

THE EGYPT GAME



Zilpha Keatley Snyder

THREE-TIME NEWBERY HONOR WINNER

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INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

Over the years since *The Egypt Game* was first published, I've heard from a great many readers. Their letters have been wonderful, telling me how much they enjoyed the book and how they made up their own versions of the game, and almost always asking me the following question: "Where do you get your ideas?"

That question is perhaps the one fiction writers hear more frequently than any other. But it's the wrong question. A better one would be "How do you get your ideas?" Because getting stories and ideas is pretty much a matter of habit—the habit of taking interesting, but rather ordinary, bits and pieces of reality and building on them, weaving them together until a story emerges. Ideas can come from anywhere. Everyone has good sources of ideas. But the building and weaving part can be hard—fun and exciting but also difficult and demanding.

I've often used *The Egypt Game* to illustrate how any story can have "idea roots" that go back to different periods in one's life. The longest root goes back to when I was in fifth grade and became fascinated by the culture of ancient Egypt. I read everything I could find on the subject, made up my own hieroglyphic alphabet, and played my own rather simple, and very private, Egypt Game, which included walking to school like an Egyptian—imagining myself as Queen Nefertiti, actually.

A somewhat shorter root goes back to when I was teaching in Berkeley, California, while my husband was in graduate school. My classes usually consisted of American kids of all races, as well as a few whose parents were graduate students from other countries. All six of the main characters in *The Egypt Game* are based, loosely but with ethnic accuracy, on people who were in my class one year—even Marshall, whom I had to imagine backward in time to four years of age.

And the shortest root goes back to when my own daughter, a sixth-grader at the time, became intrigued by my stories about my "Egyptian period" and started her own version of the Egypt Game. Her game was much more complicated than mine and involved many of the activities described in the story, including the mummification of our parakeet, who, like Elizabeth's Prince Pete-ho-tep, died by feline assassination. A few years later, when my daughter was in her teens, she sometimes threatened to go through every one of my books looking for all the good ideas she had given me—and charge me for them!

But as I said before, all these idea roots came from rather ordinary sources that needed to be built on and woven together until they became the story of *The Egypt Game*.

Zilpha Keatley Snyder

The Discovery of Egypt

NOT LONG AGO IN A LARGE UNIVERSITY TOWN IN California, on a street called Orchard Avenue, a strange old man ran a dusty shabby store. Above the dirty show windows a faded peeling sign said:

A-Z
ANTIQUES
CURIOS
USED MERCHANDISE

Nobody knew for sure what the A-Z meant. Perhaps it referred to the fact that all sorts of strange things—everything from A to Z—were sold in the store. Or perhaps it had something to do with the owner's name. However, no one seemed to know for sure what his name actually was. It was all part of a mysterious uncertainty about even the smallest item of public information about the old man. Nobody seemed certain, for instance, just why he was known as the Professor.

The neighborhood surrounding the Professor's store was made up of inexpensive apartment houses, little family-owned shops, and small, aging homes. The people of the area, many of whom had some connection with the university, could trace their ancestors to every continent, and just about every country in the world.

There were dozens of children in the neighborhood; boys and girls of every size and style and color, some of whom could speak more than one language when they wanted to. But in the schools and on the streets they all seemed to speak the same language and to have a number of things in common. And one of the things they had in common, at that time, was a vague and mysterious fear of the old man called the Professor.

Just what was so dangerous about the Professor was uncertain, like everything else about him, but his appearance undoubtedly had something to do with the rumors. He was tall and bent and his thin beard straggled up his cheeks like dry moss on gray rocks. His eyes were dark and expressionless, and set so deep under heavy brows that from a distance they looked like dark empty holes. And from a distance was the only way that most of the children of Orchard Avenue cared to see them. The Professor lived somewhere at the back of his dingy store, and when he came out to stand in the sun in his doorway, smaller children would cross the street if they had to walk by.

Now and then, older and braver boys, inspired by the old man's strangeness, would dare each other into an attempt to tease or torment him—but not for long. Their absolute failure to get any sort of a reaction from their victim was not only discouraging, it was weird enough to spoil the fun for even the bravest of bullies.

Since there were several antique stores in the area to draw the buyers, the Professor seemed to do a fairly good business with out-of-town collectors; but his local trade was very small. It was said that he sold items that were used, but not antique, very cheaply, but even for grown-ups the prospect of a bargain was often not enough to offset the discomfort of the old man's stony stare.

It was one day early in a recent September that the Professor happened to be the only witne

to the very beginning of the Egypt Game. He had been looking for something in a seldom used storeroom at the back of his shop, when a slight noise drew him to a window. He lifted a gunnysack curtain, rubbed a peephole in the thick coating of dirt, and peered through. Outside that particular window was a small storage yard surrounded by a high board fence. It had been years since the Professor had made any use of the area, and the weed-grown yard and open lean-to shed were empty except for a few pieces of forgotten junk. But as the old man peered through the dirty window, two girls were pulling a much smaller boy through a hole in the fence.

The Professor had seen both of the girls before. They were about the same age and size, perhaps eleven or twelve years old. The one who was tugging at the little boy's leg was thin and palely blond, and her hair was arranged in a straggly pile on the top of her head. Her high cheekbones and short nose were faintly spattered with freckles and there was a strange droop to her eyes. The old man recalled that she had been in his store not long before, and along with some other improbable information she had disclosed that her name was April.

The other girl, who had the little boy by the shoulders, was African American, as was the little boy himself. A similarity in their pert features and slender arching eyebrows indicated that they were probably brother and sister. The Professor had seen them pass his store many times and knew that they were residents of the neighborhood.

The fence that surrounded the storage yard was high and strong and topped by strands of barbed wire, but one thin plank had come loose so that it was possible to swing it to one side. Both the girls were very slender and they had apparently squeezed through without much trouble, but the boy was causing a problem. He was only about four years old but he was sturdily built; moreover, he was clutching a large stuffed toy to his chest with both arms. He paid not the slightest attention to the demands of the two girls that he, "Turn loose of that thing for just a minute, can't you?" and, "Let me hold Security for you just till you get through, Marshall." Marshall remained very calm and patient, but his grip on his toy didn't relax for a second.

When the little boy and his huge plush octopus at last popped free into the yard, the girls turned to inspect their discovery. Their eyes flew over the broken birdbath, the crumbling statue of Diana the Huntress, and the stack of fancy wooden porch pillars, and came to rest on something in the lean-to shack. It was a cracked and chipped plaster reproduction of the famous bust of Nefertiti. The two girls stared at it for a long breathless moment and then they turned and looked at each other. They didn't say a word, but with widening eyes and small taut smiles they sent a charge of excitement dancing between them like a crackle of electricity.

The customer, an antique dealer from San Francisco, was stirring restlessly in the main room of the store. Hearing him, the Professor was reminded of his errand. He replaced the sacking curtain and left the storeroom. It was more than an hour later that he remembered the children and returned to the peephole in the dirty window.

There had been some changes made in the storage yard. Some of the ornate old porch pillars had been propped up around the lean-to so that they seemed to be supporting its sagging roof; the statue of Diana had been moved into position near this improvised temple; and in the place of honor at the back and center of the shed, the bust of Nefertiti was enthroned in the broken birdbath. The little boy was playing quietly with his octopus on the floor of the shed and the two girls were busily pulling the tall dry weeds that choked the yard, and stacking them in a pile near the fence.

"Look, Melanie," the girl named April said. She displayed a prickly bouquet of thistle blossoms.

“Neat!” Melanie nodded enthusiastically. “Lotus blossoms?”

~~April considered her uninviting bouquet with new appreciation. “Yeah,” she agreed. “Lotus blossoms.”~~

Melanie had another inspiration. She stood up, dumping her lap full of weeds, and reached for the blossoms—gingerly because of the prickles. Holding them at arm’s length, she announced dramatically, “The Sacred Flower of Egypt.” Then she paced with dignity to the birdbath and with a curtsy presented them to Nefertiti.

April had followed, watching approvingly, but now she suddenly objected. “No! Like this,” she said.

Taking the thistle flowers, she dropped to her knees and bent low before the birdbath. Then she crawled backward out of the lean-to. “Neat,” Melanie said, and, taking the flowers back, she repeated the ritual, adding another refinement by tapping her forehead to the floor three times. April gave her stamp of approval to this latest innovation by trying it out herself, doing the forehead taps very slowly and dramatically. Then the two girls went back to their weed pulling, leaving the thistles before the altar of Nefertiti.

A few moments later the blond girl sat back suddenly on her heels and clapped a hand to her right eye. When she took it away the Professor, peering through his spy hole, noticed that the eye had lost its strange droopy appearance. “Melanie,” April said. “They’re gone. I’ve lost my eyelashes.”

At about that point, a customer, entering the Professor’s store, forced him to leave his vantage point at the dirty window. So he missed the frantic search that followed. He also missed the indignant scolding when the girls discovered that April’s false eye lashes had fallen before the altar of Nefertiti, where Marshall had found them and quietly beautified one of the button eyes of his octopus.

When the Professor finally was free to return to his peephole the children had gone home, leaving the storage yard almost free from weeds, and a thistle blossom offering before the birdbath.

Enter April

HER NAME WAS APRIL HALL, BUT SHE OFTEN CALLED herself April Dawn. Exactly one month before the Egypt Game began in the Professor's backyard she had come, very reluctantly, to live in the shabby splendor of an old California-Spanish apartment house called the Casa Rosada. She came because she had been sent away by Dorothea, her beautiful and glamorous mother, to live with her grandmother she hardly knew, and who wore her gray hair in a bun on the back of her head. None of April and Dorothea's Hollywood friends ever had gray hair, except the kind you have on purpose, no matter how old they got otherwise.

It had been on that very first day, early in August, that April and the Professor first met. On that first morning of her new life April had spent half an hour arranging her limp blond hair in a high upsweep, such as Dorothea sometimes wore. It was hard work, much harder than it looked when Dorothea did it. As she pinned and repinned, April told herself with righteous bitterness that Caroline was sure to make her take it all down again anyway, and all her hard work would be for nothing.

But if her grandmother noticed the hairdo, she said nothing about it at the breakfast table. She didn't even seem to notice how quiet and depressed April was and try to cheer her up with questions and conversation. April decided that Caroline must be the uninterested kind of person who didn't notice much of anything. Well, that was good. Because, for the short while she was here, April intended to go right on leading the kind of life she was used to, and if Caroline didn't even notice—well, at least there wouldn't be any trouble. All through breakfast Caroline went on saying almost nothing, but finally when she was almost through she did say that she wouldn't mind being called Grandma or even Grannie, if April liked.

"Oh, I guess I'll just go on calling you Caroline," April said. And then with pointed sweetness she added, "That is, unless you'd rather I didn't." Dorothea always called her Caroline instead of Mother, so what was wrong with Caroline instead of Grandmother? Of course, Caroline wasn't Dorothea's mother. She was the mother of April's father, who had died in an accident before April even had a chance to get to know him.

Nothing more was said until Caroline began to clear the table. Then she said, "I've arranged for you to have lunch with Mrs. Ross and her children on the second floor. She said she'd send Melanie, her little girl, up for you about twelve o'clock. The rest of the time you'll be more or less on your own, but I'd appreciate it if you'd let Mrs. Ross know if you leave the building. Just tell her where you're going and how soon you'll be back."

"I could get my own lunch," April said. "I cooked a lot at home."

"I know," Caroline said, "but I've made this arrangement with Mrs. Ross, so we'll try it for a while, just till school starts. The Rosses are very nice people. Mrs. Ross teaches school and her husband is a graduate student at the university. Their little girl is about your age, and they have a boy about four. They're African Americans," she added.

April shrugged. "Dorothea and I know a lot of black people. There are a lot of black people in show business."

Caroline smiled. "I see," she said. "Tell me, April, what do you think of the Casa Rosada?"

"The what?" April said.

“The Casa Rosada, this apartment house.”

“Oh.” April repeated her shrug. “It’s okay.” Actually it had been a pleasant surprise—that is, would have been if she’d been in the mood for pleasant surprises. The last time she’d visited Caroline, she’d lived in a tiny supermodern apartment, like a cell, only with paintings. The Casa Rosada was very different. Somehow it made April think of Hollywood and home. It was very Spanish-looking with great thick walls, arched doorways, fancy iron grillwork, stained-glass panels in the windows and tile floors in the lobby. Outside it was painted pink.

Caroline smiled her small prim smile. “Mr. Ross calls it the Petrified Birthday Cake, and I’m afraid that’s a pretty good description. It must have been quite the thing when it was built back in the twenties. Of course, it’s terribly run down now, but the apartments are roomy. It’s so hard to find a modern place with two bedrooms that’s not awfully expensive.”

It hadn’t occurred to April that Caroline had moved because of her—so she could have a bedroom of her own. She knew she ought to feel grateful, but for some reason what she really felt was angry. What made Caroline think that April was going to be with her long enough for it to make any difference whether she had a room of her own or not? Dorothea had promised it would only be for a little while. Only until things got more settled down and she wasn’t on tour so much of the time.

Before Caroline left she wrote down the phone number of the library at the university, where she worked, in case there was an emergency and April needed her. There wasn’t much likelihood of that. April was used to taking care of herself.

When she was alone April went out on the tiny iron balcony and looked around. Caroline’s apartment was on the third and top floor and fronted on the avenue. Most of the buildings in the neighborhood were only one or two stories high, so from where she stood she could get a pretty good idea of the lay of the land. On one side of the Casa Rosada were some small shops—a florist, a doughnut shop and some others. On the other, across a narrow alley, was a tall billboard that pretty much blocked the view, but by leaning forward April could see the façade of a low building. She could tell that it was very dingy and the windows were badly in need of washing. From her position—high and to one side—she couldn’t make out the sign; but from the interesting clutter in the show windows it seemed to be some sort of secondhand store.

A store of that type always offered an interesting possibility for exploring, but April was really looking for something else at the moment. A drugstore might do or perhaps a beauty shop. When Dorothea and Nick, Dorothea’s agent and good friend, had put April on the bus the morning before, they had each slipped her some money. It added up to quite a bit more than April was used to having all at once, and she wanted to make some purchases before Caroline found out about it. Not that she really thought that Caroline would take the money away, but it would be just like a grandmother to insist that it be spent on something “sensible” like new shoes or a school dress.

A few minutes later April was taking the old-fashioned elevator, with its door like a folding iron fence, down to the lobby. It wasn’t until she was out on the sidewalk that she remembered what Caroline had said about reporting to Mrs. Ross before she left the building. She paused long enough to decide that reporting wouldn’t be possible until that afternoon. After all, Caroline hadn’t even told her where the Rosses lived, at least not exactly. With that settled to her satisfaction she went on up the street.

The girl in the drugstore looked surprised, but she didn’t make too much of a big deal out of April’s purchases. When she got out the false eyelashes, she did ask if they were to be a present for

someone. But when April made her smile poisonously sweet and said, “Oh no,” she seemed to get the point and stopped asking questions. On the way home April decided that since there was still plenty of time before twelve o’clock, she might as well explore the store she had seen from the balcony.

The store was called A-Z, and its dusty show windows were crammed with a weird clutter of old and exotic-looking objects—huge bronze oriental vases next to some beat-up old pots and pans. An old-fashioned crank telephone, a primitive-looking wooden mask and a treadle sewing machine. Two kerosene lamps and a huge broad-bladed knife with a carved ivory handle. April felt a tiny tingle of excitement. She always felt that way about old stuff. It had been one of the few things that she and Dorothea didn’t agree on. Dorothea always said, “I’ll take mine new and shiny.”

It was dusky inside the store after the outdoor brightness. There didn’t seem to be any clerks at all. Not that it mattered, because April was only looking. She squatted down in front of a glass case full of small objects: vases and jars, some partly cracked or broken, crudely made jewelry and tiny statues. All of it looked terribly ancient and interesting. She was pressing her nose to the glass when suddenly she knew she was being watched.

An old man was leaning over the counter right above her head. “Oh hello,” April said and went on looking at a tiny statue with broad shoulders, short legs and a hole in the top of its head. It looked almost Egyptian and April had always been especially interested in Egyptian stuff. After a moment she looked up again and the man was still there. “What’s that?” she asked, pointing to the tiny figure.



“That is a pre-Columbian burial figure. It was made in Mexico about two thousand years ago.” The old man’s voice was slow and rusty.

April looked up again quickly. “Two thousand—you’re kidding,” she said. But on second glance she was sure he wasn’t. He wasn’t kidding and he wasn’t quite like anyone she’d ever seen before. He had a strange skimpy-looking little beard and his eyes were deep set and as blank as an empty well. He said nothing more, and not by so much as a flicker did his face reveal what he was thinking.

April was impressed. A deadpan was something she’d cultivated herself, and she knew from experience that such a perfect one was not easily come by. “I mean,” she said with respectful caution, “is it really that old?”

The old man only tilted his stone face downward in a stiff nod. April went back to studying the objects in the case, but now her interest was divided. The old man was almost as unusual as the

strange things behind the dusty glass. In a few moments she stood up and smiled at him. It was a real smile, small and quick, not the gooey kind she usually used on grown-ups. Somehow she had a notion he wouldn't fool easily.

"My name is April Hall," she said. "I've just come to live in the apartment house next door with my grandmother. I used to live in Hollywood with my mother." She paused. For a moment it looked as if the old man wasn't going to answer at all, but at last his craggy face cracked enough to allow the escape of two small words, "I see."

April regarded him with grudging admiration. It usually wasn't very hard to pick the real meaning out of things people said, if you watched them closely. But this one wasn't going to be easy. The "I see" said nothing at all. It wasn't friendly, or angry, or curious, or even bored. In fact, there was something about the absolute nothingness behind it that was a little bit frightening, like putting out your hand to touch something that wasn't really there. April began to chatter a little nervously. "I'm a nut about things like that." She motioned towards the case. "I'm always reading about ancient times and stuff like that. You know, Babylonia and Egypt and Greece and China. It's kind of a hobby of mine. As a matter of fact, I'm even planning to be an archaeologist when I grow up. Some people think that's a pretty kooky ambition for a girl—but I like it. You see, I have this theory about how I was a high priestess once, in an earlier reincarnation. Do you think that's possible?"

"Possible?" The old man's voice quavered the word into a whole flock of syllables. "Many things are possible."

"That's what I think, too. A lot of people don't think so, though. When I told Nick—he's my mother's agent—about the high priestess thing he just laughed. He said, 'I don't know about those other reincarnations, kiddo, but in this one you're a nut.' "

Before the old man could answer, if he was going to, a couple of ladies breezed in through the doorway. Of course, they interrupted right away when they saw that April was just a kid.

As she drifted out the door and back to the Casa Rosada, April wondered why she'd gabbed so much. It wasn't really like her. She'd started out just trying to get the old man to talk and then somehow she couldn't quit. It was almost as if the old man's deadly silence was a dangerous dark hole that had to be filled up quickly with lots of words.

Enter Melanie—and Marshall

ON THAT SAME DAY IN AUGUST, JUST A FEW MINUTES before twelve, Melanie Ross arrived at the door of Mrs. Hall's apartment on the third floor. Melanie was eleven years old and she had lived in the Casa Rosada since she was only seven. During that time she'd welcomed a lot of new people to the apartment house. Apartment dwellers, particularly near a university, are apt to come and go. Melanie always looked forward to meeting new tenants, and today was going to be especially interesting. Today, Melanie had been sent up to get Mrs. Hall's granddaughter to come down and have lunch with the Rosses. Melanie didn't know much about the new girl except that her name was April and that she had come from Hollywood to live with Mrs. Hall, who was her grandmother.

It would be neat if she turned out to be a real friend. There hadn't been any girls the right age in the Casa Rosada lately. To have a handy friend again, for spur-of-the-moment visiting, would be great. However, she had overheard something that didn't sound too promising. Just the other day she'd heard Mrs. Hall telling Mom that April was a strange little thing because she'd been brought up all over everywhere and never had much of a chance to associate with other children. You wouldn't know what to expect of someone like that. But then, you never knew what to expect of any new kid, not really. So Melanie knocked hopefully at the door of apartment 312.

Meeting people had always been easy for Melanie. Most people she liked right away, and they usually seemed to feel the same way about her. But when the door to 312 opened that morning, for just a moment she was almost speechless. Surprise can do that to a person, and at first glance April really was a surprise. Her hair was stacked up in a pile that seemed to be more pins than hair, and the whole thing teetered forward over her thin pale face. She was wearing a big yellowish-white fur thing around her shoulders, and carrying a plastic purse almost as big as a suitcase. But most of all it was the eyelashes. They were black and bushy looking, and the ones on her left eye were higher up and sloped in a different direction. Melanie's mouth opened and closed a few times before anything came out.

April adjusted Dorothea's old fur stole, patted up some sliding strands of hair and waited warily. She didn't expect this Melanie to like her—kids hardly ever did—but she *did* intend to make a very definite impression; and she could see that she'd done that all right.

"Hi," Melanie managed after that first speechless moment. "I'm Melanie Ross. You're supposed to have lunch with us, I think. Aren't you April Hall?"

"April Dawn," April corrected with an offhand sort of smile. "I was expecting you. My grandmother informed me that—uh, she said you'd be up."

It occurred to Melanie that maybe kids dressed differently in Hollywood. As they started down the hall she asked, "Are you going to stay with your grandmother for very long?"

"Oh no," April said. "Just till my mother finishes this tour she's on. Then she'll send for me to come home."

"Tour?"

"Yes, you see my mother is Dorothea Dawn—" she paused and Melanie racked her brain. She could tell she was supposed to know who Dorothea Dawn was. "Well, I guess you haven't happened to hear of her way up here, but she's a singer and in the movies, and stuff like that. B"

right now she's singing with this band that travels around to different places.”



“Neat!” Melanie said. “You mean your mother’s in the movies?”

~~But just then they arrived at the Rosses’ apartment. Marshall met them at the door, dragging Security by one of his eight legs.~~

“That’s my brother, Marshall,” Melanie said.

“Hi, Marshall,” April said. “Hey, what’s that following you, kid?”

Melanie grinned. “That’s Security. Marshall takes him everywhere. So my dad named him Security. You know. Like some little kids have a blanket.”

“Security’s an octopus,” Marshall said very clearly. He didn’t talk very much, but when he did he always said exactly what he wanted to without any trouble. He never had fooled around with baby talk.

Melanie’s mother was in the kitchen putting hot dog sandwiches and fruit salad on the table. When Melanie introduced April she could tell that her mother was surprised by the eyelashes and hairdo and everything. She probably didn’t realize that kids dressed a little differently in Hollywood.

“April’s mother is a movie star,” Melanie explained.

Melanie’s mother smiled. “Is that right, April?” she asked.

April looked at Melanie’s mother carefully through narrowed eyes. Mrs. Ross looked sharp and neat, with a smart-looking very short hairdo like a soft black cap, and high winging eyebrows, like Melanie’s. But her smile was a little different. April was good at figuring out what adults meant by the things they didn’t quite say—and Mrs. Ross’s smile meant that she wasn’t going to be easy to snow.

“Well,” April admitted, “not a star, really. She’s mostly a vocalist. So far she’s only been an extra in the movies. But she almost had a supporting role once, and Nick, that’s her agent, said he has a big part almost all lined up.”

“Wow, that’s cool!” Melanie said. “We’ve never known anyone before whose mother was an extra in the movies, have we, Mom?”

“Not a soul,” Mrs. Ross said, still smiling.

During lunch, April talked a lot about Hollywood, and the movie stars she’d met and the big parties her mother gave and things like that. She knew she was overdoing it a bit but something made her keep on. Mrs. Ross went right on smiling in that knowing way, and Melanie went right on being so eager and encouraging that April thought she must be kidding. She wasn’t sure though. You never could tell with kids—they didn’t do things in a pattern, the way grown-ups did.

Actually Melanie knew that April was showboating, but it occurred to her that it was probably because of homesickness. It was easy to see how much she’d like to be back in Hollywood with her mother.

While they were having dessert of ice cream and cookies, Mrs. Ross suggested that April might like to look over Melanie’s books to see if there was anything she’d like to borrow.

“Do you like to read?” Melanie asked. “Reading is my favorite occupation.”

“That’s for sure.” Mrs. Ross laughed. “A full-time occupation with overtime. Your grandmother tells me that you do a lot of reading, too.”

“Well, of course, I’m usually pretty busy, with all the parties and everything. I do read some though, when I have a chance.”

But after lunch when Melanie showed April her library, a whole bookcase full in her bedroom, she could tell that April liked books more than just a little. She could tell just by the way Ap

picked a book up and handled it, and by the way she forgot about acting so grown-up and Hollywoodish. She plopped herself down on the floor in front of the bookcase and started looking at books like crazy. For a while she seemed to forget all about Melanie. As she read she kept propping up her eyelashes with one finger.

All of a sudden she said, "Could you help me get these stupid things off? I must not have put them on the right place or something. When I look down to read I can't even see the words."

So Melanie scratched the ends of the eyelashes loose with her longest fingernail, and then April pulled them the rest of the way off. They were on pretty tight, and she said, "Ouch!" several times and a couple of other words that Melanie wasn't allowed to say.

"————!" said April, looking in the mirror. "I think I pulled out most of my real ones. Does it look like it to you?"

"I don't think so," Melanie said. "I still see some. Is this the first time you've worn them? The false ones, I mean?"

April put back on her haughty face. "Of course not. Nearly everybody wears them in Hollywood. My mother wears them all the time. It's just that these are new ones, and they must be a different kind."

April put her eyelashes away carefully in her big bag and they went back to looking at books. Melanie showed her some of her favorites, and April picked out a couple to borrow. It was then that April took a very special book off the shelf.

It was a very dull-looking old geography book that no one would be interested in. That was why Melanie used it to hide something very special and secret. As April opened the book some cutout paper people fell out on the floor.

"What are those?" April asked.

"Just some old things of mine," Melanie said, holding out her hand for the book, but April kept on turning the pages and finding more bunches of paper people.

"Do you really still play with paper dolls?" April asked in just the tone of voice that Melanie had feared she would use. Not just because she was April, either. It was the tone of voice that nearly anyone would use about a sixth-grade girl who still played with ordinary paper dolls.

"But they're not really paper dolls," Melanie said, "and I don't really play with them. Not like moving them around and dressing them up and everything. They're just sort of a record for a game I play. I make up a family and then I find people who look like them in magazines and catalogues. Just so I'll remember them better. I have fourteen families now. See, they all have their names and ages written on the back. I make up stuff about their personalities and what they do. Sometimes I write it down like a story, but usually I just make it up."

April's scornful look was dissolving. "Like what?"

"Well," Melanie said, "this is the Brewster family. Mr. Brewster is a detective. I had to cut him out of the newspaper because he was the only man I could find who looked like a detective. Don't you think he does?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Well anyway, he just—that is, I just made up about how he solved this very hard mystery and caught some dangerous criminals. And then the criminals escaped and were going to get revenge on Mr. Brewster. So the whole family had to go into hiding and wear disguises and everything."

April spread the Brewsters out on the floor. Her eyes were shining and without the eyelashes they were pretty, wide and blue. "Have they caught the criminals yet?" she asked. Melanie shook her head. "Well, how about if the kids catch them. They could just happen to find out where they

criminals were hiding?"

"Neat!" Melanie said. "Maybe Ted" ~~she pointed to the smallest paper Brewster~~ "could come home and tell the other kids how he thinks he saw one of the criminals, going into a certain house."

"And then," April interrupted, "the girls could go to the house pretending to sell Girl Scout cookies, to see if it really was the crooks."

From the Girl-Scout-cookies caper, the game moved into even more exciting escapades, and when Mrs. Ross came in to say that Marshall was down for his nap and that she was leaving for the university, where she was taking a summer course for schoolteachers, the criminals were just escaping, taking one of the Brewster children with them as a hostage. An hour later, when Marshall came in sleepy-eyed and dragging Security, several of the other paper families had been brought into the plot. Marshall seemed content to sit and listen, so the game went on with daring adventures, narrow escapes, tragic illnesses and even a romance or two. At last, right in the middle of a shipwreck on a desert island, April noticed the time and said she'd have to go home so she'd be there when Caroline got back from work.

As they walked to the door Melanie asked, "Do you want to play some more tomorrow?"

April was adjusting her fur stole around her shoulders for the trip upstairs. "Oh, I guess so," she said with a sudden return to haughtiness.

But Melanie was beginning to understand about April's frozen spells, and how to thaw her out. You just had to let her know she couldn't make you stop liking her that easily. "None of my friends know how to play imagining games the way you do," Melanie said. "Some of them can do it a little bit but they mostly don't have any very good ideas. And a lot of them only like board games or other things that are already made up. But I like imagining games better than anything."

April was being very busy trying to get her stole to stay on because the clasp was a little bit broken. All at once she pulled it off, wadded it all up and tucked it under her arm. She looked right straight at Melanie and said, "You know what? I never did call them that before, but imagining games are just about all I ever play because most of the time I never have anybody to play with."

She started off up the hall. Then she turned around and walked backward, waving her fur stole around her head like a lasso. "You've got lots of good ideas, too," she yelled.

The Egypt Girls

ALL THROUGH THE MONTH OF AUGUST, MELANIE AND April were together almost every day. They played the paper-families game and other games, both in the Rosses' apartment and in Caroline's. They took Marshall for walks and to the park while Mrs. Ross was gone to her class, and almost every day they went to the library. It was in the library in August that the seeds were planted that grew into the Egypt Game in September in the Professor's deserted yard.

It all started when April found a new book about Egypt, an especially interesting one about the life of a young pharaoh. She passed it on to Melanie, and with it a lot of her interest in all sorts of ancient stuff. Melanie was soon as fascinated by the valley of the Nile as April had been. Before long, with the help of a sympathetic librarian, they had found and read just about everything the library had to offer on Egypt—both fact and fiction.

They read about Egypt in the library during the day, and at home in the evening, and in bed late at night when they were supposed to be asleep. Then in the mornings while they helped each other with their chores they discussed the things they had found out. In a very short time they had accumulated all sorts of fascinating facts about tombs and temples, pharaohs and pyramids, mummies and monoliths, and dozens of other exotic topics. They decided that the Egyptian couldn't have been more interesting if they had done it on purpose. Everything, from their love of beauty and mystery, to their fascinating habit of getting married when they were only eleven years old, made good stuff to talk about. By the end of the month, April and Melanie were beginning to work on their own alphabet of hieroglyphics for writing secret messages, and at the library they were beginning to be called the Egypt Girls.

But in between all the good times, both April and Melanie were spending some bad moments worrying about the beginning of school. April was worried because she knew from experience—lots of it—that it isn't easy to face a new class in a new school. She didn't admit it, not even to Melanie, but she was having nightmares about the first day of school. There were classroom nightmares, and schoolyard nightmares and principal's office nightmares; but there was another kind, too, that had to do with an empty mailbox. In the whole month of August she had had only one very short postcard from Dorothea.

Melanie was worried, too, but in a different way. School had always been easy for Melanie; and even though she wasn't the kind who got elected class president, she'd always had plenty of friends. But now there was April to think about.

April was the most exciting friend Melanie had ever had. No one else knew about so many fascinating things, or could think up such marvelous things to do. With April, a walk to the library could become an exploration of a forbidden land, or a shiny pebble on the sidewalk could be a magic token from an invisible power. When April got that imagining gleam in her eye there was no telling what was going to happen next. Just about any interesting subject you could mention, April was sure to know a lot of weird and wonderful facts about it. And if she didn't, you could always count on her to make up a few, just to keep things going.

There was only one thing that April didn't seem to know much about—that was getting along with people. Most people, anyhow. With Melanie, April was herself, new and different from anyone, wild and daring and terribly brave. But with other people she was often quite different.

With other kids she usually put on her Hollywood act, terribly grown-up and bored with everything. And with most grown-ups April's eyes got narrow and you couldn't believe a word she said.

Melanie had gone to Wilson School all her life, and she knew what it was like. There were a different kinds of kids at Wilson; kids who looked and talked and acted all sorts of ways. Wilson was used to that. But there were some things that Wilson kids just wouldn't stand for, and Melanie was afraid that April's Hollywood act was one of them.

And Melanie wasn't entirely just guessing about how her schoolmates would react to April. A couple of times when April and Melanie had been at the library or in the park they'd run into some of the Wilson kids Melanie knew; and you could see right away that April wasn't making the right kind of impression. And it was going to be worse at school, where every kid would feel duty-bound to do his or her part in trimming the new kid down to size. Melanie had a feeling that April wasn't going to trim easily.

The thing that worried Melanie the most was the eyelashes. April was still wearing them a lot of the time. She'd gotten so she didn't wear them to the library because she still had trouble reading through them, but even if she hadn't had them on all day she always put them on when it was time for her grandmother to come home. Once Melanie asked her why.

"She doesn't like for me to wear them," April said.

Melanie thought about that for a minute. Then she said, "You don't like your grandmother very much, do you?"

April just shrugged but her eyes got narrow.

"I don't see why," Melanie said. "She seems pretty nice to me."

"She doesn't like my mother," April said. "She doesn't even think that Dorothea's going to send for me to come home pretty soon."

"Did she say so?"

"No, but she thinks it. I can tell."

Then, just at the beginning of September, with school only a few days away, came that exciting day when the Egypt Game began. April and Melanie and Marshall were on their way home through the alley when, by the sheerest luck, Melanie noticed the loose plank. It had moved stiffly, that first time, with a reluctant rusty yelp and they peeked through into the hidden and deserted yard. It was fascinating—so weed-grown and forgotten and secret—but then came the most unbelievably wonderful part of all.

There she was, waiting for them in the shed, Nefertiti, the beautiful queen of ancient Egypt like a magical omen, or, as April put it, "a beautiful messenger from out of the ancient past." There had to be something terribly out-of-the-ordinary about it. Why, it had only been a few days before that they had read all about her and admired a picture of her lovely sculptured head. And there it was, almost like magic. Very much like magic, in fact—and that's the way the Egypt Game was, from the very beginning.

But even the discovery of Egypt didn't stop the beginning of school from arriving with all its problems. So, when April lost one of her eyelashes that first day in Egypt, Melanie couldn't help feeling a little relieved, although she wouldn't have said so. But then, there it was on Security—and the problem was just as complicated as ever. It was the next morning when Melanie finally got up nerve enough to talk to April about it.

April was helping Melanie dry the dishes so they'd be ready to leave for Egypt sooner. "Are you going to wear your eyelashes to school?" Melanie asked with careful casualness.

But April turned quickly, and with her face all shut up the way it was with other people. “Sure,” she said. “Why not?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I just don’t think anybody else at Wilson wears them.”

April’s chin went up and her lips thinned. “Am I supposed to care what the kids at a little place like Wilson School wear?”

Melanie could see that she wasn’t going to get anywhere so she let the subject drop. But before the dishes were finished she had started making a drastic plan. April just couldn’t wear those eyelashes to school on the first day. She was going to be hard enough to integrate even without them.

As soon as Melanie had finished her chores they were free to head for Egypt. Since it was Saturday, Melanie’s parents were both at home, but Mr. Ross always had to study and he was on too glad for the girls to get Marshall out from underfoot. Just outside the apartment door April stopped with her finger to her lips.

“Shhh,” she warned, “we must proceed with caution. We may be being watched.”

“Who’s watching?” Marshall asked, looking around.

“The enemies of Egypt. Who were those worst enemies, Melanie?”

“The Syrians,” Melanie whispered.

“Yeah, they’re the ones. The Syrians. Their spies are everywhere.”

With elaborate caution they made their way out of the back door of the Casa Rosada and down the alley. They went the wrong way first and took evasive action through a garage and around a stack of garbage pails. Then they crawled through a piece of cement pipe and started to make a run for it; but they had to go back for Marshall, who was still in the pipe, all tangled up with Security’s legs. When they finally arrived at the fence they were out of breath.

“All clear?” Melanie asked, looking both ways.

“Yes, for the time being,” April breathed. “But they almost had us. That was a close call back there in the tunnel.”

“Close,” Melanie agreed, “but we fooled them.” With that they shoved Marshall through the hole in the fence and crawled in after him.

The Evil God and the Secret Spy

WHEN APRIL AND MARSHALL AND MELANIE SQUEEZED back through the fence for the second time they found everything just as they had left it. They started out by pulling the rest of the dead weeds and stacking them in one corner of the yard. While Marshall stood guard halfway down the alley to see if anyone was coming, they shoved the whole stack out through the hole in the fence. Then they scouted around and found a trash bin that was nice and roomy and not too full to hold an extra donation of dead weeds. When, at last, the loose stones and broken bits of things had been cleared away, Egypt looked clean and bare and ready for whatever might be going to happen.

Next they turned their attention to the lean-to shed, or the Temple, as they were already beginning to call it. It was actually only a wooden platform about a foot off the ground, across one end of the yard. A roof of corrugated tin was supported in the front by a few wooden posts and on the other three sides walls were formed by the tall boards of the fence. Already the birdbath altar of Nefertiti, the fancy pillars from the porch of some Victorian mansion and the crumbling statue of Diana by the entrance were beginning to create a temple-like atmosphere. But there was much more that could be done.

April and Melanie were sitting on the edge of the Temple's floor resting for a moment, and planning, when April pointed out the only real door to the storage yard. It was on the opposite site from the loose plank and was apparently locked with a latch and padlock from the outside. "I wonder where it goes to," she said.

Melanie thought a moment. "I guess it goes to the rest of the Professor's backyard," she said. "You know, that part with a driveway so trucks and things can back up to his store for deliveries. You can see into that part from the alley." It was right then when she mentioned the Professor that Melanie, for the first time, had an uncomfortable feeling. "What do you suppose the Professor would do if he caught us in here?" she wondered out loud.

April shrugged. Melanie had told her how most of the children in the neighborhood felt about the Professor. While she had to admit he'd been a little bit creepy, she didn't see what all the fuss was about. But Melanie seemed to feel that April's short talk with the old man had made her an authority on the subject, so she was more or less obliged to come up with an opinion. "I don't think he'd do a thing," she said. "I just don't think he'd even care, as long as we don't bother him or hurt anything. Besides, how's he going to know? You can tell by the weeds and everything that no one's been in here for ages. I'll bet the padlock on that door's rusted so tight he couldn't get in if he wanted to. And that window isn't the kind that opens. He'd have to break the glass if he wanted to get through."

"He might be watching us through it, though."

Somehow that thought was almost more scary than the possibility of the Professor's actually entering the yard. With one accord the girls moved warily towards the window. Closer and closer until their noses were only inches from the dirty panes. Then Melanie breathed a sigh of relief. "There's something like a heavy curtain hanging clear across it. He couldn't see through that."

"Besides, I don't think he could see through the dirt even if there wasn't a curtain. I'll bet the window's in some little back room he doesn't even use any more. Otherwise he wouldn't leave

so dirty.”

Feeling pleasantly safe and secure, the girls sat back down and began to make plans. Marshall was busy digging a little hole in the middle of the yard with a sharp stick. He had knotted two of Security's legs together around his neck so that his hands would be free for digging. Security's pear-shaped plush body and six of his black legs were hanging down Marshall's back.

“I know,” April said suddenly, “Marshall can be the young pharaoh, heir to the throne of Egypt. Only there's a civil war going on, and the other side is trying to kill him.”

“Okay. And we can be high priestesses of Isis who are assigned to protect him.”

“Ummm,” April said. “Or else we could be evil high priestesses who are going to offer him as a human sacrifice on the crocodile altar to—what was that evil god's name?”

“Set?”

“Yeah, that's the one.” April jumped to her feet. Throwing up her arms, she chanted, “Almighty Set has promised his servants, the crocodile gods of the Nile, the bloody heart of the young Pharaoh, Marsh—uh, Marshamosis!” She dropped to her knees. “O mighty Set, god of evil, we hear and obey.”

Marshall had stopped digging, and now he stood up and started towards the opening in the fence. The girls ran after him. He didn't struggle when they caught him, but Melanie was familiar with the expression on his face. His funny little baby-round chin was sticking out defiantly and his black eyes glared. “Leave my bloody heart alone,” he said.



The girls giggled. “You know, he's pretty sharp for a four-year-old,” April said.

Melanie got down on her knees and tried to take Marshall's hands, but he wouldn't turn loose of Security. “Marshall, honey,” she said, “it's just a game. Just pretend. We wouldn't really hurt you.”

“What's a pharaoh?” Marshall asked suspiciously.

“A king,” Melanie said, “king of all the Egyptians.” Marshall's frown lifted a little and his chin began to go back into its normal position.

“A terribly important kind of king,” April said. “Everybody had to bow down to him and do exactly what he said.”

Marshall nodded soberly. “I'll play,” he said.

So that was the way Set started—Set the god of evil and black magic. At first he was just supposed to be a character in that particular game, and that first day he was represented by a picture of a man with an animal's head that Melanie drew on a piece of cardboard and tacked to the wall. But once he got started, he seemed to grow and develop almost on his own, and all o

of control; until he was more than evil, and at times a lot more than Egyptian. For instance, ~~different times, his wicked tricks included everything from atomic ray guns to sulfur and~~ brimstone.

But, actually, that was the way with all of the Egypt Game. Nobody ever planned it ahead, at least, not very far. Ideas began and grew and afterwards it was hard to remember just how. That was one of the mysterious and fascinating things about it.

On that particular day, the game about Marshamosis, the boy pharaoh, and Set, the god of evil, didn't get very far. They'd no more than gotten started when April and Melanie decided they just had to have some more equipment before they could play it well. So they postponed the game and went instead to scout around in the alley for boards and boxes to use in making things like thrones and altars. They found just what they needed behind the doughnut shop and the furniture store in the next block, and brought them back to Egypt. And it was on the same trip that they had the good luck to rescue an old metal mixing bowl from a garbage pail. April said it would be just the thing for a firepit for building sacred fires.

When they had everything as far as the hole in the fence, they ran into a problem. The boards and boards went through all right, but the boxes were just too big. The only solution was to throw them over the top of the fence. It wasn't easy, and in landing they made quite a bit of noise.

It wasn't long afterwards that the curtain on the small window at the back of the Professor's store was pushed very carefully to one side. But April and Melanie were so busy building and planning that they didn't notice at all. Only someone with very sharp eyes would have been able to see the figure that stood silently behind the very dirty window in the darkened room.

Eyelashes and Ceremony

THE NEXT DAY WAS THE LAST BEFORE SCHOOL WAS TO start. It was also Melanie's last chance to put into effect her plan to get rid of the eyelashes. So after dinner she went up to Mrs. Halpern's apartment to see April. She took the library book that she was reading and one that she knew April wanted to read.

In April's room they talked about the Egypt Game and about school starting in the morning—what they were going to wear and things like that. Then Melanie suggested they read for a while, so they got comfortable on their stomachs across April's bed and started in on the books—although not so sure enough, April got up and took off her eyelashes so she could see better.

But, for once, both the girls had a hard time keeping their minds on their reading. April was thinking about the next day, telling herself that it didn't matter whether the people at Wilson School were friendly or not, because Dorothea would write soon saying she wanted April to come home. Dorothea—it seemed ages since April had seen her. April shut her eyes and tried to picture her, but tonight the picture wouldn't come clear. It was only a blur—a blur of laughter, tall buildings, movement and color. But a bright and beautiful blur, no matter how distant, was better than the reality that was dull and gray.

Melanie was having trouble keeping her mind on her reading because she was so worried about what she was planning to do. In fact, they both were having such a hard time pretending not to be worried that they were secretly relieved when Caroline came in and suggested it was bedtime for the girls who were going to school in the morning. The eyelashes were lying on April's dresser and Melanie managed to walk right past them as she went out. Because of the sticky stuff to make them stay on your eyelids, she only had to brush her hand against them to pick them up. Feeling both triumphant and treacherous at the same time, Melanie took the eyelashes home and hid them in her closet. She kept them there until the first few days of school were over. Then she took them back and put them under April's dresser, so it would look as if they'd just happened to fall. By that time April had gotten out of the notion of wearing them to school.

But even without the eyelashes Melanie had a hard time trying to translate April into something that Wilson School could understand and appreciate. April was still wearing her hair in a messy upsweep and her mother's ratty old fur stole, even though her grandmother had given her a great new jacket. Besides, she still put on her Hollywood act with people she didn't know, and worst of all, she got furiously angry when she was teased. Melanie could see that to the kids at Wilson, all the stuff April knew made her a know-it-all; her wonderful differentness was one of her strengths; her kookiness; and her courage only meant she'd punch you in the nose if you kidded her, no matter how many teachers were looking.

At least, that was the way it was for a while. But with Melanie working her hardest as go-between, it wasn't too long before things began to be a little better. The sixth grade began to find out that April had a way of making life interesting. For instance, when she raised her hand in class, her answer wasn't always what the teacher wanted, but it was almost certain to be fascinating. And when it came to guts—whether it was hanging by your heels from the highest bar, or putting a stinkbug on the principal's desk—you could count on April to do it first and best.

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