

was that he was about to die from a hideous skin disease because a rat had bitten off his nose when he was a baby and the skin grafts didn't take. He kept her on the phone for two hours and twenty-six minutes. That was the record!

Now Lorraine can blame all the other things on me, but she was the one who picked out the Pigman's phone number. If you ask me, I think he would have died anyway. Maybe we speeded things up a little, but you really can't say we murdered him.
Not murdered him.

CHAPTER 4

John told you about Dennis and Norton, but I don't think he got across how really disturbed those two boys are. Norton has eyes like a mean mouse, and he's the type of kid who thinks everyone's trying to throw rusty beer cans at him. And he's pretty big, even bigger than John, and the two of them hate each other.

Actually, Norton is a social outcast. He's been a social outcast since his freshman year in high school when he got caught stealing a bag of marshmallows from the supermarket. He never recovered from that because they put his name in the newspaper and mentioned that the entire loot was a bag of marshmallows, and ever since then everybody calls him The Marshmallow Kid.

"How's The Marshmallow Kid today?"
Anyway, he's the one who started cheating in the telephone marathons we were having. After Dennis had rung up that staggering record about

having his nose bitten off, Norton started getting smart, and when it was his turn to pick out a phone number, he'd peek a little and try to make his finger land on a woman's number rather than a man's. You could always make a woman talk twice as long as a man. I used to ignore it because in his case it didn't matter whom he spoke to on the phone. They all hung up.

But this one time I decided to peek myself. When it was my turn, I made believe I had covered my eyes with my left hand, then thumbed through the pages, and as I moved my finger down a column I happened to spot the words "Howard Avenue." Now, Howard Avenue is just a few blocks from where I live, so I could pretend I belonged to the Howard Avenue Civic League or some other fictitious philanthropy.

There it was:

Pignati Angelo 190 Howard Av YU1-6994

When this man answered, my voice was rather quivery because John was watching with his X-ray eyes and I think he knew I had cheated a bit. Whether he is an actor, I know he'll be able to project those glaring eyes clear up to the second balcony.

"Hello," this jolly voice said as I cleared my throat.

"Hello. Is this Mr. Angelo Pignati?"

"It sure is," came the bubbling voice again.

"This is Miss Truman of the Howard Avenue Charities. Perhaps you've heard of us and our good work?"

"My wife isn't home just now."

"I didn't call to speak with your wife, Mr. Pignati," I assured him. I changed to a very British accent. "I distinctly called to speak to you and summon you to our cause. You see, my organization is interested in receiving small donations from people just like you—good-hearted people, Mr. Pignati—we depend on lovely people just like you and your wife—"

"What did you say the name of your charity was?" the voice asked.

Suddenly I couldn't control myself anymore, and I burst into laughter right into the phone.

"Is something funny?"

"No . . . there's nothing funny, Mr. Pignati . . . it's just that one of the girls . . . here at the office has just told me a joke, and it was very funny." I bit my tongue. "But back to serious business, Mr. Pignati. You asked the name of our charity—the name of it is—"

"The Lorraine and John Fund?"

"The name of it is—"

"The Lorraine and John Fund," John repeated.

“Shut up,” I said, covering the mouthpiece and then uncovering it. “The name of our charity is the L & J Fund, Mr. Pignati, and we’d like to know if you’d care to contribute to it? It would really be a very nice gesture, Mr. Pignati.”

There was a pause.

“What was the joke the girl told you?” he finally said. “I know a lot of jokes, but my wife’s the only one who laughs at them. Ha, ha.”

“Is that so?”

“She really did laugh at them. She liked a good joke, she did, and I miss her. She’s taken a little trip.”

“Oh, did she?”

“Yep. She’s out in California with my sister.”

“Isn’t that marvelous!”

“Her favorite was the one about the best get-well cards to get. Did you ever hear that one—what you say your name was?”

“Miss Truman.”

“Well, Miss Truman, did you ever hear that one the one about what the best get-well cards you can get are?”

“No, Mr. Pignati—”

“It was my wife’s favorite joke, that one was. She’d make me tell it a lot of times. . . .”

There was something about his voice that made me feel sorry for him, and I began to wish I had

never bothered him. He just went on talking and talking, and the receiver started to hurt my ear. By this time Dennis and Norton had gone into the living room and started to watch TV, but right where they could keep an eye on timing the phone call. John stayed next to me, pushing his ear close to the receiver every once in awhile, and I could see the wheels in his head spinning.

“Yes, Miss Truman, the best get-well cards to get are four aces! Ha, ha, ha! Isn’t that funny?”

He let out this wild laugh, as though he hadn’t known the end of his own joke.

“Do you get it, Miss Truman? Four aces . . . the best get-well cards you can get—”

“Yes, Mr. Pignati—”

“You know, in *poker*?”

“Yes, Mr. Pignati.”

He sounded like such a nice old man, but terribly lonely. He was just dying to talk. When he started another joke I looked at John’s face and began to realize it was he who had started me telling all these prevarications.

John has made an art out of it. He prevaricates just for prevaricating’s sake. It’s what they call a compensation syndrome. His own life is so boring when measured against his daydreams that he can’t stand it, so he makes up things to pretend it’s exciting. Of course, when he gets caught in a lie, then he

makes believe he was only telling the lie to make fun of whomever he was telling it to, but I think there's more to it than meets the eye. He can get so involved in a fib that you can tell he believes it enough to enjoy it. Maybe that's how all actors start. I don't know.

One time last term Miss King asked him what happened to the book report he was supposed to hand in on *Johnny Tremain*, and he told her that he had spilled some coffee on it the night before, and when the coffee dried, there was still sugar on the paper and so cockroaches ate the book report. You might also be interested in knowing that the only part of *Johnny Tremain* that John did end up reading was page forty-three—where the poor guy spills the molten metal on his hand and cripples it for life. That was the part he finally did his book report on—just page forty-three—and he got a ninety on it! I only got eighty-five, and I read the whole thing. Of course, writing book reports is not exactly the kind of writing I want to do. I don't want to report. I want to make things up. In a way I guess that's lying too, except I think you can tell the real truth with that kind of lying.

And John lies to his mother and father. He told them one time that he was hearing voices from outer space, and he thought creatures were going to come for him some night, so if they heard any

strange noises coming from his room would they please call the police.

"Don't be silly," his mother told him and laughed it off with just the slightest bit of discomfort. His parents don't know quite what to make of him because neither of them has the imagination he has, and in a way they sort of respect it. Actually, I think they're a little frightened of it. But they're just as bad as he is when it comes to lying, and that may be the real reason they can't help John the way they should. From what I've seen of them, they don't seem to know what's true and what isn't true anymore. His father goes around bragging how he phoned up a car-insurance claim to get a hundred dollars to replace a piece of aluminum on their new car, which he had really replaced himself. Mrs. Conlan goes to the store and tells the clerk he forgot to give her Green Stamps the last time she was in, and she knows very well she's lying. It's a kind of subconscious, schizophrenic fibbing, if you ask me, and if those parents don't have guilt complexes, I don't know who has. I only hope I won't be that kind of adult.

"I don't know where you get that from, John!" I do.

"Miss Truman, are you still there?"

"Yes, Mr. Pignati," I muttered.

"Well, did you get that joke? I didn't hear you laugh."

"No, I'm sorry I didn't get that joke."

"I didn't think you did. I said, 'In many states a hunting license entitles you to one deer and no more. Just like a marriage license.' Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's very funny, Mr. Pignati. That is very funny."

I must have sounded uncomfortable because he said, "I'm sorry if I'm taking up too much of your time, Miss Truman. You wanted a donation, did you say—for what charity?"

"The L & J Fund, Mr. Pignati." I bit my lip.

"I'll be glad to send you ten dollars, Miss Truman. Where do I send it?"

John bolted upright from his ridiculous position of pressing an ear against the receiver.

"Tell him to send it to your house."

"I will not!"

"Let me talk to him," John demanded, taking the phone-right out of my hand. Just from the look in his eyes I knew what was going to happen. You just have to know how John does things, and you'll know one thing will always happen. He'll end up complicating everything.

CHAPTER 5

You have to know how demented Dennis and Norton are to understand that when I told them Angelo Pignati caught on Lorraine was a phony and hung up, they believed it. I could tell them I went alligator hunting in St. Patrick's Cathedral last night, and they'd believe it. I just didn't want them to know Mr. Pignati had invited us over to his house the next day to give us the ten bucks for the L & J Fund. Especially Norton. If he knew about it, he'd try to hustle in on the deal, and he'd never stop at ten dollars. I didn't want anyone really to take advantage of the old man. Some people might think that's what I was doing, but not the way Norton would have. In fact, if Lorraine felt like saying one of us murdered Mr. Pignati, she should have blamed Norton. He's the one who finally caused all the trouble.

The next day Lorraine chickened out and said she wouldn't go with me to collect the money.