

While Mother Was Gone With 571

Last night Mother had her first date with 571. She has a big case on him, so she wore the beige dress with the ivy vines slinking all over it. And orange fishnet stockings on her legs. You could look at her face and know she knew what a knock-out she was.

My sister and I call him 571 because that's what his license plate says. He's a doctor, but talk about shrimps. I'll bet you he's barely bigger than the stupid floor-fan that's always spinning in the corner of our upstairs hall. Mother's had this huge case on him for months. She used to come into our room in the morning and say to my sister, "Katherine, you look so pale and wan. Maybe you'd best stay home from school today if you're not up to par." And Katherine knew as well as I did that Mother wanted to cart her off to see 571. But unlike me, Katherine hates school worse than doctors. She's in ninth grade at Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows, and I'm in seventh at Immaculate Heart. Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows is twice as hard, strict, and boring as Immaculate Heart. So Katherine would look at my mother and say, "Yes, I do feel sick." Then she'd hold her stomach and groan to make it seem less of a lie to us all. I'd roll my eyes and make no bones about saying, "Have fun visiting 571." Then I'd braid my hair, put on my uniform and storm outside as soon as possible, headed for Immaculate Heart.

Mother would sure enough get spruced up and take Katherine to his little brick doctor office on Tenth and Broom. I can see Katherine trying to look ill and Mother in a gorgeous dress and her long lips painted red, sitting lady-like on the stool in the corner of the examining room while 571 holds a stethoscope on the bare chest of Katherine, saying, "Breathe deep." I can picture 571 saying, "Why, Katherine here is just as healthy as the day is long," and Mother saying, "I suppose it's just a case of tiredness and growing pains," then giving him one of her smiles. She's a tall red-head with movie star teeth. All curves in her figure like a movie star too. She smokes Benson and Hedges menthol all day long and people like to watch her. On the inhale her eyebrows come together like she's working on a problem and on the exhale they relax like the problem's been solved. People always tell her, "You look good when you smoke." And it's a good thing she does since she'd smoke in her sleep if she could. It's really something to drive

with her since she's got one hand on the wheel while the other holds the Benson and Hedges, not to mention the habit of her mind to wander so far it doesn't see she's about to smash into the green side-wall of J. Kustler's bakery which we came close to doing last Tuesday.

After Daddy left us Mother took to driving around in the Ford. We'd go with her because she always wants people to go with her. I soon figured out that we were following 571 around town. It was like a spy movie. 571 drives this light blue brand new '62 Corvair and we'd all be craning our necks to spot it. I could go on about all the accidents we almost had just trying to catch up with him. That's why I suppose I'm very glad that he and mother had a date. Now she won't have to risk our lives. But I'm running away if they get to being marriage material. And Arlene Thompkins, my fat friend, said she'd come with me and even spend all her savings to get us a ticket (one way) to Atlantic City. Even if Mother figures out that 571 is the pits I still just may go down there to Atlantic City.

Anyhow, not only did Mother have a date last night. Katherine had one. Mother said Katherine couldn't have one until she was fifteen, then backed down and said she could. Katherine teased up her yellow hair and wore Mother's white sandals with the heels. She put on a red skirt with a jacket to match. And on the jacket is the monogram: K.L.G. She looked like a seventeen year old.

My friend Arlene Thompkins and I just sat there on the couch in the living room while Mother and Katherine waited for their prince charmings. The windows were open and the last of sunlight streamed in, lighting up Mother who sat facing the door like a queen in the blue chair. There was a nice breeze puffing the white curtains, which only made the room seem too still the way a room can be on summer nights when you're waiting for something. Even Mother got very quiet. Then Arlene started giggling for no reason. She was wearing this dumb flowered skooter skirt which made her look even fatter. I couldn't help giggling too because Arlene is contagious and Katherine shot me one of her "You are such a child" looks which shut me right up. I elbowed Arlene which made her yelp and jump. Her blue glasses fell off her face and she gave me this look like I was the meanest friend you could have. Then all of a sudden a knock came to the door; a soft little knock which made me know it was old 571 and Mother must've known too. She leaped out of the chair, grabbed her shawl from the banister, told us to be good and that she wouldn't be late and not to eat

all the marble cake. Then she swung the storm door open and I watched at the window as 571 stepped back in surprise. He was casually dressed in a windbreaker. Mother says to him: "Well! Johnny! Hello!" Then she linked his arm and practically dragged him down the walk-way to his new Corvair which wasn't even parked straight. I bet you she knew not to bring him in on account of me being in an unfriendly state of mind lately. I bet you when he said "Pleased to meet you," I'd of simply stared.

Then Eddie Sculley came for Katherine. Arlene's eyes practically popped out of their sockets when he walked in. For one thing, he's sixteen. He's about as handsome as you can imagine and as tall as a basketball player. Katherine had the most nervous smile and you could tell she was eager to get away from the house. Eddie told her she looked really nice and kept staring at her stacked top. Arlene and I stared at him from the couch and both of us were all smiles I guess since he sort of cocked his head in our direction and said to Katherine, "They look awful happy." Then he looked straight at me and said, "The pair of you got something up your sleeve?" And I thought to myself, "Yeah, I wish," and I felt like saying, "Why don't you and Katherine just sit right down and enjoy a good summer night in the living room?" But Katherine winked at me and said, "Goodnight, Punch," which they used to call me and which I could kill her for saying. I said, "My name is Patricia for your information." Eddie Sculley told us not to do anything he wouldn't do and then they were gone out the door and it was just me and Arlene on the couch like two old ladies at a bus stop. We sat and listened to Eddie Sculley's car move down West 27th. Then it was quiet.

I sighed and stood up. "Now what?" I said. Arlene shrugged. "Beats me," she said. One thing I was not in the mood for was giggling about Eddie Sculley so when Arlene started up I gave her a Katherine look. I said, "Arlene, let's act our age and not our shoe-size." Then I started walking up the steps to my room, Arlene clumping behind. I sat down on my bed, and she sat down on Katherine's bed, facing me. I looked at her for a few seconds. Then I got up and walked back downstairs, Arlene following, a little bit puzzled on account of me not saying one thing. We walked outside and the McCabe boys were fooling around on their porch and Francine Yarmey was doing the hula hoop, and a lot of other kids were on the curb sucking ice-pops. I pulled my blue super-ball out of my pocket and walked out to the middle of the street and bounced it. I like being in the middle of the street. All the

houses on both sides are connected, making like walls so you can feel like you're in a hallway. I bounced the ball to Arlene and we had ourselves a catch.

Two doors down on the opposite side of the street from our house I could see Rose Pellerzy with her old watering can sprinkling the spider-mums in her front yard. Every kid hates her because she tells you to get off her lawn even if you have to fetch something you've lost, like your superball. She has a mean, shaking kind of voice. Michael Fiorelli says she's a witch and that he even saw her through her window one night, all dressed in black and pacing back and forth in her kitchen. She's not even too old. I'd say about 37 going on 38. But she's skinny as an old lady, with hunched shoulders and no husband or even boyfriends. Probably as skinny as me and you can believe I'm bony as they come no matter what I eat. And her hair is another story. It just hangs there.

Anyway, we had our catch and I watched Rose Pellerzy and thought of this idea. I turned it around in my head, and the more I thought about it, the funnier I thought it was. I stopped the catch and told Arlene to come sit on the curb so I could tell her the idea. I said that wouldn't it be hilarious to call a cab and say we were Rose Pellerzy and that we needed to go somewhere right away. Arlene said that she thought that was a great idea. So we got into my house and got the telephone book out. I looked up Taxi and there were about seven companies in the city. Then I got the idea that we wouldn't call only ONE company. We'd call A Whole BUNCH. I figured we could time it so that a cab showed up at her house every ten minutes for an hour or something. I figured we could go right up on our roof and watch the whole thing. I told this to Arlene and she thought it was a great idea and we were laughing just imagining it.

We called four cab companies. Lincoln, City Cab, Otto's, and Hillman Brothers. To each man that we talked to I said: "Hello, my name is Rose Pellerzy. I live at 16 West 27th and I need a cab because I'm going on an outing to Philadelphia for some dancing and dining." Then I'd tell him a time. At first Arlene was cracking up so bad she had to leave the room. I started laughing at one point, so I had to hang up on one of the companies, but I called back in another voice.

After we made our phone calls we went up on the roof. There were a lot of stars out, and an orange slice of a moon. Down on the corner kids were playing Freeze-Tag and we could hear Bobby

McCabe trying to boss the whole world around as usual. Arlene and I just sat there and waited until finally the first cab came. It sat and beeped smack in front of Rose Pellerzy's. She came out on her porch wearing what looked like a man's raincoat but I thought maybe it was a bathrobe. She stood on her porch with her hand above her eyes the way captains do on boats. The driver got out of the car and said, "What's the holdup?" He was a fatty. Rose Pellerzy said, "I think you must have the wrong house number. Perhaps you want the McCabes next door?" The driver asked her if the number on her house was sixteen and she said, "Why, yes it is." He stood there staring at her for a minute, shrugged, then got in his cab and drove away, his fat arm hanging out of the window and tapping the yellow side-door. We were up there laughing. It was like watching a movie.

When the next cab came, the horn was very ugly. Louder than the first. Rose Pellerzy came out on her porch again and made a go-away sign with her arm. The driver just kept beeping. And she just kept waving him away but it was like he wouldn't take no for an answer. So Rose Pellerzy walked off of her porch and out to the curb and said, "I didn't ask for you. I'm not going anywhere." The driver rolled down his window and said, "Watzat you say there, lady?" We could hear the song "Moon River" rising out of the cab. Rose Pellerzy said again, "I didn't ask for you. Go away now, go on." So he said, "Whadda ya mean, ya change your mind?" and she said, "I don't know what the mix-up is, but really, I haven't any need for your services." Her voice was even shakier than usual. "Well," the cab driver said, "Anything you say, lady." Then he pulled away, making a screech. He practically turned the corner on two wheels up where they were playing Freeze-Tag and somebody yelled after him, "Slow down, you ignorant pig!"

It seemed like a long time went by before the third cab came. It was getting a little chilly, so I climbed through the window and got two of Katherine's sweaters out of the cedar chest. A yellow one for me and a powder blue for Arlene. I brought them back to the roof and we put them on. They were very soft and smelled like the cedar chest and Katherine's perfume.

I looked up at the stars and got one of those feelings you get about how big the world is. I was thinking about how each star is gigantic and how far away they have to be to look so tiny and how planet earth is just a small part of one galaxy and how there are a whole mess of others. It gave me a chill right up my spine.

Then I looked down at the houses on the street and that gave me another chill.

When the third cab came, the driver beeped as usual. After the third beep, Rose Pellerzy ran out of her house like a woman gone out of control. She flapped her arms and screamed, "I DID NOT CALL FOR YOU! I DO NOT NEED YOU! GO!" Arlene and I just stared. We saw Mrs. McCabe and Mr. Cleaver on their porches, looking at Rose Pellerzy and probably wondering if they should go over and see what was happening. But they didn't. The driver shouted from the window, "O.K. lady, for cryin' out loud, I hear ya!" But Rose Pellerzy didn't seem to hear him and she shouted back "I DO NOT NEED YOU! YOU GET OUT OF HERE!" It sounded like she was starting to cry. I was getting scared and wishing that I'd only called one cab instead of four. And I was thinking about what would happen when another cab showed up. I couldn't remember which company showed up yet so I couldn't even call and tell them please not to come.

The driver got out of the cab. "Pull yourself together, lady, it's just a mistake," he said, and Rose Pellerzy looked at him and suddenly pulled herself together. It was definitely a raincoat she was wearing. She walked inside and flicked off her porch light. The driver got into his cab and left. Mr. Cleaver walked over and started talking to Mrs. McCabe on her porch.

We watched as all the lights went out in Rose Pellerzy's house. Then we climbed through the window, and walked through my bedroom, and downstairs.

Arlene reminded me that another cab was coming and I just didn't say anything. I went into the kitchen and cut us giant slices of marble cake and poured us each a glass of ice cold milk. We took them to the living room and sat on the couch to eat.

When the fourth cab showed up and beeped, I walked to the storm-door and stared out through the screen into the dark. There was no sign of Rose Pellerzy, not even a light flicking on. The cab waited for a minute, then drove off.

I walked back to the couch and finished my milk and asked Arlene to please take off my sister's sweater since Katherine would kill me if she knew we were wearing them. Then I said, "Arlene, I'm sleepy, could you go home now?" And she said, "Sure, I'll go home." She gave me a look as if to say how sometimes she didn't understand me. But she knew not to try and talk just then. She took her plate and glass to the kitchen and left by the back door.

I stood at the window and watched her cut through the alley in her skooter skirt and felt bad that I'd asked her to leave.

Then I went up to my room and didn't turn a single light on. I took off my clothes and put on my nightgown. Then I knelt by my window and looked across the street at Rose Pellerzy's house. I knelt there and took my braids out. Then I closed my eyes and thought about my father and how I didn't know where he was, and how my mother was out smoking her Benson and Hedges somewhere with 571. I felt like I had a hole in my stomach. I listened to parents ring bells and call names because it was time for everyone to come in. I listened to kids asking if they could stay outside for five more minutes. Then I stood up and got into my bed. I lay there perfectly still under the cold sheet, with a view of all those stars.