

*Are you there God? It's me, Margaret. We're moving today. I'm so scared God. I've never lived anywhere but here. Suppose I hate my new school? Suppose everybody there hates me? Please help me God. Don't let New Jersey be too horrible. Thank you.*

We moved on the Tuesday before Labor Day. I knew what the weather was like the second I got up. I knew because I caught my mother sniffing under her arms. She always does that when it's hot and humid, to make sure her deodorant's working. I don't use deodorant yet. I don't think people start to smell bad until they're at least twelve. So I've still got a few months to go.

I was really surprised when I came home from camp and found out our New York apartment had been rented to another family and that we owned a house in Farbrook, New Jersey. First of all I never even heard of Farbrook. And second of all, I'm not usually left out of important family decisions.

But when I groaned, "Why New Jersey?" I was told,

“Long Island is too social—Westchester is too expensive—and Connecticut is too inconvenient.”

So Farbrook, New Jersey it was, where my father could commute to his job in Manhattan, where I could go to public school, and where my mother could have all the grass, trees and flowers she ever wanted. Except I never knew she wanted that stuff in the first place.

The new house is on Morningbird Lane. It isn't bad. It's part brick, part wood. The shutters and front door are painted black. Also, there is a very nice brass knocker. Every house on our new street looks a lot the same. They are all seven years old. So are the trees.

I think we left the city because of my grandmother, Sylvia Simon. I can't figure out any other reason for the move. Especially since my mother says Grandma is too much of an influence on me. It's no big secret in our family that Grandma sends me to summer camp in New Hampshire. And that she enjoys paying my private school tuition (which she won't be able to do any more because now I'll be going to public school). She even knits me sweaters that have labels sewed inside saying MADE EXPRESSLY FOR YOU . . . BY GRANDMA.

And she doesn't do all that because we're poor. I know for a fact that we're not. I mean, we aren't rich but we certainly have enough. Especially since I'm an

only child. That cuts way down on food and clothes. I know this family that has seven kids and every time they go to the shoe store it costs a bundle. My mother and father didn't plan for me to be an only child, but that's the way it worked out, which is fine with me because this way I don't have anybody around to fight.

Anyhow, I figure this house-in-New-Jersey business is my parents' way of getting me away from Grandma. She doesn't have a car, she hates buses *and* she thinks all trains are dirty. So unless Grandma plans to walk, which is unlikely, I won't be seeing much of her. Now some kids might think, who cares about seeing a grandmother? But Sylvia Simon is a lot of fun, considering her age, which I happen to know is sixty. The only problem is she's always asking me if I have boyfriends and if they're Jewish. Now *that* is ridiculous because number one I don't have boyfriends. And number two what would I care if they're Jewish or not?

We hadn't been in the new house more than an hour when the doorbell rang. I answered. It was this girl in a bathing suit.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Nancy Wheeler. The real estate agent sent out a sheet on you. So I know you're Margaret and you're in sixth grade. So am I."

I wondered what else she knew.

"It's plenty hot, isn't it?" Nancy asked.

"Yes," I agreed. She was taller than me and had bouncy hair. The kind I'm hoping to grow. Her nose turned up so much I could look right into her nostrils.

Nancy leaned against the door. "Well, you want to come over and go under the sprinklers?"

"I don't know. I'll have to ask."

"Okay. I'll wait."

I found my mother with her rear end sticking out of a bottom kitchen cabinet. She was arranging her pots and pans.

"Hey Mom. There's a girl here who wants to know if I can go under her sprinklers?"

"If you want to," my mother said.

"I need my bathing suit," I said.

"Gads, Margaret! I don't know where a bathing suit is in this mess."

I walked back to the front door and told Nancy, "I can't find my bathing suit."

"You can borrow one of mine," she said.

"Wait a second," I said, running back to the kitchen. "Hey Mom. She says I can wear one of hers. Okay?"

"Okay," my mother mumbled from inside the cabinet. Then she backed out. She spit her hair out of her face. "What did you say her name was?"

"Umm . . . Wheeler. Nancy Wheeler."

"Okay. Have a good time," my mother said.

Nancy lives six houses away, also on Morningbird Lane. Her house looks like mine but the brick is painted white and the front door and shutters are red.

"Come on in," Nancy said.

I followed her into the foyer, then up the four stairs leading to the bedrooms. The first thing I noticed about Nancy's room was the dressing table with the heartshaped mirror over it. Also, everything was very neat.

When I was little I wanted a dressing table like that. The kind that's wrapped up in a fluffy organdy skirt. I never got one though, because my mother likes tailored things.

Nancy opened her bottom dresser drawer. "When's your birthday?" she asked.

"March," I told her.

"Great! We'll be in the same class. There are three sixth grades and they arrange us by age. I'm April."

"Well, I don't know what class I'm in but I know it's Room Eighteen. They sent me a lot of forms to fill out last week and that was printed on all of them."

"I told you we'd be together. I'm in Room Eighteen too." Nancy handed me a yellow bathing suit. "It's clean," she said. "My mother always washes them after a wearing."

"Thank you," I said, taking the suit. "Where should I change?"

Nancy looked around the room. "What's wrong with here?"

"Nothing," I said. "I don't mind if you don't mind."

"Why should I mind?"

"I don't know." I worked the suit on from the bottom. I knew it was going to be too big. Nancy gave me the creeps the way she sat on her bed and watched me. I left my polo on until the last possible second. I wasn't about to let her see I wasn't growing yet. That was my business.

"Oh, you're still flat." Nancy laughed.

"Not exactly," I said, pretending to be very cool. "I'm small boned, is all."

"I'm growing already," Nancy said, sticking her chest way out. "In a few years I'm going to look like one of those girls in *Playboy*."

Well, I didn't think so, but I didn't say anything. My father gets *Playboy* and I've seen those girls in the middle. Nancy looked like she had a long way to go. Almost as far as me.

"Want me to do up your straps?" she asked.

"Okay."

"I figured you'd be real grown up coming from New York. City girls are supposed to grow up a lot faster. Did you ever kiss a boy?"

"You mean really kiss? On the lips?" I asked.

"Yes," Nancy said impatiently. "Did you?"

"Not really," I admitted.

Nancy breathed a sigh of relief. "Neither did I."

I was overjoyed. Before she said that I was beginning to feel like some kind of underdeveloped little kid.

"I practice a lot though," Nancy said.

"Practice what?" I asked.

"Kissing! Isn't that what we were talking about? *Kissing!*"

"How can you practice that?" I asked.

"Watch this." Nancy grabbed her bed pillow and embraced it. She gave it a long kiss. When she was done she threw the pillow back on the bed. "It's important to experiment, so when the time comes you're all ready. I'm going to be a great kisser some day. Want to see something else?"

I just stood there with my mouth half open. Nancy

sat down at her dressing table and opened a drawer. "Look at this," she said.

I looked. There were a million little bottles, jars and tubes. There were more cosmetics in that drawer than my mother had all together. I asked, "What do you do with all that stuff?"

"It's another one of my experiments. To see how I look best. So when the time comes I'll be ready." She opened a lipstick and painted on a bright pink mouth. "Well, what do you think?"

"Umm . . . I don't know. It's kind of bright, isn't it?"

Nancy studied herself in the heartshaped mirror. She rubbed her lips together. "Well, maybe you're right." She wiped off the lipstick with a tissue. "My mother would kill me if I came out like this anyway. I can't wait till eighth grade. That's when I'll be allowed to wear lipstick every day."

Then she whipped out a hairbrush and started to brush her long, brown hair. She parted it in the middle and caught it at the back with a barrette. "Do you always wear your hair like that?" she asked me.

My hand went up to the back of my neck. I felt all the bobby pins I'd used to pin my hair up so my neck wouldn't sweat. I knew it looked terrible. "I'm letting it grow," I said. "It's at that in-between stage now. My mother thinks I should wear it over my ears though. My ears stick out a little."

"I noticed," Nancy said.

I got the feeling that Nancy noticed *everything!*

"Ready to go?" she asked.

"Sure."

She opened a linen closet in the hall and handed me a purple towel. I followed her down the stairs and into the kitchen, where she grabbed two peaches out of the refrigerator and handed one to me. "Want to meet my mom?" she asked.

"Okay," I said, taking a bite of my peach.

"She's thirty-eight, but tells us she's twenty-five. Isn't that a scream!" Nancy snorted.

Mrs. Wheeler was on the porch with her legs tucked under her and a book on her lap. I couldn't tell what book it was. She was suntanned and had the same nose as Nancy.

"Mom, this is Margaret Simon who just moved in down the street."

Mrs. Wheeler took off her glasses and smiled at me.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello, Margaret. I'm very glad to meet you. You're from New York, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

"East side or West?"

"We lived on West Sixty-seventh. Near Lincoln Center."

"How nice. Does your father still work in the city?"

"Yes."

"And what does he do?"

"He's in insurance." I sounded like a computer.

"How nice. Please tell your mother I'm looking forward to meeting her. We've got a Morningbird Lane bowling team on Mondays and a bridge game every other Thursday afternoon and a . . ."

"Oh, I don't think my mother knows how to bowl and she wouldn't be interested in bridge. She paints most of the day," I explained.

"She paints?" Mrs. Wheeler asked.

"Yes."

"How interesting. What does she paint?"

"Mostly pictures of fruits and vegetables. Sometimes flowers too."

Mrs. Wheeler laughed. "Oh, you mean *pictures!* I thought you meant walls! Tell your mother we're making our car pools early this year. We'd be happy to help her arrange hers . . . especially Sunday school. That's always the biggest problem."

"I don't go to Sunday school."

"You don't?"

"No."

"*Lucky!*" Nancy shouted.

"Nancy, *please!*" Mrs. Wheeler said.

"Hey Mom . . . Margaret came to go under the sprinkler with me, not to go through the third degree."

"All right. If you see Evan tell him I want to talk to him."

Nancy grabbed me by the hand and pulled me outside. "I'm sorry my mother's so nosy."

"I didn't mind," I said. "Who's Evan?"

"He's my brother. He's disgusting!"

"Disgusting how?" I asked.

"Because he's fourteen. All boys of fourteen are disgusting. They're only interested in two things—pictures of naked girls and dirty books!"

Nancy really seemed to know a lot. Since I didn't know any boys of fourteen I took her word for it.

Nancy turned on the outside faucet and adjusted it so that the water sprayed lightly from the sprinkler. "Follow the leader!" she called, running through the water. I guessed Nancy was the leader.

She jumped through the spray. I followed. She turned cartwheels. I tried but didn't make it. She did leaps through the air. I did too. She stood straight under the spray. I did the same. That's when the water came on full blast. We both got drenched, including our hair.

"Evan, you stinker!" Nancy shrieked. "I'm telling!" She ran off to the house and left me alone with two boys.

"Who're you?" Evan asked.

"I'm Margaret. We just moved in."

"Oh. This is Moose," he said, pointing to the other boy.

I nodded.

"Hey," Moose said. "If you just moved in, ask your father if he's interested in having me cut his lawn. Five bucks a week and I trim too. What'd you say your last name was?"

"I didn't. But it's Simon." I couldn't help thinking about what Nancy said—that all they were interested in was dirty books and naked girls. I held my towel tight around me in case they were trying to sneak a look down my bathing suit.

"*Evan! Come in here this instant!*" Mrs. Wheeler hollered from the porch.

"I'm coming . . . I'm coming," Evan muttered.

After Evan went inside Moose said, "Don't forget to tell your father. *Moose Freed*. I'm in the phone book."

"I won't forget," I promised.

Moose nibbled a piece of grass. Then the back door slammed and Nancy came out, red-eyed and sniffing.

"Hey, Nancy baby! Can't you take a joke?" Moose asked.

"Shut up, animal!" Nancy yelled. Then she turned to me. "I'm sorry they had to act like that on your first day here. Come on, I'll walk you home."

Nancy had my clothes wrapped up in a little bundle. She was still in her wet suit. She pointed out who lived in each house between mine and hers.

"We're going to the beach for Labor Day weekend," she said. "So call for me on the first day of school and we'll walk together. I'm absolutely dying to know who our teacher's going to be. Miss Phipps, who we were supposed to have, ran off with some guy to California last June. So we're getting somebody new."

When we got to my house I told Nancy if she'd wait a minute I'd give her back her bathing suit.

"I don't need it in a hurry. Tell your mother to wash it and you can give it back next week. It's an old one."

I was sorry she told me that. Even if I'd already guessed it. I mean, probably I wouldn't lend a stranger my best bathing suit either. But I wouldn't come right out and say it.

"Oh, listen, Margaret," Nancy said. "On the first day of school wear loafers, but no socks."

"How come?"

"Otherwise you'll look like a baby."

"Oh."

"Besides, I want you to join my secret club and if you're wearing socks the other kids might not want you."

"What kind of secret club?" I asked.

"I'll tell you about it when school starts."

"Okay," I said.

"And remember—no socks!"

"I'll remember."

We went to a hamburger place for supper. I told my father about Moose Freed. "Only five bucks a cutting and he trims too."

"No, thanks," my father said. "I'm looking forward to cutting it myself. That's one of the reasons we moved out here. Gardening is good for the soul." My mother beamed. They were really driving me crazy with all that good-for-the-soul business. I wondered when they became such nature lovers!

Later, when I was getting ready for bed, I walked into a closet, thinking it was the bathroom. Would I ever get used to living in this house? When I finally made it into bed and turned out the light, I saw shadows on my wall. I tried to shut my eyes and not think about them but I kept checking to see if they were still there. I couldn't fall asleep.

*Are you there God? It's me, Margaret. I'm in my new bedroom but I still have the same bed. It's so quiet here at night—nothing like the city. I see shadows on my wall and hear these funny creaking sounds. It's scary God! Even though my father says all houses make noises and the shadows are only trees. I hope he knows what he's talking about! I met a girl today. Her name's Nancy. She expected me to be very grown up. I think she was disappointed. Don't you think it's time for me to start growing God? If you could arrange it I'd be very glad. Thank you.*

My parents don't know I actually talk to God. I mean, if I told them they'd think I was some kind of religious fanatic or something. So I keep it very private. I can talk to him without moving my lips if I have to. My mother says God is a nice idea. He belongs to everybody.