

GARRISON KEILLOR
AND JENNY LIND NILSSON

The Sandy Bottom Orchestra



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THE GREENS

*R*achel Green woke up on a shining May morning, her bedroom window wide open and white curtains wavering in the breeze, to the sweetness of lilacs and a Mozart symphony, squares of sunlight crinkled on the sheet. The Mozart came from the bathroom down the hall, where Daddy had his portable CD player cranked up, perched on the toilet tank, while he shaved. Mother said he was going to electrocute himself, the way he splashed water all over the place, but Mother didn't have a good grasp of electricity. Mother was downstairs in the kitchen; Rachel could hear her turning the pages of the newspaper. One right after the other. Mother was not one for dawdling.

Daddy hummed along with the Mozart clarinets in his soft baritone, and Rachel remembered her bad mood

from last night, after Daddy said that no, he didn't think they would take a vacation trip this summer, thank you very much. And Mother laughed and said, "Can you imagine the three of us spending two weeks together in the car?"

"Yes," Rachel said. "I can. Other families do. Why not us?"

"We're not other families, and besides, Daddy has to run Dairy Days on the Fourth of July, remember? It's less than two months away. And I've got church services to play and I've got to stand guard and keep the mayor from turning that old Ramsey Building into a parking lot. If I leave town, the place'd be rubble in ten minutes."

"Couldn't we go to San Francisco? You said last year you wanted to go."

"We're going to Milwaukee to see Grandma and Grandpa in August. Maybe we'll spend a day in Chicago with them. San Francisco's too far, and the hotel rates are just exorbitant."

Daddy said, "Why should we pay good money to go be miserable someplace else when we can be perfectly miserable right here at home?"

Rachel gave him a dry look: *not funny*. "I wish you'd at least *consider* it instead of automatically saying no. If I have to sit around here all summer . . ." She shuddered at the thought.

And then Mother said something about developing one's Inner Resources, and the true test of a worthwhile person being her ability to keep herself busy and enter-

tained without outside help. Developing Inner Resources. That was why they had no television set, because it created habits of passivity, et cetera et cetera, and so forth, blah blah, woof woof.

Rachel looked around her room. The bedspread and one of the pillows and a pile of clothes lay in a heap at the foot of the bed. The alarm clock said 7:32. The little maple bookcase was jammed tight with books and music, and more music was piled on a card table, along with Rachel's violin case. Books and folders and schoolwork lay strewn across her white wooden desk, and clumps of newspaper clippings—Mother was a habitual clipper of interesting newspaper articles. Rachel's jeans and a blue T-shirt hung on a chair, and the bureau top was crowded with hair-brushes, headbands, pencils, sample perfume bottles, and stuff. Whenever Mother walked in the room, she looked around and sighed. It was a mess all right, but there wasn't anything Rachel could throw out.

She stared up at the plaster bumps on the ceiling. A few more weeks of eighth grade and then a long summer vegetating in Sandy Bottom, Wisconsin (*Pop. 4,500, A City on the Grow*), with not a single thing to do. Of course, if you loved the smell of chlorine, you could go swimming at the Charles Shanks Memorial Municipal Pool and have boys gawk at your body, or you could go to the public library and peruse the encyclopedia—how about a long article about Sophocles? The South Pole? Soybeans? There was the youth recreation program, of course, but Rachel didn't play sports. Either you did or you didn't, and she

didn't. She sort of wished she could, but the girls who played softball were so serious about the game and got furious with you if you dropped a fly ball, and if you ever got yourself into a game, you stood there worried sick that the ball might be hit toward you, and then if it was, you panicked and dropped it and everyone rolled their eyes and groaned and said, "How *could* you? It was right *to* you!" and turned away as if you had committed some deliberate destructive act.

Sometimes Rachel wished she had an older brother to teach her softball, but she was an only child. An odd term, *an only child*. Like *a single woman*. As if it were an unnatural state of existence.

The Wymans next door were driving to Wyoming in a rented motor home and camping for two weeks in the Grand Tetons. Carol Wyman had been Rachel's best friend since grade school. Carol was a sort of only child, too, now that her older brother, Mike, had enlisted in the Coast Guard. Rachel wished that Carol would invite her to come with them to the Grand Tetons and say how cool it would be, the four of them, cruising around, and Rachel would say, "Oh, I don't know. I'm pretty busy," and Carol would say, "*Please, please* come," and Rachel would say, "Oh, well. Okay." And off they'd go. But Carol hadn't invited her, and Rachel doubted that she would.

Carol seemed distant lately. Carol was *her* best friend, but Rachel wasn't sure if she was Carol's best friend. Sometimes it seemed that Carol had a lot of best friends and that Rachel had been demoted to Second B. F. or

lower—to Lady-in-Waiting, or Assistant Friend. Carol was always busy—she had been the star forward on the Sandy Bottom Junior High School girls' soccer team that had gone to the state tournament and won second place against big tough teams from Milwaukee and Madison and Green Bay. Carol had starred in the school play, *The Diary of Anne Frank*—Rachel had been on the scenery crew—and now Carol was gearing up for a big summer as the star shortstop in the Minneota County junior girls' softball league. So what did Carol need a nerd like Rachel as a friend for anyway?

Rachel propped up the pillows and pulled the sheet up to her chin and pretended she was sick with liver cancer. A nurse looked down and smiled and whispered, "Your mother is here to see you," and Mother walked in and burst into tears—"Oh my darling Rachel, how can I make it up to you? All those years I neglected you! If only I could have those years back! We'd do wonderful things together! We'd go on vacation trips!"

The problem with the Greens taking vacations was that Mother and Daddy were so different, and on trips they made each other miserable. Daddy hated leaving home; he hated driving on freeways, he was terrified of flying, he was restless and twitchy in strange cities. Mother looked on a trip as a unique educational opportunity, and she studied for it in advance and gave you books about it with the important parts marked with yellow Post-Its and worked up a detailed itinerary and by George she made good and sure you *did your job and saw what you were there*

to see. But all that poor Daddy cared to do was sit in a quiet hotel lobby, drink his coffee, read his newspaper, and wait for the vacation to end, when he could go home and do what he really wanted to do, which was to run the Sandy Bottom Dairy.

Daddy had been president of the dairy for three years, since Mr. Sorenson retired to Arizona, and he loved it. His employees got all happy when Daddy walked through the plant—he knew their names and the names of their kids, he had introduced employee profit sharing, he had improved their health benefits, he was the Good Boss, and he was smart. Mr. Sorenson had run the dairy his own way for forty years—he believed the business consisted of milk, cream, butter, ice cream in four flavors (vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, and butter pecan) and three kinds of cheese (Colby, cheddar, and Swiss), and when yogurt became popular, he harrumphed and said it was a fad and not to bother. When Daddy took over, the Sandy Bottom Dairy got into yogurt and frozen yogurt and added a new line of expensive ice cream called Bluebird with six new flavors including Aïda (fudge, cookie chips, and pistachio), and Ludwig van Blueberry, and Madame Butterfly Brickle, that sold like crazy—ninety-thousand gallons shipped last June alone and this year it could be a quarter million. Daddy got excited about this stuff. The dairy had built a gleaming new plant along the river, near the lumberyard, and hired twenty-seven new people to work there.

Daddy loved to take people on tours of the new place and show them the stainless-steel vats and how the

ingredients got mixed in uniformly so there would be a cookie chip in every bite of Aïda without turning everything to mush. Why should he go suffer through two weeks slouching around San Francisco when he was perfectly happy at work?

Daddy was always thinking up new ideas, and three years before, he had decided the dairy would sponsor a big Fourth of July Dairy Days celebration and give away hot dogs and ice cream and there would be fireworks and a big concert. Last year it was the Chatfield Brass Band and this year he had hired the Dairyland Symphony Orchestra.

“Just imagine, classical music in old Sandy Bottom. Won’t that be something?” said Daddy. When he wasn’t at work, he loved to lie on the old red sofa in the tiny book-lined den with a glass of wine in his hand and listen to the Beethoven Symphony No. 6 or a Prokofiev violin concerto or Anna Moffo singing Mozart arias and let his mind drift far away. That was how Daddy preferred to travel.

Rachel rolled out of bed and stood and stretched and did her groaning exercises. What did it take to convince these people to *go* someplace? They had gone to Italy last summer. Mother’s best friend from college, Phoebe Hanson, lived in Florence. She was an art historian, tall, with blond hair tied in a braid, cool and smart, unmarried, no kids, who lived in a sunny two-room apartment (a big kitchen with a couch, a teeny bedroom) across the Arno River from the center of the city and who treated Rachel like a grown-up and listened to her opinions and told her secrets. Rachel stayed with Phoebe while Mother and Daddy lived in a

small hotel near the cathedral. Every morning, Phoebe and Rachel traipsed across the Ponte Vecchio, an ancient stone bridge lined with jewelry shops, and went to a café and drank coffee and made up stories about the people passing by. It was a game they called Novel. “She’s a laundress and she’s on her way to buy a lottery ticket and her son is gay and her teeth hurt,” Phoebe would say about an old woman in a black shawl hurrying across the street, and Rachel would see a boy pedaling a bicycle, a knapsack on his back, and say, “He’s failed his math test and is afraid to tell his father and he’s supposed to see a movie with his girlfriend tonight and he’s wondering how to get the money for the tickets.” They could do this for hours.

Mother walked through museums looking at acres of art, and Daddy sat in the hotel lobby and read the *London Times* and waited until afternoon, when it was morning in Wisconsin and he could call his office and ask about Bluebird sales and gossip with Florence, his secretary. Phoebe and Rachel sat in the sidewalk café by the piazza and watched rivers of people flow by, Germans and French and Japanese and English and Americans—“He is a social studies teacher and she is a beautician and she’s mad at him because he’s mad at her for buying those pots yesterday, and they’ve got four more days here and they’re going to spend it being mad and arguing about whose idea it was to come here anyway.” Their waiter Rodolfo brought Rachel cups of coffee with *grande latte*—lots of milk—and she said, “Grazie, signore,” and he complimented her on her accent. It was the most wonderful trip.

Over Rachel's dresser hung a picture of a little gang of angels painted by Ghirlandaio that she had brought home from Italy, in a gold frame. The angels looked eagerly to their right, as if someone outside the frame were bringing them ice-cream cones. On her desk stood a pair of silver candlesticks and long white candles that she sometimes lit at night and imagined she was back in the café, talking to Rodolfo.

Grazie della serata (GRAH-tsee-ah DAYL-ah say-RAH-tah). Thanks for the evening.

Il piacere è stato mio (Eel pee-ah-CHAY-reh EH STAH-toe MEE-oh). The pleasure was mine.

But the Italian trip wore Daddy out. He worried about pickpockets, food poisoning, being cheated by shopkeepers—and what if they missed the flight? And then, having rushed them to the airport in plenty of time and checked their luggage, he turned pale as he boarded the plane. Beads of sweat ran down his forehead and he stiffened as the plane ascended into the clouds. Daddy sat, silent, frozen, breathing rapidly, heart pounding, for nine hours over the Atlantic, and another two hours to Milwaukee, and every time the plane bounced a little or shook, or he heard a funny grinding noise from down below, he closed his eyes and clung to the armrests. When they finally touched down on Wisconsin soil, he looked like the ghost of Christmas Yet to Come.

"That's it for me," he said. "No more airplanes for a while. I'd rather die at home."

So there was not much hope of going to Italy again.

San Francisco was out. Nothing to look forward to—Carol would be busy all summer, and Rachel would be stuck at home with a couple of nutcases.

The bathroom door opened. "All yours!" called Daddy as he went downstairs. Rachel ducked in, brushed her teeth, took a fast shower using Mother's Natural Aloe shampoo, put on plain white cotton underpants. Once, when she had chosen fancy lacy ones in a shop in Milwaukee, Mother said it was ridiculous to pay extra for lace and made her put them back. She blow-dried her short black hair and wished it was thick and curly, more like Carol's. Her closet was stuffed with clothes, but there was something wrong with everything. Her pants were either too short or too long, her shirts were the wrong colors, or the ones she wanted to wear were in the laundry pile in the basement.

Finally she pulled on a pair of khaki pants and a dark blue T-shirt and trudged down the stairs.

Daddy was in the den drinking coffee, standing at the bookcase, listening to a Bach cello suite. "Good morning!" Rachel said, and Daddy looked at her, teary-eyed. Bach really got to him sometimes.

In the kitchen, Mother sat at the table, handsome and tall, her long black hair bursting out of its bun, her right foot tapping on the tile floor. She was wrapped in her old green plaid bathrobe, drinking coffee, writing furiously on a yellow legal pad, the *Sandy Bottom Register* spread out in front of her.

"Morning," said Rachel.

"Good morning, sunshine," Mother said. She didn't look up.

Rachel got out the yogurt and spooned a glop of it into a bowl and poured bran flakes over it.

"Look at this!" Mother said, stabbing the newspaper with her pencil. "Can you believe this? It says they're eliminating *Spanish* at the high school next year!"

"Well, if you never take trips anywhere, what does it matter if you learn a foreign language?" Rachel said.

Mother ignored her. "There used to be Latin and French and German *and* Spanish, and they cut it back to Spanish, and now they're cutting that too! This idiot mayor is trying to ram through a bond issue to spend a half million dollars on new curbs and gutters and they can't spend twenty-five thousand on a Spanish teacher. It's a horror show! They eviscerate the public library, they demolish what few beautiful buildings they have and make them into *parking lots*, for crying out loud, and now they go and dump the *only foreign language taught in school!* What's left? Are they going to close the school and just buy the kids laptops and plug them into the Internet?"

"What does eviscerate mean?"

"It means to rip the guts out of something."

"Oh."

Rachel crunched her bran flakes and glanced at Mother's legal pad. Sure enough, she was writing a letter, and it was addressed: "To the Editor." Oh boy, Rachel thought. Here we go again. One right after the other.

"I tell you," Mother said, "this mayor has consumed

too much red meat, and his brain is full of suet. That's his problem. He has an IQ that's right around room temperature, and if anybody dares to question his judgment, he goes bananas. He's nothing but a senile delinquent!"

Senile delinquent! Mother liked that phrase. She picked up her pencil and started scratching away again. It looked like she was already up to four pages.

Daddy wandered in from the den. He smelled of lime cologne. He bent down and kissed Rachel behind her ear. He kissed Mother and said, "Good morning, General." He poured himself a bowl of bran flakes and made such a face of disgust that Rachel laughed.

"What is it?" said Mother, not looking up. Daddy loved fried eggs and sausage and toast slathered with butter, but his cholesterol count was high, and Mother had put her foot down. No more fried food.

Rachel smiled at Daddy. "The bran flakes are excellent this morning," she said.

"Glad to hear it," Daddy said. "The ones we had yesterday tasted like sawdust."

"These are better, they're fortified," said Rachel.

"I am about ready to pack my bags and leave town," said Mother. She looked at both of them. "I mean it. I am so mad." She tapped a cigarette out of its pack and lit it. Today was the day Mother had said for two weeks she was going to start quitting smoking.

"We noticed," said Rachel.

Daddy chewed his bran flakes.

Mother pushed the legal pad aside. "Mayor Broadbutt