

CHAPTER 8

"His wife's *dead!*" John whispered.

"What?"

"I just found her funeral bill."

A terrible chill ran through me when he said that, because I had been afraid Conchetta was not away on a vacation. I didn't exactly suspect Mr. Pignati of having murdered her and sealed her body behind a wall in the cellar, but I was suspicious. There was something about the glaze in his eyes when he laughed that disturbed me because I could tell he didn't really believe his own laughter. It was a nervous type of laughing, the same kind as that of a landlady we once had after her husband died in a dentist's chair while he was under gas.

"Did you see the ad in yesterday's paper?" Mr.

Pignati asked, finally coming back with more of the red wine.

"No."

"For sale: Complete set of encyclopedias, never used. Wife knows everything." And then he let out that laugh again.

I just couldn't smile at his joke. I thought it was very sad. I mean, that cute little girl in the ruffled dress had already grown up, gotten married, lived her life, and was underground somewhere. And Mr. Pignati wasn't able to admit it. That landlady used to think her husband was going to come back one day too, but she died less than two months after him. I've always wondered about those cases where a man and wife die within a short time of each other. Sometimes it's only days. It makes me think that the love between a man and a woman must be the strongest thing in the world.

But then look at my father and mother, although maybe they didn't ever really love each other. Maybe that's why she got the way she is.

"I found this upstairs." John smiled, holding a small plastic card. "What is it?"

The Pigman explained what a charge card was.

"You mean you just sign your name, and a department store lets you take whatever you want,

and you don't have to pay for it for months?" John asked, wide-eyed.

Mr. Pignati said he only got the card so his wife could go shopping in the fancy-food delicatessen they've got at Beekman's.

"She loves delicacies," he said.

And I remembered the taste of the scungilli!

When I got home that night, I thought of them again, but another thought struck me. I realized how many things the Pigman and his wife must have shared—even the fun of preparing food. Good food is supposed to produce good conversation, I've heard. I guess it's no wonder my mother and I never had an interesting conversation when all we eat is canned soup, chop suey, and instant coffee. I think I would have learned how to cook if she had ever encouraged me, but the one time I tried baking a cake she said it tasted horrible and was a waste of money.

"Did you fix my coffee?"

"Yes."

"This one has sex on the brain. He has only got a couple of months to live, and he's still got itchy fingers." I watched my mother powdering her nose at the kitchen table. She leaned forward between

sips of coffee, dabbing at her face.

"The last nurse quit because she couldn't control his hands. He's always trying to touch something, but I put a stop to that the first time he tried anything."

"Can I make you some eggs?"

"Don't bother. I'll have breakfast at their house.

His wife is treating me with kid gloves because they know a nurse isn't easy to come by—particularly when they've got to put up with what I've got to. Make yourself something."

"I'm not hungry."

"Make sure you scrub the kitchen floor today. In fact I'd concentrate on the kitchen. It's worse than anything else."

"We're out of cleanser. Shall I buy a can?"

"Wait until I see if I can take one from the job. I think I saw some when I was going through the closets yesterday." She checked herself in the bathroom mirror and then headed for the door. "Give me a kiss—and lock the doors and windows. Don't open for anyone, do you hear me?"

"Yes, Mother."

"If a salesman rings the bell, don't answer it."

I watched her waiting on the corner until the bus came. If I strained my neck, I could always

catch a glimpse of her standing there in her white uniform and white shoes—and she usually wore a short navy-blue jacket, which looked sort of strange over all that white. As I watched her I remembered all the times she said how hard it was to be a nurse—how bad it was for the legs, how painful the varicose veins were that nurses always got from being on their feet so much. I could see her standing under the street light . . . just standing there until the bus came. It was easy to feel sorry for her, to see how awful her life was—even to understand a little why she picked on me so. It hadn't always been like that though.

But she did pick on me now!

Lots of times I'd cry myself to sleep, but more and more I felt myself thinking of the Pigmans whenever I felt sad. Sometimes just after I put the light out, I'd see his face smiling or his eyes gleaming as he offered me the snails—some little happy detail I thought I had forgotten—and I'd wish my mother were more like him. I'd wish she knew how to have a little fun for a change.

I got most of the work done in plenty of time for John and me to meet the Pigmans down at the Staten Island ferryhouse by eleven thirty that morning. Mr. Pignati said he'd meet us there after

he had stopped at the zoo to feed Bobo, which was fine with John. He loves to wait for people in the ferryhouse because all the bums and drunks come over. He really drives them crazy. They've got drunks and bums all over the Staten Island ferryhouse, but not half as many as they've got on the other side at South Ferry. John makes them tell their whole life story before he'll give them a nickel.

This one bum who came over said his name was Dixie. Everybody called him Dixie because he came from the South. Then he told this story about how he used to be a professor at Southern Pines University, but he took some LSD as part of an experimental program and lost his power of concentration. His whole academic life had come to an end because he'd lost his power of concentration.

I thought of writing a story about him until John told me the same bum had come up to him a month ago and said his name was Confederate. He said they called him that because he was from the South. John said he told an entirely different story—about how he had been taking a speed-reading course and he was reading faster than anybody in the world. He said he used to read so fast he had to buy two copies of every book and cut the pages out

and put them on tables around the room, and then he'd run by the pages. That's how fast he could read. He said he was written up in *Scientific American* magazine in the January, 1949, issue, and anybody could check it out. He was supposed to have a sister in Marlboro, Vermont, who could do the same thing. And then the tragedy was supposed to have happened. He was running around the room so fast he banged into a table and lost his power of concentration.

The Pigman got there in time for us to get the eleven forty-five boat to Manhattan. I just had to go along on this trip to Beekman's Department Store because John has absolutely no control over himself. If I had let him and Mr. Pignati go alone, John would have charged half the store. He wouldn't have done it to be mean. He just isn't used to people giving him stuff, and that's what Mr. Pignati wanted to do.

When the ferry docked on the other side, we got off on the upper deck, which meant we had to walk down this long, curving ramp that looks like a poor man's Guggenheim Museum. The subway station is right there, so we went down the stairs and got on the Seventh Avenue Local. When you take the Seventh Avenue Local, you have to switch at Chambers Street for the Seventh Avenue Express.

It really can get boring unless you keep your eyes open. There was one woman at Chambers Street who was talking to herself a mile a minute, and I know now it was another omen.

"Death is coming," she kept repeating. "God told me death is coming. He calls me his little chaty doll . . . God's chaty doll. . . ."

It's sort of spooky how when you're caught talking to God nowadays everybody thinks you're nuts. They used to call you a prophet.

We couldn't get to Thirty-fourth Street quick enough for me, and just as we came up out of the subway, there was Beekman's—good old Beekman's.

Mr. Pignati started getting excited when we got inside with all those Saturday shoppers. You could tell right off he was going to show us around as though he owned the place. He took us right to the fancy-food store on the eighth floor. It was probably the only part of Beekman's he'd ever been to, and I could just picture Conchetta and him pushing the cart up and down the aisles picking out all that vile food.

"Wait until you try these frogs' legs," he said happily, "with ricotta cheese."

I felt sick.

He also picked out three jars of bean soup, barn-

boo shoots, fish killies with their heads still on, and a lot of other delicious items.

"The killies are tasty in bean soup."

I guess Conchetta and he had liked the same things.

"Now you pick out some things *you'd* like to try." He smiled at me. John had already picked out a carton of tiger's milk and a box of chocolate-covered ants. *Ugh*. Anything to be weird.

"Please," Mr. Pignati insisted.

Just then my eye caught a two-pound can of Love'n Nuts, which is a mixture of pecans, almonds, and popcorn. Right next to it was a large container of Jamboree Juicy Jellies, and before I knew what had happened the Pigman had grabbed them and put them into the shopping cart.

"I don't want you spending all that money, Mr.

Pignati," I said.

"Nonsense," he insisted.

But I really didn't. And still it felt good. No one had ever bought me stuff like this before—something I just liked and didn't need and didn't even ask for. Now I knew how John felt because I felt the same way.

After we finished with the delicatessen department, we went to the fifth floor. We had to cut

through women's underwear to get to the toy department.

"Hi, doll," John said to one of the dummies that was wearing only a girdle and a brassiere.

"Can I help you, sir?" a saleslady with too much makeup and an enormous beehive hairdo wanted to know.

"I don't think so," I said.

"Nothing for your daughter?" she asked Mr.

Pignati. He started to smile.

"I'm not his daughter," I blurted out, and the Pigman looked depressed. I didn't mean to say it as though I would be ashamed to be his daughter, but I guess it just came out that way.

"I'm his niece," I quickly offered, returning the smile to Mr. Pignati's face.

"Is there something you'd like here?" Mr. Pignati asked, and I knew he meant it. I had no intention of accepting anything more, but I couldn't help looking around.

"No, nothing, thank you."

"We have some lovely nylon stockings," the saleslady said, with just the tone to make me embarrassed if I didn't say yes.

"Go ahead," Mr. Pignati urged. "Please."

"I'll take one pair," I mumbled, and I'm sure my

face was stark red.

"They come in three-pair packages."

"We'll take three pairs," the Pigmán insisted.

"What size, please?"

"Eleven."

"Eleven?"

"Yes, ma'am. Eleven," I repeated.

"You couldn't take more than a size seven-and-a-half."

"I want size eleven, thank you."

"But—"

"Size eleven."

I began to get terrified at what my mother would say when I brought her home three pairs of stockings. I'd have to tell her some girl friend at school bought them by mistake and wanted to sell them cheap or something like that. But then I broke out laughing.

"Is something funny?" the saleslady inquired, putting her hand up to her beehive.

"No," I said, watching John slip a lit cigarette into the hand of the dummy with the girdle and the brassiere.

The visit to the toy department was something else. I hadn't been in Beekman's toy department in years, not since I was three years old and my mother took me to sit on Santa Claus' lap. It was

fun then, but now everything was made out of cheap plastic, and you could tell the stuff would break in a minute.

The one thing that really got my goat was these ships in bottles. They were ships in bottles all right, but the bottles were made out of plastic. They had bottoms so you could open the bottle up and take the ship out whenever you felt like it. I mean, they lost the whole point of having a ship in a bottle. You're supposed to wonder about how it got in there, not be able to screw the bottom off the thing and take the ship out whenever you feel like it.

And there was the arsenal of course: guns, pistols, shotguns, slingshots, knives, and swords. It's no wonder kids grow up to be killers with all that rehearsal. There was enough artillery in Beekman's toy department to wipe out Red China and the Mau-Mau tribe of Africa, and I personally think some of the toy manufacturers could use a good course in preventative psychiatry.

"Can we look at the pet shop?" Mr. Pignati asked.

John groaned.

"Of course we can," I said, scowling at John.

"*Kitchy kitchy kitchy koo*," John said, tapping his finger on the side of an aquarium that had two piranha flesh-eating fish in it. One of them darted

for his finger and bumped its nose on the glass. Next to them were three little monkeys in a cage that were hugging each other like crazy, and you-know-who stopped to talk to them for half an hour.

"Bobo . . . you look just like my little Bobo," Mr. Pignati was saying, leaning over the counter and waving his hand at one of the poor monkeys that looked like it was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"My little Bobo."

The three monkeys were hugging each other desperately, and I really had to smile, watching them. Here they were, clinging to each other in the pet shop at Beekman's, looking out at everybody with these tiny, wet eyes—as though pleading for love. They looked so lonely and sweet just holding on to each other.

"Aren't they cute?" I had to say.

"Bobo . . . you look like my little Bobo—"

"Give 'em a piece of popcorn," John suggested. I offered my can of Love'n Nuts to Mr. Pignati, and he took a couple of pieces.

"Don't feed them," this nasty floorwalker called out.

"I'm sorry," Mr. Pignati said, looking embarrassed.

"Why not?" John had to ask.

"Because I told you not to, that's why."

Now that's the kind of logic that really sets John off. That floorwalker could have simply said that monkeys bite or that popcorn is not their natural diet or something like that—but instead he had to think he was a schoolteacher. From that moment on, every time the floorwalker half turned his back John made believe he was throwing popcorn into the monkey cage, and I thought that man was going to go insane.

"Bobo. Little Bobo. . . ."

I made the mistake of leaving the two of them alone while I went to the ladies' room, because when I came out John was yelling, "Hurry up!"

"What for?"

"Mr. Pignati's going to buy us roller skates."

"Oh, no, he isn't. He's spent enough money on us."

"He's not spending any money," John corrected.

"He's going to charge them!" He ran ahead and caught up with the Pignan, who was heading for the sports department.

"How do those fit?" the salesman asked.

"Mr. Pignati, I don't think you should buy these."

"I used to love roller-skating," he answered. He

looked so happy and funny bending over in his seat, trying to put on one of the skates, that I had to laugh. One part of me was saying "Don't let this nice old man waste his money," and the other half was saying "Enjoy it, enjoy doing something absolutely absurd"—something that let me be a child in a way I never could be with my mother, something just silly and absurd and . . . beautiful.

"Please let me get them," Mr. Pignati said, practically asking for my permission.

"I'll wear mine," John told the salesman, a tiny round bald man with spectacles which quickly dropped to the end of his nose as he laced up the skates.

"Pardon me?"

John picked up his shoes and plopped them into the box the shoe skates came in. "I said I'm going to wear them."

"But you're on the fifth floor."

"She'll wear hers too."

"John, are-you crazy?" Just as the words came out of my mouth I could tell from the fallen expression on his face that if I didn't wear the roller skates, I'd be letting him down. I'd be disappointing him in the main thing that he liked about me. I—and maybe now even the Pigman—were the only ones he knew who could understand that

doing something like roller-skating out of Beekman's was not absolutely crazy. Everything in his home had to have a purpose. There was no one there who could understand doing something just for fun—something crazy—and that was what he'd liked about me from that first day when I laughed on the bus and was just as crazy as he was.

"I'll wear mine too," I sighed, and before long we were rolling toward the escalator—a good number of people staring.

"Wait for me," Mr. Pignati yelled, carrying his skates under his arm and laughing along with us.

All John was doing was opening his arms and in his own way saying: "Look at me, world! Look at my life and energy and how glad I am to be alive!" We must have looked just like three monkeys. The Pigman, John, and me—three funny little monkeys.