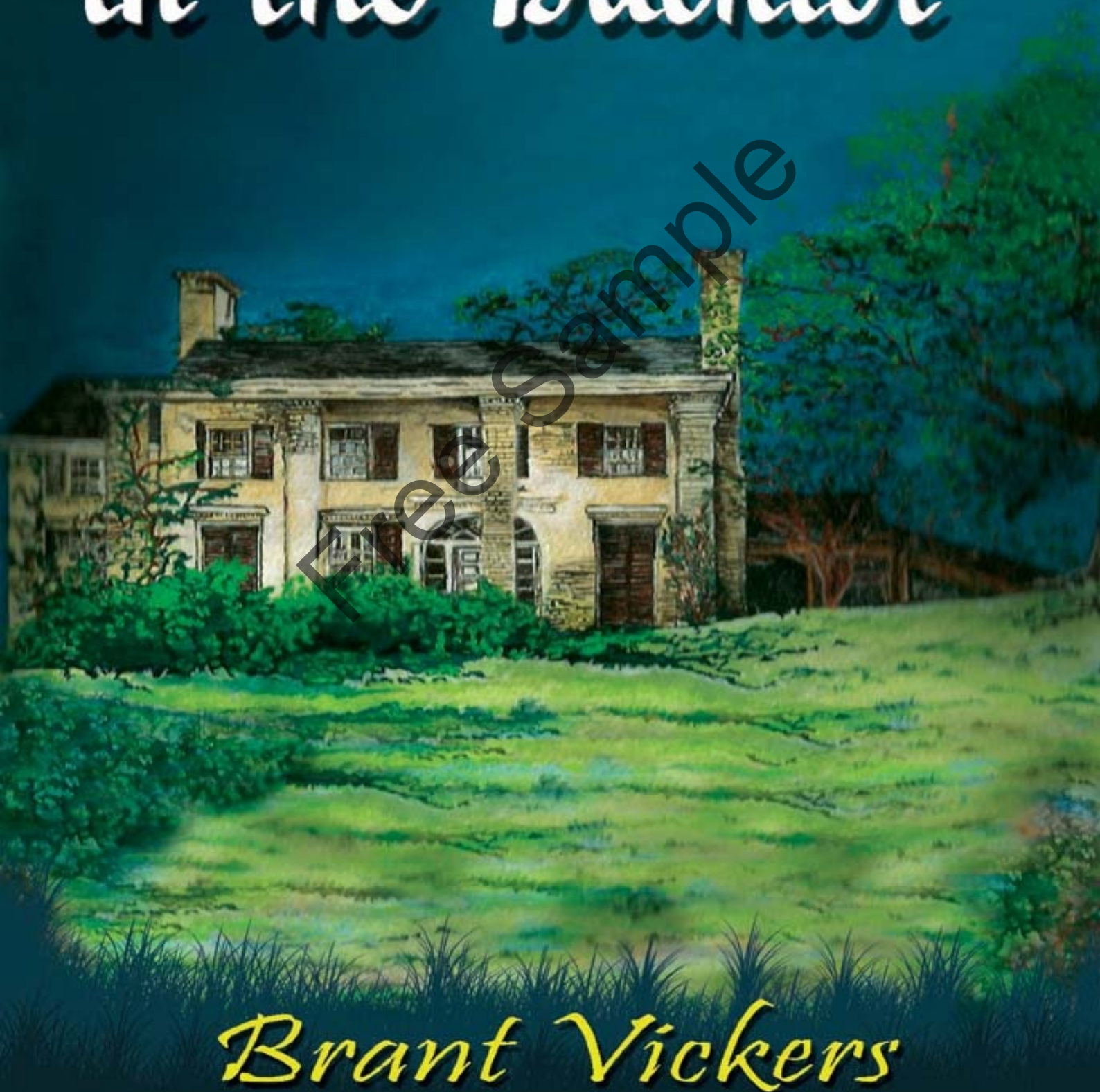


The Sift in the Backlot



Brant Vickers

The Sift in the Backlot

By Brant Vickers

eBook Edition

Produced by  Books2Go

1827 Walden Office Square Suite 260,
Schaumburg, IL 60173, USA

Enquiries:

info@ebooks2go.net

www.ebooks2go.net

ePUB ISBN: 978-1-5457-2009-7

Mobi ISBN: 978-1-5457-2010-3

Free Sample

Table of Contents

- 1 The Graveyard
- 2 Friends
- 3 1969
- 4 MGM
- 5 Visions
- 6 Flash
- 7 Zach
- 8 Brie Ann Bell
- 9 Dreams
- 10 Magic
- 11 The Sift
- 12 Miss Rigby
- 13 Enter
- 14 The Ozone
- 15 Cobalt Blue
- 16 Len
- 17 Brie Ann Again
- 18 Ashley
- 19 Leslie
- 20 The Truth
- 21 Arthur Ford
- 22 The Séance
- 23 The Medium
- 24 Houdini
- 25 Laurence Olivier
- 26 Gone

Free Sample

In that place the sun always shone, but was never too bright or too hot. A long sweeping line of tall eucalyptus trees swayed continuously in a slight breeze. They could hear nothing but the essence of things old, dilapidated, devoid of most color, beautiful and disquieting. Not being there caused restlessness in their hearts that couldn't be restrained. Its breeze ran through their subconscious like a whispered scream. Its buildings became their refuge, its landscape their haven, its memories their reality.

The Graveyard

Paul and Kyle sat in the limbs of the oak tree, in the dark, over Elenda Street without talking for several minutes, catching their breath.

“What was that?” Paul finally asked. He was still panting. “What do you think?”

“I don't know,” Kyle answered. “We'll figure it out in the morning.”

“Right, did you see what happened to Zachary?” Paul asked.

“I don't know, but I'm sure he got away.”

Paul continued to blurt out questions without waiting for answers. “Did the brothers keep up with Zach? Could they keep up? Did they see what he and Kyle saw?”

“I don't know,” Kyle said for the third time. He didn't want to talk about it right now. The air was heavy with this strange phenomenon.

“This should have been a simple night sneaking into the Backlot,” Paul said.

“It's time to get home and find Zach and end this night,” Kyle said.

“We should go, I'll go first,” Kyle said before Paul could respond with more questions.

Paul was sure they could handle climbing out further on the limb, they'd done this kind of thing a million times before and, as long as you rolled with the fall, didn't twist an ankle, you'd be fine. Kyle climbed out on the branch, hung for a moment, looked Paul in the eyes, nodded, and dropped.

The instant he hit the ground, the lights on an unmarked police car about a half-block away exploded on, with the red and blue flashing light on top, and the car peeled rubber driving straight toward Kyle. Kyle momentarily glanced back over his shoulder at Paul, and sprinted toward Marietta Avenue. Paul watched in dread as the cop car flew by, squealing its tires rounding the corner Kyle had run up just seconds before.

Paul couldn't believe it. He was alone in the monster tree at the far end of the Backlot. He had to think fast. Drop down now that the cop was after Kyle, or wait and watch for a while, or the one thing he didn't want to contemplate, go back through the Backlot by himself and take the long way home. The cop could be anywhere and any car on the dark streets could be another cop. The situation was crazy. If the cops caught Kyle, and he

called his mom, she would call Paul's mom. She would know and they would know Zach was missing and he didn't even want to think about the goony brothers; the whole thing had him babbling in his own head.

He could circle back home down Washington Boulevard; he knew plenty of places to duck and hide along the way. What was usually incredible fun and comfortable and familiar territory turned sinister and seemed so strange. It looked like the best choice was going back through the place that had sent the five of them running, terrified, a short time ago. Contemplating this suddenly gave him chills.

Paul looked up and down the street one last time; he couldn't see or hear anything except the rustling trees. He climbed down the oak tree into the Backlot, and dropped to the ground. The cottonwood trees towered over him. He stopped to listen and couldn't hear a sound in the night. Out toward the sets it was complete darkness. The Backlot reflected no lights from the surrounding city. The cottonwoods, elms, eucalyptus, and oaks hugged the inside of the fence and blanketed the Backlot from the outside world. Paul was panicky even though this place had become like a second home to him and Kyle.

He had no choice but to cross through the graveyard and circle back through the European Village then double back to get to Arizona Street and make it out to Washington Boulevard. It was the only way to go and not cross the open field in front of the southern mansion, and that's where he didn't want to be, alone. He couldn't think about what had happened to Kyle, Zach, and the brothers. He knew he was alone.

It only took a couple of minutes to get to the graveyard. He moved crouched low, traveling fast, staying as low to the ground as he could without crawling. At the arched stone entrance to the graveyard he stopped. Paul noticed the breeze had also died down. It was silent. He thought about those first days, remembering the discovery of the cemetery, and how they were so scared and walked so slow it took, what seemed like hours, to go even a short distance. The haunted house loomed in the distance, thankfully in the dark. It was different than the southern mansion. They had run across the broken down horror movie set the second or third day of exploring, along with the graveyard. It looked like it should have been haunted, three stories high, spirals, shutters, huge shadowy gothic windows, and faded black. Its overgrown yard sloped down to a dirty abandoned swimming pool that edged up to the cemetery.

The graveyard sat on an acre of land with tall detailed tombstones and headstones complete with name and dates. Most went back to the turn of the century or earlier. The graveyard was large and spooky. It seemed real to the boys and they had to look closely at the tombstones and had argued whether this wasn't, in fact, a real cemetery they had stumbled onto on the MGM Backlot. Kyle was especially fearful and superstitious about stepping on the graves as they walked through. They had snuck into other real cemeteries around Culver City, like the humongous *Hillside and Holy Cross Cemeteries*, and ridden their bikes up and down the hills and he felt no different about this one.

"Don't step there, man, it's uncool, don't really," Kyle had pleaded, hopping around the graves.

"Okay, okay, I won't. Sorry," Paul always answered.

The combination of events of the night and the idea of crossing the cemetery made

Paul almost opt to go back and take his chances with the police. He was frozen with fear. He took a deep breath, pushed the gate open, and started running under the archway. He closed his eyes and ran, but had to force himself to open them so he wouldn't trip. Nothing registered in his brain, as he darted between the headstones and ran down one path. Then another, heading vaguely in what he thought was the right direction. The next thing Paul knew he was on the other side. He darted down three cobble-stoned streets and made his way behind the southern mansion. He had successfully skirted the open field in front of the mansion. Paul never turned his head to look toward the field where all five boys had been running from less than an hour ago

Paul crawled through the weeds and was soon at the place they normally climbed in and out on Arizona Avenue. He stopped and looked around once more and thought, *at least I didn't totally panic and freeze*. The breeze had picked up again and the line of towering trees around the mansion were swaying and making the familiar swishing noise. Paul climbed up and looked over the steel fence and started down the chain-link fence on the other side. He thought about Kyle and hoped he was home and safe with Zach, waiting for him. As he was hanging down to the street he hesitated for a moment and thought, as forbidding as this night was, Paul couldn't believe their time in the Backlot was entirely over. His thoughts leapt from one thing to another and he remembered how Kyle and he had met and became friends. That made him smile for a moment. He knew deep within himself he was still drawn to this place, but they had seen what they had seen, both Paul and Kyle. Some part of Paul wanted to know more about what it was and that meant, possibly coming back. The thought vanished as soon as he hit the ground running.

Free Sample

Friends

One night late Paul and Gram were walking up the alley to Center Street. Gram lived about halfway down Center and Paul lived on Commonwealth, the next street over. It was late summer and school was fast approaching. The alleys were how they traveled around their neighborhood.

“I can’t believe you didn’t like that movie,” Paul said.

“It was okay,” Gram replied.

“It was great!” Paul and Gram didn’t seem to see eye to eye on many things most of the time. They were friends mostly because they lived near each other and well, it was convenient. They were coming back from the Meralta Theatre way up in downtown Culver City.

“Man, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, is one of the best movies I’ve seen in a long time,” Paul said. He was wishing he had someone to enjoy it with instead of Gram, who acted like he was bored with it. At least talk about it, more than it’s just okay.

They stopped to talk and make plans for the next day. The corner house had a descending brick wall down to the street; it was from about six feet to waist high. Large bushes hid the duplex from the alley and street. Gram leaned against the wall and a brick that was loose almost fell off the ledge.

“Hey, check it out, all of these are loose,” Gram said.

They pushed and pulled and separated them from the wall.

“Someone new lives here, don’t they?” Paul asked.

“Yeah, I haven’t seen them yet. Here, help me get these loose.”

Paul and Gram weren’t vandals but the temptation proved far too great. The top bricks broke free easily from the mortar and in the dark the two boys laid about a dozen of the bricks across the yard. They formed a sloppy circular pattern and ran away laughing. About a week later they found themselves walking along the same alley again that night. It was totally unintentional. This time they laid a zigzag pattern. They came back again about two nights later and did it again. Three nights later - one more time. A couple of days after that last time Paul was riding his bike down the street and saw two tall boys with an older man in the front yard cementing the bricks to the top of the wall. He continued riding over to Gram’s house, told him what he saw, and they cracked up.

A week later Paul was riding his bike by again and saw one of the tall boys out in front of his house throwing a football up in the air by himself. He rode up to the curb, got off his bike, walked to the other end of the yard, put his hands up as if to catch an imaginary ball thrown at him, and smiled.

The boy threw the ball hard at Paul and as he caught it said, “I’m Kyle, nice catch,

what's your name?"

"I'm Paul, nice throw."

Both boys were wiry and strong from playing sports. Kyle, who was 14, a year older, a tad taller, also blond, all angles, bones, and sinew, smiled back at Paul. They both wore their hair long and were wearing t-shirts and Levis with tennis shoes. Kyle and his brother Zach just moved into Culver City from another part of Los Angeles. After his step-dad knocked down a wall, the boys shared the whole duplex with their parents and little sister. Paul could never remember what made him stop that day, but the connection was immediate. It was that simple. Kyle was instantaneously Paul's best friend, and not just a neighborhood friend, or an acquaintance, but the kind of friend that only comes along once in a lifetime. They shared all their thoughts, discussed books, sports, movies, music, what politics they knew, and always, endless discussions about girls. It was a friendship Paul would measure all other friendships by for the rest of his life.

That first weekend they went to see *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* twice and it was well over a year before Paul remembered and told Kyle that it was he and Gram were the ones who put the bricks in the patterns on his front yard. He had almost completely forgotten about it.

"You guys did that! My dad went nuts. He thought it was some kind of conspiracy, that someone didn't want us in the neighborhood," Kyle said.

"We just did it, we didn't mean anything by it. I can't even tell you why," Paul said.

"He had us wait in the bushes for a couple of nights waiting to catch whoever was doing it. It drove him crazy for a couple of weeks."

Kyle often pretended to hold Paul hostage to the threat of telling his step-dad just who put the bricks in the patterns. That would usually get Paul to concede to whatever demand was being made.

One day Paul asked Kyle if he thought they would still be friends when they were thirty-five. It was an impossible age for him to imagine.

"Sure," Kyle answered. "Why not?"

1969

Paul and Kyle always had an amazing amount of freedom. Since Paul was about nine he had the run of at least two blocks, and now as long as he was home by dinner he could hang out with friends all day long. They spent a lot of time down on the boardwalk in Venice Beach watching all the strange people; crazies, gypsies, wannabe rock stars strumming guitars, and hippies wander around. In the summer of 1969, the place was packed everyday with interesting freaks and of course, girls. At night they would tell their parents that they were spending the night at one or the other's house. Usually the plan was to spend the night at Paul's house because his parents let them sleep in the garage, in a room the boys built out of old sheet-rock and 'found' two-by-fours and pieces of wood. His parents always went to bed early so they would sneak out the do whatever they wanted and this allowed them the freedom to roam wide and far in their world.

They rode their bikes crazily around Culver City and Venice Beach at night. One of their favorite rides was down to Studio Drive-in. It was down on Sepulveda. They'd ride down and go in the exit where the tire spikes were set up. No one ever guarded the exit. Kyle and Paul would then pick the most inconspicuous spot as possible, set up the speaker on one of their bikes, sit down, kick back, and watch the movie. One time a guy even bought them popcorn to show off for his girlfriend. They loved it. One of the best nights was watching a Clint Eastwood double feature, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* and *A Fistful of Dollars*. It was a beautiful summer evening and a spaghetti western for free. They couldn't imagine that it could ever get any better than that.

One long summer day they rode their bikes up into Bel Air, following a map a guy on the beach had given them. It was a couple hours riding, but they finally found what they were looking for coming around a bend in the maze of small streets. Tall walls, trees and shrubbery hid most of the mansions. They parked their bikes and walked up to the tall flamboyant garish gate. Off to the side a small hut sat just out of sight from the street. A uniformed guard immediately stepped out.

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave," he said.

"We're just looking. We weren't doing anything," Kyle said.

"This is a private residence and the residents don't want to be bothered," he said.

"Well, we know the residents and we want to know if Jethro can come out and play?" Paul said.

"Yeah, like I've never heard that before," the security guard said.

"We just want to know if we can go swimming in the cement pond and maybe make some lye soap out back with Granny..." Kyle said as they jumped back on their bikes and rode away laughing. They had discovered the real house the *Beverly Hillbillies* used in the opening on the TV show.

Paul was an only child who grew up in an extended family with a cousin four years older than him. It was an idyllic childhood with aunts, uncles, and a special grandmother everyone called Nanny, who watched him and his cousin while his parents worked. They all lived within a few blocks of each other so Paul's life was always filled with family. He never really experienced what it was to be an only child. Like when Paul and his cousin split a candy bar, one would divide while the other got to choose. The process always seemed to take close to an hour. The one doing the choosing would look at the two halves forever, and as soon as the other was ready, the other would wail and well, the whole process would start again and end up in an inevitable fight.

On Halloween, Paul and his cousin would carry pillow cases to hold heavy weight, and run the entire night, filling them several times. They'd use minimal costumes and makeup, because the purpose was never dressing up, but collecting a ton of candy. After gorging themselves for a couple of days they'd come home from school and find all their candy gone.

"Where's all our candy?" they'd cry.

"Ants, the ants got to it and, well, I had to throw it out, it was covered black with ants," Nanny would say.

Paul's cousin was as good as a brother to him while it lasted. But when his cousin got older, he started going his own way, as older brothers do. He did things with Paul when he could, but there was a gap now.

These years Paul didn't feel as close to his mom and dad either. They were both working hard and tired much of the time. Paul felt he had recently let his dad down. His dad was a life long hunter and fisherman. Growing up in West Virginia, hunting and fishing were second nature to him. Paul had gone with him, driving hours out of Southern California, and he had enjoyed the trips to the desert and mountains of the High Sierras, but one morning last summer he had asked his mom if he could quit hunting. She stopped washing the dishes, turned to him, and with an incredibly sad look on her face said, "Oh, Paul this is going to break your dad's heart. He's waited his whole life to have a son to hunt with."

"But Mom, I just can't do it, I don't like it. It's not something I want to do. I'm sorry, but I just don't like killing animals."

Soon after that Kyle moved in and it seemed like the breach in his life was instantaneously filled.

There was always something going on at the beach. One day early in the summer break, Kyle and Paul listened as this guy with long dirty hair in a ponytail was talking about sneaking into Backlot 3 on the other side of Culver City. They both knew the Backlot closest to them down on Culver Boulevard was Backlot 2 and Backlot 1 was connected across Overland Boulevard. Paul could look out of his grandmother's second floor apartment window and just catch glimpses of the trees and buildings on the set used for TV and movies.

"Can you just climb the fence?" Paul piped in and asked after listening for a few minutes.

“Yeah,” he answered brushing the hair out of his eyes. “You have to be real careful, they’re still filming there and the workers are all over the place, but you can see through the old wooden fence. Just pick out a place when it doesn’t look like anyone is around, climb over, and you can cruise inside for a while. It’s a gas, man.”

“How about the Backlot 2 on Culver?” Kyle asked.

“Naw, it’s a bummer in the summer. Nothing in there except old abandoned sets, nothing cool. Real spooky place, man... bad vibes,” he answered. “And you can’t climb the new 12 foot steel fence at all, you end up shredding your hands.”

“What does that mean?” Paul asked. “Spooky how?”

“Nothing man, never mind, I’m just never going back there again, end of story. I’d suggest you do the same. The Backlot on Culver is a bummer.”

Paul and Kyle walked away discussing what he said and what it could be like.

“If they can sneak into Lot 3 then we can sneak into Lot 2 near us,” Kyle said.

“Man, it’s only a few blocks from our houses.”

“We just have to find a place to do it. He’s right, Lot 2 has that wicked high steel fence all around it,” Kyle said.

“Maybe that’s a good thing, considering what that freak said,” Paul added.

“I wonder what he meant by all that ‘bummer’ stuff?”

Free Sample

MGM

Early the next day, Kyle and Paul found themselves walking along the steel fence bordering the Backlot. Elenda Street was the western border and a couple of other streets cut in on the north end. The first street off Elenda was Arizona Avenue and immediately it offered the perfect hidden place to climb the fence. A broken-down eerie two-story house sat on the corner of the Backlot surrounded by its own 12-foot chain link fence that connected to the high steel MGM fence. This was a gloomy old house that seemed deserted from the outside and had a dozen huge oak trees that constricted views from all angles on Elenda Street. Directly across from the MGM fence was a deserted lot. They waited several minutes and saw no cars or people coming or going.

“You go,” Paul said.

“No, you go first,” answered Kyle.

“I’ll keep watch,” Paul shot back.

“Jeez, you chickenshit,” Kyle said, laughing as he climbed up the chain link fence. Paul followed right behind him. They hoisted themselves up the rest of the way over the steel fence. It had footrests halfway down the inside, and they jumped down into waist high weeds on the other side. They hit the ground, squatted and froze. Immediately to their left was a building – it looked like a green house, huge glass windows, and peaked glass roof, dirty and discolored.

“This looks like some kind of old nursery,” Paul said.

“It hasn’t been taken care of in years,” Kyle agreed.

In front of them, across a dirt road, was a line of trees and bushes and the faint outline of buildings. After about five minutes, of letting the panic settle, and catching their breath, Kyle motioned for Paul to follow him out across the dirt road and through the chest high bushes and weeds.

Several buildings were standing on the other side of the dirt road, but as the boys got closer, they realized they weren’t really buildings. The largest was a three-story structure, but old two-by-fours supported walls, landings, and platforms running in several directions. The walls were aged and weather-beaten. The boys ran over and jumped up on one platform. Weeds grew up between the floorboards. It was fifty feet wide hidden by walls on three sides. They waited again without saying a word. Directly in front of them was the back of what looked like a huge double door. Paul walked over and looked back at Kyle.

“Go ahead Paul, open it,” he said.

No one was in sight and they hadn’t heard a sound except their own breathing. Paul pushed it open slowly. They peeked out then squeezed their heads out, looked around and slowly walked through the door.

“Wow, whoa,” Paul and Kyle both exhaled.

They walked out on a huge porch that ran the length of the building with four whitewashed square columns spaced evenly along its span. Stairs dropped down on all three sides. Plants and ivy grew up the sides of the house and two of the pillars. The roof slanted down giving it a regal look. An old path ran up to the front of the stairs with tall beautiful oak trees running down along each side of the lane. It gave the appearance of a tunnel, because the trees were so spacious and the branches grew together over the lane. On either side of what looked like unkempt overgrown gardens, were other buildings in the distant background, mostly hidden by still more trees. They cautiously stepped out further onto the porch, down the stairs and looked back behind them. What they saw was a huge southern mansion; at least three stores high, with walls made of brick, two monster chimneys on each end, and at least eight full-sized picture windows. It was old and decrepit, but had a stately beauty and majesty that took their breath away.

“I’ve seen this before,” Kyle said.

“Me too,” Paul answered. “But I can’t remember where.”

“Yeah, I can’t place it either, but is sure looks familiar,” Kyle said.

“Maybe just movies in general.”

They looked around, on guard for a vehicle or any noise, but all they heard was the wind faintly blowing through the towering trees. The sun was shining bright and clear, the outside world seemed non-existent or at least remote and far away. Time seemed to stand still.

The boys skirted the path and walked in the tall grass and weeds. They came upon another mansion, not nearly as big or stately as the first, but with an old dilapidated horse stable attached to the side. They looked over at the tree-lined path down the middle of the open area and noticed the sun reflecting off the surface of a lake where four paths converged on the far side.

“This place is huge, man, check it out!” Kyle said.

“It’s immense,” Paul answered.

They turned the corner from the second mansion and, off from the south was a fully constructed train station with railroad tracks running out and ending about fifty feet from the entrance. The name **ATLANTA** was painted over the front, faded, and peeling now, but at least fifteen feet high.

Looking back at the big mansion, Kyle said, “I can’t believe it’s fake; it looks so real. You’d never know that it was just a front with nothing behind it. It looks just like an old southern house or something should look.”

Once again, the boys paused to listen and heard nothing but the rustling of the wind in the trees. Paul had a peculiar feeling, but couldn’t put his finger on what it was about this day.

“I don’t know what that guy at the beach was talking about yesterday,” Paul said. “This is soooooooooo cool.”

As they continued walking beyond the railroad station, they crossed another open field and came to the edge of the small lake that ran back to the smaller mansion. A shabby bridge crossed over it at the far end, and a small rowboat was tied to a short pier. Again, bushes and trees were on the other side hiding what lay beyond. They continued and saw the lake was part of a larger set.

“This looks like some kind of a European village,” Kyle said.

“Yeah, but is that writing on the windows French, German, or Italian?” Paul asked.

“My mom gets magazines and stuff and reads things like that, I think it’s German,” Kyle answered.

They walked onto winding streets leading up from the lake and bridge, and immediately got lost in the maze of stores, churches, bakeries, tailor shops and what looked like ancient apartment cottages. The facades of the building had some French names and some had German names, some the boys weren’t sure of. Walking through a door would take them into a tight alleyway filled with weeds and bushes along with more scaffolding, platforms, and two-by-fours, reinforcing another wall that opened into another street within the labyrinth of cobble-stoned streets.

“It doesn’t matter how real it looks, if we push the door open – it disappears,” Kyle said.

“So, we just don’t go through all the doors, leave them closed and it looks real,” said Paul.

The entire village, except for two houses they found that were intact with staircases leading up to a second floor, were just fronts with only the scaffolding in the rear. From that upstairs window they could see more fields and different movie sets in the distance.

As he leaned out of a window and looked out over the Backlot, Kyle said, “This is unbelievable; this really feels like we’re cut off from the outside world.”

“Yeah, I don’t feel like we’re in the middle of Culver City. This is just soooooo cool,” Paul said over and over again.

They explored for hours.

Visions

They couldn't believe their luck in finding a place so completely strange and unique. It was a magical wonderland, but a little threatening at the same time. They felt at any moment they were going to get caught and taken to jail. That put their nerves on edge and heightened their anxiety, but also increased their enjoyment.

Kyle said that first day, "I feel like my senses are on fire in here."

"Half the fun is how scared I am, sometimes," Paul said.

The enchanting playground was less than a mile from their homes. That first day they didn't explore everything, they left much for other days, although they did go back almost everyday for a week or two. They couldn't stay away. They never got enough and they never got caught either. A couple of times someone drove by in a jeep and scared them almost to death, but they were still cautious and hid in the innumerable building facades, nooks and crannies and waited until the sound of the jeep faded away. It was a charmed and wondrous place they had discovered in their backyard, but having fun during the day was only the beginning.

They decided to expand their search and when they explored the remaining parts of the Backlot, they found more than they ever imagined. A tall structure, four or five stories high, and from the outside looked just like two plank walls. The walls stood about a hundred feet apart, with thousands of two-by-fours and reinforcements, facing each other, but was actually on the inside, a New York street. It was a complete Brooklyn brownstone block with stoops, stairs, and railings going down to the street level, fully enclosed in a dead end cul-de-sac.

The northeast part of the Backlot was a small sleepy southern town with cottage homes and tree-lined streets like something out of *To Kill A Mockingbird*. It had a half-dozen twisting blocks with weathered houses, more complete, only a few facades here. Alleyways ran behind several of the streets and bushes ran overgrown along the yards and the mailboxes sat on curbs of most homes, never having been used. Shutters covered the dirty windows and most of the paint was wearing off.

To the east of this town were a few office buildings, the main gate, and the official entrance. The further into this town they ventured, the closer they came to the sound stages and offices, so they rarely spent much time deep in its streets. To the south of this area of the Backlot were two warehouses. One warehouse was open with only a chain link fence as a wall. They could see hundreds of military uniforms of all description and Foreign Legion like back packs and fake rifles, with hundreds of boots discarded like some forgotten war. Hats, helmets, and different wardrobe costumes were piled up almost two stories high in some places.

Discovering these goods immediately raised questions and drove right to the heart of whom Paul and Kyle were and how they began to deal with the Backlot. If they climbed

through the fence and took some of this stuff for souvenirs, they felt they would be crossing a line. Cruising around inside the Backlot was a gift; stealing was another.

“It would be, like, maybe disrespecting this place,” Paul said.

Neither Paul nor Kyle were thieves, but they wanted to bring other kids into this incredible playground and share it. It was too good to keep a complete secret. They had plans for playing army and other elaborate games of hide and seek. The expansion of other kids obligated them to develop a code. They used a strict system to decide who was and wasn't worthy. They had hours of discussion as to whether any school friend or neighborhood boy deserved the opportunity to be let in on what they felt was their own personal discovery and property. They felt like small gods during these discussions, it was a very powerful emotion.

“No one is welcome who would destroy something on the sets,” Kyle said.

“That lets Keith out of going in,” Paul stated with authority.

“No one is welcome who would steal something, anything,” Paul added.

“That keeps Keith out again, and Robert probably too,” Kyle said.

“No one is welcome who would not follow directions and who wouldn't keep it a secret, or...” Paul started.

“And who couldn't keep up physically, if we had to run...” Kyle interrupted.

“Or who we think would bring in others without our permission,” Paul finished the sentence. They almost always thought exactly alike on issues regarding the Backlot.

Most times it was a needless worry. Few enjoyed the experience as they did. Almost everybody was extremely scared and nervous and could never let their anxiety go enough to enjoy it. Paul and Kyle let the fantasy world they found themselves in overwhelm them and transport them out of the present and into their dream world here in the Backlot. It became their secret place: they took care of it, they guarded it, and it seemed like it was taking care of them. They could hardly believe that they never got caught. Their games lasted hours, the vastness of the Backlot required rules about movement and courses of action, so they would eventually run into each other if they split up.

“We'll meet by the side of the smaller mansion across from the lane in about two hours, if we don't see you before then,” Paul would command to the other boys, or the other team. “If there is a problem, go there and wait under the oak tree, there's a depression in the ground and you can't be seen from the field. Understand?”

The other boys sometimes would go straight there and hardly participate at all, just wait for the day to be over, so they could go home. Paul and Kyle were always ready to continue the games the next day, but most kids had had enough in one day and left the Backlot nervous wrecks.

As one boy put it, “This place creeps me out. Something's spooky here and I can't put my finger on it, but I'm outta here.” Ironically, echoing the hippie at the beach.

Paul and Kyle were never deterred, and never felt anything but completely comfortable after the first week or two. The sun was always shining bright when they

went into the Backlot. They sensed a connection immediately that transcended any worry about being caught and getting in trouble. It became a home away from home. It was their private fantasyland. It was a wonderland, it was Europe, their personal southern plantation, and Tarzan's jungle all rolled into one. It retained the enchantment and seductiveness of the first day of discovery every day.

Eventually, they decided to explore the Backlot in the dark. The moment they climbed down the fence in the dark that first night the Backlot was transformed. As the sun always seemed to shine when they were in during the daytime, at night it was always very, very, dark and mysterious. Everything changed. The atmosphere was charged with electricity and their apprehension initially returned. The trees, most of all, seemed alive and swayed with a slight wind that didn't make its presence known at all before the moment they hit the ground inside. Every corner of every building and set and every blade of grass appeared conscious like a motion picture had started rolling the instant they walked by.

"It's dark, but I can tell where we are, no problem," Kyle said.

"Yeah, it's like, as dark as it is, it doesn't seem like night. I couldn't see my hand if front of my face walking here, so we must just be getting used to where everything is," Paul said.

They were city boys; they had grown up without ever really noticing the stars. Smog, haze, exhaust, the lights reflecting off the city at night, however you explained it; there rarely saws stars in their world. Once they were in the Backlot though, they looked up and saw stars. Twinkling, brightly, splashed all over the sky. Like a painting of a dark sparkling rainbow, washed against the sky. It was bizarre, and it was heavenly at the same time, but they loved the view too much and never questioned it.

"Paul, look up, man, look up," Kyle whispered, that first night.

"Oh, wow, I've never seen stars like that, man, whoa."

The darkness hid the appearance of everything being just a set on a movie studio lot, and allowed them to imagine, create, and to transform it all to be a breathing, living entity. They rarely if ever, returned during the day anymore.

Many times Kyle and Paul weren't completely sure if it was their imagination or not, but every once in awhile as they walked along by some deserted façade of an old movie set, they would be jolted with a vision. It was a wonderful, but scary feeling. It was the same sensation they were having in their separate dreams, ones they hadn't confided in each other yet. They could see for a moment, people and things, as they would have been if the Backlot was a real German village or the Atlanta train station was filled with Confederate soldiers coming home from battle. It was as if a doorway opened and they could see through it for a flash of a second, and they saw individuals strolling along the street. After all, it was a movie set and hundreds of movies had been made there. But at those times, they each felt they had either been there before in another life, or were returning to some place they'd visited. Then they'd be walking beside each other and the doorway would be closed as fast as it was opened. They explained the wonderment to each other as just that; it was about movies. Sometimes though, they left it unsaid to each other, they felt it was more than that.

You've Just Finished your Free Sample

Enjoyed the preview?

Buy: <http://www.ebooks2go.com>

Free Sample