

Wax Lips, Candy Cigarettes and Giants

by Phillis Ideal

Five-year-old Molly walked through the kitchen, slammed the back porch door, and fixed her sights on the rock fence that surrounded the backyard and the large zigzag wooden gate that opened onto the alley. It seemed such a long walk from the back door to the fence. All the while, she gripped fifteen cents in her small hand. So far, she had gotten away with stealing the money from the sideboard in the kitchen, where her grandmother had left some change after paying the yardman hours before. She knew it was wrong to steal and hurried toward the alley, determined to walk to Knoedler's, the corner grocery store, and return with her new treasures—wax lips and peppermint cigarettes with bright red tips.

She had watched her mother put on dark red lipstick, meet her friend, light her cigarette, then lean over to light her friend's. They would spend the rest of the evening talking and laughing. Molly wanted to pretend she too was an adult with a good friend and needed to practice this ritual until she could get it just right.

She scrambled over the rustic fence, her small feet hitting the alley dirt with a soft thud, her heart hammering against her ribs like a trapped bird. As she let go of the last wooden rung, the familiar shortcut had transformed into a wall of shadows. She had stepped out of her world and into a no man's land.

As far as she could see, the alley was drowning in a forest of tall blue legs that marched with a heavy, bone-shaking rhythm, rattling the very ground beneath her sandals. Beyond the safety of her fence, the world had turned into a canyon of giants.

Just last night, she had curled up in her grandmother's lap, listening to the lilting rhythm of *Jack and the Beanstalk*. In the safety of the lamplight, the giants had seemed like distant, clumsy

creatures of ink and paper. But as she stood in the no man's land of the alley, the story clawed its way into the real world.

The ground didn't merely shake—it shuddered with a rhythmic, bone-jarring thrum: the thump-thump-thump of a thousand *Fee-Fi-Fo-Fums*. A wall of monolithic men filled the alley, a terrifying uniformity of blond hair and blue-gray wool that reached toward the sky. Each step they took rattled the teeth in her head.

At their front, the leader—who lacked the bumbling face of the storybook giant—walked backward, staring directly at the advancing battalion. He blew a shrieking metal whistle and barked commands in a guttural language she had never heard before. He was massive, a full head taller than the men behind him, and seemed carved from the same unyielding stone as the buildings forming the alley walls. His hair, a striking, almost white shade of blond, was cropped so close it was barely visible. His face was a map of sharp angles and clean lines, with a jaw that could cut glass. But his eyes were the most chilling feature—not a warm blue, but a flat, arctic gray, devoid of any warmth or empathy. A thin white scar bisected his left eyebrow, adding a final brutal touch to a face built not for smiling but for commanding.

The moment his cold eyes locked onto her—frozen at the side of the road—he pointed a rigid finger and bellowed a chilling command:

“Get out of the way, little girl, or be crushed as we come through!” The deafening roar of it didn't make the five-year-old flinch backward in terror; instead, she went utterly still. It was an instinctual paralysis—the small prey faced with the overwhelming predator. Her wide eyes, already glossed with unshed tears, did not leave the leader's face. Every muscle locked as she stared up at that wall of men, her dream of wax lips, red lipstick, and candy cigarettes vanishing under the shadow of their boots. She was small prey at the foot of a beanstalk that led nowhere but down.

The leader stopped walking backward. The entire phalanx halted in perfect, disciplined silence, their collective gaze shifting from him to the tiny obstacle that had frozen their advance. The man with the

arctic eyes narrowed his focus, the scar over his eye twitching slightly. He strode forward—the crunch of his boots impossibly loud in the sudden quiet—stopping mere inches from the small girl. He leaned down, his angular, imposing face level with hers. He didn't soften; if anything, he hardened.

He pointed a rigid finger down the street, not shouting this time but speaking in a low, dangerous growl that commanded absolute obedience. Molly just sniffled, her bottom lip trembling, a single tear tracing down through the dust on her cheek.

Behind him, the uniformity of the men cracked—if only for a second. The first two rows remained statues of discipline, but a ripple of quiet, murmuring confusion stirred the middle ranks. A few men exchanged quick glances; others subtly shifted their weight, their rigid postures softening fractionally. One man in the third row, younger than the others, risked a sharp intake of breath, a flicker of concern crossing his face before being eradicated by a glare from his squad leader. The perfect machine had encountered grit in the gears, and for a fleeting moment, a hint of humanity surfaced in the collective militaristic order.

The wall of blue-gray fabric began to surge forward again, the rhythmic thud of boots sounding like a giant's heartbeat. Just as the shadow of the lead soldier began to swallow her, a frantic voice cut through the guttural commands.

“Molly! Molly! Get back here!”

The gate she couldn't open suddenly groaned on its hinges. Walter, her grandmother's yardman, reached through the gap. His large, calloused hand scooped her up by the waist, plucking her from the alley just as the first row of soldiers marched past the spot where she had stood frozen. He pulled her back into the safety of the yard and slammed the gate, the bolt sliding home with a decisive *clack*.

Molly didn't move. She stood against the rock fence, the bone-jarring cadence now muffled by wood and stone. Slowly, she opened her sweaty palm. The fifteen cents was still there, but the coins felt cold and heavy—like the eyes of the leader. The wax lips and

peppermint cigarettes no longer seemed like a magical ritual. Looking toward the kitchen, she realized she didn't want to be an adult anymore—not if it meant standing in no man's land while the world tried to crush you. She dropped the coins into the dirt, wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, and walked slowly toward the back porch. The silence of the kitchen was now the only thing she craved. Molly slipped through the back door, her breath coming in shallow hitches. The kitchen was quiet, smelling of floor wax and the lingering sweetness of morning peaches—a sharp, dizzying contrast to the dust and iron she had just escaped.

In the parlor, the rocking chair groaned softly. Her grandmother sat by the window, the worn edges of *Jack and the Beanstalk* still resting on her apron. She looked up, her spectacles catching the afternoon light.

"I was looking for you and I'm glad to see you. Where did you go?"

"I was going to walk to Knoedler's, but the alley was filled with giants, and I had to get out of the way or be crushed."

The room went still. Her grandmother's hand tightened slightly on the book, her gaze flickering toward the window that faced the alley. For a moment, the fairy tale in her lap and the reality outside seemed to blur.

"They aren't giants, Molly," her grandmother said softly, her voice steady but somber. "Those are German men from the prison camp—the POWs. They're the ones working on the stone lining for the Spring River. They were walking back to their quarters for the evening."

Molly pulled back, her eyes searching her grandmother's face. "They seemed like the giants in the story," she insisted, though the fear in her chest was already settling into a dull, confusing ache.

"Come here," her grandmother said softly.

Molly climbed into the familiar lap, burying her face in the scent of lavender and old paper. The giants were still out there, their metallic whistles echoing faintly in her ears—but for now, the beanstalk was chopped down, and the kitchen door was locked tight.

Historical Footnote

The Roswell, NM POW Camp (1942–1946)

During World War II, Roswell, New Mexico, was home to a large prisoner-of-war camp that housed approximately 4,800 German soldiers—many from the Afrika Korps. The Nazi POWs were often contracted for local construction and agricultural projects to help alleviate wartime labor shortages. One of their most enduring legacies is the stone lining of the Spring River banks that runs through the center of the city. Legend has it that among the stones, the prisoners used contrasting rocks to create a small iron cross—an artifact that remained a point of local historical interest for decades.

