

One

LEAH NELLS sat silently in the passenger seat of the car while Mrs. Nells navigated through the sleepy suburban neighborhood. With one hand on the steering wheel and a list of addresses in the other, Mrs. Nells checked the addresses against the numbers on the houses of the shady street, searching for one house in particular. This morning, mother and daughter were on a tour of local garage sales, and as their second hour of driving and shopping came to an end, Leah already felt exhausted. She wished she were back home in her bedroom, but with only one chapter left before she finished the geography book that her mother bought for her, along with several other books, at the start of the summer vacation, Leah was almost out of reading material and needed to go on this shopping trip.

She had already found four new books to read this morning. While her mother looked for the next house on her list, Leah looked at the spines of her new books and read the titles silently to herself: *The Little Book of Earthquakes and Volcanoes*, *The Biomechanics of Insect Flight*, *Attracting Birds to Your Backyard*, and *The Social Construction of the Ocean*. All of the books were hundreds of pages long. Some had pictures; others hardly had any at all. The bird book had the most pictures, and Leah was beginning to regret choosing it. Still, it was over 300 pages long, and it had only cost her mother forty cents. Leah decided she would read it first just to get it out of the way. She had found all of

these books at the first garage sale that she and her mother had visited. Since that first garage sale, though, she hadn't had any luck finding books that interested her.

When they finally reached their destination—the next address on her mother's list—Mrs. Nells parked the car against the curb two houses down the street from the garage sale. Leah started to feel nervous. She could see a lot of people crowded on the driveway and in the garage. Book shopping was one of the very few things that could draw Leah out of her house on a Saturday morning, but she didn't like the crowds that she encountered. Mingling with so many strangers, and fearing the possibility that she might run into someone she knew—someone from school, was agony for her.

"Wow, this looks like the biggest garage sale we've seen all morning," Mrs. Nells said, excited. "I bet you'll find a book here."

Leah didn't share her mother's enthusiasm. No book could compensate for the torture she was about to experience.

Leah's mother got out of the car and marched eagerly towards the house. Mrs. Nells rarely bought anything for herself from these garage sales—the only money she had spent this morning was for Leah's new books—but she did enjoy browsing. "You never know what you might find," Leah once heard her remark to Mr. Nells who sometimes teased them both for shopping at garage sales. Leah followed timidly behind, her eyes searching the small crowd ahead of her to see if there were any faces that she recognized. There weren't; in fact, she could only see one other child—a small boy, six or seven years of age, holding a plastic toy gun in his hand and launching surprise attacks against imaginary foes in the front yard of the house. Leah pretended not to notice him, and rallying as much courage as she could, she followed her mother inside the garage and began looking for books.

She found some, but they weren't anything that interested her. Most were once-read romance novels, with a few horror novels thrown in for good measure. Unwilling to believe that a garage sale of this size wouldn't have any of the books that she liked to read, she spent a moment browsing the other tables making sure she hadn't missed

anything. The other tables were littered with clothing that was long out of style, old kitchen appliances that just barely still worked, and little knick-knacks of all sorts. There were no more books, so Leah stood just outside the garage and waited for her mother to finish browsing. A sale this large meant her mother might take a while, so Leah resigned herself to a long wait and turned her head, and her attention, to the sky as she stood on the driveway.

It was a sunny August day. The air was hot but breezy. The beach would be open on a day like this. The start of school was a little more than a week away, and Leah imagined that many of her classmates were at the beach, with hundreds of other people, enjoying what remained of their summer vacation. Leah was probably the only one spending her Saturday visiting garage sales. As bad as this experience was, at least she wasn't at the beach. She had been there before, and she knew how stressful it could be.

Leah's mind wandered, and she nearly forgot where she was. She didn't notice when an old woman, with a vase in her hand, approached from the right and asked, "Are you working here?" Leah snapped back into reality and before she could even begin to think of how to respond, the old woman added, "I found this vase on the table over there," she motioned towards one of the tables in the garage, "but it doesn't have a price on it. Do you know how much it is?"

Leah struggled to reply, but all she could offer was an expression of confusion and alarm on her face. The old woman seemed to understand, though. "Oh, I guess you don't know," she said. "I'm sorry, I thought perhaps you lived here." The old woman turned and walked away.

Leah decided to move farther from the house so that no one else would be tempted to speak to her, but as she turned towards the street she was suddenly startled when the little boy with the toy gun jumped out from behind the hedge and attacked. Having vanquished all of his invisible enemies, he was moving on to those with more substance. He aimed his gun at Leah and pulled the trigger twice. The gun made a rattling sound, but apparently that wasn't the sound the boy wanted to

hear so he sputtered, "Thd-thd-thd-thd-krhhh!" and exclaimed, "I shot you! You're dead!"

Leah didn't know what to do. She'd almost rather be locked in conversation with the old woman than be stuck trying to convince this boy she was still very much alive and not interested in playing his game. Fortunately, before Leah could think of something to say so she could get away from him, she was rescued by the boy's mother who came up from behind Leah and intervened. She grabbed the toy gun and said sharply to her son, "Give me that! This doesn't belong to you! And stop bothering people!"

The woman took the gun and returned it to the nearest table. The boy ran after her, crying and begging her to buy the gun for him. Meanwhile, Leah had had enough of this awful garage sale, so she walked back to her mother's car.

She found the doors locked, so she sat down on the curb and waited. A few minutes passed and Leah spent them in a comfortable silence, her eyes glancing around at the cars parked in the street; the tall oak trees that loomed above them, shading them from the sun; and beyond the trees, the other houses. She realized that people lived in those houses—they were probably there even now. She thought she was alone, but as was usually the case, she was surrounded by people. Bashfully, her eyes drifted slowly downwards until she was staring at the pavement under her feet. There, she saw an ant, black and tiny, exploring the ground and searching for food. Leah watched it crawl past the bits of gravel, which to its perspective, must have seemed like enormous boulders. She wondered if the hot asphalt ever burned its tiny feet, and she wondered if the ant was even aware of her. The poor creature's only purpose was to find food for the rest of the colony, and as far as it was concerned, Leah was probably nothing more than a feature of its landscape, like a mountain that had always been there, or a cloud drifting past—enormous but barely worth noticing. And Leah realized that if she had not sat down here at this curb, she would never have been aware of the tiny life so close to her feet. Leah knew from books she had read in the past that the ant was searching for food in the form of crumbs or

leaves or other dead bugs. Looking around, Leah didn't see anything that the ant might eat, but the ant continued searching, as it did everyday, struggling on alone.

Leah heard footsteps approaching from behind. She turned around and saw her mother, with a smile on her face but empty-handed as usual. Mrs. Nells watched as Leah stood up and waited for her mother to unlock the car doors.

"There were a lot of books in there—didn't you see anything that you liked?" Mrs. Nells asked as they got into the car.

Leah shook her head no and fastened her seatbelt.

"Well, we've got one more stop left," Mrs. Nells remarked, looking at the list of addresses she had compiled from the newspaper earlier that morning. She didn't always know where the streets were, and often she had to ask Leah to pull an old map of the city out of the glove compartment to find out where they were going—and even then their search could be difficult. This morning, they had spent as much time driving around the city as they had spent at the garage sales themselves.

But Mrs. Nells recognized the name of the last street on her list, so their trip didn't take long. When they arrived, they found a much smaller garage sale than any of the others they had visited that morning. There were two tables set up on the driveway of the house, and only a few customers were browsing. The small size of the garage sale was discouraging to Leah who wondered if it was even worth the trouble to get out of the car. Surely, there wouldn't be any books here that she'd want. But Mrs. Nells decided to look. She turned off the car and got out, and Leah followed her.

As they walked up the driveway, they passed the owner of the house: a sleepy-looking middle-aged woman sitting in a lawn chair on the driveway who quietly and indifferently examined her newest customers as they approached. Mrs. Nells said hello, but the woman just nodded her head. Leah tried to avoid eye contact.

To her surprise, Leah did find some books, and they weren't the worthless novels that she saw at the last garage sale. She was surprised to find one book that was just what she was looking for. It was an old

textbook dating from the 1970s titled *Astronomy, the Evolving Universe*. There were some charts and pictures in the book, but Leah didn't understand most of them. The book looked like a good buy. She presented it to her mother, who was standing nearby browsing through a rack of old clothes. Leah tapped her mother on the arm to get her attention and then showed her the title of the book.

Mrs. Nells looked at the title, and she looked at the price. She said, "Only fifty cents? OK. Do you want anything else?"

Leah shook her head no.

"All right." Mrs. Nells reached into her purse and found two quarters. She handed them to her daughter and said, "You go ahead and buy it. I'll wait for you in the car."

Mrs. Nells was gone before Leah had a chance to react. When she finally realized that her mother expected her to buy the book herself, she almost panicked. As she watched her mother walk away, she wondered what she would do. Leah looked at the woman sitting in the lawn chair. The woman was staring dully into space, obviously wishing she were elsewhere. Leah wished she were somewhere else, too. Why didn't her mother buy the book herself just as she had bought all the other books that morning? Leah wanted the book, but when she looked again at the woman in the lawn chair, she changed her mind. With one last glance at the astronomy book, she set it down on the table where she found it and started walking away. As she passed the woman in the lawn chair, Leah saw her suddenly come to life and ask, "Did you find anything you wanted?" Leah just shook her head no and hurried back to the car.

Mrs. Nells had already unlocked the doors when she saw her daughter, empty-handed, on her way back. Mrs. Nells wasn't surprised by what happened, but she was certainly disappointed. When they were both inside the car, she held out her palm without saying a word, and Leah returned the two quarters to her. Leah could sense her mother's disappointment as Mrs. Nells placed the two quarters back in her purse.

The engine was started, but the car didn't move. Mother and daughter sat uncomfortably in their seats, staring straight ahead. At last, Mrs. Nells broke the awful silence: "It's the easiest thing in the world,

Leah. You hand the woman the money, she thanks you, you take your book and go on your way. You are fourteen years old—you're about to start *high school* in less than two weeks for goodness' sake—yet you can't even buy a book at a garage sale like any other girl your age. I can't understand what's wrong with you!"

Leah didn't reply. She just stared out the window and felt ashamed. Her excitement over her new books was spoiled by this sudden failure to live up to what her mother expected of her. She regretted disappointing her mother once again, and she wished they had never gone on this shopping trip. Leah sat silently as they drove home. She didn't look at her mother, and her mother didn't look at her.