

ORA'S FARM

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“Hey, Jessica, want to go with me to Ora’s?”
Stephen asked.

“No, I’m having a tea party,” Jessica answered and
Stephen realized her dolls and her koala bear, Sydney, were
in a circle around a make believe table.

“Suit yourself,” he said as he went on his way.

Jessica was two different people inside one body,
Stephen decided. Sometimes she played with dolls and was
prissy, other times she would put on blue jeans and become
the best tomboy in the world. She would ride her bike
really fast and then slam on the brakes and slide. She even
blew a tire once. Another redeeming quality was some of
the things she said. *Gag me with a maggot* was pretty cool,
coming from a girl, Stephen thought.

Jessica had the face of an angel, but not the attitude. Her hair was long and her face was slender, she had a cute little dimple and her blue eyes laughed when she did.

She lived in a fancy three story cluster home just down the street from Stephen. He lived in a house that had been there before the street got so fancy. He had to pass her house to get to Ora's and he always asked if she wanted to go. Sometimes she did, sometimes she didn't.

As Stephen left his street and walked down the older main road, he could see that the gate to Ora's was open. Ora had no phone. Everyone knew they were more than welcome if the gate was open, they knew they should go home if it was closed. It was that simple.

Jessica's mom was raised on a farm and was happy to be gone from it, living in her fancy cluster home. Stephen wasn't sure what kind of farm she had lived on, but he figured it probably wasn't like Ora's farm. Ora's farm was the kind of place one would expect a spider like Charlotte to take residence and spin a miraculous web or something.

“Hey – wait up!” Jessica called and Stephen turned to see her running behind him. “Changed my mind,” she said and Stephen smiled as he waited for her.

Stephen had sandy blonde hair and a cowlick and Jessica thought he was really cute, but she never planned to tell him.

“Where is Kristin?” Stephen asked her.

“She’s your next door neighbor, don’t *you* know?”

He shook his head. “She’s been gone a long time.”

“A whole week,” Jessica said, as puzzled as he was.

Ora recognized Jessica and Stephen immediately as they walked down the long dirt driveway. He waved and called out *hello* to them in his friendly, *I’m so really glad to see you* way. “Kristin not with you?” he asked the two of them as they got closer.



“No, she’s not home,” Stephen said. “Her whole family has been gone all week. I don’t know where.”

Ora looked sad, but Stephen didn’t know why. Ora was putting a blanket over his gardenias because he had heard it might frost. It felt too warm to put a blanket on anything to Stephen, but he was only seven. Kristin and Jessica were seven, too, and Stephen had known them for two years. That’s how long it had been since Stephen’s mom and dad had gotten a divorce and he and his mom had moved into the neighborhood.

Jessica went to see the rabbits and Stephen grabbed an edge of the blanket to try and help Ora cover the gardenias, but the gardenia bush was taller than he was.

“I’m sure Kristin will be back soon,” Ora said kindly and Stephen nodded.

Stephen and Kristin’s houses had separate driveways, but a common slab of cement joined them together at one point. Someone had made the driveway that way so a car could be turned around easily, but to Kristin and Stephen, it was their mutual place. They rode their bikes through the turn around spot and they sat on it at night and talked. Stephen’s basketball goal stood right at the edge of the concrete and he and Kristin played basketball in the mutual spot also. He had taught her to dribble and shoot and she had rapidly become the best girl basketball player in the neighborhood. She could even outshoot most of the boys.

Kristin lived with her mom and dad and her brother, Nathan. Jessica lived with her mom and her step father. Stephen lived with just his mom. He thought the other kids

were lucky to have a dad or a step dad around their house, but Jessica told him that she thought *he* was lucky.

She said that she could see his house from her bedroom on the third floor and she told him that sometimes she watched him and his mom out in the yard. Sometimes his mom was working on her flowers and talking and laughing with him as she worked and sometimes she would throw him a baseball over and over so he could practice hitting it.

Stephen had asked Jessica if she had noticed that his mom couldn't pitch very well and that her shoulder always started to hurt after so many throws. Jessica said she hadn't noticed that, she just saw them having a good time. She said that sometimes even after it was dark and she had been sent upstairs to her bedroom to go to sleep, she would see them on the front porch, still talking.

Stephen told her that his dad could pitch for nine innings and not even be tired. His dad was the coach of his little league team. He knew that his dad loved him and he knew that his mom loved him, but he still wished they all lived together. Then his dad could pitch to him more and he

would get better and better and maybe even be a famous baseball player for the Atlanta Braves someday.

“What’s troubling you?” Ora asked the little one who was so lost in thought he hadn’t even run up to see the goats yet.

Stephen told Ora that he might not be able to play for the Atlanta Braves because he didn’t have his dad at home to help him practice a lot.

Ora’s blue eyes widened, then his head moved downward with a quick little jerk without the rest of his body moving, as he did a lot.

“Life isn’t perfect, you know. This old world could be a lot better than it is if folks went by some of God’s rules and stuff, but they don’t and it’s not and we have to live with it.”

“What rules?” Stephen asked as Ora continued to cover the gardenias.

“Take the golden rule, for instance. If everyone treated their neighbor as they would like to be treated, wouldn’t this be a wonderful place?”

Stephen wasn't sure what that had to do with his parents' divorce, but he nodded. He and Kristin and Jessica always treated each other that way and it worked pretty well. Besides, Stephen took Ora's word as the gospel truth. Ora's track record spoke for itself. He was never wrong, as far as Stephen knew.

"If it's meant for you to be a player for the Braves, you will be, if it's not, you won't," Ora said kindly. "No use worrying too much about it and don't ever make baseball your God."

"Is that a baby crying?" Stephen asked suddenly.

"Why, it sure is!" Ora said with all the enthusiasm of a new mother, proud to show off her young. "Come on!" he said as he hurriedly put the last blanket on the bush. He was so excited, he was having a hard time moving as fast as he wanted to move.

"I thought it was a real baby," Stephen laughed as Ora picked up a little black billy goat.

"Well, it is," Ora said seriously. "It's only three days old."

Stephen would have laughed, but Ora was serious.
He loved his animals as if they were his children.

“There’s new rabbits, too. Want to hold one?”

“I want to hold the billy goat.”

“Be my guest, but watch out for the mama goat,”
Ora said, handing him the little bundle.

