

CHAPTER 6

Indian Cigars & the Secret Place

Mouth's older brother had told him about Indian Cigars, and he enthusiastically shared this information with us. When his brother was our age, he and his friends would pick the green pods from a Catalpa (Indian cigar) tree during the summer and put them on a shed or carport roof to dry. When dried, they became dark brown, and when lit, they burned slowly. His brother and friends would smoke them, pretending they were smoking real cigars.

"How cool," I thought as I listened to him tell us about them. In the 1950s it was cool to smoke. Our dads smoked, and smokers inundated the movies and TV, so of course, we all wanted to be cool like the people we admired.

Mouth took us to see the Indian cigar tree in a neighbor's yard. It was filled with eight to ten-inch green pods that looked like giant string beans. A few of us climbed the tree and dropped down enough pods for everyone to have about five. Most of us had a special place to dry them. My house had a tool shed in the backyard. I went to the back of the shed and, using my dad's saw horse, climbed up to the slanted roof and carefully placed my stash there to dry for about a month. I also had

a place in the shed to hide them when it rained. Somehow I just knew that if my parents found the pods they'd know I planned to smoke them, so I kept them hidden. We were all excited to have our first smokes, and I checked my stash weekly, turning them with each inspection hoping to hurry them up.

When they darkened, we made secret arrangements to meet in the woods near our neighborhood. Mouth and Limpy supplied the matches and also demonstrated how to light and puff on the pretend cigars. Both had older brothers who shared their smoking expertise freely.

"Hack, hack, hack," rang out as we took our first puffs.

"Man, this is really strong," and I coughed some more.

"Yeah, and it tastes terrible," Shortstop tossed his to the ground and stamped it out.

"I'm a real cool cat," announced Gabby as he puffed on his cigar.

Mouth inhaled, but the rest of us didn't. We merely took the smoke into our mouths and blew it out. Sometimes we'd exhale through our noses or blow smoke rings. That was fun. If I inhaled, it was by mistake and resulted in a coughing fit.

As we smoked, we walked through the woods. We followed our usual route along the path which began at the east end of the woods, turned south, and eventually looped around to the western end of the trail which led out of the woods. At the southernmost part of the trail where it made its turn to the west, Speedy spotted what looked like a path heading south through the dark, thick woods. It was heavily covered with brush and weeds, but you could still see that it had been an active trail at one time.

"Let's follow it and see where it goes." He started down the trail with Gabby and Twitch right behind him. "I'll be the trailblazer, so be

careful and don't let the tree branches hit y'all in the face." With that comment, Speedy intentionally let go of several small branches that whacked Gabby and Twitch across the face.

"Very funny!" replied Twitch. Gabby laughed and shot a few more branches at Twitch. Twitch ducked and punched Gabby playfully in the arm and said, "Wise guy."

It became a game as we walked through the woods. When we saw a branch with a little spring in it, we'd let it fly after we'd passed. The game was to see how many you could dodge before getting hit.

As we walked, Seeds commented, "I've never seen a path here before."

"Me, neither. I guess it's because we've been on our bikes and went by too fast," agreed Limpy.

It was slow going, but fun as we talked, whacked each other with branches, and ventured deeper into the woods. By this time we'd either finished our smokes or tossed them back on the main trail.

"Do y'all suppose this is an old Indian trail?" questioned Booger.

"All of the trails in the woods could have been Indian trails once upon a time, but that would have been a really long time ago when the Indians used them. This one is newer, but no one's used it for a long time. The brush is too high," Smarty explained, sharing his knowledge. It's funny how Smarty could tell us stuff, and everyone listened, and no one objected to the mini-lessons. That didn't happen with the other older guys, like Mouth or Limpy. When they told us stuff, we thought they were trying to fool us or something.

"Wow! I didn't know these woods were so big," remarked Tank.

"I wonder where this path comes out?" said Speedy who was leading the way.

"Do you think we'll be able to find our way back?" Gabby worried.

“We’ve gone a long ways, and I haven’t paid any attention.”

“We’ll be fine.” Smarty nudged Gabby. “I can find the way back.” That news seemed to satisfy Gabby, and he began telling jokes.

“Why can’t a frog get any books from a library?” No one answered. “Cause he always says Reddit. Don’t you get it, read it, reddit,” he explained. “I know. Why did the little moron throw the butter out the window?”

Speedy said, “Why?”

“Because he wanted to see a butterfly.” Most of us chuckled. Now he was encouraged, “Why did the little moron hit himself in the head with a hammer?”

“I’ll ask why if you promise this will be the last one,” Tank complained.

“Because it felt so good when he stopped,” Gabby said with a laugh. Some guys laughed but most booed. Bouncy started talking about the Yankees, and Gabby ceased with the jokes and joined in that conversation.

After traveling for about fifteen minutes, our column of boys stopped. The path was blocked by a gate and fence. In the distance I could see some very large trees and a very large, old house.

“Is the gate locked? I want to go in and see what’s there,” Gabby said excitedly.

“Hold your water!” Speedy started messing with the gate. “Yep, it’s locked. The gate hinges are all rusted, but I think I can push it open. There, it’s opening from the hinge side rather than the latch side,” he muttered to himself.

“I sure hope we don’t get in trouble for this. Do you see any dogs or people around?”

“No. It looks empty.”

“There’s a ‘No Trespassing’ sign.”

“Sometimes those signs say, ‘Trespassers Will Be Shot.’ Do ya’ll

think anyone's around to shoot us," whispered Booger.

"Here, you come up front in case anyone's around with a gun." With that comment, Speedy grabbed Booger and pulled him to the front as Booger protested and squirmed to get away.

"Ya'll stop horsing around and making noise. We need to be quiet in case someone's here," cautioned Limpy.

"I don't know about this."

"We came this far. Let's check it out."

We walked around to the front of the house through low weeds. The canopy from the trees provided a lot of shade and kept the weeds from taking over the yard, but vines clung to everything on which they could gain purchase.

"Look at the size of that house. It looks like three stories," declared Tank.

"Do y'all suppose it's haunted?" Gabby said standing behind Speedy.

"Let's go in and see if we can find any ghosts. *He, he, ha, ha, ha!*" Smarty spoke in his scariest mad-scientist voice.

"Stop trying to scare us, Smarty. I'll stand guard out here while y'all go inside." Marbles stepped back a few feet and crossed his arms over his chest.

Tank stepped up beside him. "I'll help you."

"Chicken, *bok, bok, bok,*" teased Speedy with Gabby joining in.

"Ghost, if you're in there, get Speedy. He's the one you want," Tank called out, cupping his hands around his mouth.

The chicken calls continued as Speedy led the way up the creaky steps to the front door of the old house. He grabbed the doorknob and gave it a slow turn. The door screeched open, and we apprehensively entered the large spider-webbed room.

“I wonder why the front door isn’t locked. Do you suppose someone’s in there?”

“It’s unlocked because ghosts don’t need keys.”

“Ghosts don’t need doors either. They go through walls.”

“Look at all the spider webs. No one’s been here in a long time,” noted Speedy as we looked around the large room.

“Hey, there’s some furniture in here covered with sheets,” Gabby started to touch the couch.

“Don’t move that sheet. There’s a ghost under there. Look out!” shouted Smarty as he jostled another piece of furniture in the room trying to spook Gabby. It worked. Gabby and Speedy both jumped and dashed back out the front door with everyone following except Smarty. Booger, who was too scared to move, stood frozen in place. As we reached the spot where Marbles and Tank stood guard, Booger suddenly flew out the front door with his hands in the air, terrified and screaming loudly. As he bounded down the steps, he stumbled and fell face first to the ground. He jumped up and continued his dash, past us and all the way to the fence. Suddenly the front door to the house slammed shut with a bang. We all were poised to run as we stared at the door to see what would happen or what would come through the door next.

“Did y’all see a ghost? I knew that place was haunted,” Tank stammered.

“Yeah, I saw the sheet covering the couch move. I think we woke a ghost,” agreed Gabby.

Booger walked to our position to join in the conversation, “I was so scared I couldn’t move. I finally called out to Smarty, but he didn’t answer. So I looked around for him, but he was gone. I think the ghost

got him. Then I heard a noise coming from another room, and that's when I ran out of the house. It was really scary."

Marbles said. "Maybe we should go home and get help."

"No, we've got to go back in there and get Smarty," I stated firmly. "We can't leave him here."

"Okay," replied Mouth hesitantly.

We all walked slowly and cautiously to the front door of the haunted house. Marbles stayed on guard duty, but this time Tank joined in with the rest of us in the search for Smarty. I turned the doorknob and called out Smarty's name. The door creaked opened, and I cautiously entered, scanning every inch of the room for the ghost or Smarty. I saw neither.

"Spread out and look for any trace of Smarty," I directed.

"I don't want to go in another room by myself," whined Booger.

I acquiesced, "Okay. We all will search this room first, and then we'll look in the other rooms." And with that said, we moved about the room with much trepidation. I think we probably looked like a school of minnows since everyone moved together and within arm's length of each other.

"Look Gabby, here's the couch where the ghost almost got you," whispered Shortstop. With that pronouncement, the sheet jumped from the couch with a ghoulish laugh followed by a howl. Every one of us bolted for the door screaming all the way, and four of us got stuck in the threshold trying to go through at the same time. With the rest of the guys following in quick secession, they broke the blockade in the doorway causing the roadblock to tumble through to the porch outside. The rest of the guys ran over our prone bodies to a safe distance from the house. The ghost came through the door last, almost tripping over us four. The ghost was laughing hysterically, even doubling over.

“Wait a minute, that’s Smarty!” Bouncy yelled from his prone position on the porch. “Look at the sneakers.” Speedy, Gabby, Bouncy, and I got up from the porch and walked toward the ghost. Speedy grabbed the sheet and exposed Smarty as he continued his hysterical laughter.

“Look, guys. This is our ghost,” announced Speedy.

“I wish I could have seen the expressions on your faces better, but I was only able to poke a few small holes in this sheet. Shortstop almost jumped as high as Booger did when we went to see *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man*,” gasped out Smarty between bouts of laughter. It was contagious, and the rest of us started laughing along with him.

“Shortstop, when the ghost came up from the couch, you jumped so high, your legs started pumping before you hit the ground. I think you were the one who broke the blockade in the doorway. You were really moving,” Limpy said, chuckling with every word as he and the rest of the gang joined us on the porch.

As the laughter died down, Tank inquired, “Smarty, were you causing all the ghost stuff in the house?”

“Yep.”

“What about the first time when the sheet moved, and we heard noises?”

“Yep, that was me.”

“After all the guys ran out of the house and only you and me were left, was that you making the noise in another room?” Booger piped in.

“That was me.”

“After Booger ran out of the house, the front door slammed shut. Was that you?”

“Booger slammed it when he ran out.”

“No, I didn’t,” interjected Booger.

“Well, who did?” I pondered. Puzzled by this last statement, we all looked around at each other with special scrutiny of Smarty to see if he was lying.

“I don’t know how the door closed. I was in the dining room when Booger ran out of the house. That’s the honest truth,” claimed Smarty.

“I told y’all this place was haunted,” announced Tank.

“Hey, where’s Marbles?” Twitch had been scanning the group intently. “He was supposed to be on guard duty.”

“Maybe he’s around back. I’ll go look,” and Mouth jogged off.

“Guys, this is a really neat place, and from the looks of it, no one’s been here in years. Let’s make this our secret meeting place. Like a special club that only we know about,” observed Smarty.

“What about the ghost?” Tank was serious.

“We can make him a part of our club, too,” suggested Gabby, and we all laughed at that.

“He can be your best friend, Tank,” razzed Speedy.

“I want a girlfriend not a ghost friend,” Tank responded quickly. More laughter.

“Believe me, you’ve got a better chance with a ghost,” was Speedy retort. Tank always talked about girls and about wanting a girlfriend, but it was just talk. He was as shy around them as the rest of us were.

As we discussed the idea of making the haunted house our secret meeting place, Mouth returned with Marbles by his side.

“Hey, Marbles, where’ve you been?” queried Twitch.

“I was looking around back, but I didn’t see anything,” replied Marbles casually.

“He was waiting on the other side of the back gate for us,” Mouth rebuked.

“Oo-oo-oo!” Twitch ribbed. “I guess you wanted to get a head start on the ghost.” We all laughed, but Marbles pretended he didn’t hear the comment.

Smarty told Mouth and Marbles about the idea of making this our secret meeting place, and our excitement began to build about the possibilities. Marbles reported seeing the remnants of a tree house in the back yard, and Smarty said there was a large table in the dining room where we could hold meetings and play games. Bouncy volunteered candles that were stored in a drawer in his house. Other possibilities were tossed around which generated even more excitement. Now that the ghost scare had died down, we took a little time to explore the house and the yard.

While we were doing that, Speedy and Gabby walked down the front driveway, which meandered through the woods, to a large, locked gate. The gate was at the dead end of a paved road with no trespassing signs posted everywhere. While they were there, no traffic of any kind came down the road.

It was getting late, and we needed to start walking home. We had always judged the time by looking at the sun’s position in the sky, and that worked well most of the time, but since Smarty had gotten a Roy Rodgers watch for his last birthday, we didn’t need to guess anymore. Before we left, however, Mouth suggested we make a pact of silence about our secret meeting place, and everyone agreed. Mouth held up his right hand and said, “I will never, never tell a single soul about our secret place. Cross my heart and hope to die. Now y’all repeat that,” and we all mumbled the pledge and made a cross on our chests mimicking Mouth’s actions.

“Now, we all need to spit and shake on the pledge,” and he spit into his right hand and reached out to shake hands with Bouncy who was

standing next to him. Bouncy spit into his hand and shook hands with Mouth. This was repeated over and over again until everyone had sealed his pledge of silence.

“What a mess. I could almost puke with all that spit on my hand,” complained Booger as he wiped his hand in the grass. Others were wiping their hands on their pants legs. It was gross; fourteen slimy yuck samples of spit in your palm.

We put the back gate in its correct position, so no one could see that it had been broken from its hinges. Then we hurried along our freshly blazed path back to the main trail. We took some time to disguise the entryway to our path, hoping no one else could see it. As we continued our walk home, we talked and laughed about our day’s adventures and made plans for our next visit there.

“Hey, after dinner tonight, let’s play Kick-the-Can,” Seeds suggested, looking around for agreement.

“Yeah, I bet some of the other kids in the neighborhood will be out tonight. It will really be fun with lots of people,” Gabby encouraged.

“My cousins will be visiting tonight, and I know they’ll want to play,” Mouth added.

It seemed to be unanimous, so we made plans for our evening game as we walked the rest of the way home.

After dinner that night, we assembled outside as we often did during the summer. Sometimes we’d talk and goof around, and sometimes we’d play a game. This night we played Kick-the-Can as we had planned. We always kept a stash of tin cans for this purpose. One can would be placed on the dirt path that went between my house and a neighbor’s house. The path went across the creek to the street and houses behind

our street. By placing the can on the path, we could kick it in many directions unobstructed, and the players had time to run in any direction to hide from *It*. *It*, of course, was the name given to the person who tried to find the players and race them back to the can. When *It* got to the can first, those whose names were called went to jail. Should anyone beat *It* to the can, they'd kick the can, thereby freeing everyone from jail, and *It* had to start over from scratch. The jail for captured players was around a tree in my front yard. Both the jail and the path were lit by the streetlights nearby making this a perfect place to stage the game. We also had boundary rules. You couldn't hide in a house, and you needed to stay within the yards of the houses that could be viewed from the can's home base on the path.

That night we had at least twenty players, and I was *It*. Speedy volunteered to kick the can, and it sailed towards the creek allowing everyone to run and find a hiding place before I was able to fetch the can and return it to its home. As I went for the can, I surveyed the area watching to see where people might hide. I had spotted a number of logical locations. Some of the younger kids took up hiding places among bushes in a neighbor's yard not far away. I recognized two of them and called their names with my foot on the can, and they came out of hiding and went to the jail. Three others who were hiding with them ran, and I called their names, and they also went to jail. I looked around and noticed movement in the bushes beside a house across the street. I raced towards the bushes as quietly as possible. As I approached, one of the kids spotted me, and we all raced back to the can with me in the lead and gaining ground. However, before I reached the can, Speedy ran out from my backyard and kicked the can just as I arrived. Everyone scattered as I quickly retrieved the can, and again I had twenty

opponents to capture. I ventured in an ever-expanding circle around the can looking for movement in the darkness. Seeing no movement, I ran two doors down from my house and entered the backyard. I ran past Smarty, Mouth, Marbles, and Tank who were pressed against the side of the house in the shadows. I called their names and dashed to the can. I barely beat Smarty, calling his name and the others in quick succession. They entered the jail.

We continued this game for some time. After a while, I spotted several girls and two smaller kids hiding near the creek. I pretended not to see them and wandered in another direction moving my head from side to side checking my peripheral vision for movement. I spotted two of the girls running for the can. I also spotted Speedy and Gabby running for the can from another direction. I reacted quickly and beat all of them to the can while calling out their names. Other attempts were made to free the jailed players, but soon I had all twenty kids in jail. It was time for a new *It*.

We could usually play one complete game and one partial game before it was time to go in around nine o'clock. It was always a good time, and surprisingly, we had few arguments. When we did argue, it was always when Tank, Gabby, or Speedy were *It*. Tank would sometimes get frustrated and quit before the game ended, and Speedy and Gabby would often work as a team giving up the hiding places of others. When we caught them cheating, several of us would conspire to charge the can simultaneously from different directions and free their prisoners. Booger was seldom chosen to be *It*. The few times he was, the game ended with no one in jail. He was just that slow and uncoordinated. It was good clean fun and a great game to play at night.

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“You mentioned the woods and the old house to me before, but I hadn’t heard the stories. I hope you have more about your secret place. I enjoyed that one; it was funny. I never heard of a spit pledge before. Yuck!” Sam stated.

“It was a slimy mess but it cleaned up easy. I thought you’d like our adventures in the woods and at the old house. We spent a lot of time there, and I have several more stories that I think you’ll like, as well. When we first discovered the place, it was really scary. I think I was nine. As we got older and got used to going there, it became a club house, but we always had the feeling that it was somehow haunted.”

“Your scary voice imitation startled me. Was Smarty’s voice that effective?”

“Yeah, he could do a really good scary voice.”

“Even Smarty had a mischievous side. You’ve always talked about him as if he was your highly respected big brother.”

“He was more mature than the rest of us, but he was still a kid. He really seemed to enjoy the old house.”

“Did you ever go to your secret place in the dark?”

“Yes. We went there at night when we were older, but I’m trying to tell the stories chronologically, so that’s a story for later.”

“Oh goody. Your haunted house at night. I bet that was really scary.”

Clay did his scary voice imitation again, and they both laughed. “Did you have a scary place or play those games?” asked Clay.

“Nope, girls don’t usually look for scary places to play. I did play Hide-and-Go-Seek, but never Kick-the-Can.”

“We played Hide-and-Go-Seek when we were little, but by the time I was nine or ten, Kick-the-Can was our nighttime game of choice.

“Your story took me away from my task for a bit, but I think that’s all we need for the stew. Thanks for cutting up the vegetables. I’ll put it on a low temperature and let it slow cook till dinner time. You did wash your hands before handling those vegetable, didn’t you?”

“You’re worried about the spit pledge, aren’t you?” They both laughed.

As he was preparing to leave the kitchen, Clay drew in a deep breath and said, “It smells good already.”

“Yeah, I like the smell of seared meat, too. In a few hours the vegetables and spices will blend to really make a great smell.”

“I know. This is one of my favorite meals, always satisfying and healthy.”

“I’ll meet you in the den after I clean up the counter,” and she kissed him on the cheek.

Soon Sam joined Clay in the den, and he continued his stories after they both had settled into comfortable chairs.