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Opening extract from

The Pickle King

Written by

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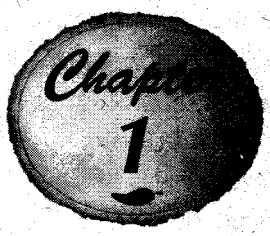
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In Elbow, the town where I live, it rains all summer. Not the kind of rain that is fun to run through, stomping your feet. Not the kind of rain that is fine and warm and accompanied by a rainbow. No, in Elbow it rains heavy, dark rain. Rain that makes a noisy clashing sound like hundreds of angry fingers. The angry fingers beat down hour after hour onto the sidewalk, cars and people's umbrellas, and people turn pale because there's no daylight for their damp faces, only darkness and wet. Some people go mad because of it and run into the streets in their PJs screaming, 'Stop it! Stop it! I can't take it any more!'

Every single summer is the same in Elbow – from May through September there's nothing but rain. It's been like this as far back as I can remember. Normal people leave town before the rain begins, and fly to sunny places like Florida or Fiji or to favorite European destinations like Tuscany or St Tropez. Was I one of the lucky ones? Do I *ever* get to spend the summer on a beach or in the countryside with my parents? Nope. Not one bit of it. I get to stay in Elbow, in the rain.

We don't have much money. Dad died when I was nine and Mom is in a place called St Agnes', where they take care of people who don't know what's real and what's in their heads. Maybe in Mom's head it's warm and sunny – but I doubt it. I think the rain got in and now it won't leave.

I live with Bertha, my mom's best friend. She came to live in our house after Mom went to St Agnes'. Everyone who knows her calls her Big Bertha – but that's an understatement. She's as big as a house and she's warm and soft like freshly baked bread. She's not home too much because she's a nurse at the hospital and works shifts. She can be pretty tough on me sometimes, but I think she must kind of love me because she makes me pancakes in the mornings and leaves me these little notes saying things like, *Please buy milk and eggs today XXX.*

Anyway, it was summer vacation in Elbow and, of course, it was pouring with rain.

I don't know if you've been anywhere where it rained for a few days without a break, not even a little one. If you have, you'll know that it makes you feel edgy, kind of jumpy inside. There are shadows, an unnatural kind of light, strange rainy noises, and you start to feel like you can't trust the regular things around you, the things you take for granted. Sometimes it seems like the things you've seen in scary movies or your own nightmares have come alive and are real – and have moved in for good. Other times it's as though you're living under water and

there's no air, and you really start to believe the sun will never *ever* shine again. It's no good for anybody to spend the summer in Elbow, but it's the kids like me who have to hang around; kids with no money or no parents or a bit of both. Some of us have got green bits between our toes from all the rain. It's a kind of mold. Bertha says it's the start of webbed feet.

Every year the school secretary sends a list to all the kids who are stranded here over the summer. It's called the Summer Club List. But it's not a club and in Elbow there's no summer, so it's just a list. Anyway, the school expects us to get together, even if we're not friends (which we never are) and spend the holidays together. It's like detention except it goes on for weeks. We're supposed to report back on what we did together and how much fun we had, even if we were so bored we wanted to kill each other.

By the way, my name's Bea. It's short for Beatrice but nobody's ever called me that. I'm going to be twelve in November.

That first day of the vacation, I came downstairs for breakfast and, like always, wrapped myself in a blanket on the couch with a plate of pancakes balanced across my knees. I sprinkled some extra Swiss cheese on top and was about to start eating when I realized I was missing the most important ingredient of all, so I headed back to the refrigerator to get my jar of Herman's Devil Tongue Chili. The best thing to eat in the whole wide world is Swiss cheese pancakes with

Devil Tongue Chili.

The town of Elbow is famous for just two things. The summer weather and Herman's Devil Tongue Chili. They make other stuff here too, like Lola's Cola, Bert's Big Cheesies, and Pinehillss Honey, but not everybody's heard of them, whereas *everyone* knows about Devil Tongue Chili. There's a giant pickle and relish factory just outside Elbow where the Chili is made, and a lot of people who live in Elbow work there. The factory makes Herman's Jamberry Pickalilly which is a sweet kind of salsa (some people like to eat it on their hamburgers), Herman's Treacle-Chunk Relish which is dark brown with little cubes of vegetables in it, Herman's Original Horseradish Mustard; and my favorite, Herman's Devil Tongue Chili (which comes in three strengths: Easy Does it, Turning Up the Heat and Burning Down the House). On the side of each jar of Herman's pickles and relishes there's a picture of Herman himself, the man who makes them, smiling a big cheerful smile that makes you happy just looking at him. He's got dark sparkly eyes and a big beard like a pirate's.

Most of the year you can smell the smells from Herman's factory – funny kinds of smells like sugar beet, boiling vegetables, and liquorice. But in the summer you can't really make out that many odors because the rain suffocates them, kind of like putting a big wet hand over the mouth of everything and holding it there. In the summer the smells of the rain take over, wet smells like mud-water, damp and the

liquid of rotting things.

My dad introduced me to Herman's Devil Tongue Chili when I was about five years old and I've been eating it ever since. Even when everybody was saying Herman's Pickles tasted bad, about three years ago, I still ate them. But that was around the time my dad died and I'd kind of stopped paying attention to a lot of stuff. I have Devil Tongue Chili with everything now: in sandwiches, with scrambled eggs, sometimes even with ice cream. Things just don't taste as good without it.

That morning, the long green angry fingers of the rain were tapping down on the roof and the garbage cans outside. It was so dark, it was like the darkest green of the deepest, blackest lake. Bertha had already set off for work, probably wearing her yellow waterproofs, yellow hat, and green galoshes. I was in my PJs, watching cartoons. Maybe it's the bright colors, the funny sounds or the happy faces, or all those things put together, but they help me block out the weather. They put me in a rainbow-colored daze that's safe to escape to. If you don't find a way to distract yourself, the rain will start to make you drowsy. That's what happened to Mom.

I'm not supposed to, but when Bertha's out, I turn on all the lights in all the rooms – and that helps too.

Sometimes when the black rainy sky pushes against the windows like it wants to swallow me up, the cartoons and the house lights just don't work. When

that happens, I close my eyes tight and try desperately to imagine sunshine: golden sunshine. Soft, warm, yellow light shining through palm trees.

We drove through Florida once, Mom, Dad and me, in our bug-shaped car, the warm air blowing my hair about. Looking up at the blue sky, the light sparkled so, so brightly through the trees. I had to keep my eyes tightly shut and let the light in a little at a time until big circles of sunshine, like fat jewels, danced on my eyelashes. I like to remember my parents in the sunshine, all smiling and golden. We were a proper family once. I think we were happy then.

If only I could get out of here. Get out of Elbow, out of the rain and the darkness. If only for a day.

All I could think about all day was what I could sell to get the money for a ticket out of here. I only had two things that were worth any money – to collectors, anyway. My camera and my record player. And there was no way in the whole world I would ever sell my camera.

When Dad died, an old man in a brown room read out his will. He said, 'Your father would like you to have his camera.' My dad was a photographer and a journalist. A photojournalist. He would take pictures and then write the story that went with them. It's an old camera and it's quite heavy and you have to attach a big square flash if it's dark, but it's a really good one and it takes great shots.

And I love my record player. It's big and old like my

camera and it used to belong to my mom. In the evenings my parents would play each other songs they liked, and I would listen and sometimes dance. I couldn't sell that, either.

What I really needed was a job. Trouble is nobody gets their newspapers delivered in the summer because they get wet, there's no gardening because . . . you guessed it, there are no gardens (although Mrs Greenblatt did once ask me to stir the mud in her back yard); Sam already had the job at the arcade and you have to be fifteen to work in one of the stores. There just aren't many jobs for (almost) twelve-year-olds.

I promised myself that next year, as soon as school started, I would do lots of jobs for people. I'd mow their lawns and wash their cars. I'd work really hard while the weather was good, save up and get out of Elbow. Somewhere sunny, somewhere like Florida.

My eyes were still staring at the vivid characters dancing and jumping in front of me on TV, but my brain had stopped taking them in hours ago. When Bertha arrived back from work I was in a kind of happy trance, half asleep and half awake.

'You look like one of those zombie creatures!' she said as she pushed her big dripping body through the front door. It was about ten thirty and she was home from her shift at the hospital. (Bertha is a nurse and her specialty is very old people. 'Geriatrics' is what they're called. Bertha says that when people get old they become like children again. They need help eating, walking, getting up, sitting down, and even

going to the bathroom.)

Bertha took off her waterproofs, wrapped her big arms around a stack of brochures and carried them into the lounge. They made a loud thud as they hit the floor next to me, and my heart suddenly leaped with happiness. They were holiday brochures. I reached over and lifted one from the top of the pile. The picture on the front had so much sea on it the whole page was blue. It was so blue I felt like I was already swimming in that warm, transparent blue ocean with the sun on my face.

'Now don't go getting all excited,' Bertha called from the kitchen. Sometimes Bertha seemed to leave her eyes in the room with me. 'They're not for us. They're for the patients to cut up and make pictures with. It's supposed to make them feel better.'

'Can I keep one? Just to look at?' I said, feeling my warm fingertips stick to the glossy cover.

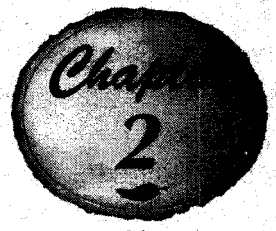
'Now don't you go making me feel bad – you know we can't afford to go no place sunny. I already promised you, if you're good, I'll take a few days off and we'll take the bus out to my dad's place for Thanksgiving.'

Bertha stood there for a moment, waiting for me to say 'Great' or 'I'd like that a lot'. And I tried to smile but it didn't come out right. I needed to get away now! But Bertha didn't notice; she'd landed on the sofa and become part of it.

Bertha's feet were up, her TV dinner was on her chest and she'd switched the channel to her favorite

game show, where people win houses and cars and kitchens and holidays to sunny places. I didn't like that show, with the lady with teeth that were too white and the contestants who got sweatier the closer they got to winning, but I liked cuddling up to Bertha who was big and warm and soft. Sometimes she would put her arm around me during the commercial breaks and give me a kind of quick squeeze.

I lay curled up next to Bertha, looking at my brochure of different oceans and beaches, letting the buzzing and cheering of the game show wash over me. As I drifted in and out of sleep, dreaming of sunshine and seas of a hundred different blues, for the first time in a month I barely even noticed the sound of the rain.



I took the brochures to bed with me that night and woke up with my face stuck to one of the shiny pages. When I opened my eyes there was a giant shiny palm tree folded over my forehead and the deep blue waves of the ocean were lapping my chin.

I peeled the tropical scene off my face and went downstairs for breakfast, taking my brochure with me.

I sprinkled Swiss cheese on my pancakes and added an extra big spoonful of Herman's Devil Tongue Chili. By the time I'd eaten that first pancake, I'd made my way through Europe, Asia, and South America for the second time. I wasn't really interested in the places, I just wanted to look at beaches. I compared different oceans, to find the most sparkling turquoise sea that I could. I imagined my bare, sun-tanned feet sinking into different types of sand, feeling its dry warmth between my toes. I liked the look of the really, really white sand. Starting my second pancake, I had to open a new jar of Devil Tongue Chili, and that's when I saw the ad. There was Herman's picture as usual and his promise that his

Chili was home-made using his grandma's recipe, but on this jar, the other half of the label had a picture of an orange sun setting over palm trees and a beach. It said *Win a trip to Florida in our Photography Competition.*

My stomach suddenly went fizzy inside – and it wasn't the Chili. My whole body came alive, as though it was suddenly plugged into an electrical circuit, and my heart started beating fast in my chest like someone was inside trying to get out. *This is meant for me!* I thought. It seemed so perfect I even looked around the kitchen to see if somebody was playing a trick on me. I ran my finger over the label and then held it under the light bulb. It was real all right. It said they wanted *an original picture on the theme of Family* because *Herman's relishes are based on traditional family recipes.* It said they wanted pictures of *the people of Elbow.*

I had a camera and I was pretty good at taking pictures. The more I thought about it the more excited I got. It felt like I had firecrackers going off in my belly.

When I hold my camera, which is pretty heavy, I imagine my dad holding it in his much bigger hands, and I feel like he's still alive. And when I look through the lens it's like he's looking through it with me. Things look different through the lens of a camera, like they belong to a different world. I used to look through it, then look at the real object, and then look back through the camera to try to figure out what was going on, what it was all about. 'The camera transforms

things,' Dad used to say, 'it's like magic.' And he was right.

I didn't want to waste any time. I needed to get a good photograph. One good enough to win the competition. It was so dark and so wet outside there was no chance of just snapping people passing by on the sidewalk, I was going to have to ask some people if I could photograph them.

I was certain I was going to win that competition. I was going to win that competition and get out of Elbow. This summer I was really going to do it. And I was going to Florida – the Sunshine State – the exact place I'd dreamed about going. The place I'd gone to as a little kid with my parents. The warmest, sunniest, dreamiest place in the world. I didn't care about those exotic white beaches and tropical turquoise oceans in the brochure, they weren't real anyway. I was going to Florida. Flo-ri-da. FLORIDA!