

BY BRUCE COVILLE



The Secret of Life, According to Aunt Gladys

"Your brother called this afternoon."

This seems like a fairly simple sentence. Yet when Dad uttered it at the dinner table last April, it caused my mother to turn pale and freeze, holding her broccoli-laden fork halfway to her mouth.

I felt as surprised as she looked. "I didn't know you had a brother," I said, watching her fork to see if the broccoli would fall off. "What's his name?"

"George," said Mom. She sounded as if she was having a hard time getting the word past her throat, and I don't think she was really answering my question. "George called?"

Dad nodded.

"What did he want?"

"He said he's coming for a visit."

The fork, broccoli still attached, hit the plate. "What?"

"He said he's coming for a visit."

"Who's George?" I asked.

"Your mother's brother," said my father.

"I know that," I replied. "At least, I know it now. How come I didn't know before?"

"We don't talk about George," said Dad. From the look in his eye, I got the feeling he was enjoying this.

"Why not?"

"Randy, if I wanted to tell you that, we would have talked about him before," said Mom sharply. Turning to my father she said, "Did you tell him not to come?"

"He's your brother," said Dad, which wasn't quite an answer but seemed to provide the necessary information, at least if the tightening in Mom's jaw was any indication.

"Did he leave a number?" she asked.

"Nope."

She narrowed her eyes. "Did you even ask?"

"Actually, I did," said Dad, obviously pleased that he was off the hook on this one. "But he said he was traveling and didn't have a number where he could be reached."

My mother picked up her plate and left the table.

"What's the matter with her?" I asked, once she was gone.

"She doesn't like George."

"Thanks for the news flash, oh fatherly fountain of wisdom. Care to tell me why she doesn't like George?"

"Actually, I don't have the slightest idea. All I know is that George has been the Great Unmentionable ever since I met your mother. I only found out about him myself because I saw a picture of him in an album at your grandmother's house."

Mom's mother, Grandma Verbeck, lives about three thousand miles from us, in a little town in Maine. I've only been to her place twice, so it was no surprise that I hadn't found out about George through her.

Then I realized this guy wasn't just George to me. From my point of view he was *Uncle George*. This was a very interesting thought. I have three aunts—one on Mom's side, and two on Dad's—but I never had an uncle before, at least not one that I knew about. I had always kind of wanted one, though. From what I had seen, they were pretty good things to have. For example, Spud Martin gets to live at his uncle's camp in the mountains every summer. Well, Spud's uncle is rich, so maybe that doesn't count. But Peter MacKenzie's uncle is always taking him to ball games, and Herb Lassiter's uncle hangs out and plays two-point in the driveway with us sometimes. So all in all, uncles seemed like a good idea.

Except, from the way my mother was acting about Uncle George, you'd think the guy was a baby-eater or something.

I was getting ready to ask Dad some more questions when the doorbell rang.

"See who that is, find out what they're selling, and then tell them we don't want any," said Dad. "I have to go talk to your mother."

I crammed another bite of casserole in my mouth and went to the front door. It was open, because it was a nice night and we had wanted to let the breeze in, so there was only a screen door between me and the tall, elegant-looking woman standing on the porch. A big sample case sat next to her.

"What are you selling?" I asked, eyeing the case and not even making a move to open the door.

"Etiquette lessons would seem appropriate," she replied in a husky voice. "You must be Randy."

"I narrowed my eyes. "How do you know that?"

Before she could answer, my mother shrieked, "George! Get off that porch before the neighbors see you!"

And that was how I met my uncle George.

The idea that this was my long-lost, or at least long-misplaced, uncle was a bigger lump than Mom's broccoli casserole. I was still trying to digest it—the idea, not the casserole—when George said, "I can't get off the porch until someone opens the door."

"Yes you can," said Mom. "Just turn around and walk away."

"Are you serious?" asked George. His lower lip trembled, and I thought for a minute he was going to cry. I backed away from the door, not particularly wanting to watch his mascara run.

"Of course I'm serious!" sputtered Mom. "If you think—"

She stopped as Dad put his hand on her elbow and began to whisper in her ear.

She closed her eyes and sighed; her spine, which had been as rigid as a telephone pole, seemed to collapse. "All right, George," she said softly. "You can come in."

"Randy," said Dad, "go unlock the door for your uncle."

I did, then stepped back, not wanting George to touch me. I felt like I did back in third grade, when I still thought cooties were real. At the same time, I was wondering if maybe this would be enough to get me on one of those daytime talk shows.

When George came through the door, I realized that what I had thought was a salesperson's sample case was actually his suitcase.

The realization hit Mom at the same time. "Now look," she said, "if you think for one minute—"

Before she could finish, George drew himself up to his full height, which was considerable. Looking her right in the eye, he said in a low voice, "When I was naked you clothed me, when I was hungry you fed me."

I recognized the words. They're from a speech Jesus makes somewhere in the New Testament. George was either very smart, or very devious—or very religious, which didn't seem likely under the circumstances. (Actually, it turned out that he is religious, which still

sort of surprises me.) Anyway, he sure knew the way to get to Mom. She is a Very Serious Church Person, serious enough not to be a hypocrite, once she thinks about things. For the second time in as many minutes I could see the wind go out of her sails.

She closed her eyes, then said softly, "What do you need, George?"

"Gladys," said George.

"You need Gladys?" I asked, surprised at the thought.

"Gladys is my new name," replied George, with a surprising amount of dignity. "And what I need is a place to stay while I finish having my surgery."

Without intending to, I crossed my legs.

Mom staggered a little, and Dad helped her to the couch.

"We're going to be sisters!" said George, and though his voice was cheerful, I caught a kind of desperate eagerness in his eyes.

I was starting to get desperate, too. Though I had been amused at my mother's reaction, I was beginning to wonder what the guys were going to say about this. I was also wondering how much Spud Martin would charge to swap uncles.

"Well, isn't anyone going to ask me to sit down?" asked my would-be aunt.

"Sit down . . . Gladys," said my father.

"Why thank you," said George/Gladys. Settling to the couch, s/he crossed his/her clean-shaven legs at the knees. S/he carefully straightened a panty-hose wrinkle, then looked around and said, "Well, isn't this nice? A genuine family gathering!"

My mother made a small, strangled sound. George/Gladys was definitely not her idea of family. Actually, Mom's idea of a family is very simple: one man and one woman get married, and they have kids. That's it. End of choices. In the world according to Mom, no one gets divorced, no one has affairs, and for God's sake no one even imagines being any sex other than the one they started out as!

Mom brought up that exact point a little later in the conversation. "Listen, George," she said severely, "God made you the way you are for a reason."

"If She made me this way for a reason, perhaps the reason was to test your love and tolerance," replied George/Gladys primly.

"Don't be ridiculous! I mean God made you a man for a reason.

And don't call God a her!"

"Do you really believe God purposely put me into a body where He knew I would be permanently miserable just to test me? Is that any more ridiculous than thinking the test was to see if I would have the courage to do something about it? You don't know God's will, Ginny. None of us do. So you might as well stop fussing about trying to tell me what it is, and just decide if you're going to keep on being my sister or not. After all, that was God's will, too."

Mom stood up. "You can stay here until this is over, George, if you absolutely have to. But we are not going to talk about it, not now, not ever. And no one else is going to know about it! I don't want the neighbors gossiping about this. It's a secret." Turning to me, she added, "Is that clear, Randy?"

"Hey, you think I want this to get around?" I asked, putting my hands up. "My life in school is hard enough as it is. No offense, George. Er, Gladys."

"It's George," said my mother sharply, "And will be as long as he's in the house. Is that clear, George?"

"Clear, but highly offensive," replied George softly.

"Those are the terms."

He bent his head. "Terms accepted, Sis. May I be excused? From the room, I mean."

They put him in the spare bedroom at the end of the hall. "Now you stay away from him, Randy," said Mom in a fierce whis-

per, once George's door was safely closed. "And for heaven's sake, don't let him try anything with you."

"Mom!" I said, totally disgusted.

"Well, you can't be too careful."

I suspect that's not actually true. I think you can be way too careful. You can be so careful that you go your whole life without ever seeing a rainbow because you're so busy trying not to step in any puddles.

The next couple of days were not easy. To begin with, the emotional temperature in our house dropped by about fifty degrees. And I was a nervous wreck at school, torn between a desperate need to talk to someone, *anyone*, about what was going on in my house, and a desperate fear that someone would actually find out. I could think of several guys, including Spud Martin, who would cheerfully use that information to make my life a living hell.

I almost told Moonglow, who is sort of my girlfriend, one afternoon when we were walking home after school. (Moonglow's real name is Heather, but she changed it because she said it wasn't really her. So I thought maybe she would understand.)

We were walking along, holding hands, and I said, "Was it hard when you decided to change your name?"

I thought this might give me a good opening. But after she thought about it for a minute, she said, "Nah. It's not like I was changing my sex, or something."

Which pretty much made me decide this wasn't the time to talk about Uncle George. What if she thought it was something that runs in the family?

Besides, comparing what George was doing to changing your name was like comparing an alligator to a salamander.

The only thing that improved around the house after that first night was our meals. This was because Uncle George started doing the cooking, and he was a lot better at it than Mom. But even that had its downside, since I don't think it did anything to make her any happier about the situation.

The third night after George's arrival I was sitting at the dining room table doing my homework when he came in, sat down opposite me, and started to file his nails. He was wearing a dark-blue blouse, jeans, and full makeup. Actually, I never saw him without his makeup.

Neither one of us said anything for a while. Finally he brushed back his hair—revealing a dangling earring—and asked, "What are you working on, Randy?"

"Biology," I replied. Immediately I wished that it had been any other subject.

George smiled. "Me, too."

My discomfort must have shown on my face, because George laughed—such an easy, open laugh that I couldn't help but smile myself. I closed the book and looked at him. "I can't believe I had an uncle all this time and never knew it."

"I suppose I would come as sort of a shock," said George, shrugging his shoulders, which were a little too wide for his blouse. "Especially now."

"You're not kidding. Just finding out you existed would have been surprise enough for one week. Much less all the—all the rest of it."

George made a face. "I don't make things easy, do I?"

"So, how long have you . . . ?" I trailed off, uncomfortable with the question.

"How long have I been a family secret?" filled in George.

Actually, I had been going to ask how long he had been working on

turning into a woman, but this question was almost as interesting. So I nodded. "Yeah, how long?"

He pursed his lips. "Hard to say. I can't remember a time when the rest of the family didn't disapprove of me. Oh, I guess they loved me when I was a babe in arms. But from the time I was old enough to start being interested in things, and it turned out that all the things I was interested in were for girls, not boys, they tried to keep a lid on me. Not that it worked that well. I mean, you are what you are, you know? But I got pretty well smacked around for it. Not by Dad," he added quickly. "By my fellow classmates. A charming bunch of thugs, much approved of by most of the town."

His voice was very calm, but I noticed that his hand was trembling. "It would have been one thing if Dad helped me out with the beatings—given me sympathy or advice, or talked to the parents of the kids who were doing it. But he never did. I think he figured if I got beat up enough I would straighten out." He spread his hands in helplessness disbelief. "Good grief, if it was that easy I would have turned butch the first time I got the crap kicked out of me for being a 'sissy.' How Dad could think I would insist on acting in a way that made my life so difficult if I had a choice . . ."

Suddenly he turned away. When he turned back I could see tears trembling in the corners of his eyes.

"Sorry, Randy. I get a little emotional sometimes." He chuckled. "I'd claim it's because the doctors are having trouble balancing my hormones, but the truth is I've always been like this." He took a deep breath. "Anyway, as I got older the teasing and whispering and jokes and fights just kept getting worse. When it all got to be too much, I ran away from home."

"How long did you stay gone?" I asked, remembering the times I had run away myself. I think four hours was my personal best.

"I never went back."

"Never?"

He shook his head firmly.

"How old were you?"

"Fourteen."

"How did you live?"

He looked away. "You do what you have to do. I did get a little help from your mother. She was the only one in the family I stayed in contact with."

"You're talking about my own personal mother?" I asked. "The one sitting in the next room?"

"Her heart is a lot kinder than her mouth," said George.

I thought about that for a minute. "Yeah, I guess maybe you're right," I said at last.

After that neither of us said anything for a while. When the silence started to feel uncomfortable, I said, "Want to give me a hand with this homework?"

He smiled as if he'd just won the lottery. "What do you want me to do?"

"Ask me these chapter questions," I said, passing him the book.

I got an A on the chapter test the next day, the first I'd managed in biology all year long.

"Hey, Randy!" said Spud Martin, as we were leaving class. "What happened, you get a brain transplant or something?"

"I just studied more than usual," I mumbled, ashamed to mention George, afraid what the conversation would lead to.

I was also ashamed of being ashamed. I remembered something Jesus said to Peter, the night before he was crucified. "You will betray me three times before the cock crows."

And sure enough, Peter did.

When I used to hear that story in Sunday School, I always thought

Peter was a real creep for not speaking up when people asked if he knew Jesus.

I always told myself that I wouldn't have been such a coward.

But this was different.

At least, that's what I told myself now.

I wasn't the only one having a hard time admitting that George existed. While Mom's heart may have been kinder than her mouth, she did a good job of not letting that kindness show over the next few days.

"George," she would say, out of the blue, "have you thought about the fact that this is going to kill Mother if she finds out?" Or, "Can't you have a little consideration for anyone else, George? Why is it only what *you* want?"

That was when she talked to him at all.

Maybe it was because she was being so mean to him that I started talking to him more myself. He never "tried anything" with me, as Mom so delicately put it. But he did tell me things I doubt she really wanted me to know. Not about his upcoming operation—that was something I was trying hard to not think about. (I mean, really...) Mostly it was stuff about our family history.

He even had a photo album, which he brought so he could show me some of the people he was talking about. When I asked him how come he was dragging around an album filled with pictures of people who hadn't treated him all that well, he replied, "There's a difference between leaving and forgetting, Randy. Leaving is the easy part."

Things in our immediate family reached the boiling point the night before George was to go in for his surgery. Dad had an important meeting of some sort, so it was just Mom, George, and me at dinner, which wasn't all that comfortable, especially since Mom was acting

kind of funny. I figured out why after dessert, when she said, "Mrs. Patchett from next door is coming over in a little while to talk about the church supper; we're organizing for next week."

"That will be nice," said George, who was clearing the table.

"Would you like me to make a fresh pot of coffee?"

"What I want you to do," said Mom in a steely voice, "is stay in your room. I do not want Margaret to see you."

George's cheeks flamed red. He didn't say a thing, though; just set the plates he was holding in the sink and left the room.

"Nice work, Mom," I muttered.

"Don't you start, Randy!" she snapped.

"I've got homework to do," I said, shoving myself away from the table.

It was true. I did have homework to do. But I couldn't concentrate on it, especially when I heard Mom and Mrs. Patchett nattering away down in the living room. Finally I went up to George's room. When I knocked on the door, he pulled it open so quickly it startled me. He had on the same outfit he had been wearing the day he arrived, and he was holding his suitcase.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Leaving."

"Don't!" I said, astonishing myself.

"Why not?"

"Because you still need someplace to go while you're recovering," I said, surprised at how important it was to me that he not go.

"I can't stay here, Randy. Not if I have to be some sort of horrible secret. I know that was the agreement. But I just can't do it."

He started past me. I grabbed the suitcase from his hand and walked back into his room with it. I plunked it onto the bed and opened it. Trying not to look at the lacy underwear, I pulled out the photo album he had showed me.

"Take this downstairs," I said, thrusting it into his hands. "Tell her what you told me."

"Why?"

"Because if you go now, she's not going to change. And you need her to change, George. I need her to change. It might not work. But it's the only chance either of us has. I don't think she knows the stuff you told me. If she knows it, she doesn't think about it."

He glanced at the door.

"Leaving is the easy part," I said.

George sighed. He stared at me for a long moment, then nodded and took the album from my hands.

I followed him down the stairs, and into the living room.

Mom gasped when we walked in. Mrs. Patchett put down her coffee cup and smiled, clearly waiting for an introduction.

"What is it, Geo . . . Gladys?" asked Mom.

"We have to talk," said George in a surprisingly deep voice. (I could tell he had to work to keep it down there.)

Mrs. Patchett's eyes widened.

"Not now!" said Mom desperately.

"Yes, now," said George. "We need to talk about us, Ginny. About our family. About secrets."

Mom stood up. "I don't think—"

"That's the problem, at least part of the time," snapped George.

"You don't think. You just go by the stuff our dear mother drummed into your head. Or you do think, but what you think doesn't have anything to do with what's real. Now sit!"

She didn't move.

"Sit!" he barked, sounding like a drill sergeant.

Mom sat. She turned to Mrs. Patchett with a desperate look on her face.

"Oh, don't mind me, dear," said Mrs. Patchett, looking as happy as I

had ever seen her. She picked up her coffee cup. "I'll just wait while you two have your little chat."

George plunked the album down on the coffee table. Facing Mom, with the table between them, he knelt. Then he opened the album to the first page. "Our father," he said, pointing to a photo I had seen a hundred times. I had never actually met Grampa Verbeck; he died before I was born. But I almost felt like I knew him from that picture. He was wearing an army uniform, standing with his arms crossed, his head thrown back, an open smile on his face. Sometimes I check the mirror, hoping I will turn out to look like him.

"What about him?" asked Mom.

"How did he die?"

"You know very well how he died. He was killed in a terrible car accident. A truck ran a stop sign and—"

"Stop right there. The truck didn't run the stop sign, Dad did. He was dead drunk. And so was the teenage girl he had in the car with him."

"That's not true!"

"It most certainly is. I looked up the court records. I've got a copy, if you want to see them. The only place it isn't true is in our family, where we tried to keep it a secret."

Mom turned to me. "Randy, leave the room," she ordered.

"Stay right where you are!" snapped George.

"Tell her about Uncle Louie," I said eagerly.

George nodded and flipped forward a few pages. "Uncle Louie," he said, when he came to the right picture. "I know how many times he was married?"

"Once," said Mom firmly.

"Twice. He has two kids by his first marriage, but he pretends they don't exist. A pair of cousins that you never got to meet, Ginny."

"Stop, George. Please!"

"Not now," he said, his voice relentless. "It took me too long to get started." He turned the page. "Aunt Pam. Terrific lady. I like her a lot. Good marriage. Three great kids! one of them actually from her husband. She just got back from her third trip to detox."

He turned the page. "Ah. Mom."

"What about her?" asked my mother, her voice suddenly protective.

"She ever tell you about—"

"Stop it!" screamed Mom. "Stop it right now!"

"No, you stop, Ginny," he said, fiercely. "Stop pretending. You want to keep me a secret because you think I'm the great disgrace of the family. But I'm not. I can take you back through a chain of horse thieves and hookers that would make your head spin. Generations of disgraceful behavior."

"My great-grandfather killed a man once," put in Mrs. Patchett hopefully. "Up in Alaska."

George rolled on as if he hadn't heard her. "But we kept all those things hidden. Then I came along, and somehow I couldn't master the trick of hiding. My little 'problem' ruined the illusion that we're normal."

He was starting to cry now, just a few tears leaking out of the corner of his eyes. He leaned across the coffee table and took my mother's hands. His voice low and urgent he said, "Listen, Ginny: *no one's family is normal*, at least, not normal like you use the word. All the 'good' people, the 'nice' people, they try to hide the messy parts of their lives and pretend that everything is just fine. And sometimes it even looks good on the surface. But all that hiding, it kills something in your heart.

"Yeah, I was a weird kid. So what? I didn't hurt anyone. Not like

Buzz Walker, most beloved person in the school. I kept track of them all after I left, you know. Even stayed in touch with a few people, including Margie Simmons, the girl Buzz raped."

Mrs. Patchett gasped and spilled her coffee.

"But Buzz was a hero," continued George. "So it got hushed up. Me, I was just the boy who liked to dress funny, so I didn't get hushed up, I got beat up. Sorry, just a trifle bitter there. But don't you see, Ginny? These secrets are like a slow poison, eating their way through our family, through our lives. And what do you get by hiding them—by hiding me? The respect of your neighbors?"

He glanced at Mrs. Patchett, who shook her head, wide-eyed, as if to say she would never respect someone who hid a secret.

"I guarantee you, Scout's honor, heart of gold, swear on a Bible, the neighbors are keeping secrets, too. The sad thing about it is, they're so busy trying to hide things that they're missing the real secret of life. But it's right out in the open. They'd see it if they'd just open their eyes. Do you know what it is, Ginny? Do you know the real secret of life?"

She shook her head.

"Then I'll tell you. Here it is: Normal is bigger than most of us think. Someone out there, I don't know who, is trying to shove us all into little boxes. 'This is all you can be,' they say. 'This is all you're allowed.' But it's a lie. People, real people, are bigger than that, stranger than that. You, me, Mom, Dad—our whole family—if you compare us to the tight little lie of what we're supposed to be, we're all whacked. But if you could see the truth, see everyone's truth, you'd know we're no weirder than anyone else. Even me, Ginny." He clutched her hands more tightly. "Don't turn away from me now, sister. Don't pretend I'm something you have to hide. I'm not evil. I'm not! I just want to be what I am!"

With that he fell forward, sobbing like a baby. Mom stared down at

him for a moment, then lifted her hand to stroke his hair. "Poor George," she whispered, tears running down her cheeks. "Poor baby brother."

Mrs. Patchett put down her coffee cup. "I think I'd better go," she said softly.

After she tiptoed out of the room I took her place on the couch. I sat there until Dad came back, patting my mother on the shoulder with one hand, patting George with the other, trying to make sense of it all.

Aunt Gladys is coming home today.

I, for one, will be glad to see her, since it's been kind of dull around here without her.

Next week, when she's feeling better, I'm planning to introduce her to Moonglow.

And after that . . . well, after that I might tell my parents about what Coach Lewis did to me back in seventh grade.

I'm tired of keeping it a secret.
Besides . . . what's the point?