

5 Small Ones Are Sweeter

Our house, that is, Millie and George's house, is so old that the bathtub stands off the floor, on legs. And the hot and cold water don't come out of the same faucet, so when you're washing your hands, you either freeze them or burn them. Mom says you're supposed to put the plug in the sink and mix the water in the basin. But that's a lot of trouble. At least we don't have chamber pots. The toilets actually flush.

Outside, the house is painted yellow and the shutters are white. The windows and doorways are slightly crooked. Dad says that's part of the charm of the house. I know better than to tell him what I think. Inside, the floors are wooden and they creak when you walk across them.

Downstairs, there is a living room with a piano, a dining room with a table so big you have to shout to make yourself heard, a kitchen with pots and pans hanging all over the place, and a library, where the walls are lined with books, arranged according to color. There's a brown leather section, a green leather section, a red leather section and a tan leather section. Upstairs, there are four bedrooms, all in a row. And everywhere you look there are fireplaces. There's one in every bedroom, there's one in the living room, another in the dining room and still another in the library. There aren't any in the bathrooms or the kitchen.

My mother and father call the house *fantastic, fabulous, unbelievable*. I hear them talking to their friends on the phone, and those are the dumb words they use to describe this place.

Our neighborhood is a lot like our house. Old. Every house on the block is a lot like this one, with a small front yard and a big backyard. In our backyard we have George's rose garden and Millie's herb and vegetable garden. The first day we were here, Dad bought a stack of books with titles like *Know Your Roses*, *Know Your Herbs*, *Organic Vegetables and You*, and my favorite, *The Agony of Beetles in Your Garden*.

"You didn't have to worry about beetles in New York, did you, Dad?" I said at dinner.

"That's enough, Peter," Dad said to me.

"That's enough, Pee-tah," Fudge repeated.

"Cut that out!" I told him.

"Cut that out!" he said back to me.

Fudge's new game is repeating everything I say. He's really driving me crazy this time.

"Pass the salt, please," I said to Mom.

"Pass the salt, please," he said, laughing.

I pushed back my chair. "I can't take it anymore. I mean it. Do something, will you?" I begged my parents.

But he was already at it. "I can't take it anymore. Do something, will you . . ." And he laughed so hard he choked.

Dad turned him upside down and whacked him on the back.

"I want you to stop doing that, Fudge," he said. "Do you understand?"

I don't know why my parents are always asking him if he understands. He understands just fine. That has nothing to do with it.

Fudge nodded.

"Because if you don't stop repeating everything that Peter says, I'm going to do more than just whack your back. Get it?"

I couldn't help smiling.

. . .

Mom has this thing that's called a Snugli for carrying Tootsie. She hangs it around her neck and Tootsie fits into it and rides right next to Mom's middle. It looks very comfortable. Sometimes Dad carries Tootsie in it, too. Mom says they didn't have them when I was a baby. I missed out on a lot of good things.

Every night after supper, we walk into town, stopping at Baskin-Robbins for ice cream. One night Mom asked me if I would like to wear the sling and carry Tootsie.

"No, thanks!" I said. "I wouldn't be caught dead wearing a baby around my neck."

"Oh, Peter, you're so silly."

Baskin-Robbins is having a contest. They're looking for names for a new ice-cream flavor. So far I've suggested Lemon Lunatic, Crazy Chocolate, and Miserable Mint.

After almost two weeks of hanging around the house, I actually met a kid my age. He lives across the street, but he was at scout camp when we first moved here. His name is Alex Santo and he's going into sixth grade too. He's very small, with hair that hangs into his eyes, and he's always wearing a T-shirt that says Princeton, Class of '91. By the time I met him, I was

so lonely and bored I wouldn't have cared if he had three heads, as long as he was my age and wanted to be friends.

Alex came over one morning and said, "You want to go into business with me?"

"What kind of business?" I asked.

"Worms," he told me.

"Worms?" I asked.

"Yea, worms," he said again.

"Worms!" Fudge said, jumping down the front steps. "Wormy wormy worms!"

Alex looked over at him.

"Don't mind him," I said. "He's just my little brother."

"Oh," Alex said. "So what do you say?"

"Sure," I told him, having no idea what kind of worm business Alex was talking about. "When do I start?"

"How about now?" Alex said.

"Okay. What do I do?"

"First we dig them up. Then we sell them to Mrs. Muldour, down the street. She pays five cents a worm."

"What does she do with them?" I asked.

"She doesn't say. Some people think she uses them for fishing. Other people think she uses them in her

garden. Personally . . .” He stopped and scratched his head.

“Go on . . . go on. . . .”

“I think she eats them,” Alex said.

I thought for a minute. “Worm pie?”

“Yeah . . . and worm stew . . . and worm juice. . . .”

“And worm soup,” I said, getting warmed up. “And worm bread.”

“Oh yeah, that’s the best,” Alex said. “Nice soft bread with little worms here and there. . . .”

“You can make a really tasty worm and cheese sandwich on it,” I said. We were doubled over now, laughing our heads off.

“And worm ice cream,” Fudge said, jumping on top of us.

“Worm ice cream,” Alex and I said together.

I decided that with Alex Santo in my class, Princeton might not be too bad.

That afternoon Alex and I went digging for worms. We rode our bikes over to the lake. It’s easy to ride in Princeton, because they have bike paths on every street. Alex had a pail and a couple of shovels, and we got to work. Finding worms was no problem. An hour later we rode back to my house.

“Mrs. Muldour likes her worms clean,” Alex told me, turning on our hose.

"That figures, if she uses them for cooking," I said. We left the pail of worms outside and went in for a drink. When we came out, Fudge was standing next to Tootsie's carriage, dangling a worm in front of her.

"Cut that out!" I yelled, racing over to him.

"Why? She likes it," Fudge said. "Watch. . . ."

Alex and I looked into Tootsie's carriage. She laughed every time Fudge held up the worm.

"You're right," I said. "She does like it. Hey, Mom . . . look at this. . . ."

"What is it?" Mom called from where she was weeding Millie's organically grown vegetables.

"You've got to see for yourself," I called back.

She came over, wiping her hands on her jeans.

"Watch, Mommy," Fudge said, and he took the worm from behind his back and dangled it over Tootsie's carriage.

She smiled and gurgled.

But Mom screamed. "Get that thing out of here. Hurry up . . . get rid of it . . . now."

"It's just a worm, Mommy. Don't you like worms?"

"No, I don't. I really don't like worms at all. And I never want you to show me another one. Do you understand?"

Fudge put the worm on his arm and let it crawl up to his shoulder. "See . . . isn't he cute? I'm going to

call him Willy. Willy Worm. And he'll be my very own pet. I'm going to sleep with him, and he can eat next to me at the table, and he'll take a bath with me. . . ."

"Fudge!"

"Yes, Mommy?"

"I told you, I don't ever want to see that worm again. And you may *not* bring him into the house. And you may *not* hold him that close to Tootsie. Do you understand this time?"

"You really don't like worms?" Fudge said.

"That's right," Mom said. "I really don't."

"Why not?" Fudge asked.

"It's nothing I can explain." Mom went back to weeding the garden. Fudge followed her.

"Is your family always like that?" Alex asked.

"You haven't seen anything yet!" I told him.

On our way to Mrs. Muldour's house, I thought I remembered reading that worms regenerate when you cut them in half. But I wasn't sure. So I asked Alex if he'd ever tried that.

"Sure," Alex said, "plenty of times."

"And what happens?"

"Nothing. You get two little worms."

"Right. And if Mrs. Muldour pays you five cents a worm . . ."

A slow smile spread across Alex's face. "I see what you mean," he said. "How come I never thought of that?"

I didn't answer.

We dumped our worms out on the sidewalk and cut all but one in half. That one was big enough to cut into thirds. So now, instead of sixteen worms, we had thirty-three.

Mrs. Muldour lived in an old house that was painted gray, with blue shutters. Alex rang her bell. A big, round woman with hair the color of her house and glasses halfway down her nose came to the door. She wore sneakers and blue jeans and a red and white shirt.

"Well, hello Alex . . . long time no see."

"Hi, Mrs. Muldour," Alex said. "I've got a partner now."

She looked at me over the rims of her glasses.

"I'm Peter Hatcher. We just moved in down the street." She kept looking at me, so I kept talking. "In the Wentmans' house . . . Millie and George Wentman . . . they're friends of my mother and father . . . we're just here for the year . . . to see how we like being away from the city. . . ."

"Are you finished?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Good. Then let's get down to business."

"We've got thirty-three for you today, Mrs. Muldour," Alex said. "Real beauties."

"Thirty-three . . ." She held up the jar and studied them. "They look awfully small."

"Small ones are sweeter," I said.

She gave me a strange look this time.

So I quickly added, "They'll get bigger later in the summer."

"Really? I should think they'd be at their best now."

"Oh no," I told her. "They'll be getting fatter and longer by August, and by September they'll be in their prime."

"Is that a fact?" she asked.

"Uh huh," I said, praying that she wouldn't guess I didn't know what I was talking about.

"Well, live and learn," Mrs. Muldour said. She went inside and came back with her wallet. "You know," she told us, "I could go down to the filling station and buy a container of worms, but I think freshly dug ones are so much better." She opened her wallet. "Let's see . . . five cents times thirty-three worms . . . that's one dollar and fifty cents." She handed the money to Alex.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Muldour," Alex said, "but it's one sixty-five."

Mrs. Muldour laughed. "Can't fool you, can I, Alex?"

"No, Mrs. Muldour, not when it comes to math. Would you like more worms next week?"

"Of course. As many as you can bring me. You can't have too many worms, you know."

Alex gave me a look, and we thanked Mrs. Muldour and walked away. Once we were out of earshot, Alex said, "Small ones are sweeter . . ." and he gave me an elbow in the ribs.

"Worm soup tonight," I told him. And we exploded, laughing.

After supper, Mom got Tootsie into her sling, and the five of us went off to Baskin-Robbins. When we got there, Fudge walked up to the girl behind the counter and said, "Worm ice cream."

"Beg pardon?" the girl said.

"Worm ice cream," he repeated.

"We don't have . . ."

"For flavor of the month," Fudge told her. "Worm ice cream."

"Are you saying . . ." she began.

"Yes, he is," I said. "Worm . . . that's *w-o-r-m*."

"I can spell," the girl said, annoyed. "But I really don't think that people would go for that flavor."

"Some people would. Right, Pee-tah?"

"Sure," I said. "Some people right in this town might think it's terrific."

"Look, kids . . . we're very busy tonight, so cut out the wise-guy stuff and tell me what you want."

"I'll have a chocolate-chip-mint sundae with the works," I told her.

"And I'll have a fudge ripple cone," Fudge said. "Just like my name."

"Oh, your name is Cone?" she asked.

"No."

"Ripple?"

"No."

"I suppose you're going to tell me it's Fudge . . . right?"

"That's right," Fudge said, chinning himself on the counter.

"Cute kid," she mumbled to herself. "Real cute."