

## The Least

This was back when we first moved to town, before I got to be buddies with guys like Neil Penner and Tom Sproule. Moving to a new place, let's face it, you're the lowest of the low and totally at the mercy of everyone else. If kids aren't making fun of you behind your back, they're taking turns trying to beat the crap out of you. I wasn't looking forward to when school started in the fall. Being small and something of a coward, I figured I was a natural target.

Peg...well, with Peg it was different. She acted like she couldn't care less and point blank refused to accept her diminished status. She'd sunbathe on our front lawn...or go for walks and bike rides around town, looking for trouble, turning her nose up at pretty much anyone or *anything* that crossed her path. My sister was never what you would call a shrinking violet.

But those first few weeks were tough, even for her. For one thing, we arrived in mid-July so half the town was away on holidays. We'd hang around the front yard and she'd listlessly toss a ball or frisbee in my general direction while keeping one eye on the street, but few people of *any* age ventured by.

"This is stupid," she snapped, finally losing patience and flinging the football down in disgust. "This entire town is dead. Inhabited by ghosts. *Bored* ghosts..." She flounced off, leaving me to ponder the notion of being the one solely responsible for keeping my sister

entertained for the six weeks remaining until school started. It was a daunting proposition, to say the least.

Our parents weren't much help: we had strict orders to stay out of the way while they put the house in order and, at the same time, tried not to kill each other. That move took place during one of their really rough patches and it made for interesting theater. I walked in on them on a number of occasions, that first month in particular, and the tension in the air was *electric*.

So Peggie and I were pretty much left to our own devices, which meant we spent much more time together than we normally would. We tried to eat up the lazy, hot days with games-- *Monopoly*, *Clue*, *Hands Down*, whatever struck our fancy. She taught me how to play cribbage and poker but I was never much good at either. We bickered over the most trivial things. The three and a half year age difference didn't help; she had little patience for my sudden spasms of immaturity and her bossiness really got on my nerves after awhile. More than once we blew up at each other, on some occasions nearly coming to blows. We didn't have anything in common, didn't like the same music or books or movies. Secretly, we each believed the other to be retarded.

Our family was weird, there were no two ways about it. How our mother and father treated each other and how little notice they took of us except when parental duties and obligations intruded. Most of the time we barely interacted. At meals, that was pretty much it. That's somewhat *bizarre*, don't you think? I used to harbour a strong suspicion I'd been adopted. There were baby pictures but anyone knows those can be faked. And, besides, most babies look so much alike you can't tell them apart anyway.

I guess I exaggerated when I said there were no kids around. The Peterson sisters lived the next block over and liked to roam the neighbourhood, the oldest on a hideous, yellow “banana” bike, the youngest gamely keeping up on *her* bicycle, which sported squeaky training wheels. You could hear them coming from a mile away.

Sally and Frances. Christ, I can picture their faces, plain as day. Chubby, ugly children, with no redeeming virtues. They picked their noses and talked too loud about stupid things and you wanted to *hurt* them for being alive. It’s hard to explain. Even now I feel revulsion when I think about them. I doubt their lives ever amounted to anything and would wager my last dollar that they’re no brighter today than they were at seven and eight. Sorry, but it’s the truth.

They found us about a week after we moved in. By then, Peg and I were fed up with each other. By then, she was dangerously *bored*.

They cycled past, slowed down and kept on going until they reached the corner. Then, predictably, they doubled back, staring at us as they cruised by.

“Take a picture, it lasts longer!” Peg called after them.

“*What?*” The younger one, Frances, stopped, confused. We could barely see her head over top of the fence. Her sister did a loop and came back. They looked at us, then each other, then at us again. It was almost comical.

“Do you live here?” Sally inquired brightly. And keep in mind, she was the older one.

“God, what a twit,” Peg muttered. I grunted agreement.

“What’s your name?” The little one asked. She wasn’t even slightly cute. Too tubby, with a wide nose, like a snout. She’d gotten off her bike and was standing on tiptoes, resting her chin on top of our fence, her head resembling a flesh-coloured pumpkin.

“Heckyl and Jeckyl,” Peg retorted.

“No, it isn’t.” But she didn’t sound too sure, as if she was willing to be convinced. At her age you half-believed everything you heard. And lies carried as much weight as the truth.

“She’s Frances,” the older one said, “and I’m Sally. SallyMariePeterson. We live over there,” pointing, “and our dad is building us a treehouse.”

“Well whoop-de-do,” Peg congratulated them and that quieted things down for awhile.

“What do your parents do?” Frances piped up. Her voice was really starting to get to me.

“I think that’s rather a rude question,” Peg countered.

“My dad works for Mr. McPherson and my mom is a part time nurse,” Frances announced.

“My sister isn’t rude.” Sally’s plump face was red with indignation. “She was only curious and that’s only natural.”

“Oh, please,” Peg said and they lapsed into another long silence. We still hadn’t introduced ourselves. Lonely but not *that* lonely.

Frances was getting fidgety. “Maybe they could come and see our treehouse?”

Sally sounded cross. “They don’t wanna see the treehouse. God, you’re clueless.” She glanced at us quickly, maybe looking for allies. But Peg wasn’t in the mood to do anything more than scowl.

They left not long afterward.

But they came back.

It was clear they had no friends and it was equally clear why. They had absolutely no social skills and were famous around the neighbourhood for doing things like walking into homes unannounced and asking everyone they met for food and pop and sometimes even money. Most people avoided them like a swarm of gnats. We never saw their parents; those two girls got no supervision at all. So I guess in a way it wasn't really their fault.

After the third or fourth visit, it was obvious they were sizing us up as potential friends. Peg was appalled by the idea. "God, if I ever sink that low, kill me, Con, and I mean it."

But we couldn't get rid of them. They came by nearly every day and it wasn't long before they were pushing their way through the front gate and inviting themselves inside. If we moved to the backyard, they walked around and found us. And when we tried to dodge them by hiding in the house, either mom or dad got on our case. It was a no-win situation.

It was odd how they both talked so *loud*. Like they were constantly trying to get your attention. And whereas Peg and I could sit together in companionable--or, at least, neutral--silence, those Peterson girls *never shut up*. I guess they were probably as bored as the rest of us and basically we were the only game in town.

They idolized Peg, even though she treated them with such obvious contempt. She gave off coolness and attitude, not to mention the fact that she *swore*. It didn't matter if she mocked them and made barely veiled comments about how fat and simple-minded they were. They ate it up and kept coming back for more. It got so bad, they started bringing her gifts--or maybe they were more like *offerings*. Little chocolate bars and those candy necklaces. I kidded Peg about it sometimes when I wanted to get on her nerves. Her little band of disciples.

It was early August, a day hot enough to melt your socks. That dry, unrelenting prairie heat.

Peg and I had been banished outside, yet again, and were trying to stay in the shade as much as possible. We had a couple of lawn chairs, a stack of old movie magazines, some *Archie Digests* and a plastic pitcher of grape Koolaid. It was just after lunch and the heat and inactivity were making me drowsy. A drunk kind of feeling. Peggy was fanning herself, attired in a tube top and cut off shorts. I was in swimming trunks and even *that* felt like too much.

We were listening to some Top Ten countdown on her radio. I don't remember what number they were at when Sally and Frances Peterson came around the side of the house. They'd heard the music, of course, and wanted to find out what we were up to.

"Can I have some juice?" Frances asked right away, practically yelling it.

"There're only two glasses."

"But I could--"

"No."

Sally was standing beside my chair. "Wow, sure is hot." I might have grunted, I'm not sure. If I did, it was by accident. I could tell Peg was really annoyed that they had disturbed her afternoon. She was glaring at them but they pretended not to notice. It was a game I'm certain they'd played on many occasions. "Watcha doin'?" Sally nudged my arm to get my attention. I was nine, a full year older, but she was two or three inches taller than me and outweighed me by at least twenty pounds. Hefty and dull and ugly. Nature had played a nasty practical joke on her.

"Plotting a murder," Peg spoke up, "guess whose?"

They didn't take the bait. Frances was still hovering around the Koolaid jug. Sally was looking down at me and I was glad it was so bright and I couldn't see her face clearly. I was feeling *mean* that day, I don't know why. Maybe because I had a lousy headache and I'd busted my sunglasses. Or maybe it was just one of those days.

"You should come see our treehouse." Frances, master of the *non sequitur*. "Daddy already has the floor in. Next week he starts on the walls."

In other words, no progress since the last time she'd reported. Sounded like dear old daddy had given up on their little tree fort but I didn't have the heart to tell them. You couldn't trust grownups, that was something they'd soon figure out for themselves. The hard way, like the rest of us. But maybe their father was different from ours. Maybe *he* actually kept his word.

"What's the point of having a treehouse?" Peg asked bitchily.

At first, her question seemed to stump them.

"It's a private place," Sally responded at last.

"Somewhere we can be by ourselves," Frances elaborated. They looked at each other and smiled in agreement.

"To do what?" Peg challenged them. "Why do you need a place that's private? You got something to hide?"

Once again, she appeared to have flummoxed them. "It's...somewhere away from everybody else." Sally, sounding like a broken record. "A place of our own."

"We *get* that," Peggy said impatiently, "but for what *reason*?" Just seeing the look of confusion on their silly faces should have been enough, but not for Peg. She had to up the ante. "Conrad and me have a club," she confided, her tone guarded. I glanced at her but knew better

than to contradict. Playing along meant she wouldn't give me grief later on. Besides, it was fun teasing those two morons.

"You have a *club*?" Frances' eyes practically bugged out. It was hilarious.

"So what is it?" Sally was smart enough to be skeptical. She'd played the fool too many times to bite right off the bat.

"We started it where we used to live. It's, like, very exclusive."

"Yeah? What's that mean?"

"It means," I explained, "that we get to pick and choose who gets in."

"Is there a secret handshake? My dad's a Mason and--"

"Shut up, Frances." Her sister's tone was brusque, cruel. Poor little Frances looked like she'd been slapped. "She's only seven." Sally said, as if that explained everything.

"You shouldn't be saying anything," I warned Peg, playing it straight. "We hardly know these two."

She gave me a snooty look. "I am the Serene Empress of the Order of the Pale Moonlight," she stated, "and I say these two are ripe for initiation."

Frances clapped her hands and I could tell Sally was pleased as well. Peg had them hooked like a couple of goofy pike.

"But are you sure we should be--" I never got to finish.

"*Silence.*" The command made me jump. "You are a mere knight errant of the Crimson Garter. As such, you have no right to question me." I lowered my head, properly chastened, although I didn't have the foggiest idea what she was going on about. She rose from the lawn chair and waved the two Peterson girls forward. "Come with me. Conrad, get the keys to the

shed.” I looked at her and she looked right back. It was no contest. “And bring the flashlight,” she called after me as I ran to obey...

The shed was a major selling point as far as dad was concerned. Extra space to store the outside stuff like the lawnmower and garden tools and maybe, he mentioned at one point, it could be his private workroom in the summer. Which made mom laugh. I didn't get it and dad's face sort of stiffened but he didn't say anything. That time.

Mom suggested converting it into a greenhouse but he didn't seem to care for *that* idea so the issue remained unresolved. At the moment, the shed contained the overflow from the move. Old baby clothes, an ugly set of lamps, some extra kitchen chairs and boxes of various odds and ends.

Not much room for four kids and once the door was pulled shut it was as dark as King Tut's tomb. I switched on the flashlight but kept it pointed at the ground. Just enough illumination to see by. I noticed Frances pressed close to her sister.

“This is a serious club,” Peg began, “and we don't put up with crybabies and teller cats.” That got their attention. “Where we came from, only eight people passed the, uh, feat of endurance. Only eight of us were deserving to be members of the Pale Moonlight. All the others...*failed*.” I liked what she was doing with her voice. Slowing it down and making it low and spooky-sounding.

That was enough for Frances. “Sally, let's goooooo.” But Sally was staring at Peg and you could tell she was completely under her spell. Her eyes were *this* big. No way was she leaving. My suspicions were confirmed moments later:

“Go, Fran. I mean it. I’ll see you later.” She still hadn’t taken her eyes off Peg. And I got this little tingle as I watched them. *Like a goose walking on my grave*, grandma would say. “Go, I told you...”

Frances edged past us and when she got to the door turned back, but her sister was resolute. She left alone. I closed the door behind her.

Peg nodded. “You have proven yourself worthy.” Sally smiled. So trusting. Peg turned to me. “Step forward, knight errant.” I had no idea what she was up to but moved to comply. Somehow managing to keep a straight face. “Do you obey without question, do you work silently, secretly for the good of our group?”

I didn’t have a problem with that. “I do.”

Peg reached out and grabbed Sally’s arm. “Our group is all about trust. Do you trust us?” She drew Sally in closer. “Trust is everything. Tell me you trust us.” Placing a hand on my shoulder. “My brother and me have complete trust and understanding between us. We share *everything*. You can have that too.” It was like there was a circuit joining the three of us and Peg was the conduit, channeling and directing a strange energy that surged through our bodies. She was still doing fantastic things with her voice. You couldn’t help listening. Nothing else mattered. “Do you trust us? Do you?” Peg repeated and finally the dumb bunny realized it was a question.

“Yeah, I do.” Her voice all husky.

“If you join us, if you qualify, you belong to the group. Nothing about you is separate. Your body is not separate. Your mind is not separate. You no longer think or act for yourself.”

And that's when I got sort of an inkling of what Peg was up to. Not the complete picture, just a sense that it wasn't all fun and games. And at that point, I suppose I could've stopped it, could've walked out or refused to cooperate any further. I wasn't helpless, it's not like I was *forced* to stay and take part. Let's be clear on that. And if I'd chickened out, maybe Peg wouldn't have...well, what's the point of going on about it? I stayed. Maybe I was bored too. Or it could be that deep down inside I hated those Peterson brats just as much as she did and wanted to teach them a lesson for even *imagining* they could be our friends. *We were better than them*. And I think part of me wanted to prove it, to them...and to myself.

I've never seen my sister Peggie like that. She kept talking and she hardly ever stumbled over words. And her *voice*...so low and the way she kept repeating certain phrases like "you belong to us" and "all that is yours is ours". I noticed she was stroking Sally's arm and the two of them were staring at each other, never breaking contact. Sally's eyes seemed kind of glassy, even in the subdued, greyish light. The rest of her face was blank. She stood there, sort of swaying, like she was about to topple over.

Peg was squeezing my arm. Her eyes, unlike Sally's, were bright with excitement. She wanted me to do something--*what?*

"Here is your brother in the Pale Moonlight. Greet him, greet your brother..." Sally turned toward me but it was like she was underwater or something. "Go to him, greet your brother. Greet him..." She started shuffling forward and I glanced at Peg, uncertain of what to do. Her eyes flashed a warning--I got the message and stayed put. "Greet your brother, *kiss* him, *kiss* your brother..."

I managed to avoid her lips at the last second and grimaced when she brushed them on my cheek, leaving a wet spot. She pulled back slightly and from that close I could see she was out of it, staring right through me.

And Peg kept at her, talking and whispering...and that shed got smaller and hotter and the air thick and stagnant.

I believe to this day something was born that afternoon, beget in a sweatbox atmosphere of complicity, something it took the three of us to make. I won't excuse myself or refuse my portion of the blame. I touched her and she touched me. Sometimes I followed Peg's instructions, sometimes I acted on my own. At first it was gentle, exploratory; then Peg decided *initiation* meant some sort of display of courage or endurance. So we took turns spanking Sally, whacking her until our hands felt over-heated and sore. I heard her whimper but she didn't cry out. Tough kid.

Then I spotted a pair of pliers sticking out of a box and we made her raise her shirt. I used the pliers to *pinch* her, snagging thin folds of skin and leaving welts on her stomach and back. I even playfully poised the metal teeth above her button-like nipple. Her face never changed.

How far would I have gone? I wonder that sometimes. Would I have burned her with matches? Tortured her? Savaged her sexually? At what point would I have said *no*?

In the end I think what stopped it was that Peg got really spooked by the way Sally was acting. She was trembling and her eyes were funny. Almost crossed. Peg told me to open the door and I rushed to comply. We stumbled into the yard, light-headed and disoriented.

Right away, Sally started walking away from us. I took one look at Peg and went running after her, asking if she was okay. I was feeling panicky at that point, certain she was bound to blab to someone and then we were in for it. Sally wouldn't answer my queries. She kept walking, her lips pressed together, and when I ran in front of her to make her slow down and talk to me, she almost bowled me over.

But at least she finally acknowledged my presence. Her eyes seemed normal again but she was still shaking, like she was cold. Or scared. Or excited.

"Just so you know," I panted, "you're, uh, in the club. The Pale Moonlighters or whatever." I grinned, trying to look cheerful and reassuring. I don't think I managed either. She crossed her arms, scowling at me.

"So?" Her tone was insolent.

"So...so that means that you're now a member and--and what we do is private, right? Nobody else is supposed to know. It's *secret*. And--and we all had to go through it. Even Peg." She didn't believe me and I didn't blame her. "'Cause it's all part of the, y'know, test or whatever. And *you* passed. Way to go! In fact, you did *great*. Your sister, she--"

"Her too."

"Huh?"

Sally seemed to swell in size. "I want her in too." I glanced back toward Peg but she was too far away to be of any help. "If you want it kept secret. If you don't want people to know..." Not just about the club, she meant. Picturing her mom catching sight of her backside the next time she climbed into the tub. Those marks on her back and stomach. What that might lead to.

“Sure, she’s in,” I conceded smoothly.

“And she doesn’t have to...what happened to me.” There was nothing to be done for it. I nodded. Wanting only to get out of there now that it appeared I’d salvaged the situation. “We can have parties and sleepovers. Just us members.” I didn’t know what to say. I stood there, dumb as a post. Her face had come to life and all of a sudden she seemed right back to her old self. “We can use our treehouse. It’ll be *so* neat. I gotta go tell Frannie...”

I watched her race off, then started back toward the house.

Peg was waiting to hear what happened. She watched me approach and I could see from her face she’d already guessed what I’d done and that I would pay dearly for selling us so cheap.

*End*