, Tennessee—hence "Minsky Brothers Burly-Q Barbecue," their rib joint down on Pockhardt Avenue. However, Murray's aspirations lay south of the border (as he liked to insinuate): "*¿Que pasa?*" had been his all-purpose exclamation since the age of nine. Friends hailed him by that phrase, substitute teachers were told it was his real name, and "Q. P. MINSKY" appeared on football and swimming rosters.

Last fall he'd begun going out with younger girls of the hardcore sort. Notorious Nancy Knopf had dubbed him "Kewpiedoll," which led directly to his dumping her and taking up with Gretchen Digresso; also to Murray's truncating the epithet to a single bold syllable. "Call me *Kyoop*," he now told the flirtworthy, after asking them "*¿Que pasa?*"

But before he could say either (or both) to Vicki, the auditorium lights went down and the Pfiester High orchestra took a whack at *The Sound of Music* overture.

All through Act One, acutely aware of Kyoop's proximity, Vicki's attention was torn between Tricia proclaiming that hills were filling her heart—and the grin buzzing away like a neon question mark, one seat over.

“¿Cómo resolver un problema como María?”

Tricia, needless to say, was letter-perfect and flawless-pitched onstage. Cynthia, though still depressed, couldn't help but revert to normal gusto when she said Maria wore curlers underneath her wimple and ought to have a cowbell round her neck. Rupa Pramanik, wigged with golden pigtails, made a delightful Liesl; Randy Knopf was a Hitler-Youthful Rolf; Brian Minsky whistleblew, orderbarked, and *ländler*-hopped with smile-smile-smiling impunity.

While Kyoop snortled at them all.

Tricia/Maria fled back to the Abbey; Reverend Mother told her to go climb ev'ry mountain; the Pfiester High curtain came down and the audience rose. Some, like PopPop, headed directly for the washrooms; others, like Ozzie and Felicia, bought coffee first from nonperforming Jacks & Jills in the school lobby.

Vicki followed Kyoop along the row to the aisle, where he put his saunter on pause to let her precede him exitward. *OhmyGahd he's checking out my tush I just KNOW it* she told herself, half-cursing (but only half) that she'd left her coat behind (as it were) to mark her seat (so to speak).

In the lobby she turned to look for Stephanie but found Kyoop instead, standing thickly blackly mackinaw'd at her vulnerable elbow. “Smoke?” he proposed, drawing her off to a deserted side entrance.

“Um,” went Vicki, shaking her head at his extended Marlboros.

“You're Trish's sister, right?”

“Um,” Vicki nodded. “Are you, like, enjoying the show?”

Tight lustrous eyes traveled down off her face and back up again. “Not bad. Pretty foxy for a nun, though. Dontcha think?”

“Oh. Um. I guess so, Murray.”

“Call me Kyoop.” With a plume of come-to-where-the-flavor-is Marlboro Country.

“Okay... Brian's awfully good, too.”

Fresh snortle. “You could say that. Kills his old man, though.”

“What does? Why?”

“Whyja *think*? Havin’ a fruit for his only son!”

Having a—? “You mean *Brian*?”

“Hey, I’m not knockin’ the guy, he’s my cousin after all. But why else would he be up there prancin’ around with powder on his face? It’s like a rule for those actor-types: they *gotta* swish, or the other fruits won’t let ‘em play. Trust me—if you ever see one of ‘em with a foxy lady, like Briny and your sister, you can be sure that’s just another act. It’s what they call ‘bein’ a beard.”

Kyoop ran his smokeless hand over a tight dark jawbone, on which sprouted a few bristles.

“I can hardly believe it,” Vicki murmured, rerunning memories back to when Tricia’d purloined Brian from Patty Kuchenesser.

“Well, don’t think it’s true about *all* us Minskys,” said Kyoop with a wink, flicking his cigarette butt out the side door. “Some of us know how to barbecue ribs the *right* way.”

“Um...”

“Aay, QuePasa!” boomed Dusty Jarlsberg. He was another Reulbach eighth-grader, but so tall and broad and resonant he could easily be mistaken for a Pfiester High student. Melissa Chiese had recently ensnared him as her steady boyfriend, and people whispered they were Doing It—or, if not It, then at least Stuff.

“Aay, Dustman! Ready to haul ass?”

“You know it,” said Dusty, tipping Vicki a suave nod. “Let’s blow this joint and go see *The Towering Inferno* again.”

“Wait!” said Vicki. “You’re not staying for the rest of the show?”

“Aw, we know how it turns out. ‘*Bomb ev’ry mountain—strafe ev’ry stream—*’”

“‘*Merrily merrily merrily—life is but ice cream,*’” added Kyoop. “See ya around, babe.”

They departed into the chilly night, leaving Vicki in a confused but humid daze.

She and Stephanie spent the rest of that weekend parsing every sentence of their respective conversations with Kyoop and Bill Goldfarb. (Steph thought Kyoop *might* be telling the truth about Brian Minsky, but surely not *all* actor-types. What about Robert Redford? Or Burt Reynolds? Or Tony DeFranco, for Gahd's sake?)

(Vicki, waiting till the Operetta was over and done with, cautiously brought up the subject with Tricia. "Do you still, y'know, like Brian as much as you used to?")

("I'd like him a lot more if he could dance as well as he *thinks* he can," snapped Tricia.)

On Monday, Mrs. Lundgren's Language Arts teams began a new poetry project. By artful maneuvering Stephanie got Vicki and herself paired with Bill and Jonathan Dohr, mostly for coquettish pursuit but also because Bill and Jon were poetic experts. They'd formed a band with two eighth-grade rockers, Iggy Blew (born Louis Brandeis Klosterdorf) and Whumper Sunn (who figured with a surname like Starr and Moon, he was meant to play the drums). "Blew Dohr" they called themselves, agreeing from the outset that every song they'd compose and ultimately record would be an equal four-way collaboration.

"So Jon does most of the music and I do most of the lyrics," quipped Bill.

"Funny you should say that," Steph interjected. "I brought *these* in that I wrote last night, y'know for poetry? But they rhyme instead of being like free verse or whatever, so maybe they could be a song! Whaddaya think?"

*I smile all the while
 You dangle me from your strings
 I smile all the while
 Whatever your heartache brings
 I can't help but smile
 A marionette that sings
 Manipulate
 Me*

"Um," went Bill.

Vicki's strings gave a sudden twang when she felt a foot press against hers. It wasn't a creepy-feeling foot, and (given the angle) couldn't be Stephanie's or Bill's. So it must belong to...

Another glance caught and held.

Dusty Jarlsberg was tall for an eighth-grader, yet Jonathan Dohr was even taller for a seventh. Which might account for the footplay (long legstretch, inadvertent contact) but not this embrace of eyes and minds.

Jon, as an adolescent, had even less to say than before—at least aloud with his voice. When mute, his broodish-spookish fluency was unmatched. The pressure on Vicki's toes, though, felt mope-free; as did the glint in Jon's deep-set regard. There was amusement to share and awareness to perceive, and reassurance that Vicki Volester could never be considered a Poochie.

(Put thoughts into a girl's head, why don't you?)

You'll see me in your dreams.

Shouldn't that be the other way around?

It already is.

Oh... kay.

The bell rang and they left the Resource Center, with Stephanie humming the sort of tune she thought her poem could be set to, and Bill giving it his variation on "Oh... kay." Vicki (for what seemed the thousandth time) stumbled on the top step to the second floor, but Jonathan caught her like an errant Frisbee and kept her from sprawling. Though not from feeling tingly and feather-light and utterly transcendent of Klumsy Klutzerhood. As if nothing could ever muddle her again.

That is, until she reached the third floor and found Kyoop Minsky slurping at the water fountain.

He straightened up and stood tall (though not as tall as Jonathan) and wiped tight full lips on a sturdy wrist with a virile flourish. Ignoring Jon and Steph and Bill, but giving Vicki a smack-in-the-face toothflash.

"Hey," he said.

And passed on by, leaving that flash to linger before her eyes.

Doubling her confusion and tripling her humidity.

*

During spring break the Dollfusses took Cynthia and Tricia downstate to Carbondale. Its university had sent letters of acceptance to both girls and also Miles Carlisle, or “Cuzzy” as Tricia’d started calling him last August. At that time they’d come to what Tricia said was an understanding—one that allowed her to date anyone she pleased, while keeping Miles’s senior picture in a frame atop her bedroom bureau.

(It seemed to blush every time Tricia undressed in front of it.)

Carbondale was not her first choice (that was Ann Arbor) nor her safety school (that was Lakeside Central). But she alone had been accepted to Michigan: Miles hadn’t applied there, and Cynthia’s GPA wasn’t high enough even with Spaz Schwauble’s dedicated assistance. In Tricia’s opinion, Carbondale was just a party college in the sticks; yet she went along for the ride and even began to consider tolerating the sticks for a year or so. She and Cynthia would be roommates, Cuzzy Miles would be handy, and Tricia could always transfer to Ann Arbor afterward.

Left unspoken was everyone’s aim to put three hundred miles between Cynthia and Fred Minerich.

Her folks had scarcely been able to conceal their feelings about Da Crusha, which of course had only enhanced his desirability till Fred himself flushed that away. “You know I’m not overdevout,” Albert Dollfuss had confided to the Volesters, “but THANK-God-Almighty-with-a-glory-glory-hallelujah-*in-excelsis-Deo*-plus-a-hey-nonny-nonny-and-a-hot-cha-cha!”

Mr. Dollfuss worked as a foreclosure auctioneer, which kept him plenty busy during the recession and generated almost as much dough as Ozzie made selling compact cars. Cynthia could do an affectionate takeoff on his rapidfire auction chant, sounding like the gander in *Charlotte’s Web*. And Bert had done some ganderlike wingbeating to keep Fred away from his gosling. A rat, he said, was a rat, and rotten eggs always came to a bad end.

Cynthia’s talent for agile mimicry—like her sister Jennifer’s for mock-ferocity—had been inherited from their mother Eloise. She could do stunts her daughters only dreamed of: walking on her hands, touching her tongue to her nose, and private accomplishments with

tasseled pasties. “If you don’t bring home the bread, be sure you can churn the butter,” Eloise liked to say (and Cynthia liked to quote). But for all her love of fun and games, Mrs. Dollfuss was second to none when it came to loathing Fred Minerich. She claimed the Crusha voodoo doll she’d special-ordered from Port-au-Prince had been worth every penny.

The Dollfusses lived in a brownstone on Manderley Avenue—not one of the grand gloomy piles Tricia used to admire, but a cheerful one north of the Park. They got home from Carbondale just in time for Cynthia’s eighteenth birthday, and the rest of the Volesters were invited over for the family jamboree.

You couldn’t believe Cynthia was almost a year-and-a-half older than Tricia, given her childlike sugarbuzz excitement as she ran from room to room, eager to unearth presents:

“Where *are* they? I’ve tried all the usual hiding places—oh I know! I know what you’re giving me!! It’s a CAR, isn’t it?? Oh Mommy, Daddy, I love you both to pieces!! Oh Mr. V, I just know you sold it to ‘em at dealer cost!! Oh you shouldn’t have—but I’m so glad you did!! Thank you all so very very much!!”

Ozzie appreciated the double-barreled kiss Cynthia planted on him, but had to deny the car’s existence.

“Nope, we’re doing better than that,” said Eloise. “As soon as you and Trish get your diplomas, we’re kicking you both clean off the continent! That’s assuming you two won’t mind spending a few weeks BACKPACKING THROUGH EUROPE—”

No winners of *Let’s Make a Deal* ever screamed so loud or bounced so much, their arms wrapped alternately around parents and each other, after cries of “Are you *kidding*??” brought out brochures, itineraries, and lists of needed supplies to prove the gift was for real.

“You know, Princess,” Ozzie said during one hug, “this means *you* won’t be getting a car on your birthday either.”

“There’ll always be cars! This is EUROPE we’re talking about!” said Tricia, seizing hold of Cynthia, and they danced a joyous *ländler* up and down the Dollfuss brownstone.

“Is this Tuesday? Are we in Belgium yet?” laughed Cynthia. “Wheeeee *hee hee* HAW HAW HAW!! Yeah!... *y-e-a-h!*” (Clap clap clap.)

Vicki would always remember her as she was in that moment. And always tried, difficult as it would be, to remember Tricia likewise.

*

Morning announcements in Mrs. Lundgren's class. Melissa Chiese rising to declare the gym's new floor was finally finished, and a semiformal dance for seventh- and eighth-graders would soon take place upon it. "Stairway to Heaven" had been picked as the theme, and their own Blew Dohr booked as the band.

(Round of applause for Bill and Jonathan, giving each other solemn five.)

Tickets would go on sale at lunchtime for \$3.00, or \$5.00 for accredited couples. Meaning you both had to sign up together *and* show up at the dance together.

Hand raised by Jim Maxwell. Did two girls count as a couple? Even if they were both really hot? What if a guy brought two girls—would he get the couple's price, or a special discount *à trois*? How about a guy bringing two kangaroos?

Note slipped to Vicki by Steph: ***U & me & J & B!***

Note slipped to Steph by Vicki: ***& Kanga & Roo 2!***

Amused/aware/reassuring eyeglint to Vicki by Jonathan.

And a perfectly peachy-keen a.m. it was, right up to the clang of the recess bell.

Then Wernie Ball came surging across the classroom to trip and crash at Vicki's feet, his cobwebby head practically inside her too-short skirt. Causing Vicki to do a spontaneous backward broadjump and clamp both hands over her crotch.

"Vicki!" gargled Wernie on the floor. "Wouldja go... wouldja go with..."

"NO. NEVER."

Said not loudly, but widely openly mouthedly.

She ran like hell to the washroom and spent recess in a stall, fighting off waves of crampy nausea. How could she ever return to class? stay in this school? remain in the same neighborhood as... as W—? Oh, she couldn't even bear to think his full name! If only her folks *had* bought that suburban Colonial! If only they were moving there this very morning, with a van pulling up outside Reulbach this very minute to whisk her away!

But no such luck.

Back to class, then.

And behold: nobody'd noticed more than W— falling down and Vicki leaping out of the room. Stephanie was ticked that she'd run off when they could've been planning dance

strategy, but accepted cramps as an excuse. As for W—

Forget W—.

Dismiss him from your thoughts. Ignore him from now on. Take Firesign Theater's advice: when an alien attacks, avoid eye contact unless the alien *has* no eyes, in which case avoid *all* contact.

Later that day in Language Arts, Steph was at her sprightliest. "Guess you guys won't be needing tickets to the spring dance, hunh?"

"Naw, we're the *band*," said Bill. "All we'll be taking there is our instruments."

Corroborative grunt from Jonathan.

Deflated crumple by Stephanie.

And no pressure against Vicki's espadrille. Enigmatic detachment instead.

Cancellation of promised appearance in future dreams.

Which turned very bad that very night.

W— might be expelled from Vicki's waking thoughts, but as she slept he could found hanging by a noose round his pencilneck; or plummeting off a skyscraper ledge; or vomiting gallons of pea-green *Exorcist* paste. Each time collapsing at Vicki's feet like a broken puppet, before jerking fitfully up between her ankles and shins and knees and THIGHS—

—to jolt Vicki awake with a *DOHHHH* OH OH OH that she tried to keep strictly to herself. (Happy as Tricia'd been of late, disturbing her sleep could still be dangerous.)

Scramble to grab your ancient stuffed cat. Just a few traces remained of its fluorescent teeth, but they gave off enough gleam to put you in mind of Kyoop Minsky. Who might pose a few dangers of his own, but surely could be depended upon to protect you from the nightmarish. Yes, with that smirk like a moonlighting river, wider than a mile...

*

Dance talk got bumped from the front page by rumors that April Tober'd done a junior lingerie spread for a major summer catalog. She refused to confirm or deny this to interested boys, but the other girls were told it was true and "no big deal."

"She looked great—sixteen at least!" added Kris, who'd been at the shoot. "The photographer even offered to make her a fake ID!"

“(In exchange for what?)” Stephanie mumblewondered to Vicki.

A throng of fantasy-minded guys asked April to the dance. She chose Keith Vespa, so Swede Swedebach (ever the follower) asked Kris, who lost no time in buying a swanky turquoise dress for the occasion. Vicki, while praising snapshots of this dress, couldn’t help but remember a time when little Kris came home crying from the Y because the mean girls *including April* had jeered at her turquoise leotard. Now here she was being all semiformal and April-chummy, giving Annie Haeckel a run for her Human Freckle money.

On second thought it shamed Vicki to be thinking such a thing about one of her best friends.

A once-upon-a-time best friend, anyway.

Next thing you know, you’ll be giving Melissa Chiese a run for her Chief Blue Meanie money...

Melissa’s meanness had not relented one iota over the years. A fresh layer got added by April’s throng, since Melissa felt boys should fantasize first and foremost about *her*. So counterrumors flew that she and Dusty Jarlsberg, while Doing Stuff if not It, had created an album of Polaroid self-portraits à la John and Yoko. Let April parade her scrawny figure in summer-sale bras and panties! Melissa had gone *au naturel* WITH a better bod AND an older guy, THANK you very much!

Brenda derided both girls, all their suitors, and “Stairway to Heaven,” suggesting that Mr. Overland do an audit on just how much the Student Council made raising funds for the new gym floor. On the night of the dance, Brenda intended to work up an *honest* sweat at the JCC’s kosher (in every sense of the word) gymnasium.

Hayley too would be a no-show. She’d been hoping Jim Maxwell would ask her, following up on his *zaftig* observations; but he said he’d be going stag with a six-pack of Old Style Lager, which he planned to decant into the Kool-Aid punchbowl. So Hayley, putting on a brave face, planned another evening with her Baptist youth group.

“Are *you two* going to the dance?” Vicki asked Yash and Sarah-Jill, finding them by the big “Stairway to Heaven” poster in the school vestibule.

“Us? No, we’ll be downtown that night at a lecture by Swami Srednivashta,” said Sarah-Jill, showing her the flier they were actually perusing.

“You should accompany us there, Vicki” said Yash. “It will be most enlightening as well as an opportunity so rare. Swami Srednivashta is a guru of great renown, and not nearly as fierce as his reputation would have you believe.”

“Um, I’ll think about it.”

Psssst from the other end of the vestibule. *PSSSSSSST!*

“I think that person’s trying to attract your attention,” Sarah-Jill remarked.

Kyoop Minsky, showing his teeth, though not in a smile.

“Hi!” said Vicki, crossing over. “Did you *psssst* at me?”

“You’re not goin’ to the dance with *him*, are you?”

“Who? Yash?”

“I heard you say you’re thinkin’ about it!”

“Oh, that. He and Sarah-Jill want to go hear some guru guy—”

“‘Cause you’re NOT, you get me? I’M takin’ you to that dance.”

Pleasurable indignation. “Oh yeah? Is this how you ask girls out? And what about Gretchen Digresso?”

Return of the Minsky smirk. “Aw, she wears this really weird-smellin’ perfume. I like yours a lot better.”

“Yeah?” said Vicki, with a smirk of her own. “It’s called Wind Song. Y’know—‘I can’t seem to forget her, / Her Wind Song stays in my mind.’”

“On *your* mind, hunh?”

“No—yours. *You’re* the one asking *me* out, ‘member?”

“And you’re the one sayin’ yes! Okay then, it’s all set—we’ll go with Dusty and his girl.”

(Eruption of giggles at the thought of a double-date alongside Melissa Chiese.)

(Interrupted by a breath-catch as Kyoop’s fingertip—tight, of course—traced the line of her cheekbone. Then over to beep her nose: once, twice, and again.)

“Lis—ten—here. No more of this hangin’ around with *schwarzers*. You get me?”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Look, I’m not puttin’ him down or nothin’. Just that *schwarzers* oughta stick to girls their own color, understand? Tell your friend in the glasses that, too.”

“Are you talking about Yash *Pramanik*? He’s not even black! And anyway, so what—”

“Cullehd is as cullehd does, honeychile,” Kyoop hogjowled. Giving her nose a grossuncledoughish TWEAK that wasn’t the least bit pleasurable.

Twitch yourself loose. “Y’know something? You better buy Gretchen a bottle of Wind Song, ‘cause you are taking *her* to the dance!”

“W—”

“I’m gonna be busy that night, washing my hair—and YOU out of it! And y’know what else, *Murray*? Your cousin Brian makes YOU look like a doodle-yanking wimp! So there!!”

Pirouette on an espadrille heel and stalk off.

*

The only reason not to feel superproud of yourself was that now you didn’t have a date for “Stairway to Heaven.”

Stephanie didn’t help matters by accepting an offer from Elliott Freund. He was another eighth-grader, several leagues below Kyoop and Dusty (or even Iggy Blew and Whumper Sunn), but with the recommendation of having hated his kid sister Mitzi Buttinski her entire life.

“How was I supposed to know you were turning Kyoop down?” Steph reasoned. “But lookit—if you say you don’t want me to go with Elliott, I won’t.”

“Really?”

“*Vicki!* I already told him I *would!* C’mon, just say YES to whoever asks you next!”

And who would that be, exactly? The ranks were thinning fast. Even Eileen Agnew got an invite, though everyone knew Lefty Levitch was hoping to use her somehow as a means of peeking at Melissa’s nudie-album (assuming it did exist).

What, then? Go alone? That needed more guts than Vicki possessed. Stay home and wash her hair? Too literal a retribution. Attend Swami Srednivashta’s lecture? That might be a stairway to Nirvana, but probably not all that heavenly.

In the end, after sitting beside or behind Vicki these past three alphabetical years, it was Ordinary Mark Welk who came through for her. “Hey,” he said one day after lunch.

“You going to the dance?”

“I dunno. You?”

“I will if you will.”

“Okay. Sure.”

“Mark Welk, hunh?” was Steph’s reaction. “Well, he’s... nice.”

“He’s *okay*,” Vicki corrected her. No point acting all head-in-the-clouds about it.

Unlike Tricia, still very much in a HILLS-ARE-ALIVE! mood thanks to her European horizon. She took Vicki shopping for a nice violet maxidress with matching pumps, and even staked her to a set of frivolous party undies.

“I’m not gonna be, y’know, *doing* anything with the guy!”

“That’s not why you wear them,” Tricia explained. “Trust me—just knowing you have them on will make you feel prettier, and *be* prettier. Works every time.”

So: thus clad, do you look sixteen at least? Ready to model for a fake ID?

Or just to dance again, gyrating your body to pulsating rhythm as Blew Dohr pounded out approximations of Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, Uriah Heap and The Who:

“Is it me for a moment (for a moment, for a moment)?”

It was Ordinary Mark for intermittent moments. Vicki’d nurtured a slight hope he might reveal a Debonair Mark alter ego who would swoop her round the gym. But though Mark took all the right steps and made all the right moves, every one of them was rooted in the mundane. No spills taken; no thrills given.

Never mind. It might not be a cotillion ball; she might not have an engraved dance card to fill; but numerous guys did ask her to get down and shake it with them. Classmates, strangers, same age, older, and more than one wanting another turn. Every so often Ordinary Mark went through this rotation, always stepping aside for the next guy in line.

Vicki kept an eye peeled for Kyoop Minsky. *Not* to rub (or tweak) his nose in her obvious popularity—just to make certain it was unmistakable.

No sign of him, though, or Gretchen Digrosso either. Maybe they’d skipped the dance and hitched a ride to Bluff Drive, or gone to fill their stomachs with Burly-Q beef tips. Or maybe just find somebody else to maltreat and abuse.

Vicki's other eye kept focusing on the bandstand, trying to make a reconnection. But Jonathan Dohr never once took his gaze off his bass, no matter how hard she concentrated.

You could look up between songs, you could catch and hold my eye again, you could see if you think I'm pretty like my sister said I'd be, like I really want to be, you could please just raise your head and LOOK AT ME—

"He's come to a sticky end, don't think he will ever mend."

(B-O-R-I-S the Spider. Creepy creepy crawly crawly creepy creepy crawly crawly...)

AND OUT OF THE SHADOWS W— COMES STAGGERING TO THROW HIS FLOPLIMBED SELF BETWEEN YOUR VIOLET HEELS.

Bury a terrified face in your partner's shoulder.

And get a run-of-the-mill hug in return.

Check to see who from: Ordinary Mark. No cobwebby hair, no green puke-paste, no busted marionette with blood in its eye.

So step out of the embrace—with a smile, since Ordinary Mark *was* an okay guy—and send word to Jonathan Dohr:

Go psssst on your sticky-ended spider. I won't look for you to look for me again.

Face away from the music, and dance.

The gym was at its loudest, the crowd at its hoarsest, and the atmosphere at its densest when a shriek tore through the effluvium. Another fight had broken out at a school dance in Pfister Park—this one between April Tober and Melissa Chiese.

Its happening by the punchbowl laid powerful suspicion on Jim Maxwell; as did his occupying a ringside seat, cheering on both combatants as they yelled slurs (or slurred yells) at each other.

Vicki'd already heard most of the top Blue Meanie secrets, back when she and Steph became friends. Now the same cats were getting debagged in front of what amounted to an *assembly*. Eileen, Dusty Jarlsberg, and one chaperone tried to restrain Melissa, while Kris and Keith and a second chaperone attempted the same with April; but Old Style's influence unleashed their tongues.

Up was dredged all the cheating done on quizzes and boyfriends. All the mandatory group weigh-ins, the compulsory graphing of body measurements. The binocular stakeouts of Mr. Brown's apartment in sixth grade; the clandestine sneakouts, unsuspected by Pidge and Dr. Tober, in seventh. The mortifying popouts of falsies (they were *not* falsies!) from a sabotaged halter dress (it was *not* sabotaged!) just last month at Dusty's party when his folks were out of town and the liquor cabinet got unlocked. I know damn well *too* who broke my tieback, you little BITCH! Who're you calling a bitch, you stew-pid slutty SKANK!—

On which note two cups of adulterated punch got flung, both missing their targets but dousing Roxanne Dowell as she tried to intervene.

(“And you didn't take pictures of *any* of this??” Brenda later raged at Kris. “Why the hell didn't anybody tell me it was gonna happen? Or call me to rush over when it did? I mean Gahdammit, you guys!”)

“PLAY SOMETHING,” a third chaperone hollered at the bandstand, and Blew Dohr responded with what Bill Goldfarb claimed was an original number:

*You smile through the trial
Of being dangled from an angle
You smile through the trial
Of your last breath getting strangled
You can't help but smile
As your heartbeat comes untangled—
Emancipate
Me*

“He's singing my poem!” rejoiced Stephanie Lipperman, radiant in her silver Bat Mitzvah gown and wonderful Bat Mitzvah grin.

*

When Vicki entered her bedroom that night (having received an unremarkable First Kiss on the cheek from Mark Welk) she thought it was empty. Tricia, she knew, had gone with Cynthia to the Miss North Side pageant, where Annie Haeckel was trying to extend her tiara streak with a soulful ukulele rendition of “Ain't No Sunshine.”

Vicki eased off her pumps and reached for the light switch, but a voice went “Don’t.”
“Tricia?”

“Close the door. Don’t turn on the light.”

She was seated on her bed by the window, staring out at the alley streetlamp, looking like a marble statue.

“What’s the matter?”

“She’s not going. To Europe. To Carbondale. To anywhere.”

Fred Minerich, tipped off who knew how, had shown up at the pageant. Knelt before Cynthia. Given her a ring. Declared he could not live without her. Which Cynthia, driven by who knew what, interpreted as true love.

So now after graduation they were going to find a place of their own, and she would enroll in some community college, and he would quickly get her pregnant and she’d never earn a degree because more children would follow, and he would never amount to anything but a beerbellied fartbucket who’d blame her for all his inadequacies and treat her like a convenient punching bag, and Bert and Eloise and Jennifer would try repeatedly (as Tricia already had) to bring Cynthia to her senses before it was too late, only to be told (as Tricia’d already heard) that they just didn’t understand true love.

“And she’ll send me baby pictures. And Christmas cards saying how happy she is. And all the time she might as well be dead.”

Vicki choked up at the thought of such a fate for anybody, least of all Cynthia Dollfuss. Tricia wasn’t crying, so Vicki knew she couldn’t either; but they sat side by side on the bed by the window, staring together at the wan illumination cast by the alley streetlamp. Till Tricia stirred, and sighed, and spoke.

“She was my very best friend.”

17

Pick Up the Pieces

Tricia made arrangements to backpack through Europe with a troupe of other high school grads, and sent word to Ann Arbor that she would be enrolling there that fall.

“If you find a house you like, go ahead and move,” she told her parents. “Box up my stuff and I’ll sort it out later,” she told Vicki. “I better not find you got *into* my stuff while I’m gone,” she told Goofus.

At Commencement she went through all the appropriate motions, letter-perfect and flawless-pitched:

*We come and go as the years passing by
Bring to thee glory, O Pfiester High!
Thy purple banners unfurling to view
Fairest of emblems, our whole lives through!*

Three days later she left her bedroom, the greystone, and Walrock Avenue without a backward glance; kissed her family goodbye at the airport; and never set foot in Pfiester Park again.

*

On the last day of school, a going-away party was thrown for Sarah-Jill Shapiro. Her father’s bachelor Uncle Shmulka had died, leaving Moe and Millie his paid-off condominium and half-share of a wholesale jewelry mart in the Bronx. Although the Shapiros (like all true children of The City) had nothing but contempt for New York, they thought this opportunity too tempting to let slide.

So cans of pop were distributed to Sarah-Jill's classmates, and Mrs. Lundgren told them: "You should each offer a toast to Ms. Shapiro, in hopes she will not regret the changes she is making."

Yash Pramanik: "Allow me the first to toast. There is an old Hindi proverb that translated says, 'Help a friend's boat across and your own will reach the shore.' A thousand *Namastes*, dear Sarah-Jill."

Brenda Pomerantz: "We'll always punch with a peachy nectarine!"

Kris Rawberry: "Yeah! G-o-o-o-o-o Peaches!!"

Hayley Tamworth: "Gahd bless you, Sarah-Jill, even if you don't believe in Him. (Oops! Is it okay to say that, Mrs. Lundgren?)"

Vicki Volester: "Wish you and Garrett and your mom 'n' dad many happy landings."

Stephanie Lipperman: "*And* a boneless voyage."

Eileen Agnew: "MmmmI'm sure Melissa would tell you goodbye herself, if she was here in person."

April Tober: "(Snortle.)"

Mrs. Lundgren: "If she *were* here in person."

April again: "Well anyway—tell New York to make room for *me*."

Ordinary Mark Welk: "What? Oh! Uh, good luck."

Bill Goldfarb: "Same here."

Keith Vespa: "Me too."

Swede Swedebach: "*I* was gonna say that."

Lefty Levitch: "Is there any more pop?"

Jonathan Dohr: [*silent raising, draining, and crushing of his can*]

Jim Maxwell: "'Scuse me, what was your name again?"

Sarah-Jill Shapiro: "Thank you, everyone. I will try to miss you all."

(Larry Hersenspoel was truant, as he'd been much of the semester. And if W— had anything to say, Vicki's ears refused to hear it; though they burned all that day at the relentless sensation of his wet crimson needles boring into her.)

*

If only, she kept thinking.

If only the Colonial's owner in Willowhelm had agreed to wait, Vicki would've been the one getting that sendoff. If only the Volesters had a dead bachelor uncle to leave them a mansion on the North Shore, everything would've turned out fine. If only Vicki hadn't agreed to enclose notes to Sarah-Jill in Felicia's letters to Millie Shapiro, she wouldn't have to spend summer vacation writing any.

For her part, Felicia was more determined than ever to track down the next Most Perfect Place Imaginable. She applied herself to this with such diligence that Ozzie joked she ought to go into the real estate business fulltime.

"Maybe I will, when Vicki and Goof are a little older," she replied. "Now look at all these listings and tell me what you think—"

They spent that June in limbo. Vicki not only had a room to herself but often the entire apartment; and with Felicia away all day scouting out properties, she was expected to do the housework and prepare the meals and and look after Goofus during the rare intervals he could be dragged indoors. Being a teenager, Vicki felt obliged to roll her eyes and act exasperated by this choreload, but secretly she welcomed it as a diversion from limbo-awareness.

Which was another name for bummerdom.

Now and then she ran off with Stephanie for a little hectic hanging out. Steph must've sensed something terminal in the air—she never brought up any topic involving a future beyond the next weekend—so by unspoken mutual consent they hung out in the present, for the present, seeing time tick by on clocks but not feeling it pass.

And Vicki thought: *If only...*

Yet when the news came it caught her flatfooted. Or flopfooted, in plastic thong sandals with a busted strap, tutting her parents for not calling to say they'd be late for dinner. Or what was *left* of dinner, Goofus having gobbled up the pasta salad.

"CanIgonow?" he went, trying to escape before his microrequest could be denied.

Ozzie hauled him back by the shirttail. "Hold on there, pardner, we got sumpten to tell y'all."

"Please don't talk like that, Daddy," Vicki moaned.

Felicia (the future realtor) cut to the bottom line. "We think we've found a house."

“A what?” asked Goof.

“You *think* you have?” asked Vicki.

“All right, we *have* found one—up in Vanderlund. And we’ve made an offer on it, and the bank’s ready to approve our mortgage loan, and a certified inspector did an assessment of the house just today—it’s only a few years old, the man who built it’s been transferred to California and wants a quick sale. About all that’s left is for us to sign the mortgage, make the down payment, and collect the keys. And then we’ll be *homeowners!*”

(With a festive little squeal you wouldn’t expect from a mother of three.)

“Wait a minute,” said Goofus. “What’re we gonna do with a *house?*”

*

Drive up to see it the next morning. North on the Expressway, past the exit they used to take when going to Gran and Dime’s lox-colored cottage. Get off at Panama Boulevard, which ran parallel to what looked like a stream but was in fact a sanitary canal called Vanderlund Channel.

“Eww!” went Vicki, glad the a/c was on and her window was closed. This might be more tree-lined than the canal that ran through The City, but she bet it smelled just as fragrant during summer droughts. “The house isn’t *here*, is it?”

“Not quite, Kitten.”

They followed Panama Boulevard as it looped southwest, then turned onto a street called Lesser Drive. Which implied there was a Greater Drive in some other direction. But for the next several blocks it bordered a verdant park, much lusher and more inviting than old Pfiester back home, and Vicki wondered if it had a pond she could run around.

“Here, Daddy?”

“Almost. It’s on Burrow Lane.”

“Burrow? Like bunnies?”

“I hope not,” said Felicia. “I want to plant a big rabbit-free garden.”

“Don’t worry, Mom,” Goofus told her. “Gimme an air rifle and I’ll—”

“Christopher Blaine, don’t you start talking about guns!”

“Or shooting rabbits!” added Vicki as they turned right on Foxtail Drive. “We should catch them and keep them as pets, in like a hutch—”

“And before you know it we’d need a dozen hutches,” said Felicia as they turned left on—ta da!—Burrow Lane. Or rather *into* Burrow Lane: an honest-to-goodness *cul-de-sac*. A suburban one, too: eat your heart out, Melissa Chiese.

“Looky there,” said Ozzie, “thirteen miles exactly on the odometer. And looky *there*, kids, that’s it! Split-level ranch, four bedrooms, two-and-a-half baths, two-and-a-half-car garage, quarter-acre of land. All of it practically ours.”

“So what’re we waiting for?” Goofus demanded, struggling with his still-locked door. “Aren’t we going inside?”

“Can’t yet, pardner—the Eisensteins are busy packing, and we don’t want to give ‘em any reason to slow down. I made good ‘n’ sure they understood what *I* mean when *I* shake hands, *THIS* time.”

Vicki rolled down her window and peered out at the sort of house you’d see inhabited by families in TV sitcoms. You could almost hear Jan whining *Marcia Marcia Marcia* inside it. And the set designers certainly did a good job on the surrounding neighborhood—every yard had a couple of tall trees, all of them in full leaf, arching upward to mingle overhead so the Lane really seemed like a shady Burrow.

She pictured herself living here. Riding a bike to and from other suburban places. Jogging down to Lesser Drive for a run across the park, or over to Panama Boulevard and along the (sweet-scented) canal like a Venetian teen.

Was Tricia in Venice now? How would she react to this new house, to barely being able to set foot in 3132 Burrow Lane before college started—

College!

As in *school*.

One of the suburban places Vicki would be to-ing and from-ing. Though she didn’t know how to get there and back, or even what it was called, or anybody who attended it. Not a single solitary soul in all Vanderlund.

She scanned the houses nearby, wishing each in turn might contain a rich bachelor Lipperman uncle (better make that a wealthy maiden aunt) who’d welcome Stephanie as a live-in companion, and abiding best friend.

The mortgage papers were signed. The down payment was made. The Eisensteins finished packing up and scheduled their move to California. And Vicki knew her disclosure could be postponed no longer.

It shouldn't be too hard; things wouldn't be that bad; thirteen miles were a blip to a teen on a train. And besides, there were always telephones—Vicki might have an extension in her new room, one of those Princess (or better yet, Kitten) models. It would hardly be a separation at all. More like a “broadening of personal boundaries.”

(Right.)

Now was the time: Stephanie calling her from the pay phone at the public library, which she preferred to yelling over the perpetual bedlam at Tendon Avenue. Stephanie sounding brittle (*does she suspect?*) as she jabbered about how great *Jaws* was supposed to be (*but won't let herself believe it?*) and hey, since it was rated PG, why not take Didi and Goof next weekend just like the old days ha ha ha.

Um, Steph, the thing of it is...

Post-disclosure silence on the line.

Now came the moment when wishes should be granted. *You're moving to Burrow Lane in Vanderlund? What a coincidence! My Great-Aunt Dvosha (who has an independent income and always wanted to raise me as her own) just happens to live there—*

“Is this supposed to be a joke? ‘Cause it is NOT FUNNY.”

“Well... it's not a joke, either...”

And then came a stream of what was probably obscene vituperation.

Except Stephanie was sobbing so hard, Vicki couldn't make out the words.

She tried to break in, to stem the flow, but a appalled librarian's voice cut through the savage sobs. *Thump* went the dropped phone; *click* went the connection.

Vicki hung up her own (soon-to-be ex-) phone, wondering whether the same thing had happened to Nina Gersh a year ago—and, if so, whether that was why Nina never gave Steph her new number.

*

That same day Goofus came blithely home with a black eye, bloody nose, and split-open lip. He and Bink had decided they might as well have the fistfight each always boasted

he would win if they weren't best friends. The fight had ended in a gratifying draw, as neither boy barfed after trading blows to the stomach.

"Do we got enough time for a rematch?" Goof asked through the icebag on his lip.

"You little hooligan!" Felicia seethed, "I ought to clobber you myself! If you'd chipped any of your beautiful teeth, so help me I would!"

"Are ya *sure* none's chipped?" asked Goof. He wanted to preserve his battle scars till school started, so the guys in Vanderlund would know who they'd be dealing with.

"Oz, just look at what your son has done!"

"Y'oughta see what I done to *Bink*, Dad! He's got BOTH black eyes!"

"Well, boys'll be boyish," smiled Ozzie. "Ain't that so, boy o' mine?"

"Sure is, Dad! And hey—wanna know what else I been thinking? What a kick it's gonna be when Trish comes back here, and finds alla us *gone*! She'll hafta sleep on the stairs or even out on the street!"

Ozzie nearly chipped his own teeth on the phone trying to contact Tricia, who (according to her troupe's revised itinerary) was either in Rome, Naples, or somewhere between the two. Felicia had to wrestle the receiver out of his hand, saying the cost of such a call or calls would exceed that of moving the household.

"But *Fel*—"

"And another thing: I want to be out of here before July 1st. There is no need for us to wait for Tricia, and no reason on earth why we should pay another month's rent on *this* place. I can't wait to get away from it."

This ding'd a vague bell in Vicki's earliest memories. Mom determined to leave their lemon-yellow bungalow and come *here*; Daddy wanting to stay put till Tricia talked him around.

Oho! What's this? Has some young feller proposed?

Now Daddy, this is serious—

Listen to her, Oz—

She's going to make him move us to a city—THE City—

Now Vicki guessed it was her turn to do the talking-around. She found her father staring forlornly at an atlas ("Gol-dang Italy!") and perched herself on the arm of his ever-

favorite chair, brought from the bungalow and twice reupholstered.

“Don’t worry, ‘kay? Tricia *told* us to go ahead and move, ‘member? We can have the tour’s travel agent send her messages, right? Everyone at the greystone will know our new address, won’t they? And even if worst comes to worst, Tricia can call Beansville (collect) to get the scoop, can’t she? So you see, everything’s *cool*.”

“Hmmm,” went Ozzie, encircling her waist. “Used to think your sister was the champeen coaxer, Kitten, but I think you’ve got her beat.” (Wistful grin.) “You’re getting to be so grown up, I guess I can’t call you ‘Kitten’ anymore. Seems like just yesterday you were sitting on my lap, hardly bigger than the doll in your arms. Now I expect all the young fellers in Vanderlund’ll be knocking on our door, and I’ll have to make small talk with ‘em while you finish getting ready for your dates. Tricia put me and *her* fellers through that routine, many a time. Now it’ll be your turn.”

Vicki (concealing her obligatory eyeroll) assured Ozzie she’d be his Kitten-for-Life.

That night she fell asleep in midspeculation about all the young fellers in Vanderlund, and what these forthcoming dates with them would be like. Till a voice crept up on tiptoe to her elbow, her forearm, her wrist, her hand, whisperstuttering *I nuhnuhnuhnuh know what comes next—*

—lick of thumb—

—turn of page—

—to the next chapter—

—of juggle-uggle-uggling her dream till it turned into a SCREAM with a shakening awakening JOLT helped along by a finger that had no business being where it was or doing what it did.

OhmyGahd. *OhmyGAHD*.

The shame of it. She’d never be able to set butt in this bed again. She’d have to sleep in Tricia’s from now on.

Let me go away from here, far away where I can’t be found. Where HE won’t be waiting for me, standing or falling or flopping or jerking at me. Get me the hell out of his gross appalling dreams—but not before you get him the hell out of mine. And, um, please keep my finger out of, y’know, trouble. Amen. Et cetera. And so forth...

*

The keys were obtained. A van was engaged. Stacks of flat cartons appeared in 3W, and the Volesters boxed up their (and Tricia's) smaller possessions.

Time to start saying goodbye.

Vicki made an attempt to call Tendone Avenue, but a shorter-tempered-than-ever Tiger Lily failed to hear her through Baby Benjie's caterwauls. Even if she *had*, Vicki doubted Steph was anywhere near ready yet to have a rational conversation.

If only...

For Vicki there were no poptoasting sendoffs. Kris and the other Rawberrys, including elderly Ness, were away at the farm in Clayton County, Iowa. Brenda was away at JCC sports camp on the Upper Peninsula. It'd be better *not* to tell April goodbye, since her mother Pidge would likely have a conniption at hearing the Volesters were headed where *she'd* always wanted to move. It might even provoke her to do something drastic like divorce Dr. Tober; so really April owed Vicki thanks for keeping her yap shut.

She mused over whether the boys in her class would miss her. Would Ordinary Mark's heart give a little twinge? Would Blew Dohr compose an ode to her memory, like the one Bill and Jim did for Nina Gersh? If so, it probably wouldn't pay eight-synonym tribute to *her* modest bosom. And if they chose instead to praise the roundness of her rump (probably to the tune from "Seasons in the Sun") Vicki'd just as soon decline the honor.

She could not decline bidding farewell to everybody at the greystone. Most of whom looked suddenly older and smaller—none more so than Baldwin Hull, shrunken even for a Munchkin Mayor. You had to worry about him and Nellie, and what would become of poor Junior (weeping openly as Vicki gave him a hug). Already the Hulls were having problems keeping the building from falling apart; there hadn't been a tenant in 1W since its pipes froze last winter.

The Franks were both nearing retirement and talked of moving to Arizona. "Dair's no snow or sleet or hail to make yer rounds troo, over by dair," said Mr. Frank. "But I'll be dishin' up sahsidge sammiches for all da kiddies right uptada endada line," added Mrs. Frank, giving Vicki keepsake photos of Luigi the parrot and Beany Boy the Mighty Beagle.

The two Mrs. Partridges still offered piano lessons, though their clientele had dwindled even more than Mr. Hull. Vicki asked one or the other Mrs. Partridge how Candice and Corliss were doing, if they'd reconciled and become twins again? But whichever Mrs. Partridge she was talking to (after *never* seeing both of them at once) only shook her head sorrowfully and kept mum.

Ozzie and Harry Tamworth clapped each other on the back, recalling "Good times!... good times!" till you thought Florida and J.J. (not Juodas Jautis) were about to join in. Felicia and Mary Tamworth swapped a bit of chitchat, wishing each other's family well, albeit with the same unthawed reserve they'd maintained for more than a year now.

Vicki and Hayley stood awkwardly in the latter's bedroom, once as familiar to Vicki as her own. Gone were nearly all the trappings of childhood, replaced by early-teen Baptist-youth-group effects; but one shelf was festooned with Skipper and Skooter and all their Astro Co-ed accessories.

*They dance through space
having the time of their
lyyyy-eeeeves...*

"I won't ever give those away," Hayley vowed. "When I have daughters, they'll only get to *look* at them. That is, if I ever *have* any daughters. Or sons. Or anyone." (Self-conscious munch of apple.)

"Course you will," said Vicki. "You were born to be a mom. You just have to meet the right guy first, who's out there somewhere waiting for you."

"Yeah," said Hayley, without conviction. "I bet *you* 'll have a whole bunch of boyfriends, up in Vanderlund."

"Yeah right. I've got to start over again as a New Girl. First day of school, I'm gonna be all alone."

Shock to see a gleam of unmistakable satisfaction in Precious Puddin's eyes. Promptly replaced by remorse and sympathy; but still.

"Aw c'mon," Hayley murmured. "*You* won't have any trouble making friends. They'll be extra interested 'cause you're a New Girl. And they'll know right away that

you're a Peach."

(Crooked smiles.)

"Well..." said Vicki, "be sure to say goodbye to everyone for me. Tell them I *will* miss them—you—all, a whole lot. Whether Sarah-Jill does or not."

(Shaky giggles.)

"And Hayl, do me a favor? Try to be good friends with Stephanie. She can be really nice once you get to know her."

"Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them," Hayley quoted a Language Arts book. She put down her apple and gave Vicki the secret Peach handclasp: index and little fingers extended, middle and ring fingers folded down; knuckles bumping—one, two, three. "Gahd bless you, Vicki Volester."

"Um, thanks. I hope so. I mean, I think I'm gonna need it."

*

She, unlike Tricia, took a long look at every room in the denuded apartment. She, unlike Tricia, walked backward down the greystone staircase and stoop-steps, the better to remember it by. In the Honda she squirmed around as far as her seatbelt would permit, to watch Walrock Avenue start to recede through the rear window.

"Whatsa matter, Sis?" inquired Goofus. "Cantcha fit both boo-tocks on the seat at the same time?"

"Mom! Goofus is already being horrible and we've barely left home!"

"Christopher, don't annoy your sister," Felicia ordered. "I want everybody smiling! This is one of the happiest days of our lives."

"You bet it is!" agreed Ozzie. "Vanderlund, here we come!" He switched on the radio, flooding the Honda with Scottish funk from the Average White Band:

Pick up the pieces—pick up the pieces—pick up the pieces—

And Vicki, twisting to catch the last possible glimpse of Pfiester Park, saw something come out of her dreams. It followed them at a distance, never getting closer, never getting lost—but always looking like a Mad Man, bent on getting away with her personal mortification.

P. S. (Paul Stephen) Ehrlich was born, raised, and educated in Kansas City, Missouri. After enduring thirty-one summers and winters there, he exchanged Middle Western climate for Puget Sound's in 1988. Employed by the University of Washington (not necessarily as an instructor) he lives with himself outside Seattle.

As the author of *The Ups and Downs of Skeeter Kitefly*, *Skeeter Kitefly's Sugardaddy Confessor*, and *13 Black Cats Under a Ladder*, he has since 2002 administered the Skeeter Kitefly Website and its Split Infinitive Productions at www.skeeterkitefly.com.

