

THE Secret World

of Chestnut Drive

By Vibhuti Jain

Fertilizer, lime, bags of bulbs, sprinkler, spades, rototiller, lawn mower, plant pots . . . the Chestnut Drive Annual Gardening Frenzy is on. Whose team am I on? My dad's, of course. We're a week behind Mrs. Edwards, who already planted her cherry tomato plants. Mr. O'Conner's lawn, which is right next to ours, looks greener already. Though none of the neighbors act hostile or competitive with one another, everyone wants their lawn to look the best. My job is simple: I just have to walk around our lawn with this gardening thing with wheels on it and holes at the bottom for releasing fertilizer all over our lawn to make our grass greener. My brother gets the easier jobs because he gets impatient very quickly; he just has to water our newly bloomed chrysanthemums. My mom will call us in for lunch in a few minutes, though my dad won't go in until after an hour. After lunch, Courtney Edwards, a little girl I sometimes babysit, invites us to play baseball down in the cul-de-sac. Spring has finally arrived, and Chestnut Drive welcomes it.

Our street has 16 houses on it. There's a stream that goes behind our house and empties into a pond at the other end of the street. We've lost many baseballs to that stream. Baseball games consist of about six or seven people. Courtney's dad is my brother's baseball coach, so Courtney and little Beth always bring the equipment. Then Courtney invites a few of her friends to play. I sometimes join them, but just for fun because I don't have interest or talent in baseball. They normally do more arguing than playing, and Courtney and Megan Smith, a little girl my brother's age, make me umpire. Of course, my brother has an immediate problem with that, so there is no umpire.

Mrs. Edwards is normally gardening while we play, and she warns us when cars are coming. Little by little

the game starts getting monotonous. Cars start streaming into the street, and mosquitoes fly around in swarms. We're all starved and cranky, but nobody's going to leave without winning. My brother is scowling because Courtney and Megan called his home run a foul ball. Beth dropped out of the game an hour ago when she skinned her knee. After another hour, I drop out because I've literally been feasted on by dozens of mosquitoes, and I know there's no way we're going to make 24 runs in two innings. My brother comes trailing behind me two or three minutes later, yelling about how awful the game was. Half an hour later, he'll ask me to play a game of catch with him.

During spring our street is most alive. Though almost all the houses are empty till the adults come home from work, we have many kids on our street. I have my friend Lisa, whom I Rollerblade with, and my brother has his friend Derick. Our street is teeming with dogs. Along with us and the Edwards, everyone has a dog. This is especially annoying when we pass the people who live next to Megan, because they have four wild dogs that always get in my way when I'm Rollerblading down the hill. My brother will normally be playing in the cul-de-sac with Courtney and Megan or at Derick's house. Derick Nelson is the envy of all the little kids on our street, including my brother. He has the latest ten-speed mountain bike, the fastest go-cart, and a huge trampoline in his backyard, which he lets anyone jump on. Lisa's sister and the other new drivers on our street zip up and down the road. Then, little by little, my stomach starts to rumble; people start coming home from work, and everyone goes inside to eat dinner and watch TV. The construction workers who are building a house next door to us go home. My parents sit outside for a little



bit, and sometimes they start talking to the O'Connors, our next-door neighbors, if they're also sitting outside. My dad eyes the lawn and then begins to garden once more. My mother sits on the front steps, sometimes complaining about how often my dad gardens. My brother insists we play a small game of catch, which breaks up as soon as we argue about who goes to get the ball when it drops into the woods. The temperature begins to drop and a chilly breeze can be felt. The sky gets darker, hiding the hordes of mosquitoes circling me. My parents are discussing how they can zap the dandelions. My brother and I, uninterested, go back in the house to watch TV.

In summer everyone's away at camp or on vacation. There are a few games of baseball and roller hockey, but mostly people stay indoors. My brother constantly bothers me with requests to go outside. I flatly refuse, but usually end up joining him after my mom makes me. We're the only ones outside since no one else ventures from their air-conditioned havens. Shortly after picking a fight with my brother, I happily return inside.

On weekends Ms. Baker jogs up and down the street several times. People have many guests, and often driveways are filled with cars. The McCormicks have their annual string of summer parties with music

My parents insisted on walking around the neighborhood, hoping to meet a few neighbors . . . Everyone on the street already seemed to know all about us!

so loud you can hear it at the top of the road. Generally, neighbors don't complain because everyone on our street tends to have a large noisy party sometime. The Rosenbergs, Lisa's family, normally throw a party for all the neighbors. My parents really want to have one too, but the logistics are difficult: even though we have one of the biggest lawns on the street, it's also the hilliest.

In fall, everyone is back at home, and until the first frost, the gardeners are still active. Leaves change to brilliant reds, golds, and yellows. Lawns fill quite rapidly with layers and layers of leaves. Trees are bare and everything looks dead. I wade through the ocean of leaves in our backyard with a rake in my hand, hoping to get a bonus in my allowance. Courtney and Megan can be heard, screaming as they leap into large piles of leaves they've collected. Pumpkins and fall decorations also begin to appear. The O'Connors hoist

a flag with a pumpkin on it on the flag holder above their door. We also buy pumpkins at an orchard about a mile up the road. My brother and I decorate them with glow-in-the-dark puff paints.

On Halloween, many people don't come down our street because it's a dead-end road with houses that are far apart. The next-door neighbor's child, Vanessa O'Conner, along with Courtney and Beth, Megan, Derick and all the other elementary school kids on our road, trick-or-treat here early so they can hit other places later. My mom always puts candy on a tray and lets them take as much as they want. Beth, Courtney, and Megan each take one, but Vanessa eagerly takes two or three handfuls, waiting for someone to stop her. My mom smiles understandingly at Vanessa's mom.

After Halloween, everyone continues in their busy little worlds. Almost everyone is home until Thanksgiving weekend. When Thanksgiving is near, driveways are suddenly empty or lined with four or five cars. The gardening season is officially over. In the morning, the whole ground is covered with frost so that, at first glance, it seems as if it had snowed.

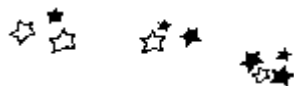
Everyone's winter jacket is out, and there is little movement outside other than cars and an occasional jogger. Chimneys suddenly begin to have smoke pouring out of them as Chestnut Drive begins to feel the chill of a Connecticut November. Drivers hope that the road stays clean. The younger generation eagerly waits for snow.

The first snow of the season finally arrives. There have been minor flurries, but nothing that stayed on the ground. The whole of Connecticut is a bit surprised, even though the weatherman warned us. Here, weathermen give at least ten false alarms of snow before the actual thing, so nobody pays much attention to what they say by the fourth or fifth time. Everyone's home. Our meager supply of firewood is replenished at once. The sounds of my dad playing with the fire blower can be heard throughout the house. Hot cocoa becomes a popular beverage throughout the neighborhood. Skiing fanatics bundle up and pack their skis so they'll be the first ones at a ski resort. All the kids on our street dress in four or five layers to go out and play, regardless of what their mom says. We drag out our toboggans and make a ton of noise. My mom stays by the window to make sure my brother and I don't get hurt or come inside with our boots on. Then after we've been out for an hour or so, mothers slowly start to come and demand that their kids go inside before they get sick. After we take off our coats and winter layers, we again ask if we can go outside, knowing full

well that Mom will never allow it. The next day, there are ugly sheets of ice, covered with heaps of sand for traction. The school bus comes later than usual, and everyone discusses what they did yesterday.

When we moved in, my parents insisted on walking around the neighborhood, hoping we'd meet a few neighbors. One would never know by the indifferent way people act around here, but news does circulate fast in our tiny community. It seemed as if everyone on the street knew all about us, though they didn't come right out and say it. The Nelsons came by our house and introduced themselves with a loaf of bread. The Rosenbergs dropped by after my parents briefly chatted with them on the street, so they could introduce me to Lisa, their daughter. The O'Connors talked to my parents before we even moved in. Right now, there are two more houses being built. One is at the total end of the street. The other is stealing our position as the first house on the street. We have no clue who is moving in.

For all its color and tradition, my neighborhood is far from perfect. It's not overly friendly, but it's always polite. The children on the street aren't that close as a group, but sometimes they do have fun together. There's not much noise or excitement, but I think that's why people live on Chestnut Drive—for the peace. ★



Humpback Whale

Streaks of light
hit your skin,
rub you gently;

a grapefruit eye
glistens within;
the spirit knows
and spreads this
to your child.

Gentle
unassuming mother,
are you frightening—
or just strange to me?

Dive down
as you fall with control
into the heart depths;

you swim at
the center of the earth
you soar in the heavens.

You speak so clearly
yet I cannot understand—
a sound that echoes
cannot be sung with any voice

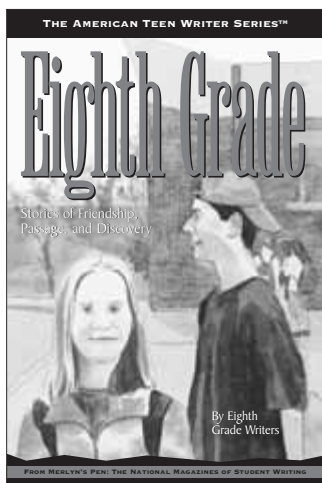
but yours.

—Julia Barenboim,
Ninth grade, James Caldwell High School,
West Caldwell, New Jersey

[Another poem by Julia Barenboim appears on page 73.]

Stories of Friendship, Passage, and Discovery by Eighth Grade Writers

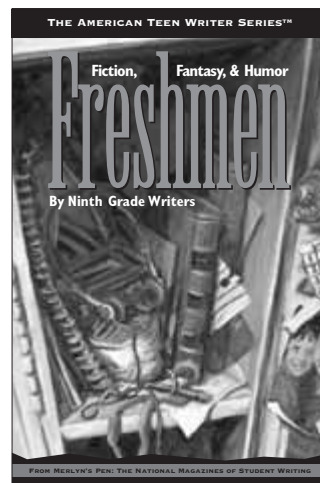
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See page 47 or 87 for more information. —Merlyn

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See page 47 or 87 for more information. —Merlyn