

LOST SUMMER

by Joe DePriest

Grass, freshly cut and soggy in the morning dew, collected on the boy's bare feet as he walked towards the front porch. Once on the concrete walkway, the boy, who was eight years old June 5 day before yesterday, began kicking his feet in an attempt to knock some of the clinging grass off. When he reached the porch, he used the door mat. There were still some long blades left on his toes. He ran the doorknob, then pecked in through the screen door, unable because it was such a bright day outside, to see anything except a fuzzy darkness. He managed to distinguish a figure moving towards him through the darkened room inside, and he held his breath, hoping it would be she. It wasn't.

"Victor, Come in," said Mrs. Wilkins.

She made him clean his feet carefully before allowing him to enter her house. They went to the kitchen where, as he had expected, she gave him a slice of French toast.

"Laurie not up?" he asked, just before biting into the toast. It was after ten. She always used to be up by ten.

"No Victor, she was out late last night."

Used to be she'd come to the door when he came down in the mornings and she never slept past ten. Lately though, she stayed in bed longer and longer in the mornings. Sometimes she wouldn't get up till dinner time, something unimaginable to him. How could she possibly be able to do that: sleep all morning? Why the dew would long since be dried up and the morning glories gone and everything hot already—and her still in bed. He couldn't see it. She must have been out pretty late.

Victor did not mind talking to Mrs. Wilkins, although she did ask him the same questions everytime he came.

"Your family going to the beach this summer?"

"Yes," he said.

"I love the beach, don't you Victor?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Does your mother still work?"

"Yes."

"At the beauty shop?"

"Yes ma'am."

Victor came down practically every morning and Mrs. Wilkins still asked the same things, her back to him as she washed dishes or tended to some something on the stove, asking but not giving any indication of hearing.

He stayed about thirty minutes, then decided it was long enough.

"I gotta go," Victor said.

"She'll be up this afternoon, Victor."

"OK."

Victor wandered home the back way: through the Wilder's backyard, through their blossoming peach trees and over their tall hedges to his own yard. Walking towards the driveway, where the dirt was packed and smooth, Victor picked a sprig from a nearby bush and considered its possibilities as a cigarette. It was rather big and somewhat irregular, but he popped it into his mouth nevertheless, sucking on it and going through the inhaling and exhaling motions. He bit into the sprig by mistake as he shifted it in his mouth, and the bitter taste of the sap made him discard it quickly. Victor made a mental note never to use that particular bush for cigarettes again.

He squatted in the driveway and drew his thoughts in the dirt. The sun felt good on his neck and short hair and, kneeling in the warmth and smelling the sweetness of flowers in the air, he thought of Laurie.

She never does anything anymore, Victor thought. Last summer, every summer he could remember, in fact, she was at home and whenever he came to see her she would, if she wasn't attending to some job for her mother, play with him.

In the mornings they would eat French toast together. Afterwards, they would pick blackberries, maybe. And sometimes they made things. Laurie showed him how to soak morning glory, reducing any number of different colored waters, which were magic, you know, she

said.

In the woods, beyond the tangle of briars where they picked blackberries, was a creek. Victor never went there alone. The woods were dark, snakey. By the creekbank there were small white rocks. One summer day Laurie had said: "Those white rocks are magic, Vic."

He had not believed her, of course, but he followed her through the woods to the creek.

"There was an Indian burial ground here once," she said, "and the bodies turned to stone and washed down to the creek. See? We're picking up little white chunks of old Indians that lived here long ago."

The way she said it, the way the deep, silent woods were, made him believe her. Besides, it was fun. They collected rocks for hours it seemed, putting them in jars.

Then she took his arm suddenly, and said in an anxious whisper: "Hush Vic. Do you hear that?"

He listened. He could hear trees swaying in the wind, birds crying. "What?" he whispered.

That noise across the creek over there. Coming through the woods. Something running towards us, Vic. A bunch of people it sounds like."

He listened. The wind shook the trees harder, stirred the underbrush into a steady, faraway tremor.

"Yes," he said. "I hear it."

"It's the Indian guardians, Vic. They've come to get us for disturbing the graveyard. Here, take a jar. Let's go, quick."

They ran, lickysplit, back through the maze of vines and bushes, all the way home.

They spent the afternoon with hammers, pounding the white rocks, which they placed in an old sock. After dumping the crushed, sugar-like contents in a cigar can, Laurie took it and told him: "Now lets go to the basement." He followed her. She turned the water spigot on and let it run into the cigar can. Then, stirring the mixture, she put a top on it.

"I'll make you something tomorrow," she said.

She did. The next morning when he came down and was sitting in the kitchen, Laurie sat in with a salt-white statue of an Indian. "Here," she said.

He took the still wet statue, looking at it in disbelief. It was perfect. He examined every inch of it and it was indeed perfect, right down to the "Made in Japan" label on the bottom.

"Keep it," said Laurie with a smile. "It's magic."

They had fun together then. On summer evenings there were fire flies to be caught and hardly ever did she decline to help him. She was always somewhere else now.

Victor got to his feet. An irritating little smell came to his attention. It was dead ants. He must have squashed some with his heels as he was kneeling. Dead ants smelled terrible. He made his way back around the garage to the garbage cans.

A nameless tune loomed from nowhere into his mind, and as he began to hum it, he decided to lead his orchestra.

Victor reached behind one of the garbage cans and found his baton. He kept it there because this was where his orchestra stayed. The largest can was where he stood and before him was the orchestra. Victor tapped the stick against the top of the can, called for silence, and raised his arms just so. Jerking and swirling the stick about, he pressed his lips together and blew, producing the desired, if not grotesque, sound effect. He began and ended his production with something vaguely reminiscent of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony; everything in between was original, contrived as he went along. He was putting the last few brilliant touches on the symphony, waving the baton in some labored, final motions, blowing deeply with slavia flying from the corners of his mouth, when a voice shook him from his trance.

"What you doin boy?" A garbage man stood looking at him, his white teeth gleaming in a huge smile.

Victor dropped the baton. "Whooping cough," he said, and ran.

After dinner, Victor returned to Laurie's house.

"I'm sorry, Vic, but she's gone up town to have her hair done. She'll be back sometime late this afternoon."

"OK."

The day she got her driver's license was one thing that changed her, Victor thought. She had to depend on

Continued on Page Eleven