

LIZARD MUSIC

by DANIEL PINKWATER



THE NEW YORK REVIEW
CHILDREN'S COLLECTION

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LIZARD MUSIC

*For Mike, Leonard,
and the rest of the Chicago boys*

Chapter 1

I figure that Mom and Dad were having some kind of trouble and needed to go away by themselves. Dad was complaining a lot about his job. I remember, and he and Mom were getting into a lot of arguments. Something was on their minds, or they would never have gone away and left me with Leslie. Leslie is my sister. She was seventeen the summer when all this happened, and she was at her all-time craziest, which is saying a lot if you know Leslie.

Leslie had this summer job, answering the telephone in some office, and she was supposed to take care of me, and see that I got fed, and keep me out of trouble while Mom and Dad went to a resort in Colorado. They made a big point of apologizing to me for not taking me along, which was okay with me, since from what I could gather, there was nothing to do where they were going but look at scenery. I have never been able to understand what the big deal is about scenery. I mean, it is very nice if there are some big mountains or something in the background while you are *doing* something, but just standing around all day and saying, “What a lovely view,” strikes me as sort of dumb.

They asked Leslie if she was sure she could take care of things, and did she understand everything she was supposed to do, and did she have any questions—about once every five minutes for three days. The rest of the time they ran around packing stuff and writing notes for Leslie. They wrote maybe two thousand notes and taped them up all over the kitchen—recipes and when the laundryman comes and the telephone number of the police, the hospital, the resort in Colorado, all our relatives, all their friends. In fact they wrote down everybody’s telephone number in McDondaldsville. They might as well have just taped the telephone directory to the wall. I suppose they felt guilty about going on a vacation without us, but I didn’t especially want to go, and Leslie, as I pointed out, is crazy, and there is no way to tell what she wants to do. By the way, I am twelve, was eleven at the time I’m telling about, and perfectly able to take care of myself. Leslie, on the other hand, needs constant watching, but I didn’t say anything about that when Mom and Dad were getting ready for their trip.

By the time Mom and Dad left, I was practically praying for them to go. They were starting to make me nervous. Every few minutes one of them would explain how they hated to leave me behind, but they had to get away by themselves. A couple of times Mom decided that she couldn’t desert her babies, and there was some crying and hollering. Finally, after going over the whole list of instructions one more time, they took off, leaving me in Leslie’s capable hands.

Twenty-four hours later, my big sister had left with her creepy friends on a two-week camping trip to Cape Cod. Typical. At least she didn’t do a number before leaving like Mom and Dad. She just came into my room and said, “Victor, I forgot all about it, but I told these kids I’d go to Cape Cod with them. Will you be okay by

yourself for a few days?" I told her I'd be fine. She threw some stuff into her canvas bag, split the household money with me, promised to be back before Mom and Dad, made me promise not to tell them she wasn't around, and took off. Her main friend, Gloria Schwartz, and a lot of other hippies came and got her in this real old station wagon full of tents and banjos, and pots and pans. I went outside and told them I'd be surprised if they ever got out of the state in a wreck like that. They all said stuff like "Far out!" and "Heavy!" and all that dumb talk, and drove off in a black cloud of burning oil. I could hear the valves rattle after they were out of sight.

I really thought Leslie would be back by lunch-time after the car broke down, but apparently they made it. About ten o'clock there was a phone call from the place where Leslie worked, asking why she hadn't come in. I told them that she couldn't come to work for a couple of weeks because she was having a baby. It was the best thing I could think of on the spur of the moment. The lady who called didn't say anything for a while, then she said good-bye, and we both hung up.

This particular summer I didn't have much to do. Most of the kids I knew were away at camp, including my best friend, Howard Foster. I had been to camp the year before, and found out I was allergic to everything that grew there. Between being allergic and poison ivy and bee stings and breaking my arm when I fell off the roof of the cabin, there didn't seem to be much point in going back.

All summer I had been going to the McDonaldsville Municipal Pool every day. It only costs fifteen cents to get in if you are a kid, plus ten cents for a locker, and maybe a dime for a grape soda. If you go in the morning, there are only a bunch of little kids who come with their day camps, and the swimming classes that the people at the pool give. That is all happening in the shallow end, so the deep end is almost empty. I'm a good swimmer. I was all ready for my Junior Lifesaving test before I broke my arm at camp. I have my Advanced Swimmer card, though, which means I can swim in the deep end any time. In the afternoon the pool starts to get crowded. Bigger kids come and start horsing around in the deep water. That's when I go home. I am serious about swimming.

On the day Leslie started on her hippie trip to Cape Cod, I didn't go to the pool. I had a few things to do. First I had to keep Mom and Dad from finding out that Leslie was gone. If they knew, they would probably drop everything and come home, which was not called for since I figured I was in much better shape by myself than with Leslie, who was likely to burn down the house or something.

I went to Leslie's room and rummaged around in her desk. I found what I was looking for—some letters she had written to some boyfriend and then came to her senses and didn't mail. The letters made pretty disgusting reading, but each one was signed, "Love, Leslie." I got out her bottle of purple ink and practiced signing her name. Then I typed ten letters on her typewriter. They don't have typing in the sixth grade, so it was hard to get the letters looking right. I made a lot of mistakes and wasted a lot of her little blue note paper. I finally got them all done. They were pretty much alike.

Dear Mom and Dad,

Hope you are having a good time. Victor is behaving himself. We are getting along o.k. Please don't worry about us, and have a nice vacation.

Love,
Leslie

Then I found ten envelopes, addressed them, put stamps on them, and stacked them on the table by the front door. All I had to do was mail one every day. Mom and Dad would probably never figure out that Leslie wouldn't remember to write to them. They would be so pleased that they would just decide that she suddenly went sane or something. When they got back and she was as crazy as ever, they would think she had a relapse.

I also made plans in case they called. If they called, it would be early in the evening so that they'd be sure to catch us both awake. I would just say that Leslie was out on a date. This would cheer them up too, because Leslie almost never went out on dates and spent most of her time complaining about it. I could do the same thing if Aunt Mildred called. The icebox was full, and there were about a thousand TV dinners in the freezer, so I didn't have any problem about food. Leslie had left me with plenty of money. Everything was organized.

By the time I had finished writing the letters and figuring everything out, it was pretty late, so I put a TV dinner in the oven—Salisbury steak with creamed corn and mashed potatoes. Then I got ready to watch the Walter Cronkite show. Walter Cronkite is my favorite television star. That's another reason I haven't got many friends at school. Most of the kids like these rock groups like "The Vermin" and "The Scum" and some of these dumb singers who smile all the time and have aluminum foil glued to their jeans. The kids who like those guys think I'm some kind of freak because I'm a Walter Cronkite fan.

Anyway, Walter Cronkite isn't on very much in the summer because that's when he takes his vacation and Roger Mudd fills in for him. I watch the show anyway, because if something really big were to happen. Walter would come straight from his vacation to take over. Another thing I like about when Roger Mudd does the show is the possibility that Walter will die (not that I wish him any harm) on his vacation, and a news flash will come in while Roger Mudd is on the air. Or he wouldn't have to die—he could be trapped underwater in a Volkswagen bus with only enough air for two hours, and Roger Mudd could describe the rescue attempts. Then the Navy divers would get Walter out, and he would say, "That's the way it is," and sort of salute into the camera, and the news program would fade out into the coffee ads. Or it might be good if he did die after all, just after the Navy divers got him out of the sunken bus. Then he could say, "That's the way it is," as his last words. There are a lot of possibilities to the Walter Cronkite show. I used to try to get some of the other kids interested in it, and maybe set up a Walter Cronkite fan club, but they didn't even take it seriously, and I got a reputation as a crazy.

I was eating my TV dinner and watching Roger Mudd. It was very nice. He's no Walter Cronkite, but he always does a good show. Usually people are talking and making noise around the house when I'm watching the news, but this time it was really nice. No Mom, no Dad, no Leslie. Just me and Roger Mudd and my TV dinner. I decided to stay up and watch the late news too. I had never seen the late news. In fact, I had never seen anything on television after ten o'clock, which is my bedtime. I was pretty excited at the idea of watching television as late as I wanted.

I got the magazine with the TV listings from the top of the television. The late news came on at eleven o'clock. In between there was a game show where people got prizes for guessing how much things cost, like a carload of assorted sausages. If they could guess how much the sausages were worth, they could have them, and an icebox, and a car, and a lot of other stuff. There was a movie about a guy who is a doctor who rides around the country on a motorcycle and doesn't tell anyone he's a doctor, and then when they get into accidents, or get sick, or have babies, he takes care of them. Then he gets on his motorcycle. I went and got my model airplane kit to work on while I waited for the late news.

I spread some newspapers in front of the TV set and got to work on my model. It was a DC-10 airliner. Authentic in Every Detail, it said on the box. Probably when Walter Cronkite goes to cover news stories in China and places like that, he flies in airplanes like it. I was thinking about how his plane could be forced down in Tibet, which is near China in the high mountains, and nobody would know what happened to him. Then Roger Mudd would be reporting it on the news, and Walter Cronkite could fix the radio in the plane and call the television station and tell them where the plane had crashed and where to send rescue parties. Roger Mudd could put Walter Cronkite's voice on the air, and he could tell how the plane had crashed in the mountains, and how everybody was getting along, and then he could finish the program for Roger Mudd. "That's the way it is," Walter Cronkite could say.

I got a lot done on the tail section of my model. The movie about the doctor who rides a motorcycle was only fair. It was made someplace where there were mountains right alongside of the ocean, probably California, and there were lots of scenes of the doctor riding on top of cliffs over the water. The story was sort of dumb. He meets this girl who hurt her leg, and she's getting gangrene, but she won't go to a doctor because she doesn't trust anybody, so the doctor on the motorcycle plays his guitar for her, and then she trusts him and he takes her to the hospital. There were some good fried chicken commercials, and I thought about putting another TV dinner in the oven to eat with the late news.

I decided to settle for some chocolate chip cookies and a glass of milk. I was going to clean up the place where I was working on my model, but I remembered that I was all alone in the house, and it wouldn't be in anyone's way. I left it just where it was. I turned down the lights and got ready to watch the late news.

The guy who does the late news has a beard! His name is Bob Barney and he's real good. He giggles, sort of, in the wrong places when he tells news stories, and he's bald, and you can see the lights in the TV studio shining off the top of his head. I was really impressed with him. I think he's almost in Walter Cronkite's class. There's also a little fat guy who does the weather forecast. He's good too. And they do news that doesn't get on the early news show. The show comes from Hogboro, which is just a few miles south of McDonaldsville, and they do stories about things that happen right around here. They even did a story about a guy who got arrested right at the McDonaldsville pool where I go every day! It was a great show.

I wasn't the least bit tired. I felt just fine, sitting in the dark living room with the set on. The only light in the room was the blue light from the television set. I could see my partly finished model airplane on the sheets of newspaper in front of the set, like Walter Cronkite's airliner forced down in the snowfields of Tibet.



I was sort of thinking about the airplane, the news had ended, and I wasn't paying any attention to the ads. A guy dressed up in an apron was in a supermarket telling two ladies how soft this toilet paper was, when a huge gorilla came up behind him and just picked him up and ate him. Like a cookie. Two bites. It all happened so fast that I wasn't sure if I had really seen it. As I said, I wasn't really paying attention.

Then a movie came on. It wasn't stupid like the one about the doctor on a motorcycle. This was a wonderful monster movie about a mad scientist who has an island and does horrible experiments there. This scientist, who is fat and always carries a big whip, takes all kinds of animals and turns them into men. Some of them are more like men, and some of them are more like animals. They all hate the mad scientist, because they would rather have been animals, but they are afraid of him too.

Every night the scientist cracks his whip and makes the man-animals repeat the same thing.

He says, "What is the law?"