

Down the Rabbit Hole

by Peter Abrahams

Shabby old gingerbread houses? Whoa. The Coke can clattered into the gutter and came to a rest on a sewer grate. The only shabby gingerbread houses Ingrid knew in Echo Falls stood in the Flats, the oldest part of town, where the shoe factories and railroad yards had been long ago. The soccer fields were up the hill from the hospital, and that was nowhere near the Flats. Was it? Ingrid looked around. No hill, no hospital, just these gingerbread houses in a neighborhood not especially safe, come to think of it. The front door of the nearest one- just about the most decrepit of all, actually crooked to the naked eye, half the roof covered with a blue tarp- opened, and out came a woman with a shopping bag in her hand.

A strange woman: She was tall, and even taller in the gold spike heels she wore. What was the word? Lamé. Gold lamé spiked heels, that was it. She also had on tights and a red-and-black-checked lumber jacket. Strips of silver foil were stuck in her hair, as though she was in the middle of a coloring treatment. Ingrid recognized the woman. She collected cans from trash barrels on Main Street and sometimes bought things at the tail end of tag sales in Ingrid's neighborhood, Riverbend. The kids called her Cracked-Up Katie.

Wearing wraparound sunglasses even though it was starting to look like rain, she came down the front stairs, wobbling just a little. She ignored the cement path leading to the street, cutting across the bare-dirt yard, straight for Ingrid, who for some reason was rooted to the spot.

Cracked-Up Katie walked right past Ingrid, missing her by inches and maybe not noticing her at all. She took a few steps down the sidewalk, then stopped suddenly and turned around.

"You lost?" she said. She had a deep, ragged voice, like a heavy smoker or someone who'd just finished screaming at the top of her lungs.

"Not really," Ingrid said.

Cracked-Up Katie took off her wraparound sunglasses and gazed down at Ingrid. She had pale irises, blue or green, but so light there was hardly any pigment at all. The whites of her eyes, on the other hand, had twisted red veins running all over them, so the effect of her gaze was painfully red.

"You look lost to me," she said. She took a step closer, gazed harder. "Like totally."