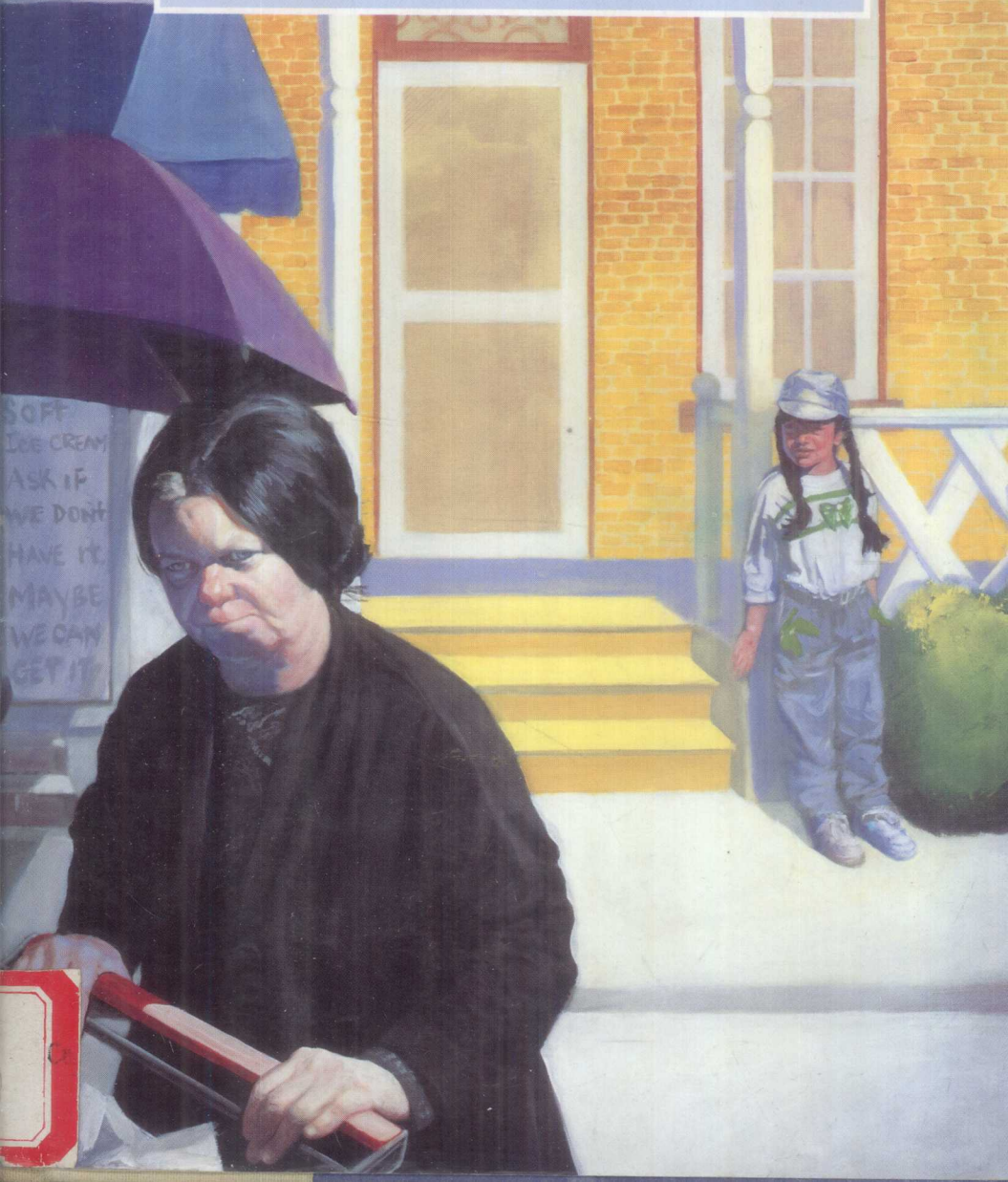


The Great Smith House Hustle

■ *Jane Louise Curry* ■



The Great Smith House Hustle

===== *Jane Louise Curry* =====

MARGARET K. McELDERRY BOOKS

New York

Maxwell Macmillan Canada

Toronto

Maxwell Macmillan International

New York Oxford Singapore Sydney

Copyright © 1993 by Jane Louise Curry
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or
transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or
mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any
information storage and retrieval system, without permission in
writing from the Publisher.

Margaret K. McElderry Books
Macmillan Publishing Company
866 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10022

Maxwell Macmillan Canada, Inc.
1200 Eglinton Avenue East
Suite 200
Don Mills, Ontario M3C 3N1

Macmillan Publishing Company is part of the Maxwell
Communication Group of Companies.

First edition

Printed in the United States of America

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

The text of this book is set in Bodoni.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Curry, Jane Louise.

The great Smith house hustle / Jane Louise Curry. — 1st ed. p. cm.

Summary: Just after moving into their grandmother's house in
Pittsburgh, the five Smith children must uncover a long-standing
scam to steal the houses of old people before Grandma Smith loses
her home. Sequel to "The Big Smith Snatch."

ISBN 0-689-50580-9

[1. Swindlers and swindling—Fiction. 2. Brothers and sisters—
Fiction. 3. Grandmothers—Fiction. 4. Pittsburgh (Pa.)—Fiction.

5. Mystery and detective stories.] I. Title.

PZ7.C936Gt 1993 [Fic]—dc20 92-33073

Sunday Evening, July 25th

ELVIRA, THE SMITH FAMILY'S OLD CHEVY VAN, COUGHED and rattled her way off Interstate Highway 79 at the Canonsburg exit. Belinda Rainbow—"Boo"—Smith didn't bother to raise her head to look out. She didn't have the energy. Even for a Sunday in July, one hundred and four degrees was *hot*. It was only a little cooler now that the sun was down.

The Smiths had been on the road for ten days. Ten *long* days. Though all of her windows were open, Elvira was a bake-oven on wheels. Boo was too miserable and sticky hot to care that they were in Pennsylvania at last. Pennsylvania or Peru—who cared? She was fed up with peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches, fed up with feeling grubby, and fed up with unironed clothes even though they *were* clean. Most of all she was fed up to the ears with her five-year-old sister, Babba. Danny, the littlest, was no trouble. But Babba?

Babba, with her blond curls and big blue eyes, might be cute as a basketful of kittens, but she was as fussy

as five old ladies. Worse, she was as determined as a rhinoceros at getting her own way. Worse still, she was liable to turn green and carsick if she didn't. Worst of all, she somehow always managed to feel urpish when there was no safe place for the van to pull to the side of the road. At least the supply of old plastic bags hadn't run out yet. Babba was too tidy ever to make a mess on the mattress. Except for taking turns on the passenger seat, the children rode in the rear on two old mattresses that lay on top of the cardboard boxes that held the family's belongings.

The Smiths, except for Mrs. Smith, who was still in the hospital back in Los Angeles, were near the end of their long journey. They had driven more than two thousand miles from California, headed for Grandma Smith's house in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Mr. Smith had begun a new job in Pittsburgh at the Buscaglia Box Company several weeks before Mrs. Smith's illness. Because she couldn't drive Elvira and the children east, their father had to take time off and fly out to California to do so. Mrs. Smith's doctor wouldn't allow her to travel until after the new baby was born. She was to join the family at Grandma's as soon after that as she could.

Boo wished with all her heart that the whole family could have stayed in Los Angeles. Nancy Bitts and Susie Loo and every other friend she had in the world were there. Now they would all be going on to Nightingale Junior High at the end of August without her.

August. Even in August the weather in Los Angeles never got icky-sticky hot—or at least not for days and days on end. And there it always cooled off at night. Here the nights stayed icky-sticky. On the day the Smiths chugged through Memphis, Tennessee, a newspaper headline on the paper rack at Ed's Truck Stop Restaurant had read 100-PLUS HEAT WAVE FROM TEXAS TO MAINE. It had been so hot that Poppy, who was eight and thin as a Popsicle stick, had fainted dead away at the restaurant's front door. Poppy, who had been born a "blue baby" and spent a lot of time in the hospital when she was small, was still not as tall or strong as other eight-year-olds. At least that had meant the children got to sit indoors in the air-conditioning for an hour. One of the truck drivers had bought them all soft drinks and frozen-yogurt cones. Mr. Smith used some of the family's emergency fund to buy a little fan in the truck-stop shop to plug into Elvira's dashboard outlet. Everyone got to use the fan, but it was mostly for Poppy. She said she felt fine, but she looked about as fine as a damp, faded dishrag.

After Memphis, Boo in her misery had decided that if it weren't that she was going to have her own, private bedroom for the first time in her life at Grandma's, she would rather be dead than going to Pittsburgh.

It was Boo's ten-year-old brother Cisco, dozing in the front passenger seat, who sat up and rubbed his eyes as Elvira slowed. (Cisco's full name, San Francisco Moonlight Smith—even goofier than Boo's—

sometimes made him wish his parents were more like everyone else's.)

"Are we almost there?" Cisco peered eagerly out into the dusk, but all he could see were hills and fields and trees.

"Not yet awhile." Mr. Smith kept his voice low so as not to wake Babba and four-year-old Danny. Both were curled up fast asleep between Boo and Poppy on the mattresses in back.

"The engine's heating up again," Mr. Smith explained quietly. "Sounds like the old fan belt's pretty near had it. If we can spot a safe place to pull to the side of the road, I should be able to get it off and the spare belt on while we still have some light to see by."

Mr. Smith could, as his old boss Mr. Monahan once said, take a car engine apart and repair it blindfolded with one arm in a cast. The new fan belt was soon installed and Elvira was on her way again. Ten or twelve miles further on, in the town of Mount Lebanon, Elvira chugged into a service station and pulled up at a self-service pump.

"What's the matter now?" Boo grumbled as the door on her father's side banged shut.

"Just gas," Cisco said. "And another quart of oil."

Poppy yawned and stretched. "Poo-oo-r old Elvira the oiloholic. Where are we?"

Cisco shrugged. "I dunno. Some town."

Curiosity got the better of Boo, and she sat up to look out the window. There was little to see but street-

lights, a brick building with empty shop windows across the road, and passing cars. One of two big boys riding in the back of a pickup truck that had stopped at the traffic light pointed at Elvira. Both boys stared. Boo, embarrassed, ducked down quickly. All the way across the country people had pointed or smiled at the battered old van's fat rear-end rainbow and the faded silver stars and red-and-gold planets painted higgledy-piggledy all over her dark blue sides and top. Boo didn't usually mind the van's being old. When she was little she had loved the paintings because Rainbow was her middle name and because the stars looked magical. In the last ten days, though, she had begun to feel like a grubby tiger cooped up in a ratty old circus wagon. She hated it.

As his father headed for the door to the snack shop and cashier's counter, Cisco squirmed around to hang over the back of the passenger seat.

"Did you see the traffic lights? They're a different shape from the ones at home. The streetlights are different, too. Even the gas stations. It's really int'resting. Some places look so old-fashioned, it's kind of like traveling in and out of olden times. Ever since back in Texas, all kinds of things have been getting different and different. It's almost like it's turned into another country. There's the shapes of houses, too. And so many of them are built out of bricks. Even some of the streets are made out of bricks."

"An' no place has got paper seat covers in the rest

room, neither." Babba sat up with a scowl. "That's not *nice*."

Boo groaned. "I thought you were asleep."

"I am," said Babba. She flopped back again.

"I like the places with brick streets," Poppy put in drowsily. "I like the way the tires go *rumbly-bumbly* on them."

A minute or two later Mr. Smith finished at the gas pump. He stuck his head in at the driver's-seat window.

"Anybody got fifteen cents? I'm fifteen cents short of ten dollars, and I don't want to break our last emergency-fund twenty-dollar bill if I don't have to."

"I've got it." Cisco dug in his pocket and counted out two nickels and five pennies.

Once the gas was paid for and Mr. Smith had added a quart of oil to the engine from their own supply, they started on their way again.

"How far's Pittsburgh?" Cisco braced himself against the dashboard as Elvira lurched over a big pothole at the service-station exit.

"Not far," his father answered. "Five, maybe six miles."

In the back, Boo stiffened. "What's that noise?"

Mr. Smith made a face. "Just another Elvira rattle. No-o-o problem."

But the rattle grew louder. A mile or so further on, Mr. Smith sighed and pulled to the side of the road again. "Where's the flashlight? Sounds like that pot-hole may have given the muffler a knock. If it's loose,

I'll have to wire the blamed thing up so we don't have it falling off in the middle of the Fort Pitt Tunnel."

"Tunnel?" Cisco yelped in excitement, bouncing in his seat.

"That's right. Under Mount Washington."

Poppy sat bolt upright. "Under a mountain?" she quavered.

The tunnel, once Elvira's muffler was fastened up again, proved to be as interesting as Cisco expected and as alarming as Poppy feared. Danny and Babba slept on, but Boo grew anxious. The tunnel seemed to go on and on. Its lights glared and the sounds of engines and tires echoed loudly. Poppy shut her eyes and covered her ears until Boo gave her an all-clear nudge.

"Wow-ee!" Cisco exclaimed.

Elvira had emerged onto a bridge approach. Ahead, across the river, the towers of downtown Pittsburgh sparkled in the dark like a fairy-tale city.

Fifteen minutes later the Smiths were making a right turn into Oakland Square in the part of the city known as Oakland. Two lefts around the end of the square brought them to the corner where Hillyard Street tilted downhill. Turning right, down Hillyard, the van pulled up in front of the first house below the corner.

Cisco jumped out excitedly onto Grandma Smith's front sidewalk.

Boo pushed open the rear side door of the van. "Ooh!" she exclaimed in spite of herself.

Poppy, dazzled by the bright streetlight, rubbed her

eyes and, with Cisco, stared in wonder at the tall old brick house. Three stories high, it had a wide front porch with a handsome stone rail and columns. A light in the front hall glowed green and gold through the front door's oval stained-glass window.

Perhaps Pittsburgh *wasn't* going to be so awful. . . .

2

Monday Morning, July 26

GRANDMA SMITH, BROKEN HIP OR NO, WAS UP BEFORE SIX o'clock the next morning making coffee, scrambling eggs, and toasting bread. Mr. Smith worked day-shift hours, repairing delivery trucks and machinery, at the Buscaglia Box Company and had to catch an early bus in order to be on the job at seven o'clock. He could not drive Elvira to work because everyone had been too tired the night before to unload her.

The children—except for Babba and Danny, who had been carried into the house sound asleep and still had not twitched—came down to their cereal and toast two hours later. They sat around the table passing the butter dish and marmalade pot and being polite. Everything felt strange. Grandma herself, whom the children had never met before, was not at all what they had expected. Her letters to California, their father's tales of growing up in Pittsburgh, his out-of-focus photographs of her—none of these had told them much. Their friends' grandmothers wore slacks and

brightly colored blouses, and some were thin and colored their hair and wore dangly earrings. Not Grandma Smith. Grandma was small and plump and looked like a picture-book granny. Her dress was a faded blue with tiny white flowers all over it. Her soft, fine hair looked like a short, curly white cloud. Her house was crowded with knickknacks and mirrors and dark, old-fashioned furniture.

To add to the strangeness, the breakfast bowls and spoons, cereal box, bread and toaster, coffee pot, and milk and juice jugs and glasses were set out on a dining-room table crowded into one end of the living room. The table was in the living room because Grandma, back at the beginning of the summer when she had broken her hip, had had to have her bed moved downstairs to the dining room. She was still in a wheelchair, so the dining room was still her bedroom.

"But not for long," Grandma said. "I can push myself up now and balance on my good leg well enough to reach most of the kitchen cupboards."

Suddenly she stiffened. "Oh, drat!" She put down her coffee cup and scuttled backward in her wheelchair, away from the front window.

The children looked up from their cereal bowls in surprise. As Grandma rolled through the wide doorway into the hall, she gave a toss of her head toward the front of the house.

"Is that old woman picking my roses?" she whispered loudly. Her face wore a comically fierce expression that made Poppy giggle.

Three heads turned toward the wide window that looked out across the front porch and narrow patch of garden to the sidewalk and the street. There they saw a fat old woman in a black sweater, an ankle-length black dress, and pointy black shoes on tiny feet come teetering past on the sunny sidewalk. She wore her black hair pulled back into a fat bun and pushed an odd-looking cart that had a bright purple umbrella fastened to it for shade.

The old woman stopped when she came abreast of Elvira. With a scowl she tiptoed over to peer in through the van's dusty windows. Then suddenly she turned and fixed an angry glare on the house. Poppy shrank down in her chair. Even Boo felt half tempted to duck under the table.

Once the woman was safely past and gone, Cisco made a funny-scared face. "Brr! That old lady looked like she wanted to zap a curse on your house, Grandma. But she didn't pick any roses. Who is she?"

"*That* was Matilda Tuttlebee," said Grandma with a sniff.

She wheeled herself back to the table and her coffee cup. "The Wicked Witch of Hillyard Street," she explained. "She fights with everybody, but she's hated us Smiths ever since your grandpa caught her son Stanley stealing poor Mary O'Meara's eyeglasses. Grandpa gave the horrid little shrimp a good wallop, and after that the least little thing was enough to set Matilda off."

"What did she do?" asked a wide-eyed Poppy.

"Anything that popped into her head, I'd say. When your daddy was a toddler and his dog Toby dug up some of her daffodil bulbs, she cut down our big, old viburnum bush. Fifty years old, that bush was! Most times nowadays she doesn't bother to wait for an excuse. Last month all my roses up and disappeared. Last week it was the daylilies. I'd bet you my bottom dollar it was Tilly Tuttlebee who snipped 'em off."

"What happened to her little boy?" Cisco asked.

"Stanley? Oh, he had a fight with his father—a nasty man—and ran away when he was fourteen or fifteen. That was the last we ever heard of him." Grandma sniffed. "Too bad Tilly didn't run away, too."

Poppy tipped her bowl sideways to scoop up her last spoonful of cornflakes. "If she tries to cut off your roses, Cisco'll catch her for you, Grandma. He's practicing to be a detective."

"Is he, now?" Grandma's eyebrows lifted. "How do you practice for that, Cisco honey?"

Cisco grinned, embarrassed. "Mostly by watching TV," he admitted. "But sometimes I practice following people or collecting clues."

Grandma nodded. "Well, I'll be very pleased to know whether Mrs. Tuttlebee is the thief, but I think I'd rather not have you *catch* her. I wouldn't know what to do with her. If I report her to the police, she'll only do something nastier still, to get even."

"You could put up a fence," Boo suggested. "A tall one."

"We could," Grandma agreed. "But the only sort that wouldn't keep the sunshine off my roses is that ugly chain-link kind. I think I'd rather find out the truth, and then let well enough alone."

"Besides," Cisco put in, "we can't put a fence around Elvira. Mrs. Bumblebee made a face at her, too. She could let the air out of Elvira's tires easy as pie."

Grandma laughed. "Not Bumblebee. *Tuttlebee*."

Before he left for work Mr. Smith had moved the mattresses out of the back of the van and into the front hall, where they leaned against the wall. Once Babba and Danny had been wakened, dressed, and given their breakfast, the children set to work unloading Elvira.

The floor of the rear part of the van had been tightly packed with a layer of boxes and baggage. Boo and Cisco lugged the boxes holding their parents' belongings up to the front second-floor bedroom. With Poppy's help the little ones carried their own cartons of clothing, toys, and odds and ends up to the top floor. The two boys had the front bedroom overlooking the street. Poppy and Babba's room, in the middle, had two windows that looked across to the next house and down into its garden. Boo's was the small room at the back.

The house itself was an adventure. In Los Angeles most houses the children had seen were all on one floor. Some, like their own old house, were two stories

tall, but only once before had they set foot in a three-story house. That one—the crooked Mr. and Mrs. Dockett's house in Los Angeles—had been *really* weird. Grandma's wasn't weird, just—different. Mr. Smith had built a ramp up one side of the porch steps for Grandma's wheelchair. And there were so many stairs! Four-year-old Danny stumped happily up and down the steep flights carrying his building blocks up two handfuls at a time until he was too tired to climb another step.

Babba's few belongings were soon tucked away in the chest of drawers she was to share with Poppy. Babba herself spent the rest of the morning exploring. For Babba that meant taking a peek into every drawer and closet and cupboard she could find. The top drawer of Grandma's dresser was best. Among the pretty, old-fashioned baubles there she found a necklace of crystal beads that sparkled like diamonds.

"Babba, you little snoop!" Boo stood in the doorway, hands on her hips. "You come out of there this minute or I'll tell Grandma."

"I didn't touch anything," Babba protested, but she pushed the drawer shut and hurried into the hall.

The next Boo saw of her, she was snuggled up with Danny in a living-room armchair next to Grandma's wheelchair. The two of them were listening wide-eyed as the old lady read them the story "The Seven White Cats."

When the story was finished, Babba sat up straight.