

Sample Chapter from THE BIG ONE-OH

Background:

Nine-year-old Charley Maplewood has no friends and no father; he lives with his mother and teen-age sister in Fresno, California, next door to a mysterious new neighbor named Garry Quarky. When Garry first moved in, Charley decided that he was the weirdest, freakiest dork he'd ever seen; but after Charley gets to know Garry a little, he comes to discover that they have a lot in common.

Charley, for instance, is a facinated by anything that's creepy and crawly, and he's an especially avid fan of a comic book series called Monsters & Maniacs. Garry, it turns out, had a previous career making special effects for low-budget horror movies; as a matter of fact, he has built a full workshop in his garage where he still makes masks and models and miniatures. So Garry and Charley - despite their age difference - strike up an unlikely alliance.

Charley is having a miserable time finding a theme for his tenth birthday party - his Big One-Oh. Years before he had been traumatized at a Western-themed party, so he flinches whenever anyone mentions "cowboys," but, so far, neither Charley nor anyone he has asked has come up with anything better. Then one day, Charley remembers seeing that - on Garry's business card - he had called himself "The Idea Man," so Charley rushes to Garry's house in desperate search of help.

And, according to Charley, this is what happens next:

"Actually, I'm what people call a consultant," Garry explained.

"But your card says "The Idea Man." Is that really you or did you just buy cards that said that already?" I asked.

"Well, I have ideas, sure. But they're... they're for businesses."

"But you agree, don't you? There's no way I can do a cowboy theme for my birthday party."

"No," Garry shook his head. "Cowboys... cowboys are really tired."

"Thank you!" I yelled.

I looked around at the room we were in. Garry had emptied one of the bedrooms in his house and made an office where he goes to work every morning. It's filled with computers and copy machines and stacks of files and piles of papers. There's a map with little colored pins pushed into cities all over the United States and Asia and Europe, and above that, six different wall clocks are set to the time in Tokyo, Honolulu, Los Angeles, New York, London and Rome.

“You work in here all day?” I asked.

“All day.”

“And in your garage all night?”

“Unh-hunh. Want something to drink?”

Garry led me into the kitchen, and I sat on a high stool at his kitchen counter. “Okay. I won’t take up much more of your time, but I need a theme for my party. Fast.”

As he poured glasses of water, Garry shook his head. “No no no. You don’t want to rush this.”

“But I gotta. My birthday is only a couple weeks away.”

“Ah. but!” He turned to me. “This is no ordinary birthday, hunh? This is a big one.” He held up one finger. “The big one...,” and, with the other hand, he made a circle, “...oh. The Big One-Oh. Get it?”

I stared at his finger figures for few seconds until I realized what he was making. “Oh! Ten!” I cried. “*One-Oh*. Yeah. I’m gonna be ten.”

Garry nodded. “Double digits, hunh? Life begins.”

The way he said that flooded me with such a feeling of specialness. A feeling of importance. A feeling of ...

“Now, how in the world did that get there?” Garry suddenly said, squinting at something on the finger he used to make the “one.”

“What?” I said, leaning forward to see.

“Oh, it’s just this fingernail. It’s... it’s longer than it should be.” And, as he said that, Garry laid his finger down on a chopping block, picked up a big kitchen knife, and WHAM!, brought it down and *chopped off his finger!*

I just about flew backwards off my kitchen stool before I realized that there wasn’t any blood. As a matter of fact, the knife just kind of bounced off the rubber finger that Garry had substituted at the last minute.

He looked up and saw that my expression was somewhere between confusion and curiosity.

“Didn’t scare you, hunh?”

I shook my head. “Sorta. Not really.”

“Well, dang,” he sighed. “It’s something that I’ve been working on.” Then he held up the squishy finger for me to see.

“It think it needs work.”

He nodded in agreement. I reached out and took the phony finger from him. “These are so cool.” I looked up at him. “How do you make them?”

“Oh, it’s easy. Like making Jell-O,” he said. “First, I make a mold of something real, somebody’s foot or ear or something. Then, when I pour this stuff...” he squished the phony finger, “...called latex into the mold, it dries into the shape.”

My mind was racing with the possibilities. “You mean, you could make, let’s just say...” I help up my right hand, “...a copy of my hand?”

Garry smiled; he seemed surprised that anyone would be interested in the thing that interested him. “How long can you sit still?”

To help the latex dry, Garry keeps his workroom warm. So he flipped on about eight space heaters until they were glowing red hot, and it got to be about a hundred degrees in there. But, honestly? I hardly noticed the heat once Garry stuck my hand in a deep bowl.

Around it he poured a fluffy goo that looked like creamy marshmallow fluff. (He calls it “alginate;” and it feels kind of gross at first; once you have it on for a while, you don’t notice.)

Garry made me promise not to move my hand while the alginate was hardening, but I didn’t get bored because, during this whole time, Garry kept telling me stories. Awesome stories.

He told me all about about the movies that he had built *effects* for back in North Carolina. He talked about making a skull with a cleaver in it for *My Principal Is A Maniac!*, which I had actually seen on the Sci Fi Channel.

“You made the skull with the cleaver?” I gasped.

“That was mine,” he blushed.

He described the swamp monster he created for *Honey, I Ate The Kids!* And there were about a dozen more that I’m forgetting now.

“And then, the *last* movie I did – the very last,” he was saying, “was called *The Coming Of The Brain Bitters*. Now, on the other films, I was one of a bunch of guys on the crew, but this one... this was entirely my baby. And this was a good story!

“It was about this evil alien bacteria that falls to earth. When people get it on their clothes, it eats into their skin and travels up to their brains and then comes blasting out their eye sockets.”

“Whoa!” My head was reeling. “I would *totally* see that movie.”

“Right?” Garry was excited. “So I made all the alien bacteria and the brains and even the eyeballs.” He picked up a perfectly painted eyeball from the counter and held it up proudly. “This was one.”

I was stunned. “That’s so good it’s scary.”

Garry smiled. “Thanks. Yeah. I did all the effects for every scene in the entire movie. And, the whole time the director and the producer and all the actors – *everybody* – they’re all patting me on the back and going, ‘Ooh, way to go, Garry!’”

“You must’ve felt great,” I said.

“Wait,” Garry warned, holding up a hand.

“Opening night. We stood in the back of a packed theatre, ready to watch the audience jump out of their seats. And my first big moment came... the first big scare that was going to get the first big scream, and... and...”

He stopped.

“And?” I prompted.

Garry shook his head. He sighed. And finally he spoke.

“They laughed.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No. They *laughed*. Just a few people at first. But that’s all it took. It was all over. Soon the whole audience was hooting and whistling and throwing popcorn at the screen. It was all over.” He turned his face away.

“So what happened?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I left the theatre. I went home and packed my stuff. And I moved. Here.”

“Maybe it wasn’t your fault,” I said.

“No,” he sighed. “I had been working toward that moment since I was twelve. And nobody – not one person in that audience – freaked out. I just wanted to... to scare them. And I couldn’t.”

After a silence, he looked up at me. And he held up the eyeball.

“You want it?”

“Seriously?!”

“I don’t need it any more.”

So I took it. It was so... so *perfect* that I couldn’t even speak, or I would have said “thank you” like Mom always reminds me to.

“Fortunately,” Garry continued, “I have a college degree in business, so I fell back on that. I make a lot more money now, believe me. It was the best thing I could have done. Getting out of the *effects* business.”

I don’t know. Something about the way he said that made me think that he wasn’t telling the whole truth.

“Speaking of ‘getting out,’ let’s get you out of that mold,” said Garry, and he slid my hand out of the hard alginate cast. He took the mold over to a table where he set it in front of a space heater to speed up its drying.

But while Garry was busy with that, I was staring at the latex eyeball, hypnotized.

And I completely forgot about Garry making my “third hand.”

I forgot about getting a theme for my party.

I forgot about making friends.

Because - and I know it sounds stupid - but at that moment I thought that eyeball was probably the most perfect present that I had ever, ever received.

That night in bed I set the eyeball on my pillow, and I stared at it. It reminded me of *Monsters & Maniacs*, Issue 114 - “I Only Have Eyes for You – *FIVE HUNDRED OF THEM!!*”

And, as I lay there, I thought. *Wow. This eye will never blink.*

It will never sleep.

It will always be watching me.

And I fell asleep smiling.