

CHAPTER 7

the gorilla. Only the gorilla started to make these terrifying noises, and John started to make believe he was a monkey and began screaming back at the gorilla. I joined in finally and got this pair of chimpanzees going. "Uygaugaboo" I told them, and they knew right away it was a game.

I thought Mr. Pignati was going to blow his top with all that nonsense going on because at first he just looked at us, and I don't mean with a smile.

Then I heard this "Uygaugaboo," and I'll be darned if it wasn't Mr. Pignati starting in. And before you knew it, all three of us were going *Uygaugaboo*, and we had Bobo, two chimps, and the gorilla worked up into such a tizzy I thought the roof of the monkey house was going to fall in. "I'll miss you, Bobo," Mr. Pignati said as we were leaving.

And when Bobo realized he wasn't going to get any more peanuts, you should have seen the expression on his face!

P.S. The answer to the snake quiz is that only statements five and six are true.

I don't happen to buy all of Lorraine's stuff about omens. She talks about me distorting, but look at her. I mean, she thinks she can get away with her subliminal twists by calling them omens, but she doesn't fool me. The only difference between her fibs and mine are that hers are eerie—she's got a gift for saying things that make you anxious.

I happen to have enjoyed that little trip to the zoo even if she didn't. I think it was sort of nice that a baboon had a friend like Mr. Pignati. I'd say that baboon was @#\$\$% lucky. As a matter of fact, the way the Pigsawman was treating Lorraine and me you'd have thought he liked us as much as Bobo. He bought me two cotton-candies-on-a-stick, one bag of peanuts, and a banana split at this homemade ice-cream palace. Lorraine got at least four bags of peanuts, one cherry ice-cream cone, and a black-and-white soda. If you let her, Lorraine would eat until she dropped, and if she keeps going at that rate, I'm afraid she's going to be somewhat

more than voluptuous. She could end up just plain fat.

We finally told him to call us Lorraine and John because every time he'd say Mr. Wandermeyer I'd forget that was supposed to be me. Besides, he was harmless—a little crazy—but really harmless.

Lorraine and I went to school the following day, and we didn't get over to the Pigmans until that night around seven o'clock. That was because when we were heading over there at three thirty, we ran into Dennis and Norton who wanted to know where we were going. We made believe we weren't going anywhere, so we had to go to the cemetery to have a beer with them. We drink at a special part of the cemetery called Masterson's Tomb. That's where all the famous Masterons are buried, you know. It's a fantastic place because they have acres and acres all for their own tomb, and it's fenced in with a private road which they only open up when one of the Masterons dies. But there is a hole in the fence at one place in the woods, and that's where all the kids go through.

The tomb is a great big marble building that's set in the side of a hill so only the fancy front sticks out. The columns and everything are nice, but it's all chained up, so we climb up the side of the hill and get on top by these two glass domes that let you

peek down inside. You can't actually see anything, but it sure makes you wonder.

I think cemeteries are one of the loveliest places to be—if you're not dead, of course. The hills and green grass and flowers are much nicer than what you get when you're alive. Sometimes we go there at midnight and hide behind stones to scare the @#\$\$% out of each other.

Once I ran away from Lorraine and the others and hid in a part of the cemetery that didn't have perpetual care. That's the part where no one pays to keep the grass cut. I was just lying on my back, looking up at the stars, and I was so loaded I thought I could feel the spin of the earth. All those stars millions of light years away shining down on me—me glued to a minor planet spinning around its own gigantic sun.

I stretched out and touched stone. I remember pulling my hands back to my sides, just keeping my eyes on the stars, concentrating on bringing them in and out of focus. "Is there anyone up there trying to talk to me? Anybody up there?"

"Anybody *down* there?" If I was lying on somebody's grave, whoever it was would be six feet away. Maybe there had been a lot of erosion, and whoever it was was only five feet away . . . or four. Maybe the tombstone had sunk at the same rate as the erosion, and the body was only a foot

away below me—or an inch. Maybe if I put my hand through the grass, I would feel a finger sticking out of the dirt—or a hand. Perhaps both arms of a corpse were on either side of me right at that moment. What could be left? A few bones. The skull. The worms and bacteria had eaten the rest. Water in the earth had dissolved parts, and the plants had sucked them up. Maybe one of the molecules of iron from the corpse's hemoglobin is in the strand of grass next to my ear. But the embalmers drain all the blood—well, probably not *every* drop. Nobody does anything perfectly.

Then I got very sad because I knew I wasn't really wondering about the guy underneath me, whoever he was. I was just interested in what was going to happen to me. I think that's probably the real reason I go to the graveyard. I'm not afraid of seeing ghosts. I think I'm really *looking* for ghosts. I *want* to see them. I'm looking for anything to prove that when I drop dead there's a chance I'll be doing something a little more exciting than decaying.

Anyway, we finally got away from Norton and Dennis, but it was too late to go over to the Pigman's—mainly because Lorraine had to get home to check in with her mother.

She finally got out of the house again that night

by performing an elaborate ritual about having to go to the library. As for myself, I didn't have much of a problem.

"Eat your peas, John," the Old Lady said, dabbing her mouth with a napkin. "Don't roll them around."

"I'm not rolling them around."

"Your mother said to stop it," Bore ordered. It was the first thing he'd said to me during dinner, and even though it wasn't the warmest remark, I could tell he had given up prosecuting the case of the phantom gluer.

"Your father sold over three hundred lots today," the Old Lady said, like she was patting a cocker spaniel on the head. Bore has a seat on the Coffee Exchange, and if he sells more than two hundred lots in a day, he's in a good mood. Anything less than that and there's trouble.

"It was like pulling teeth," Bore returned, slightly embarrassed but pleased with the praise. He cut deep into the steak on his plate. "Wait until you start working, John."

"I have to get the dessert," the Old Lady said, violently polishing a teaspoon and dashing out to the kitchen. She always gets terrified if it looks like my father and I are going to have any type of discussion. A suitable pause occurred after Hyper left the room, and then he started in.

"I think your problem is you have too much spare time."

"That's an interesting point of view."

"Don't be fresh. I was thinking maybe you'd like to work with me over at the Exchange a few days a week. Just after school?"

I almost choked on a mouthful of yams when he said that. I mean, I've been over to the Exchange and seen all the screaming and barking Bore has to do just to earn a few bucks, and if he thought I was going to have any part of that madhouse, he had another thought coming.

"I'd be better than the way you waste all your time now. After all, what are you going to do in life?"

"I'm thinking of becoming an actor."

"Don't be a jackass."

"You asked me what I'm going to do, and I told you."

"Your brother is doing very well at the Exchange. He makes a fine living, and there's still room for you. I've only got a few years left, and somebody has to take over."

"Kenny will."

"The business can be half yours, and you know it. I can't take the strain much longer."

Every time he says that, I get a little sick to my stomach because I know it's true. He's almost sixty

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years old, and I know he's not going to be around much longer. All the guys at the Exchange drop dead of heart attacks. They gather around this circle and bellow out bids all day long, like Mexicans at a bullfight.

"Pass me the butter, please."

"Just a couple of hours a day. You could help me close out the accounts. Even a dummy can learn how to do that."

"Yes, I *could*—"

"An actor?" Bore blurted, as if it finally got through to him. "Thank God Kenneth isn't a lunatic."

"Dad, it's the only thing I'm really interested in doing. I want to go to acting school right after graduation. Everyone says that's what I should be, with my imagination—"

"Try eating your imagination when you're hungry sometime."

"I just don't want to wear a suit every day and carry an attaché case and ride a subway. I want to be *me*. Just me. Not a phony in the crowd."

"Who's asking you to be a phony?"

"You are."

"I'm asking you to try working for a change. At your age I was working hard, not floundering around in a fool's dream world."

"Do you both want whipped cream and nuts on your strawberry whirl?" The Old Lady stood at

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the kitchen door, wiping forks a mile a minute. I should have said nothing, but it was a conditioned reflex.

"Do you mean *real* whipped cream or that horrible, prepared-mix, fake whipped cream?"

"Don't give the ingrate anything."

"He's only joking."

The Hyper was off again.

There was a terrible pause.

"I apologize."

"One of these days it'll be too late to apologize.

Your mother isn't going to be around forever either, you know. When she's dead, you're going to wish to God you'd been nicer to her. Mark my words." He sliced another piece of steak and groaned when the knife wouldn't go through a bit of gristle.

"Oh Dad, can't you see all I want to do is be individualistic?"

"Don't worry about that."

"I want to *be me*."

"Who's asking you not to be?"

"You are."

"I am not. I don't want you to go along with the crowd. I want you to be your own man. Stand out in your own way."

"*You do?*"

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"Of course I do. Take your plate out to the kitchen."

"Just give me a little longer to find out who I am," I said, heading for the kitchen door while the getting was good.

"Be yourself! Be individualistic!" he called after me. "But for God's sake get your hair cut. You look like an oddball."

"How nice of you to remember to bring your plate out," the Old Lady said, squirting some whipped cream out of a can. "Are you going to have dessert?"

"No, Mom."

She looked me over carefully, checking for any clues as to what mood I left Bore in.

"Your father's a little tired tonight. Maybe you'd better go over to a friend's house to do your homework? I mean he's worked hard, and I don't think we should aggravate him, do you?"

"No, Mom."

"Would you like a glass of wine?" Mr. Pignati offered, straightening up a few things in the living room. It was great how happy he was to see us. I can't remember Bore, or my mother either for that matter, ever looking happy to see me, let alone when I came into the house with a friend.

"That would be pleasant," Lorraine said.

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"This is a great house you've got," I said. "It's well . . . interesting."

He beamed.

"Come on, and I'll show you around," he said, smiling to beat the band.

He took us through the downstairs part, and the less you know about that the better. The first time we were there we saw the hallway when we came in and the stairs that went to the upper floor—and the living room that was really lived in. There was also this dining room affair with the kind of furniture you see everybody put out on the street for the Sanitation Department in the spring.

Then on the other side there was a door leading to a porchlike room that looked like someone had tried to fix it up so it could be lived in but had failed. And the only other thing on the first floor was a kitchen, and that's where we stopped because Lorraine was hungry. I mean, we were really making ourselves at home there after awhile. At first we had just stood around, bashful about touching his things. We'd walk over to a bookcase and touch a book and stroll by a table and admire the handle on a drawer. But in fifteen minutes we were laughing with the Pigman like it was a treasure hunt, and he kept smiling and saying, "Just make yourself at home. You just go right ahead and make

yourself at home." But it was really all a lot of junk. The most interesting thing I found was a table drawer full of old *Popular Mechanics* magazines, and the most interesting thing Lorraine found was the icebox.

"Try some of this," Mr. Pignati insisted, holding up a bowl of little roundish things that looked as if they were in a spaghetti sauce.

"Ummmm!" Lorraine muttered as she stuffed a few into her mouth. "What are they?"

"Scungilli," the Pigman said. "They're like snails."

"May I use your bathroom?" Lorraine asked, her face turning stark white.

"Right upstairs."

Mr. Pignati and I went into the room with all the pigs, and I started lifting the bigger ones to see what country they were made in.

You could hear Lorraine upstairs for about five minutes. When she came downstairs, she had this picture in her hands.

"Who's this?"

There was a pause. Then the smile faded off the Pigman's face. He took the picture from her and moved over to the stuffed armchair and sat down.

"My wife Conchetta," he said, "in her confirmation dress."

"Conchetta?" Lorraine repeated nervously. We both knew something was wrong but couldn't put our finger on it. I got the idea that maybe his wife had run off to California and left him. I mean, you couldn't blame her when you stop to think that her husband's idea of a big time was to go to the zoo and feed a baboon.

"She liked that picture because of the dress," he went on. "It was the only picture she ever liked of herself."

He got up and put it in the table drawer where all those old *Popular Mechanics* books were, and when he turned around, his eyes looked like he was going to start crying. Suddenly he forced a smile and said, "Go upstairs and look around while I get you some wine. Please feel at home, please. . . ."

Then he went down the hall toward the kitchen. "What else is up there?" I whispered to Lorraine.

"I don't know."

I decided to take a look, but frankly there wasn't much to look at. At the top of the stairs was this plain old bathroom with a shower curtain that had all kinds of fish designs on it.

When I opened the door on the left, I got a little bit scared because there was one of those adjustable desk lamps with a long neck that made it look like a

bird about to attack. I put the light on though, and the room was a huge bore. The ceiling slanted on the far side, and there was only one window. It was okay if you wanted to keep somebody as the Prisoner of Zenda, but it looked like a rotten place to work. All it had was this big desk made by taking a thick piece of plywood and laying it over two wooden horses, and a bookcase with blueprints and stuff in it, and a big oscilloscope, with its guts hanging out, in the corner. There were three old TV sets too, but they looked like they didn't even work.

Then I went into the room on the right of the hall. It was a bedroom—much neater than the rest of the house—and it had a lot of drawers and things to go through.

The bedroom had a closet too, so I started with that. There were all kinds of dresses in it, and lacy ladies' coats, and hats that looked like they must have been the purple rage at the turn of the tenth century. It was a big loss; it really was. And let me tell you, this room was a little nerve-racking too. It had a double bed with a cover made of millions of ruffles, and the way the pillows were laid out, it looked like there might be a dead body underneath. I checked that out right away, but there were only pillows. Then I found one drawer in the dresser

bureau that had a lot of papers in it.

There were some pictures, and I looked at them quickly. Also there were some bills and old letters and things tied up with a putrid ribbon and then—sort of funny—this little pamphlet caught my eye.

It was called *WHAT EVERY FAMILY SHOULD KNOW*. That's all there was on the cover, and it really had my curiosity up, so I opened it. The very first page gave me the creeps.

I ditched that quick enough, but one thought struck me about that dumb high school I go to. They think they're so smart giving the kids garbage like *Johnny Tremain* and *Giants of the Earth* and *Macbeth*, but do you know, I don't think there's a single kid in that whole joint who would know what to do if somebody dropped dead.

In the same drawer there was a leather case with a broken thingamajig to close it, and it had jewelry in it—a lot of junky women's jewelry that looked like it was made out of paste and stuff. I mean, that wife of his—Mr. Pignati's wife—looked like she didn't take anything with her to California. All those clothes in the closet. But how was I supposed to know? Maybe she went to visit the Pignam's sister in a nudist camp or something. They do anything in California—crazy religions and that kind of thing.

Questions

What should be done first?

Who is our Funeral Director?

Do we have a cemetery preference?

Are there any organizations or friends to invite?

What kind and type of casket?

Do we have money for the expense?

If so, where? How much?

If not, where is the money to come from:

Veterans' benefits?

Social Security?

Insurance?

These, and many more, are the questions that are asked when the time comes. Peace of mind will be yours if you follow this booklet.

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Silver Lake

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Funeral Directors

AUTHORIZATION OF SERVICES

NOTE AND TERMS

I/We, the undersigned, individually and jointly hereby authorize The Silver Lake, Co. to direct the funeral of: Conchetta Pignati and to provide all professional services, facilities, equipment, and other merchandise and services as set forth above for an agreed consideration of \$ 1,521.06, and in addition thereto a reasonable charge for such other items as may be ordered or any cash advanced by us.

Signature,

Angelo Pignati
190 Howard Avenue

Then I found this bill right in with all the jewelry and junk and her Social Security card, and that's when I knew Conchetta Pignati was not in California. I knew that where Conchetta Pignati was she was never coming back.