

"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.

"Give me one good reason," I demanded.

"Because it's wrong to take money from an old man, that's why."

"All through history artists have survived by taking money from old men. There's nothing wrong with having a patron."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Don't you know anything?"

"I said I don't—"

"We can tell him the L & J Fund is intended to subsidize writers and actors if you want."

"You're crazy."

I decided not to push the matter, but I did need a dollar and a quarter for a six-pack, so when I got home I asked my Old Lady for it.

"No, no, no," she said in her best grating voice, all the while shining the coffee table in our sparkling living room, which sparkles because nobody's allowed to live in it. She's got plastic covers on everything. I mean, I like my Mom and all that, but she runs around like a chicken with its head cut off.

"Your father says you're not to have another penny until he speaks to you!"

"What did I do now?"

"You know very well what you did."

"No, I don't."

"Well, you just ask your father."

"I'm not asking him, I'm asking you."

"Kenneth never gave us any trouble," she just had to add, neatly folding the polishing rag.

"You just never caught him."

Kenneth is my older brother who's married and carries an attaché case to Wall Street every day. He's eleven years older than me.

"Get yourself a glass of milk, but rinse out the glass," she babbled, darting up the stairs. I could tell she just got back from the beauty parlor because her hair was frizzed like she had just rammed her fingers into an electric socket.

"What did I do?" I yelled from the kitchen as I opened a Pepsi. Whenever she tells me to get a glass of milk, I feel like a Pepsi and vice versa.

"What did I do?"

"You know!"

"Please tell me."

She came to the top of the stairs with a bottle of hair spray in her hand. "You put glue in the telephone lock!" she wailed.

"I did *what*?"

"You heard me."

"I put glue in the telephone lock? Are you crazy?"

"When your father comes home we'll see who's crazy." She gave her hair a quick spray to make sure none of the frizz would disappear.

"I'm innocent."

"It was a very mean thing to do. Your father tried to call his office this morning, and he couldn't get the lock off. He couldn't dial!"

"I didn't do it."

"Then who did?"

"The ghost of Aunt Ahra."

"Your father'll have to talk to you," she said and ran upstairs. Then I heard her vacuuming in her bedroom.

I blame an awful lot of things on the ghost of Aunt Ahra because she died in our house when she was eighty-two years old. She was really my father's mother's sister, if you can figure that one out, and she had lived with us ever since the time she took a hot bath in her own apartment and couldn't get out of the bathtub for three days. They found her when she finally managed to throw a bottle of shampoo through the bathroom window, and it splattered all over the side of a neighbor's house. The neighbor thought it was the work of a juvenile delinquent at first, which is sort of funny if you think about it awhile.

"So you're not going to give me a dollar twenty-five; is that what you're trying to communicate to me?"

"He couldn't even dial his own office."

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"I told you the ghost of Aunt Ahra did it."

"This is not a joking matter."

"Mother, your hypertension is showing."

Well, that severed maternal relations for the afternoon, and I had no intention of waiting for Bore to come home. I decided to give Lorraine the signal to meet me, so I picked up the phone and tapped the connection button ten times, which is the same as dialing O. The keyhole of the lock was still expertly crammed with glue.

"Yes?"

"Hello, operator? Would you please get me Yul-1219?"

"You can dial that number yourself, sir."

"No, I can't. You see, operator, I have no arms."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"They've got this phone strapped to my head for emergency calls, so I'd appreciate it if you'd connect me."

"I'll be happy to, sir."

As soon as I could hear the number ring once I hung up. That was always the signal for Lorraine to meet me at the corner of Eddy and Victory Boulevard if she could get out of the house.

"You're ruining your lungs with that thing" was the first remark out of her mouth besides a cough from a misdirected puff from my cigarette. She

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sounds just like her mother when she says that.

"I've been thinking, and I've decided we'd better go over and collect the ten bucks."

"I've been thinking, and I've decided we'd definitely better not," she snapped.

"We're not doing anything bad," I insisted.

"Ha!"

"He sounded lonely on the phone, now didn't he?"

"So what?"

"Lonely people need visitors, so. . . ." I made believe I wanted to look at a new Chevy going by so she couldn't see my eyes. "So it's our duty to visit the lonely."

"You never wanted to visit lonely people before, or is it that you only like lonely people who have ten dollars?"

"You think you're the perfect headshrinker with all those psychology books you read, and you really don't know a thing."

She sat down on the bus-stop bench, and I could see her biting her lip. She does that every once in awhile when she doesn't know what to say. That's when I know all I have to do is push her a little further and I'll get what I want.

"You read all those books, and you don't even know when a man is thinking about committing suicide."

"Stop it, John."

"You think I'm kidding?"

"He did not sound like he was thinking of suicide."

"You only know about the obvious kind—like when someone's so desperate they're going to jump off a bridge or slit their wrists. There are other kinds, you know."

"Like what?"

"Like the subconscious kind. You're always blabbing about the subconscious, and you can't even tell a subconscious suicide when you talk to one."

She started biting her lip again.

"He sounded just like the kind of guy who'd commit suicide by taking a cold shower and then leaving the windows open to die of pneumonia!"

That made her burst out laughing, and then I knew I had her where I wanted her.

"Just think of all the joy we can bring into his life."

One-ninety Howard Avenue turned out to be just across the street from a big convent, and there were a lot of trees and stuff and nuns running around the place. There were a lot of nice houses on the street too, but one-ninety was a phenomenal dump.

As soon as she saw the house Lorraine stopped.

"Maybe he's poor," she said. "Look at this place."

I figured he must have enough money if he offered it over the phone like that without even knowing what our charity did. A couple of nuns were strolling on the lawn of the convent and staring at us kind of funny.

"Or he could be a sex maniac," Lorraine threw in for good measure. That's her mother again.

"Wishful thinking," I said, and Lorraine couldn't help laughing. And while she was laughing I rang the bell.

When Angelo Pignati came to the door, I wish you could have seen him. He was in his late fifties and was pretty big, and he had a bit of a beer stomach. But the part that slaughtered me was this great big smile on his face. He looked so glad to see us I thought his eyes were going to twinkle out of his head. He would've made one @#\$\$% of a Santa Claus if you had put a white beard on him and stuck him on a street corner in December with a little whiskey on his breath.

"Hi! Are you the charity people?" He didn't seem to be surprised that we were kids. He just seemed glad to see us.

"Yes. This is Miss Truman, and I am Mr. Wandermeyer."

The house had a nice warm smell to it. We had to walk through a hall that had a lot of old junk stored in it, and then we went into this living room that had all that old kind of stuffed furniture with lace things that cover the arms so you don't wear them out.

"Please sit down," he said, smiling away like crazy. "I've got some good homemade wine, if you like."

"That'll be just fine, don't you think, Miss Truman?"

"Yes . . . yes."

Well, actually I might as well tell you we were both scared stiff when he went into the kitchen. At first he seemed too nice to be for real, but when I looked at Lorraine and she looked at me, I could tell we both were thinking what we'd do if Mr. Pignati came prancing out of the kitchen with a big knife in his hand. He could've been some psycho with an electric carving knife who'd dismember our bodies and wouldn't get caught until our teeth clogged up the sewer or something like that. I mean, I thought of all those things, and I figured if he did come running out with a knife, I'd grab hold of the ugly table lamp right next to me and bop him one on the skull. I mean, if you're

going to survive nowadays, you really have to think a bit ahead.

He returned with three glasses of wine and that enormous smile of his.

Poison perhaps.

"I just got back from the zoo," he said, sitting in this armchair that seemed to swallow him up. I could see Lorraine looking all around, checking the dust in the corners and the pieces of electrical equipment that were scattered on one table. "I take a walk over to the zoo every day. My wife usually goes with me, but she's in California visiting my sister."

"Really?" Lorraine said, taking a sip of the dark wine.

"That's why the place is such a mess," he added, pointing to the electrical junk. "When she's home, she makes me put all that away. I'm a retired electrician, you know."

"How long has she been gone?" Lorraine asked, trying to be kind, in that English accent of hers.

"She's been out there about a month now."

For a moment he looked as though he was going to cry, and then suddenly he changed the subject. Lorraine's nervous radar was in full operation, and I could tell it made her sad to look at the old man.

"While I was waiting for you I was practicing

how to memorize ten items. Do you know the secret of how to memorize ten items?"

I looked at him, and I had to bite my tongue because I was going to burst out laughing. He looked just like a great big kid—so happy we were there.

"You just mention ten objects, and I'll memorize them right off the bat. You give me one, Miss Truman, and then you give me one, Mr.—?"

"Wandermeyer," I offered, with just the right touch of disdain I thought.

"I'm afraid I don't understand you, Mr. Pignati," Lorraine said.

"Just give me an object. Just say any object. Go on."

"Girl?" Lorraine said, her accent getting a little shaky.

"Now you give me one," he said excitedly, pointing at me. "And here's a piece of paper and a pencil to write the words down. Just don't let me see them."

"Couch," I said.

"Boy," Lorraine went on.

"Eye."

"Chair."

"Dog."

"Bird."

"Stop sign."
"Lighthouse."
"Cockroach."

Mr. Pignati sat forward in the seat, beaming. "Now I'm going to repeat them back to you. Did you write them all down so you can check me? Did you get them all down?"

"Yes, Mr. Pignati."

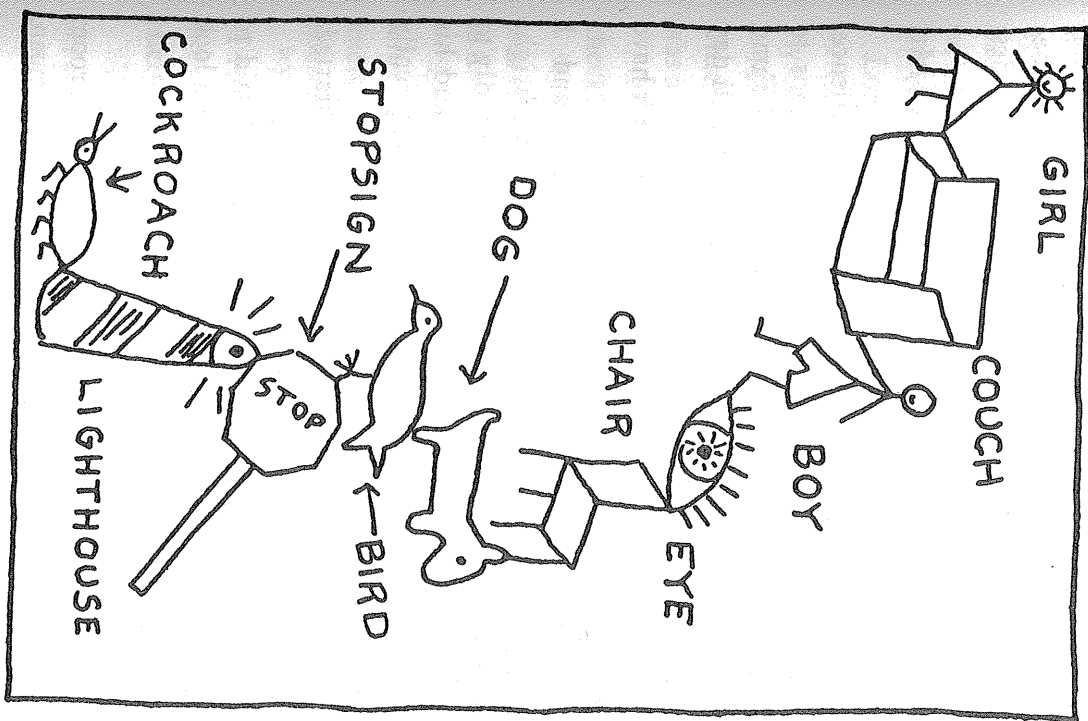
He started. "Cockroach, lighthouse, stop sign, bird, dog, chair, eye, boy, couch, girl. Is that right? Was I right?"

"Yes, Mr. Pignati."

Then he said the items, starting with girl and working back to cockroach, and I swear he looked just like a great big baby that had just made a superduper mud pie. He insisted on showing us how he did this breathtaking feat, calling us over to the table and drawing a diagram.

"You just make a mental picture. Like when Miss Truman said *girl*, I made a mental picture, and then when you said *couch*, all I had to do was make a mental picture of a couch and attach it to the girl. See, you've got to attach the pictures in your mind. That's the secret of remembering them all. Go ahead, you try it, Mr.—?"

"Mr. Wandermeyer."
It worked!



Then Lorraine tried it, and it didn't work too good with her. But if you ask me, that's only because she was worrying about the old man. Besides, she had polished off her whole glass of wine.

"We should all go to the zoo tomorrow," Mr. Pignati said, again out of nowhere.

"Mr. Pignati," I said with an air of impatience, "Miss Truman and I have many other stops to make today. I mean, where would the L & J Fund be if we simply sat around and drank wine all day and went to zoos?"

"Yes," Lorraine said. "We really shouldn't have stayed this long."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Mr. Pignati said, and I couldn't help feeling sorry. His smile and bright eyes faded in front of us, and he got awkwardly to his feet. "Let me get the check," he said, and his voice was so depressed I thought he was really going to cry.

"You don't really have to—" Lorraine started, but he looked bewildered.

"Of course, that's what we came for," I said to make it look real at least. Lorraine shot me a look of outrage.

"Of course," he said.

We watched him go down another hall to a room that had black curtains on the doorway. I mean,

there was no door, just these curtains. He disappeared through them. When he finally came back out, he seemed to be very tired, and he started writing the check.

"Whom should I make it out to?" he asked.

Lorraine gulped and went speechless.

"Cash will be fine. Make it out to cash," I found myself saying.

He handed me the check, and my hand shook a little. It wasn't that I was scared or anything, but it was an awful lot of money.

"On behalf of the L & J Fund I accept this check."

"Oh, yes," Lorraine echoed, and I could tell she was furious with me because her eyes were starting to flit all over the place again.

"Do you think you might like to go to the zoo with me *someday*?" Mr. Pignati asked just as I knew Lorraine was getting ready to flee out of the house.

"I always go to the zoo." The old man laughed.

"I love animals. My wife and I both love animals, but . . . I've been going to the zoo by myself lately. I always go. Every day."

"You love animals . . . ?" Lorraine muttered, her left hand opening the front door just a crack.

There was a dreadful pause.

"Oh, I forgot to show you my pigs!" he exclaimed, the gleam returning to his eyes. "You didn't see my pigs, did you?"

There came another terrible pause.

"No . . . we didn't see . . . your pigs," I said. He gestured us back into the living room and then moved down the hall to the room at the far end—the one with the black curtains hanging on the side of the entrance. Lorraine didn't want to follow him, but I dragged her behind me until we got to the doorway.

"Ohh-h-h!" Lorraine stammered.

The room was dark because its two windows were covered with faded paper shades. It was a real dump except for the table and shelves at the far end of it. The table had pigs all over it. And the shelves had pigs all over them. There were pigs all over the place. It was ridiculous. I never saw so many pigs. I don't mean the live kind; these were phony pigs. There were glass pigs and clay pigs and marble pigs.

Lorraine reached her hand out.

"Touch them," he told her. "Don't be afraid to pick them up." It was a big change from my mother who always lets out a screech if you go near anything, so I couldn't help liking this old guy even if he was sort of weird.

There were pigs that had *Made in Japan* on them. Some were from Germany and Austria and Switzerland. There were pigs from Russia and lots of pigs from Italy, naturally. There were little pigs and big pigs. Ugly ones and cute ones. There were blue, black, yellow, orange, striped, green, and rainbow-colored pigs. Pigs, pigs, pigs!

"Don't you like them?" he asked.

"Oh, everybody loves pigs," I said.

"My wife collects pigs. I got her started on it when I gave her one to remind her of me—before we got married."

"Oh?"

"This one," he said, lifting a large white pig with an ugly smile on its face, "this one was the first one I got her. She thought it was very funny. Pig. *Pignati*. Do you get it?"

"Yes, Mr. *Pignati*. We get it."