

# The Wordsmith, The Kid, and The Electrolux

*A Fall from the Family Tree*



Clifford Leigh

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## *“Hello”*

When I fell, the blood rushed to my head, warning me of my imminent death. My arms and legs, first frozen with fear, now flailed and grappled for something, anything to lay hold of but lost their power to deliver me. Flecks of light sailed past my eyes as a great thrashing sound surrounded my head. And so I fell, and fell, and fell. Sharp leaves coursed by my face. I had fallen into a book.

Yes, I—Corian Griffin—fell into a book. And like a good book should, it spoke to me and got inside of me as well. My life, like snapshots and press clippings strewn haphazardly on the floor, was lifted up into the air, swirled around, and then placed back down into a picture for all to see. Now this picture may or may not please you. That’s for you to decide. So won’t you step inside these pages with me and have a look? Come, let’s put the pieces together.



## 1. *First Things*

The first thing I see is the house my father built. It was all horizontals running into arches and unexpected peaks. Though it was white, the light played upon its curious angles, reflecting all the colors of the grass, earth, and sky upon it. At night, the moon cast such fantastical shadows on its shutters and porch columns that it seemed to create a whole new house.

My mother says that my father did most of the work himself. And even when the foundation was poured or the roof raised, he stood commanding the workers and directing their steps.

The second thing I see is that the house is full of animals. There were lots of dogs slipping and scratching their paws on the hardwood floors, and smooth and silent cats gliding through the maze of furniture. Fish tanks bubbled with iridescent blue and orange fish, each darting around the imaginary landscape of castles, treasure chests, rocks, and plants.

Every creature, even the fish, had a name—Gus the goldfish, Marley the cat, the dogs, Rascal and Hippo. Hippo was a white Labrador load and never moved at all, and Rascal, a Jack Russell terrier that never stopped. The cat—well, you know—was like a cat. He lay like a tiger with his green eyes surveying the bustle of the day, moving at impulses known only to him. But he, like all the critters, did not seem to just live in the house but were the fabric of the place—all in their own space, all belonging.

The third thing I see is the arrival of my sister, Anjelica, or Jeli for short. She was the giddiest, noisiest ball of fire that ever hit the

floor bouncing. But no matter what mess she got into, you could see her clean smooth face beaming below the layers of food and muck. You might think that a noisy kid ricocheting off the walls would disrupt this harmonious realm, but instead, she only seemed to add more finish to it, more joy. Her chubby arms, round cheeks, and easy, infectious smile would make you forget about yourself, and join you to her fun.

I loved our world and our family. And I especially loved my father, not just for the things he did with us, or for the things he made, but also for who he was—so powerful and gentle, thoughtful, wise, and tender. But when he was angry about something we did, watch out! He was sort of unknowable to me at that age. After all, he could do things and knew things that a kid has no idea of. So, he was *special* to me. Those were golden times, they were, but the way I saw things then would soon change forever.

After all these sights, a flood of pictures overtakes my memory. So much so that it's hard to decide what comes first or next, or to figure out which feelings go with which event. Or if, after an event, I put a feeling on it as an afterthought. Maybe even a feeling I didn't feel when it was happening, and so altering the memory of what really happened. Feelings can be tricky that way, don't you know? But there is a Truth, apart from memory, that stands the tide of time and thought. The following are the things of vital importance that cannot be swept away.

One night, as it always happened as a rule, I sat at the kitchen table after dinner with my father. Mom had just brought him his usual cup of piping hot coffee. He always drank it from a particular mug—a thick, ivory-colored, porcelain affair with smooth curves and no sharp angles. The weight of which seemed to plant it immovably on the table, only able to be lifted by his powerful hand.

I don't know why, but on that night this mug of hot, rich drink seemed to grip my attention. I hiked up on my knees to admire the black fluid. It reflected glints of light, yet seemed infinitely deep, dark, and mysterious. Wafts of steam brought its nutty aroma to my nostrils, which drew it in with delight. The cream he added did not dilute it, but only enriched its appeal to me. And with a heaping

teaspoon of sugar, my desire for it was sealed with certainty.

As they chatted about the day's events, the voices of my mother, father, and sister faded from my hearing. To me, that moment became dominated by my thoughts only, and my only thought was that I wanted to taste that drink.

"Dad," I asked, "may I have some?"

To my family, the next few moments passed as haphazardly as the previous few. The animals in the house rested contentedly in their stations, the enormous maple trees, like a canopy, still sheltered our home, but to me, what happened next fell like an ax, wedging and dividing all that came before and all that would come after.

"No, son," my father replied, "it's not good for you."

My mind immediately reeled and raced from thought to thought:

*Why not? I puzzled.*

*Why isn't it good for me?*

*Why is it good for you, and not for me?!*

*Why don't you let me have what I want?*

*Who are you to keep it from me?*

*Why are you being so mean?*

*I want it.*

*I want it, now!*

None of these thoughts passed over my lips. Not one twitch of the hand, or roll of the eye registered in my body. Where had these thoughts come from? Where did they originate? I didn't know then, and neither did I want the answers to my questions. I only wanted what I wanted, and it was denied.

Nothing was evident to my family that night. My father continued the evening without event, but he had changed in my eyes. He had ceased to be my father, but instead had become just an obstacle to fulfilling my desires. The very nature of his person and all the things he had done for me were erased in that moment. Did I despise him then? I do not know. But at that moment, he just became a sentry on a wall barring my entrance into the kingdom of my happiness.



## 2. *The Green Chinese Box*

The next day, I sat reading on the edge of my father's large bed. My sister was rummaging through the top drawer of his dresser, which was one of her favorite pastimes when he was out working. She could always find some interesting bauble to amuse herself with—tie clips became alligator jaws; watch fobs became rattlesnakes; and, like a fortuneteller, she would coil old watches and rings up and down her chubby little arms and fingers.

On that day, as she probed deeper for hidden treasure, one of her rings happened to hit upon an object, making a distinct jangling sound. It was the small Chinese enamel box that my father put his loose change in at the end of each day. By now it was brimming with quarters, dimes, and nickels (pennies were kept in a thick glass bottle in the kitchen).

The noise of that green box, though ignored by my sister, started my mind thinking of the money within. I was of an age that I understood the use of money; I knew it had the power to get me the things I wanted. And as my mind toyed with the knowledge of that power, another familiar noise faintly entered my ears. It was the jingling of the bells of Mr. Good, the ice cream truck, slowly making his daily circuit around the neighborhood. What seemed to be a coincidental set of circumstances—I know better now—presented me with a simple idea. It was a plan really, a secret mission of sorts, that no one would know about but me.

I would slowly walk to my father's dresser drawer, open the enamel box, pluck out six quarters—no more than was necessary—

and close the box. Then I would walk up the street, stop the truck, and place the money on its stainless steel ledge. I would politely say, “May I please have the Carnival Surprise” (my favorite, which was the orange sherbet ice pop with the gum ball on top and a plastic toy animal in the middle; if it was a circus monkey, you got a freebie). Then I would take it and devour it as I walked back down the street—being careful to finish before coming in view of my house. And then I’d simply toss all the evidence in the trashcan by the side of the fence (unless it was a monkey, of course). No one would know; how could they? No one would see. No one.

Like the works of a clock, this plan was executed as perfectly as I believed I conceived it. Effortlessly I moved through each phase without fear, without perspiration. The lifting of the coins could not have been more silent, my stroll up the street more inconspicuous, the transaction with Mr. Good more cordial, the devouring of the prize more delicious, and the disposal of the evidence more complete (alas, no monkey). And thus began my own secret life, my own world where I chose and got what I wanted, when I wanted it, or so I thought. . . .

For more of the story, read on...

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## *About the Author and Illustrator*



CLIFFORD LEIGH, author and C  
Illustrator, has had numerous gallery exhibitions in SoHo, and, as “Chief Idea Person” to Pop Artist Mark Kostabi, his work is exhibited in major galleries and museums worldwide. His continuing collaboration with Kostabi most recently produced an illustrated Book of Genesis and pieces for Pope Benedict XVI.

Cliff is also a designer for Evergreene Painting Studios, the world’s largest art and historical restoration firm. His design work can be seen in notable buildings such as St. Peter’s Church, San Francisco, the Miami City Hall, Grey Towers Historic Preservation, the Allen County Courthouse, and the Meridien Grand Opera House.

Cliff lives in New York with his wife and three sons. *The Wordsmith*, *The Kid*, and *The Electrolux* was entirely written and illustrated during his daily three-hour train commute. He is currently working on its sequel, *Islandship River*.

*You can visit Cliff on his website:*

**[www.cliffleigh.com](http://www.cliffleigh.com)**