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Carnivorous Plants

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Charlotte Andrews is 13.
She watched television today.

Today in American History, Mr. Delacy gave us a big lecture about how we’re all beautiful people and the trouble with beautiful people is that they never really have to learn to hold a conversation. You’re lazy! he said, all of you! stomping his little foot for emphasis. But I’m not beautiful, I thought. Neither is Mr. Delacy. He wears sandals with socks. He is small, old, crooked and excitable. He once told us that he washes his hair with a bar of soap. He seemed proud of that. After those opening comments he lectured about Manifest Destiny for half an hour. It’s a dumb idea, and it goes like this: Westward expansion of the United States was meant to be. As if God had anything to do with it. As if? That’s all I wrote in my notebook today.

When I got home, Dad was on the couch watching the nature channel like always. He likes the nature channel much more than he liked having a job, I am beginning to think.

Until a few weeks ago he dressed for the job he no longer had and spent his days listening to classical music and staring out the window. Then when I got home, he would talk to me quietly about my attitude problem, which I really don’t think existed. He called those “family conferences.” We would face each other across the kitchen table. He would talk calmly and I would try my hardest not to yell at him. He usually had
a list he referred to in order to make sure the information he presented was complete. It was all very businesslike. Things like “failure to take adequate care in stowing your possessions” and “playing the same song over and over” were on the list. Noise was always a big issue. I can’t help it if I talk loud. My mom talks loud, so loud that even though she is two-thousand miles away in Alaska I have to hold the phone away from my ear sometimes. She gets really worked up about the lack of good role models for me here in Stanton.

I lost all my “privileges” in the course of those family conferences. The first time it was no phone, no allowance, no friends for one week; the second time it was two weeks, then three weeks, and so on. He used a red pen to mark them off on the kitchen calendar at the end of each conference. By the time he got turned on to TV, I’d “earned” thirty-nine weeks of punishment and had started to develop a very bad attitude. I felt that I should do something truly wrong, something that would make me feel deserving of this punishment. I wanted to make Dad lose his cool.

So, on the last morning of this terrible time, I got up early and programmed the CD player to play Santana’s “Oye Como Va” thirteen times. I love that song. Before I started the music, I hurried around the house turning on the blender, the mixer, the vacuum cleaner, the dishwasher, the metronome, the washer and dryer. The whole house hummed. I picked up my coat and paused in the front hall to take it all in. I clicked on the CD player and, as an afterthought, I turned on the television. On the nature channel turtles were laying eggs on a warm beach far away. I put the remote control in my book bag and stepped out the door. I was high on life.

All day long, I imagined my father running around the house turning things off. I pictured him
disheveled and untucked and so angry that he couldn’t possibly form a list. I could practically see him turning the house upside down looking for the remote. I knew he would look for it, even though back then he didn’t watch TV, because with him each thing has to be in a certain place.

I couldn’t keep it to myself; I told two friends. At first they just thought I was nuts, but as I explained my reasoning and gave more details, the beauty of what I had done became clear to them. They told others, and now I am a minor celebrity. Soon I hope to be a ringleader, guiding small groups of my peers on ne’er-do-well capers.

I loitered for a long time after school that day, putting off the family conference that seemed inevitable. At six I walked in the door and discovered my dad still in his pajamas, watching a show about peat bog ecosystems. The metronome ticked slowly on the piano. Everything else had been turned off; I guess the TV distracted him before he reached the metronome. He didn’t notice me. He reclined on the couch, calm in a fuzzy absent way. I only knew his tense variety of calm, and couldn’t quite believe that this was different, so I stood in the entry hall, waiting for his lecture, watching a time lapse of moss growing in a Canadian bog. Five minutes passed like that. Then there was a commercial break and he looked my way. “Oh hi, Charlotte,” he said, yawning. “A show about cheetah society is on next. Should be great. Pull up a chair.”

I shrugged and sat down like it was no big deal that his personality had completely changed after just one long day of lying around blissed out in front of the TV. Since then, our conversations rarely last longer than a dozen words. We only talk about food, drink, and whether that last one was a good commercial. I think we
deserve a Nielson box. Yesterday I tried to explain to Mom how great it is that Dad and I can agree to sit quietly on the couch and watch grass grow and slick furry babies being born. That sure made her talk loud.

Today when I walked into the house and dropped my books on the table, Dad said, “Shhh! This is a good one.” I sat down. He was right. The show was called “Pitcher Plants of North America.” Pitcher plants are brightly colored, tall, narrow vessels that grow in the acidic soil of bogs and crave the sweet blood of living things. Each pitcher plant has a leaf flopped over the top opening to keep rainwater out and to trap its victims. A pool of enzymes inside the pitcher digests them. It takes three to five days for the plant to digest each insect. When the plant is full, it closes its hood flap and rests.

For one hour we watched ants march in lines up the nectar-coated sides of pitcher plants. They would reach the top, peek inside the hood, and fall in, one after another. One variety has hundreds of white spots on the side of the pitcher, like windows, so that when the ant peeks inside the hood, it’s not dark or scary at all. It looks like a cathedral. It looks like Manifest Destiny to the ants, I suppose, and so even though each ant sees the ant before him fall in, he leaps to meet the light.

Dad has chosen life on the couch. Today I decided that’s not the life for me. I’m not sure what to call my choice, but my first course of action is clear: early tomorrow morning I will call two friends and run down to the freeway. We’ll sprawl out on the embankment and pretend to be dead. At first the sleepier commuters will cruise by, oblivious. The less sleepy commuters will slow down, rubbernecking to see us. Then one drowsy driver — that’s all it will take — will rear end one of the rubbernecks, and somebody else will run into that person, and who knows, maybe’ll cause a ten car or even twen-
ty car pileup. And all the while I'll recline by the side of the road, my mouth sagging open, my eyes closed, imagining my future: stealing from bad people, rigging elections, killing my enemies one by one.