



# QUOTH THE MAVEN

BY BEVERLY KING POLLOCK

## The Thief

I was cleaning out the hall closet when the doorbell rang. It was my neighbor down the street with her first grade son. "Okay, Jimmy," she said. "Now you apologize."

He mumbled, "I'm sorry." And he looked at the floor and shuffled his feet. "I didn't mean to take 'em." He handed me two small seashells which must have disappeared from our gameroom table.

My neighbor continued. "Apparently he came in your house with some of the older boys and saw the shells and...."

I told her not to worry and that I'd love to chat but nobody was home but me and the closet and she understood and left.

"He'll probably turn out to be a criminal," I thought. Imagine coming to somebody's house and deliberately stealing. I went back to the closet.

And I probably would have finished cleaning it if I hadn't come upon the old photo album, the one with all my baby pictures.

I found myself wandering in and out of the past when I spied Nancy Lee and me, barefoot near the sandbox on the hill in front of her house.

Funny the sandbox wasn't as big as I remembered. It was just a hole in her yard filled with sand left over from one of her father's cement-laying jobs.

Now how could I remember that? I turned the picture over to see the date. Could I have been only six years old?

Wonder what happened to Nancy Lee? She was a year younger but we used to make great castles in the sand. There was a special trick to get just the right amount of water. And you had to wiggle your toes out real easy so you wouldn't break the tunnels.

I was an only child at the time and Nancy Lee and I were inseparable. Except for that day Nancy Lee went to visit her grandmother. I remember how lonely I was.

Nancy Lee's sandbox across the street looked so inviting. I bet myself I could walk up her hill blindfolded. And I did. I had to open my eyes only four or five times.

But the sand was no fun by myself. Maybe it was 'cause I didn't have any water. And it was too much trouble to go home and get some. And anyway I knew I'd spill it before I got up the hill.

As I clambered out of the sandbox to leave, my toe hit something in the sand. In the whole world I had never seen anything so beautiful. It was a tiny toy toilet.

It didn't hold much sand and it was dirty and I took it home to clean it. I dried it on my slip and shined it on the hem of my dress. I thought, "Nancy Lee should be ashamed of herself for not taking care of a toy like that."

It would serve her right if somebody stole -- if somebody took it from her.

I found the perfect hiding place. The hollow post on my brass bed.

I should have felt good, but there was this funny ache that went from my stomach all the way up my throat.

And suddenly I knew. If I kept the toilet, I would be a thief forever and ever.

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I raced up the hill to Nancy Lee's house, dropped the toy toilet in the sand and dashed home without looking back.

I closed the album just as the doorbell rang. It was little Jimmy of the seashells with a sad look on his face and a home-made flower in his hand. I patted his head and phoned his mother.

"Y'know," I said, "I was just cleaning out my closet and came across some notes I once took in a child psychology course. And guess what I found?"

My neighbor asked what. "All six year olds steal at one time or other," I said. "But they get over it."

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