Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Opening extract from

Stargirl

Written by

Jerry Spinelli

Published by

Orchard Books

All text is copyright of the author

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Many thanks to Nick Uliano, Tony Coia, and Mike Oliver
for helping me tell this story,
and to my editor, Joan Slattery

First published in 2001 by Orchard Books
This edition published in 2007

ORCHARD BOOKS
338 Euston Road, London NW1 3BH
Orchard Books Australia
Level 17/207 Kent St, Sydney, NSW 2000

Originally published in the United States in 2000
by Alfred A. Knopf, New York
Published by arrangement with Random House Children's Books, a division of
Random House, Inc. New York, New York USA. All rights reserved.
Illustration design by Isabel Warren-Lynch © Alfred A. Knopf 2000

Text © Jerry Spinelli 2000
The right of Jerry Spinelli to be identified as the author of this work
has been asserted by him in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 84616 600 6

Printed in Great Britain
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Orchard Books is a division of Hachette Children's Books
www.orchardbooks.co.uk

PORCUPINE NECKTIE

When I was little, my uncle Pete had a necktie with a porcupine painted on it. I thought that necktie was just about the neatest thing in the world. Uncle Pete would stand patiently before me while I ran my fingers over the silky surface, half expecting to be stuck by one of the quills. Once, he let me wear it. I kept looking for one of my own, but I could never find one.

I was twelve when we moved from Pennsylvania to Arizona. When Uncle Pete came to say good-bye, he was wearing the tie. I thought he did so to give me one last look at it, and I was grateful. But then, with a dramatic flourish, he whipped off the tie and draped it around my neck. "It's yours," he said. "Going-away present."

I loved that porcupine tie so much that I decided to start a collection. Two years after we settled in Arizona, the number of ties in my collection was still one. Where do you

find a porcupine necktie in Mica, Arizona—or anywhere else, for that matter?

On my fourteenth birthday, I read about myself in the local newspaper. The family section ran a regular feature about kids on their birthdays, and my mother had called in some info. The last sentence read: "As a hobby, Leo Borlock collects porcupine neckties."

Several days later, coming home from school, I found a plastic bag on our front step. Inside was a gift-wrapped package tied with yellow ribbon. The tag said "Happy Birthday!" I opened the package. It was a porcupine necktie. Two porcupines were tossing darts with their quills, while a third was picking its teeth.

I inspected the box, the tag, the paper. Nowhere could I find the giver's name. I asked my parents. I asked my friends. I called my uncle Pete. Everyone denied knowing anything about it.

At the time I simply considered the episode a mystery. It did not occur to me that I was being watched. We were all being watched.

1

"Did you see her?"

That was the first thing Kevin said to me on the first day of school, eleventh grade. We were waiting for the bell to ring.

"See who?" I said.

"Hah!" He craned his neck, scanning the mob. He had witnessed something remarkable; it showed on his face. He grinned, still scanning. "You'll know."

There were hundreds of us, milling about, calling names, pointing to summer-tanned faces we hadn't seen since June. Our interest in each other was never keener than during the fifteen minutes before the first bell of the first day.

I punched his arm. "Who?"

The bell rang. We poured inside.

I heard it again in homeroom, a whispered voice behind me as we said the Pledge of Allegiance:

"You see her?"

I heard it in the hallways. I heard it in English and Geometry:

"Did you see her?"

Who could it be? A new student? A spectacular blonde from California? Or from back East, where many of us came from? Or one of those summer makeovers, someone who leaves in June looking like a little girl and returns in September as a full-bodied woman, a ten-week miracle?

And then in Earth Sciences I heard a name: "Stargirl."

I turned to the senior slouching behind me. "Stargirl?" I said. "What kind of name is that?"

"That's it. Stargirl Caraway. She said it in homeroom."

"Stargirl?"

"Yeah."

And then I saw her. At lunch. She wore an off-white dress so long it covered her shoes. It had ruffles around the neck and cuffs and looked like it could have been her great-grandmother's wedding gown. Her hair was the color of sand. It fell to her shoulders. Something was strapped across her back, but it wasn't a book bag. At first I thought it was a miniature guitar. I found out later it was a ukulele.

She did not carry a lunch tray. She did carry a large canvas bag with a life-size sunflower painted on it. The lunchroom was dead silent as she walked by. She stopped at an empty table, laid down her bag, slung the instrument strap over her chair, and sat down. She pulled a sandwich from the bag and started to eat.

Half the lunchroom kept staring, half started buzzing.

Kevin was grinning. "Wha'd I tell you?"

I nodded.

"She's in tenth grade," he said. "I hear she's been home-schooled till now."

"Maybe that explains it," I said.

Her back was to us, so I couldn't see her face. No one sat with her, but at the tables next to hers kids were cramming two to a seat. She didn't seem to notice. She seemed marooned in a sea of staring, buzzing faces.

Kevin was grinning again. "You thinking what I'm thinking?" he said.

I grinned back. I nodded. "*Hot Seat.*"

Hot Seat was our in-school TV show. We had started it the year before. I was producer/director, Kevin was on-camera host. Each month he interviewed a student. So far, most of them had been honor student types, athletes, model citizens. Noteworthy in the usual ways, but not especially interesting.

Suddenly Kevin's eyes boggled. The girl was picking up her ukulele. And now she was strumming it. And now she was singing! Strumming away, bobbing her head and shoulders, singing, "I'm looking over a four-leaf clover that I overlooked before." Stone silence all around. Then came the sound of a single person clapping. I looked. It was the lunch-line cashier.

And now the girl was standing, slinging her bag over one shoulder and marching among the tables, strumming and singing and strutting and twirling. Heads swung, eyes followed her, mouths hung open. Disbelief. When she came by our table, I got my first good look at her face. She wasn't gorgeous, wasn't ugly. A sprinkle of freckles crossed the bridge of her nose. Mostly, she looked like a hundred other girls in school, except for two things. She wore no makeup, and her eyes were the biggest I had ever seen, like deer's eyes caught in headlights. She twirled as she went past, her flaring skirt brushing my pant leg, and then she marched out of the lunchroom.

From among the tables came three slow claps. Someone

whistled. Someone yelped.

Kevin and I gawked at each other.

Kevin held up his hands and framed a marquee in the air. "*Hot Seat!* Coming Attraction—Stargirl!"

I slapped the table. "Yes!"

We slammed hands.

2

When we got to school the next day, Hillari Kimble was holding court at the door.

"She's not real," Hillari said. She was sneering. "She's an actress. It's a scam."

Someone called out, "Who's scamming us?"

"The administration. The principal. Who else? Who cares?" Hillari wagged her head at the absurdity of the question.

A hand flashed in the air: "Why?"

"School spirit," she spat back. "They think this place was too dead last year. They think if they plant some nutcase in with the students—"

"Like they plant narcs in schools!" someone else shouted.

Hillari glared at the speaker, then continued,

"—some nutcase who stirs things up, then maybe all the little students will go to a game once in a while or join a club."

"Instead of making out in the library!" chimed another voice. And everybody laughed and the bell rang and we went in.

Hillari Kimble's theory spread throughout the school and was widely accepted.

"You think Hillari's right?" Kevin asked me. "Stargirl's a plant?"

I snickered. "Listen to yourself."

He spread his arms. "What?"

"This is Mica Area High School," I reminded him. "It's not a CIA operation."

"Maybe not," he said, "but I hope Hillari's right."

"Why would you hope that? If she's not a real student, we can't have her on *Hot Seat*."

Kevin wagged his head and grinned. "As usual, Mr. Director, you fail to see the whole picture. We could use the show to expose her. Can't you see it?" He did the marquee thing with his hands: "*Hot Seat* Uncovers Faculty Hoax!"

I stared at him. "You *want* her to be a fake, don't you?"

He grinned ear to ear. "Absolutely. Our ratings will go sky-high!"

I had to admit, the more I saw of her, the easier it was to believe she was a plant, a joke, anything but real. On that second day she wore bright-red baggy shorts with a bib and shoulder straps—overall shorts. Her sandy hair was pulled back into twin plaited pigtails, each tied with a bright-red ribbon. A rouge smudge appled each cheek, and she had even dabbed some oversized freckles on her face. She looked like Heidi. Or Bo Peep.

At lunch she was alone again at her table. As before, when she finished eating, she took up her ukulele. But this time she didn't play. She got up and started walking among the tables. She stared at us. She stared at one face, then another and another. The kind of bold, I'm-looking-at-you stare you almost never get from people, especially strangers. She appeared to be looking for someone, and the whole

lunchroom had become very uncomfortable.

As she approached our table, I thought: *What if she's looking for me?* The thought terrified me. So I turned from her. I looked at Kevin. I watched him grin goofily up at her. He wiggled his fingers at her and whispered, "Hi, Stargirl." I didn't hear an answer. I was intensely aware of her passing behind my chair.

She stopped two tables away. She was smiling at a pudding-bodied senior named Alan Ferko. The lunchroom was dead silent. She started strumming the uke. And singing. It was "Happy Birthday." When she came to his name she didn't sing just his first name, but his full name:

"Happy Birthday, dear Alan Fer-kooooh"

Alan Ferko's face turned red as Bo Peep's pigtail ribbons. There was a flurry of whistles and hoots, more for Alan Ferko's sake, I think, than hers. As Stargirl marched out, I could see Hillari Kimble across the lunchroom rising from her seat, pointing, saying something I could not hear.

"I'll tell you one thing," Kevin said as we joined the mob in the hallways, "she better be fake."

I asked him what he meant.

"I mean if she's real, she's in big trouble. How long do you think somebody who's *really* like that is going to last around here?"

Good question.

Mica Area High School—MAHS—was not exactly a

hotbed of nonconformity. There were individual variants here and there, of course, but within pretty narrow limits we all wore the same clothes, talked the same way, ate the same food, listened to the same music. Even our dorks and nerds had a MAHS stamp on them. If we happened to somehow distinguish ourselves, we quickly snapped back into place, like rubber bands.

Kevin was right. It was unthinkable that Stargirl could survive—or at least survive unchanged—among us. But it was also clear that Hillari Kimble was at least half right: this person calling herself Stargirl may or may not have been a faculty plant for school spirit, but whatever she was, she was not real.

She couldn't be.

Several times in those early weeks of September, she showed up in something outrageous. A 1920s flapper dress. An Indian buckskin. A kimono. One day she wore a denim miniskirt with green stockings, and crawling up one leg was a parade of enamel ladybug and butterfly pins. "Normal" for her were long, floor-brushing pioneer dresses and skirts.

Every few days in the lunchroom she serenaded someone new with "Happy Birthday." I was glad my birthday was in the summer.

In the hallways, she said hello to perfect strangers. The seniors couldn't believe it. They had never seen a tenth-grader so bold.

In class she was always flapping her hand in the air, asking questions, though the question often had nothing to do with

the subject. One day she asked a question about trolls—in U.S. History class.

She made up a song about isosceles triangles. She sang it to her Plane Geometry class. It was called "Three Sides Have I, But Only Two Are Equal."

She joined the cross-country team. Our home meets were held on the Mica Country Club golf course. Red flags showed the runners the way to go. In her first meet, out in the middle of the course, she turned left when everyone else turned right. They waited for her at the finish line. She never showed up. She was dismissed from the team.

One day a girl screamed in the hallway. She had seen a tiny brown face pop up from Stargirl's sunflower canvas bag. It was her pet rat. It rode to school in the bag every day.

One morning we had a rare rainfall. It came during her gym class. The teacher told everyone to come in. On the way to the next class they looked out the windows. Stargirl was still outside. In the rain. Dancing.

We wanted to define her, to wrap her up as we did each other, but we could not seem to get past "weird" and "strange" and "goofy." Her ways knocked us off balance. A single word seemed to hover in the cloudless sky over the school:

HUH?

Everything she did seemed to echo Hillari Kimble: She's not real... She's not real...

And each night in bed I thought of her as the moon came

through my window. I could have lowered my shade to make it darker and easier to sleep, but I never did. In that moonlit hour, I acquired a sense of the otherness of things. I liked the feeling the moonlight gave me, as if it wasn't the opposite of day, but its underside, its private side, when the fabulous purred on my snow-white sheet like some dark cat come in from the desert.

It was during one of these nightmoon times that it came to me that Hillari Kimble was wrong. Stargirl *was* real.