

# 1

It was **Halloween afternoon** and I was swinging hand over hand like an escaped chimpanzee across the lattice of open attic rafters in Miss Volker's rickety wooden garage. She was circling directly below me and impatiently shouting out orders and crossly pointing up at what odds and ends of no-good junk she wanted me to inspect. I may have been acting like a giddy monkey in the rafters but I was really trying my best to help her out and even make her laugh, because this last while her old-lady moodiness was even more stormy than usual.

Mom had noticed too and just the other day remarked that Miss Volker seemed to be a shade more irritable since she no longer had her crusty old swain, Mr. Spizz, to kick around. He had kept bugging her about getting

married, so she tricked him. She agreed to marry him but only if she was the last original Norvelt old lady alive. Miss Volker figured that would never happen and she could just keep him under her thumb forever. But suddenly a string of old ladies dropped over from eating Girl Scout cookies laced with deadly Compound 1080 vermin killer, and Miss Volker was the last old lady left. Spizz thought he'd outsmarted her, but before he could get her to the altar the police caught on to him. He confessed his guilt to Miss Volker, then stole her car and took off before he was captured. Since then nobody but the county police wanted to see him again.

“Spizz was a horrid man,” Mom remarked, “but I guess it made her happy to have him to kick around. I just hope she doesn't go out and get a grouchy old dog to replace him.”

“She won't be getting any kind of dog,” I said while filling out my community service report for school. “She has me to growl at.”

“I growl at you too,” Mom added, and pushed my drooping hair out of my eyes, “but I love you, and I'm sure she feels the same.”

I knew Miss Volker wasn't upset because of my attic antics, or even because of the criminal Mr. Spizz. She was irritable because of the nonstop radio and TV talk that was demanding an all-out war with Russia ever

since we had caught the Russians hiding nuclear-tipped missiles in Cuba—and they were aimed at us! Last week, the president had come on TV and told the nation not to panic but to brace for the worst. War talk was turning into war hysteria.

Even the Norvelt newspaper got into the act. It published a letter from Mr. Huffer, the funeral director, who argued that we should “pull the trigger first, and blast the Russians back into the Stone Age.”

Miss Volker was furious once she read that letter. Because the arthritis in her hands was especially bad that day, she had me dial Mr. Greene at the newspaper. I held the receiver up to her mouth as she gave him an earful. “You should know better than to print warmongering letters by the worst wagon-chaser in western Pennsylvania,” she scolded. “Our founder, Eleanor Roosevelt, is dedicated to world peace at the United Nations and we should be too. If we pull the trigger first and start a war, the nuclear blasts and fallout will incinerate the human race and all evidence of its history. All the wild animals will drop in their tracks. Dead fish will cover the steaming oceans from shore to shore. Birds in the sky will wither and fall like October leaves. Even the nameless things that burrow deep in the dirt will find they’ve dug their own graves.”

Mr. Greene apologized. Miss Volker hated war. She

was as angry as any bomb and wanted to blow war to smithereens.

And then, on the morning World War III was supposed to begin, the silver UFO-shaped gas tank behind the school cafeteria accidentally exploded. The propane fireball looked like a mushroom cloud over Norvelt. The explosion blasted a hole in the school kitchen and cracked a bunch of walls.

We were in class and terrified by the blast because our teacher had started the morning by pointing at the round Seth Thomas clock as it tick-tocked above the blackboard like a bomb. Casually, she had informed us that the Russian missiles launched from Cuba would begin “falling on Norvelt more or less around *noonish*. But for the moment, don’t worry,” she advised in a yawning, offhand way. “After we finish math we’ll just take our sack lunches and a few board games and head down to the basement air-raid shelter, where the National Guard said we’d be safe.”

“Safe as *cockroaches!*” Bunny Huffer had cried out derisively. She was the funeral director’s daughter and my best friend, and about as short as a tall cockroach.

“Exactly,” agreed our teacher. “Cockroaches will survive *anything*.”

But the gas tank unexpectedly blew up before noon. In the classroom the overhead lights flickered and in an

instant Bunny leaped up onto her desktop and hollered out, “Russian sneak attack! Run for your life!” Half of the class screamed and stampeded wildly toward the basement shelter, and the other half of us were paralyzed with fear while waiting for the searing white heat of a million nuclear suns to atomize our tears and eyes and brains and the rest of us into glowing space dust. I remember staring at my yellow pencil and thinking that it would soon look like a burning candle clutched in my sizzling hand.

However, nobody was hurt except for a few hysterical kids who were pushed from behind and fell headfirst down the concrete air-raid-shelter steps. The volunteer fire department whistle sounded and within minutes the Norvelt fire truck pulled up and doused part of the rear roof eaves, which had caught fire. While the firemen did their job out back the student body was evacuated through the front doors, and as we all stood on the baseball field our principal, Mr. Knox, announced that school was suspended.

We cheered loudly but he settled us right down when he shrewdly added, “Your time away from school will not be considered a holiday.” We groaned, and as quickly as he could think it up he had given us homework. We were instructed to perform useful community service in “the generous spirit of our town’s founder, Eleanor

Roosevelt. And upon your return to school I'll expect to see a written report of all you have done for Norvelt."

"But what about the nuclear war?" Bunny shouted out as she stepped forward to face him. As a group we all looked up into the air for incoming missiles but saw only a flock of extra-smart ducks heading north to Canada for cover.

"I have just received word," Mr. Knox replied cheerfully, "that the conflict in Cuba has been resolved for the moment. But nobody trusts the Russians, so keep listening to the radio for news."

"Do you mean to tell me that the war is called off?" Bunny cried out. "*Dang!*" She spit on the ground because she didn't dare spit on Mr. Knox. He had once played linebacker for the Pittsburgh Steelers and could probably eat a kindergartner for breakfast.

I knew Bunny was disappointed. She had told me her dad hoped for a war and had ordered a lot of expensive caskets for his funeral home. "Special *steel* caskets," she explained. "They are so *solid* you can actually use them for a personal bomb shelter. Plus, they have an adjustable air vent and a little blast-proof window on the cover where rescue teams can look in and see who survives, or not, without having to open the cover and find out the hard way." She pinched her nose closed and made a stinky face for emphasis.

Bunny was so thrilled about the idea of individual bomb shelters that I didn't dare point out to her that if there was a nuclear war you would actually be burying yourself alive.

So the reason I was monkeying around Miss Volker's garage attic during a school day was because Mom had started a Young Women's Club for Norvelt. Since every old lady in town, except for Miss Volker, had been wickedly poisoned and killed off by the escaped criminal, Mr. Spizz, Mom thought it was a good time for Norvelters to pitch in and donate their useless junk to raise money at a tag sale to help young women buy the dead-old-lady houses that were mysteriously vanishing.

Five houses had already disappeared, and all that was left behind of them were their garages, chicken coops, overgrown gardens, and water-filled foundations rimmed with snapped-off pipes and wires. Miss Volker said someone was stealing Mrs. Roosevelt's dream. She blamed the Hells Angels, who had bought her sister's old house, burned it down, then come back this fall to build a clubhouse on the ruins.

But my dad told me what was going on. To make extra money Mr. Huffer had been secretly buying the unoccupied houses and trucking them to a town in West Virginia where he resold them. Mr. Huffer denied doing this but Dad had been hired to drive the big truck that moved the houses, so I knew it was true.

It really bothered Mom that our town was disappearing, so she arranged for me to help Miss Volker gather her junk to sell.

“But why bother starting a club for young women?” I had remarked to my mother while eating breakfast. “We’ll all be burnt toast in the nuclear war.”

“Do as you’re told,” she replied, unfazed by my bleak news. “Somewhere in the world there is a war going on every day. The evil acts of others should not stop hopeful people like us from doing good deeds.”

“Yeah, but this is a war of the whole world at once,” I stressed, circling my arms above my head as if I were Atlas trying to keep the entire globe from exploding.

“For now,” she said sharply, exasperated with my line of thinking, “our battle is to save our town, and without young women this town is just going to disappear.”

“Hey, what about young men?” I asked, thumping myself on the chest.

“Women are the glue,” she replied without hesitation. “If they run off, you don’t have a town. Instead, you have a hobo village full of men who are as feral as wild dogs.”

Maybe she was right, I thought. Where would Peter Pan and the Lost Boys be without Wendy to keep them from turning completely wild? And look at Dad when he didn’t listen to Mom. After he had built his army surplus Piper Cub in our garage, he had dive-bombed

people's houses. He flew above cars and dropped water balloons on them. He landed on the softball field during a game. He buzzed the hens at the community hatchery so many times they stopped laying eggs. He was having so much *wild-boy* fun people wanted him to leave town and get lost—and he did! He flew to Florida to find better work and he promised he'd be back to get me and Mom, but that hadn't happened yet. He was still off in Neverland.

I didn't want Norvelt to disappear, so when I finished my breakfast on Halloween morning I went down to Miss Volker's garage. It didn't take me long to say something that annoyed her. I was climbing a ladder up to the rafters when I asked what everyone in the whole world was asking. "Can America beat the Russians in a nuclear war?"

"Do they teach you *cause and effect* at school?" she hollered up at me. "Bombing them is like committing suicide. Even if they don't bomb us back we'll still die from our *own* fallout. There is no winner."

She was so touchy about the war. I flinched and knocked over a stained old ceramic pot that nearly beamed her. "Hey! Watch the *fallout!*" she growled. "I survived three wars and don't want to be killed by a bedpan and miss out on the joy of being evaporated by a nuclear blast."

"Sorry," I sang out. "But it's pretty cluttered up here."

Because the hooked fingers on her hands were curled up from arthritis, she had me use electrical tape to bind a small flashlight to her left wrist. She pointed the beam of light at things she wanted to donate. I used a rope to lower a rickety butter churn, an old ice cream maker, a Philco radio the size of a kid's tombstone, and a rusty Western Flyer bicycle with rotted balloon tires.

"I'm glad to be getting rid of this old rubbish," she said, and kicked out at the Philco radio. It didn't tip over and she gave it a foul-weather look. "I don't need this stuff, and it doesn't need me. Look at that butter churn for instance," she continued. "It's from my hometown of Rugby, Tennessee. I used it. My sister used it. Even Spizz used it. But now it's junk.

"In fact, now that I'm the last original Norvelter left I feel like a piece of old junk myself—maybe you can sell *me* off." She kicked the radio again, but it was a glancing blow off its rounded top.

"You are not junk," I countered, climbing higher into the rafters to reach for a dented brass tuba she had spotlighted.

"I'm useless here," she insisted, and this time she reared back and gave the Philco a swinging kick, as if she were kicking one of our new Hells Angels neighbors off her front porch. The Philco tottered on its weighted base but didn't tip over. She glared at it. "My pledge to Mrs. Roosevelt to be Norvelt's town nurse is fulfilled,

my duty is complete,” she declared, “and now my twin sister in Florida needs an eye operation, so I may go take care of her for a while—perhaps for the winter. Who knows, maybe I’ll find some old geezer down there and fall in love.”

“Really?” I asked, and grabbed at the mouthpiece of the tuba. “Why fall in love?”

“You mean, *why fall in love at my age?*” she snapped back. “Does it surprise you that before the world ends this old lady desires someone to give her a big beautiful kiss?”

That is exactly what I meant and my cheeks began to throb and redden. “It was dense of me to say that,” I added apologetically.

She shone the flashlight into my face. “Now, don’t start blushing,” she ordered, and sidestepped from beneath me. “If your Swiss cheese nose has a blowout again, I don’t want you showering blood down onto my hair. I just had it done.”

Her hair was as blue as a hydrangea and stood straight up on her head like the Bride of Frankenstein’s. It was so stiff on the sides and so flat on top she could probably balance a bowl of goldfish up there.

“My nose has been fine since your last operation on it,” I hollered back. “Totally under control. Not a drop in two months.” I used to have nervous nosebleeds all the time, but ever since Miss Volker ran a red-hot

veterinary tool up my nostrils and rotated it around real good, my scorched inner nose walls had healed into a solid dam of tough, rubbery scar tissue.

I had just tied off a rope around the tuba to lower it to the ground when Bunny Huffer dashed into the garage and yowled like a Tasmanian devil as she skidded to a dusty stop across the gravel. She startled me, and the rope slipped out of my fingers. The bulky tuba shot straight down like a hand cupping a fly. If the wide opening of that tuba landed directly over the top of Bunny's little head, it would swallow her up like a man-eating snake. She'd be squeezed inside the tuba like a corkscrew and no one in the whole world would have the lungs big enough to blow her back out.

But it landed with a dull note just in front of her foot. She looked up at me with a fearless scowl. "You don't want to flatten me," she warned, "'cause I have some *incredible* news!"

"Another Russian sneak attack?" I asked.

"Better than *that*," she cried out.

"Well, don't just stand there looking like a yard gnome," Miss Volker snapped, referring to Bunny's stumpy size as she pointed the flashlight directly into her mousy eyes. "Spit it out before we donate *you* to the tag sale."

An impish smile slipped across Bunny's sweaty face

as if she knew what she was about to say would distress Miss Volker more than anyone in the town. She pulled her shoulders back and slanted her eyes to one side to avoid the interrogating beam of the flashlight.

“Well,” she boldly announced with a flourish. “Private sources tell me that a certain very old lady named Mrs. Custer at house E-19 has returned to town. And you know what that means,” she sang with a self-satisfied smile.

“Do tell me,” Miss Volker replied with disdain. Her judgment of Bunny was soured by her vile opinion of Bunny’s father, who smelled of funeral-home formaldehyde and bleach and enjoyed dead people a little too much.

“It means,” Bunny explained slowly, calculating the impact of her point, “that you are no longer the last standing original old Norvelter in Norvelt.”

Miss Volker’s jaw slowly lowered like a flag falling to half-mast. “I was afraid Mrs. *Custard* might move back,” Miss Volker said, with her voice carrying the heavy weight of her disappointment. “She called me last week from Utah and asked if it was safe enough to return after all the old-lady murders. I asked if she owned a pistol and she said yes, so I advised her to bring it with her and just shoot anyone who tried to poison her. I guess I should have made Norvelt sound more dangerous,

but I thought all those old-lady murders in a row would keep her at bay.” She sighed with regret as her shoulders slumped.

“Yikes,” I said, “I don’t think keeping a loaded gun in the house is a good idea for an old lady.”

Instantly Miss Volker drew herself up and glared at me. “What is wrong with you?” she snapped. “First you don’t want old ladies to be kissed. Now you don’t want them to have guns. Honestly, without guns how do you think old ladies ever get kissed?”

Bunny saved me from a further tongue-lashing by butting in. “Well, she won’t need to use the gun on herself,” she suggested, “because she already looks half dead. I’m sure she’ll soon drop over, which is okay with Dad because he could use the funeral business. He hasn’t made a buck off a body since the last old lady hit the deck, and now this war is a *dud* for casket sales.”

“What a vulture you are,” Miss Volker remarked. “I bet this is the way you and your dad talk about me behind my back.”

“No offense,” Bunny said matter-of-factly. “We talk about everyone this way. Tailors look at people and know the size of their suits. Dad looks at people and knows the size of their coffins. It’s just part of the funeral business. Every living person,” she sang in a radio jingle voice, “is just a breath away from a payday for us.”

“Anyway,” Bunny carried on, changing the subject, “looks like Mrs. Custer returned to make her *last stand*.”

“Good grief,” Miss Volker cried out in frustration, and clawed at the air like a dog scratching a door. “Her name is Mrs. *Custard*. Not Custer! She may be the last *dessert* but not the last *stand*.” Swiftly she spun around and gave the radio a solid kick. It held its ground.

I had read about General Custer and how he and his troops slaughtered Indians on the Montana plains until the Indians had had enough of it. At the Battle of the Little Bighorn the Indians turned the tables on General Custer and slaughtered the troops right down to the last man standing—and then they killed him too. I could imagine that bloody battle as if I were the last man killed and scalped and I felt a pressure build up in my nose kind of like when a steaming teakettle is just about to whistle. I thought for sure I was on the brink of my old bloody nose blasts, but after a moment the pressure retreated. The dam of scar tissue in my nose was still holding strong, and I dropped down from the lowest joist and landed next to Bunny.

“Oh, not to change the subject,” Bunny said as she turned toward me, “but what are you wearing for trick-or-treating tonight?”

“The same as always,” I replied, plucking cobwebs from my hair. “My Grim Reaper costume.”

“Not that old thing,” she burst out, and stomped her little foot.

“But I love my Grim Reaper outfit,” I said, and struck a fearsome pose. “Everyone is afraid of the Messenger of Death knocking on their front door.”

“You have to come up with something new,” she demanded. “Something extra scary. Because I have something *killer* good, and I’m not telling you what it is just yet.”

“Well, how about I make a Hells Angel costume,” I suggested. “That’s scary.”

She made a blah face. “Come on,” she encouraged. “Think! Make it one step scarier. Use your noodle.”

I couldn’t really think of anything scarier than the gang of Hells Angels that had moved into Norvelt like a nest of angry hornets.

“Okay,” she said impatiently. “I’ll give you a hint—*Gantos boy*.”

“Spizz!” I shouted merrily. “Yes. I could be Spizz.” I turned and looked toward Miss Volker.

“That’s psychopathic,” she said, glaring at me and raising her leg back like a horse about to kick. “You should be ashamed to go as a menacing serial killer.”

I should have been, but it sounded so deranged I knew it would be the best costume in town. And besides, Bunny was jumping up and down and waving her sausage arms as if she were on fire.

“Yes, Killer Spizz!” she hollered. “Poisoner Spizz! Murderer Spizz!” Bunny stood on her tiptoes and grabbed my shoulder. “And,” she added, “I’ll even loan you his adult *tricycle*. My dad bought it from the town and is planning to weld a passenger seat on the back and charge tourists a buck to ride it on a tour of the remaining dead-old-lady houses.”

“That is shameful!” Miss Volker remarked. “This town is really going downhill fast.”

I smiled at Bunny. “And now I know what you are wearing for Halloween,” I said. She leaned forward and whispered in my ear.

“*Dead old lady*. But you better keep it to yourself because you-know-who won’t like it.”

“*Yep*,” I whispered back, then shifted my eyes toward Miss Volker, who was still glaring at me.

“Bunny,” she said harshly. “Take the wheelbarrow and haul this junk over to the Community Center. The two of you should be horsewhipped for making fun of dead old ladies.”

Bunny grabbed the coiled body of the tuba and heaved it into the wheelbarrow as if it were a brass octopus. Then she lifted the handles of the wheelbarrow and buzzed off like a small outboard engine at the back end of a river barge.

Once she left, Miss Volker turned to me. “Death may seem a million miles away from you,” she said with an

icy voice, “but death has already reached my front porch and I don’t need some peewee serial killer knocking on my door with murderous shrieks of ‘Trick or treat!’”

She was always good at making me feel guilty about my morbid ideas. “Maybe I *should* be horsewhipped,” I said contritely, and ambled toward her to gently inch the tape from around her wrist and flashlight without peeling off any papery old skin. I knew I should be sorry because there wasn’t anything funny about what had happened to all the sweet old Norvelt ladies.

“Now that Mrs. Custard is back,” I observed, trying to find something upbeat to say, “it means you aren’t the last old lady alive in Norvelt, so Spizz can’t marry you.”

“That’s good for me,” she agreed without sounding agreeable. “But it could be bad for Mrs. Custard.”

“What do you mean?”

“What if he comes back and does her in like he did all the others?” she suggested.

“He can’t come back here,” I said, shocked at the thought. “He’d be spotted.”

“And they’d hang him,” she said, and grotesquely stretched her neck over to one side and stuck out her tongue.

“That’s awful,” I remarked.

“Sure is,” she agreed. “Because he deserves even worse.”

“Worse than hanging?” I cried out.

“Way worse,” she said coldly. “He deserves to have me tormenting him for all the days of his life.”

Then she gave the Philco a ferocious kick from behind and it fell over onto its face. “Finally!” she proudly declared, and rubbed her hands together with the satisfaction of a job well done. “It took me a few tries but I put it six feet under for good.”