

## #20

by Nancy Springer

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There's a big lilac bush growing by Mrs. Life's porch, and I used to hide in the hollow under the green leaves next to the cinderblock to play that I was Pony Queen Of The Universe or just to get away from the neighborhood awhile. But I don't go there anymore, because I'm going to die, and what I heard there is what made me understand how that's going to happen.

Not that old Mrs. Life was not a nice lady. She sat on her porch all day every day from April to October and spoke to me like I was a friend every time I passed. "Veronica" she called me, because she said "Ronni" was a boy's name. It was pretty much the only way she didn't approve of me. Most people that old don't seem to like kids much, but Mrs. Life would invite me up on her porch to sit by her and talk to her and see what she was doing. Sometimes it was crocheting an afghan, and she would say to me, "I've put in a hundred and ten hours on this one so far." She would say, "I've crocheted sixty-six afghans since 1983." And she would show me her notebook. She had a little lined spiral-bound notebook like they sell in drugstores, and she had marked in it everything she had crocheted since she learned how to crochet, and how many ounces of yarn each thing took, and how much the yarn cost, and how many hours it took her to make it, and who she gave it to when she was done.

Or sometimes she was reading a book, one of those real fat paperbacks about the Civil War or something, and she would say to me, "I'm on page six hundred and forty-seven." She would say, "I read twenty-two books last year." And she had a notebook for keeping track of that, too. She had been a school-teacher way back when my mom and dad were in school, so maybe that was why she had those notebooks and kept track of everything in very very tidy thin handwriting. Her handwriting made me shiver like having a fishhook caught in me.

She lived right in the middle of town, next to the church, across from the tavern. From up on her porch a person could see practically the whole town, because Pleasantville isn't very big. You could see all the important places, anyway: the Post Office, and the school-yard, and the drugstore, and the house next to the tavern that my folks called the cathouse, though I never could figure out why. They don't have any cats over there that I know of. Sometimes I hung around in the alley behind the cathouse watching the windows and stuff, because I like cats, kittens especially. There's different girls and ladies who live there, and I never saw any cats but I did see interesting things happening, things to give me ideas what it might be like when I was a woman. I guess that's why I kept going back.

Anyway, everybody in Pleasantville went past Mrs. Life's porch to get to those places, and they all knew her, and most of them had had her as a teacher in

school. And they all liked her, or at least seemed to. They all stopped to talk with her or at least said hi. So I knew she must be a nice lady.

Sometimes I didn't want to talk with her, though. Sometimes I just didn't want to be bothered with anybody, I didn't feel like part of my family at all, I wondered if maybe I was adopted or something, and that was when I would hide under the lilac bush beside her porch and play that I was Chinese Jumprope Master Of The Galaxy, and that was how it happened that I heard her arguing with Mr. Quickel.

It was pretty early in spring yet, and the blossoms were still on the lilac, and it smelled sweeter than a Church Ladies' Auxiliary under there, so I stayed longer than usual. I almost fell asleep. At least I think that was the day it was. It makes sense that it was, because lilac time is when people start mowing their lawns, and she was arguing with Mr. Quickel about what he was going to charge her to do hers again this year.

"Thirty dollars a week," he said. "Now you know that includes every-thing." She had a big lawn with lots of shrubs and things in it that had to be kept after.

"Why thirty? Last year you charged me fifteen."

"No, last year I charged you twenty-five. But the cost of everything has gone up, gasoline for the mower —"

"Last year you charged me fifteen."

Mr. Quickel was one of those people who had had Mrs. Life in school, and now he was a schoolteacher himself. My big brother, Greg, had him for Health and wrestling in middle school, and after going to a few wrestling matches I kind of got a crush on Coach Quickel because he was really good-looking for an old guy. Besides which he went to our church and everybody liked him. He mowed grass in the summertime because, my mom said, the school board didn't pay him enough. My mom said it was a disgrace to see a schoolteacher moonlighting. I had heard Greg and a couple of his friends talking about mooning a tour bus one night, and I wondered if it meant the same thing.

Mrs. Life said, "The cost of gas hasn't gone up that much. You want to charge me double what you did last year?"

"Now I know you're getting up there, Mrs. Life." Mr. Quickel tried to make a joke of it and put on a sort of teacher tone, like to a kid who was being dense. "You think back, you'll remember I charged you twenty-five last year. Not that I blame you for forgetting. The years do have a way of piling up, don't they? You must be pushing eighty. Are you getting a little short-minded, maybe?"

"Nicholas Quickel." Mrs. Life's voice instead of yelling went low and cold,

and I knew Mr. Quickel had made a mistake. A bad one. He knew it too, because he said, "I didn't mean any-thing, Mrs. Life." I also noticed that even though he had gray hair himself Mr. Quickel still called her Mrs. Life instead of Savilla the way some of the really old people did. "I just thought . . . my tax records show . . . never mind. Look, I guess I can still do your lawn for twenty-five. . . ."

Mrs. Life said, "I will get someone else," and I heard him walk away.

He should have known better than to think Mrs. Life was short-minded, the way she kept track of everything. I guess if she put a nickel in a Salvation Army kettle she went home and marked it down. All year long she kept track of her grocery coupons in a little note-book and every December 31 she knew how much she had saved. My mom said coupons and afghans and books and stuff weren't the only things she kept track of. Every time my big sister, Re-gina, was out on a date, Mom said, old Mrs. Life was watching to see how late she came in. I guess she counted how many times Regina kissed each boy. She stood back to watch, but Mom could see her shadow on the window.

That same night she argued with Mr. Quickel, Mrs. Life called and got my brother Greg to mow her lawn for ten dollars a week, and the first time he did it he made me come along and help rake, because I told him after he hung up the phone that he could have got fifteen. Mrs. Life watched him hard at first to make sure he mowed in nice neat lines, but after a while she went back to sit on her porch. Another old lady, Mrs. Simmermeyer, came by and stopped to talk, and I was raking the side yard so I heard them. They started with the preacher (they didn't like that he wore gray slacks instead of black) and practically went through the town person by person.

"I was just thinking last night about somebody I haven't thought of in years," Mrs. Life said after a while.

"Oh?" The other lady was happy to hear this. "Who might that be?"

"The Klunk boy. You remember little Charlie Klunk? What ever became of him?"

"Didn't you *hear*?" Mrs. Simmer-meyer was in heaven. "He came home on early discharge from the Service, remember, and then he moved to Cal-ifornia. And the Klunks all said he had married a nice girl and had two nice youngsters. But then along about 1973 — I think it was '73 — maybe it was '72 —"

Mrs. Life would've known whether it was '73 or '72. She knew what year peo-ple were born or graduated or married or died. Anyway, I knew she knew what year Charlie Klunk did what he did because I had heard her tell this same whole story to somebody else the sum-mer before. But here she was sitting and listening to Mrs. Simmermeyer tell it and not even correcting her.

Mrs. Simmermeyer got back on track. “Anyway, he went and joined one of them Gay Liberation clubs. Came out of the closet. Here he was light in his loafers all along and none of us knew it.”

“I knew it,” Mrs. Life said, real calm. “I could tell he was a sissy. I had him in school, remember? And I could al-ways tell which boys to watch. But what’s he doing now?”

“He lives with his *sweetie*. You know, his *boyfriend*. They run a *flower shop* together.” Mrs. Simmermeyer laughed, but Mrs. Life just sort of nodded.

“He and Nicholas Quickel were in the same class, weren’t they? And didn’t they used to run around together a lot?”

“Did they? I don’t remember.”

“Well, I had them both in class, and it seems to me they were *very close*.”

I turned around and raked the other way so I could watch. There they sat with their heads together, their saggy old bosoms almost touching, and Mrs. Simmermeyer’s baggy old eyes had opened wide. But Mrs. Life just said as if it was the weather she was talking about, “Nick Quickel was over here yes-terday evening, was what made me think of Charlie Klunk. I wonder if they still keep in touch.”

“Nicky Quickel. Isn’t he the wres-ting coach now?”

“Yes. Junior High. Last I heard.”

They talked some more, and then Mrs. Simmermeyer went off about her business. Mrs. Life sat rocking on her porch in her wicker rocker, and after I had raked as much as I could for a while I went up and sat with her. I was kind of hoping she would have some sort of chore for me, because Greg wasn’t giving me anything for raking grass except just letting me live. Some-times Mrs. Life sent me across to the Post Office with a letter or across to the drugstore to buy her a magazine, and even if it was just a dinky little errand she always paid me at least a quarter. Like I said, she was a real nice lady.

But she didn’t send me on any errand that day. We just watched the cars and stuff go by. When a tour bus went by Mrs. Life said, “That’s the sixth one to-day.”

The reason the tour buses go by is that we sit along the river halfway be-tween the Indian Rock Carvings up-stream and the Indian Echoes Cavern downstream. And right outside town is the Indian Maiden’s Leap. There’s this high cliff above the river, and some In-dian girl whose loverboy got axed was supposed to have killed herself by jumping off it. The thing they don’t tell the tourists is that people still kill

themselves by jumping off there. Our town is supposed to have the highest suicide rate practically in the whole country, and nobody could figure out why. It was in the paper last year, and my mom and dad talked about it for a week, how so many people in Pleas-antville killed themselves when it was supposed to be a nice place to live, no drugs, old-fashioned values, all that. Of course not all the people who killed themselves took the Leap. Some of them took pills or shot themselves or whatever. My one girlfriend's grandpap killed himself with a hunting rifle last winter and he blew his head apart so good nobody could go in the room af-terward. They had to pay a cleaning service eight hundred dollars to get rid of the mess, all the little bits of ear and nose and eyeballs and stuff. You would think he could have at least done it out-side the house.

“Those tour buses smell terrible, don't they?” Mrs. Life said to me.

I went back to raking, and more peo-ple stopped and talked with Mrs. Life, and maybe she said something to them about how Charlie Klunk and Nicky Quickel used to be real close, but I don't know. It's not like I listened to every-thing she said to everybody. I mean, as much as I could I did, because I learned a lot that way, about different people and about what it's like to be grown up. But that day I sort of felt like I'd already heard enough.

About a week later Mr. Quickel came by one evening. We were all sitting out on the lawn, out in the dusk watching the lightning bugs, and he came and sat with us. He and Mom and Dad were kind of friends back even before Greg started wrestling for him, because of church. After a while Dad gave me a dollar and sent me across the street to the drugstore to get myself a candy bar, because I guess he could tell Mr. Quickel had something on his mind he didn't want to talk about in front of me. So after I came back with my Snickers I went up to my room. But my windows were open and I still heard them down below. Something about rumors all over town.

“You can't fight gossip,” my Mom was saying. “Pay any attention to it and it just makes it worse. All you can do is ignore it.”

“Talk about getting screwed from be-hind,” Mr. Quickel said like he was trying hard to make a joke, and they all laughed a little.

By the time school was out even us kids had heard some things. Mr. Quickel was gay. Everybody said it, so it had to be true. People whose boys had had Mr. Quickel as a coach were worried. I no-ticed my parents took Greg off one eve-ning and asked him some questions. Everybody knew gay people shouldn't be trusted around children.

“But he has a wife. Grown children,” a woman said to Mrs. Life over the porch railing. I was under the lilac bush, playing Princess of California. I had been spending a lot of time under there lately. The real world had started to seem more

and more like someplace to get away from.

“Now, I’ve never said that Nick Quickel is a homosexual,” said Mrs. Life to her friend. “But I will say this, I have read that a fair number of men who are homosexuals can appear nor-mal.”

The woman was a school board mem-ber who had had Mrs. Life as a teacher once and wanted her advice. It seemed the school board had been getting letters from people who had heard things about Mr. Quickel. “But nobody seems to have any proof,” the woman said. “What if it’s all just a bunch of hooey? The man’s life is half ruined already. If we start a formal investigation —”

Mrs. Life said, “It seems to me as a teacher and a concerned citizen that we can’t take chances with our children, no matter who gets hurt. People know when they go into teaching that there are certain professional standards they have to uphold.”

“Then you think he’ll understand we have to do what we have to do.”

“I’ve known Nick Quickel for years, and I still think you have to do it whether he understands or not.”

That was the year Greg had the paper route. About midafternoon every day a green van would come and a man would thunk bundles of the *Pleasant Day* on the sidewalk in front of our house. Greg usually got me to help him because I knew what he’d do to me if I didn’t. We’d turn our fingers red tear-ing open the plastic straps because we were too lazy to go inside and find the scissors. After that we’d sit and rubber-band the papers all at once. The news-print blackened our hands and smelled sickening, the way almost anything smells sickening if there is too much of it. Then we would load the papers in the bags and deliver them. Those bags were so heavy they hauled our shoul-ders down. Dragging a cross couldn’t have been much worse. And the news-print got on the bags and our clothes and our faces. It seemed to spread and stain everything, like sin.

Mrs. Life was always on her porch waiting for her newspaper. If we were even a few minutes late she would be starting to fuss. “I’ve taken the *Pleasant Day* for sixty-two years,” she would say. “Never missed once and I don’t want to start now.” But one day early that sum-mer Greg and I were a good ten minutes later than usual yet she didn’t say anything, just grabbed the paper from us and got the rubber band off it with her crooked old hands. I saw her scan the headlines then smile, and I started to feel like I wanted to hide in green lilac shadow, because I knew what she was looking at. Greg and I had both seen it when we were getting the papers ready. It was what had made us late. Front-page news: “Pleasantville Teacher Sus-pect.” The school board had hired a psy-chiatrist and a private detective to give them a report on Mr. Quickel.

I waited until we were around the corner from Mrs. Life's place, trudging along under our loads, before I asked Greg, "He never did anything to you, did he?"

"Course not. The whole thing makes me sick."

"Me, too."

"Get used to it, Ronni. That's the way the world is. Sick."

Which was what I was trying to do: get used to it. See how it was run, how things were done. Watch the people who knew, to follow their lead. Learn the rules. Now it's too late I can see what I wish I'd done. But then I couldn't get a handle on what was going wrong. I hadn't seen anybody do anything bad. Hadn't even heard anybody tell any lies. Just had a feeling things weren't fair, that was all. Just a bad feeling.

Couple days or it might have been a week after the newspaper article, me and my mom were walking to some-body's yard sale when Mrs. Life called hello to us and beckoned Mom over to her porch.

"Have you noticed Nicholas Quickel hasn't been to church for three weeks now?" she said. She went to the same church as we did, the one right by her house. Everybody who wanted to count in that town went to that church. "Mar-jorie has been coming but he hasn't." His wife, Mrs. Life meant. "I wonder if they're having problems."

My mother said, "Um." Just barely polite.

"I'm concerned for them," Mrs. Life said, her voice turning chilly. "I think we ought to pray for them."

"I think we ought to let them alone," Mom said. She told Mrs. Life we had to get going. After we were down the street a ways she started to mutter, "Concerned. Huh. Concerned just like a fox when there's a chicken in trouble."

A few days later I heard Mrs. Simmermeyer telling the lady behind the counter at the Post Office how Mr. Quickel and his wife were having bad problems, and no wonder, what with his being a queer and all.

Mr. Quickel came to our kitchen screen door one night while we were eating supper and let himself in. Dad told him to sit down and have some-thing to eat with us, but he didn't. He just started to talk kind of wild. Didn't even seem to care that Greg and Gina and I were sitting there hearing every word.

"It's like a nightmare," he said. "It just keeps getting worse and worse. Now they're spying on Marge and me. They're saying she's going to leave me. How the

Hell do they know she's going to leave me?"

"They're just guessing," Mom said.

"They're right. Thirty years, and she's going to leave me. She can't take disgrace. Neither can I. I can't take any of this. I'm going to lose my job. You know I'm going to lose my job. Pretty soon they'll start saying I'm going to lose my job, and they'll be right, I'll lose my job—"

"Nick, calm down," Dad said. He got up and went to stand beside him, started to touch him on the shoulder and then sort of stopped his hand and took it away again. "They haven't made a de-cision yet," Dad said.

Like he hadn't heard any of this Mr. Quickel kept on going. "I'll lose my job, and then they'll start talking about criminal charges, and whadaya know! They'll be right about that, too. Some-body will bring criminal charges. See the headlines written on the wall?" He pointed at our kitchen wall as if he was really seeing something. " 'Former Teacher Indicted for Sex Crimes.' And then they'll start saying —"

"Nick!" my mother yelled at him. "Stop."

My father was still standing up, and he sort of shoved Mr. Quickel toward his chair, and Mr. Quickel sat down. But he didn't stop talking. His voice got quieter, but what he was saying got worse.

He said, "The Hell of it is, there's just a ghost of truth behind it all. That's what makes it so hard."

"What are you talking about?" My father sounded scared, but Mr. Quickel didn't even look at him. It was like he was talking in a dream.

He said, "Must have been thirty-five, forty years ago. There was this kid named Charlie Klunk. We got to be friends, and he and I did a few dirty things. Just fooling around. Testing out our chemistry sets. But then I went away to college and I put all that behind me. I knew I wanted to be a teacher, see. . . ."

He looked up at Greg and my dad and saw the look on their faces.

"It was back when I was a stupid kid," he begged them. "You know what they say about teenage boys, they're just hormones with feet. I'm not gay. Not once I grew up, anyway."

He looked at Dad and Greg some more and then he stood up to go. "Never mind," he said. "I know I'm a goner. Might as well kill myself and have it done with."



“Nick, no. Don’t talk that way,” my mother said.

He looked at her like she was throw-ing him a lifeline but it was way too short. “How the Hell did they know to hit me where I live?” he asked her. Then he went out into the dusk and we didn’t see him again.

The next day I was lying under my lilac bush, just lying there, not even playing anything, and I heard Mrs. Life say to somebody, “There goes Nick Quickel into the drugstore again. See, he’s going back to the pharmacy counter to have a prescription filled. That’s the third time this week. I wonder what can be the matter.”

It was the old man who picked up tin cans around town she was talking to. I heard him say, “Why, what do you think it might be?”

“I’m sure I couldn’t say. But don’t you think he’s awfully thin for a man his age?”

Mr. Quickel was a coach, for heav-ensake. I knew he jogged and every-thing to keep in shape.

“And pale?”

What with the Hell she had been put-ting him through, no wonder.

“Here he comes out again. Do you see all those red spots on his arm? Of course they might just be bug bites. . . .”

How could she see anything on his arm from across the street? She had to be making it up.

“You think he has that there disease queers get?” The tin can man had caught on pretty fast for a guy his age.

“I wouldn’t want to go so far as to say that.”

Only took a few days, though, before most of Pleasantville knew for a fact that Mr. Quickel had AIDS. Even the people who were still speaking to him before were afraid to go near him now.

I had started staying under the lilac bush and listening to Mrs. Life on pur-pose. Teachers in school were always telling kids to think for themselves, but this was the first time that a school-teacher had ever really taught me to do it. I was starting to see evil when I looked in her face, and I was starting to hate her. But I wasn’t used to going against adults or thinking that I knew better than them. I wasn’t used to having my own ideas about things. It was a strange feeling, and I spent a lot

of time under my bush sort of wrestling with it.

I heard Mrs. Life say, "I don't like to speak ill of anyone, but just the same, if I was a parent I wouldn't want my child to have him as a schoolteacher."

I heard her say, "Would you want to use the same restroom or water fountain as him?"

I heard her say, "Even putting aside all the rest of it, suppose he should cut himself and his blood got on some poor little girl?" I knew what I ought to do, but I just couldn't. I wasn't old enough or big enough or strong enough to speak out against her. I had plenty of anger, but I couldn't find any courage.

Mr. Quickel killed himself the day after his wife went to Arizona to stay with her mother for a while. He did it by cutting his wrists, and he stayed in the bathroom so there wouldn't be too much mess. He left a private note for his wife and kids and a public one for the rest of us. All it said was, "I never hurt anyone."

My dad is a Volunteer Fireman and answered the call when the school board's private detective found him that evening. Dad came home looking pretty grim and told the rest of us what had happened, and Mom said to him, "It's partly your fault."

"What was I supposed to do?"

"He came to you for help and you turned your back. How do you think that made him feel?"

He yelled, "What is it with you and Nick Quickel, anyway?"

She yelled back, "What's that supposed to mean?"

I left them fighting and walked into our front room and looked across at Mrs. Life's porch. She was out there, all right.

And one of the other firemen was leaning on her railing. I guessed I knew what they were talking about.

Then he left and she got up off her wicker rocker and went inside.

I must have been about half crazy. The whole thing made me so sad and mad and sick I could have puked. I walked out of my house and straight across to hers and barged right in her front door without even thinking. I still don't know what I meant to say to her.

And there she was at her dining room table with her old tortoise-shell fountain

pen, writing in one of those little notebooks of hers that she kept track of everything in. She finished writing and closed it, and I saw it was just like all the rest, spiral-bound, with lined paper, except that it had a black cover. "So I'm short-minded, am I?" she said to it. "Short-minded, indeed."

Then she looked up and saw me there. But her face didn't change. It was still the same as ever.

"Witch," I said to her. I wanted to scream it, but it came out a whisper. "You dirty witch."

In a very quiet, very cold voice she told me, "Veronica Hoffman, you watch your mouth."

I was so nuts I didn't stop. "How many people you got in there?" I squeaked at her. "Go ahead, tell me. How many suicides have you done?"

"Nineteen so far," she said.

"Wonderful. One more and you'll be up to twenty."

"That's right." She stood up, and sud-denly I was very scared. "Get out of my house."

I ran like a rabbit, and if there was a way I could have kept running clear out of this town I would have done it. But there's nothing I can do. Mom and Dad are quarreling. There's nobody I can talk to, nobody who can help me. And already Mrs. Simmermeyer is starting to talk about how little Veron-ica Hoffman spends so much time at the cathouse, what can a girl her age want at that place?

I know who number twenty in Mrs. Life's little black book is going to be.