

CHAPTER 25: The Tree Bridge

Like I said, Arthur gets teased sometimes at school by the guys, mostly when we're in gym class because he's chunky and clumsy and looks pretty goofy in gym clothes. The truth is I think some of the other kids are a little jealous of him because his family has so much money. I used to tease Arthur a little bit, too, about all his money, and so did Arnie before we knew him very well. It was just sort of the thing to do in gym. But I actually like him best when we're in gym because he has to wear the same dumb-looking shorts and T-shirts as everyone else and even though he looks goofier than most of us he doesn't complain about it. And he just smiles and shrugs when the guys tease him and I think that says a lot about him.

Arnie likes Arthur, too, although I wasn't sure about that for a while. He used to tease him quite a bit in gym class, more than me, and when I told him about the conversation Arthur and I had in the library he looked at me kind of funny and for a while there I thought Arnie was jealous that Arthur and I were becoming friends. I wasn't sure how Arnie felt about Arthur until a week later, when he pushed Arthur off the tree bridge into the creek that runs behind our grade school. That's when I knew Arnie liked him.

It's the same muddy creek where I deposited Joey's lunchbox, just



SNOWMAN ON THE PITCHER'S MOUND

upstream a little ways. We were just walking across the tree bridge late one afternoon, Arnie, Arthur and me. The tree bridge is actually an ancient dead tree that fell into the creek like a hundred years ago or something. It must have made a huge splash when it fell, and shaken the earth. It's a huge trunk, a smooth, wide, white, dead one that everyone uses now as a walking bridge. We were getting across it easy that day until Arnie got that wild look in his eyes, the look that freaks my Grandma Paulson out and tells us he's about to do something insane.

And he did. First, he grabbed Arthur's books and CDs and calmly put them down on the tree (Arnie's wild but he didn't want to get Arthur into big trouble by ruining his schoolbooks and new CDs). Then he gave Arthur a slight push, which was all it took. Next thing I knew Arthur Walcher III was standing knee-deep in the creek, drenched and scaring away all the good minnows and making Arnie and me laugh until our sides hurt.

Arthur started cussing to no one in particular. He wasn't really mad at us because we were his only friends besides his so-called friends at the country club in West Des Moines that his dad belongs to, and I think in a way he almost liked the attention. But he was a little upset because his expensive sweater was totally soaked. The creek is practically pure mud and Arthur was wearing a lot of it.

So because it was after school and it wasn't that cold and there wasn't anywhere we had to be, Arnie and I looked at each other and then joined Arthur in the creek. He jumped first, but before he even hit the water I jumped, too. And by the way, I was the first one of us to actually put my head under the water. Even Arnie, who is totally insane sometimes, couldn't believe it when I did that.

So there we were, all three of us in our school clothes standing in the creek with our shoes totally covered in mud and the water up to our chests. Arnie and I started shaking the dirty creek water out of our hair like golden retrievers do when they get wet. Then we started teasing Arthur by laughing and cussing to no one in particular and wringing out our waterlogged shirtsleeves, which we really didn't care about.



Arthur started laughing harder than I had ever heard him laugh, and he couldn't stop. Then he started splashing us and swimming in the creek. He was actually swimming, doing the backstroke and the breast stroke under water, then coming up for air and laughing some more and even spitting water out of his mouth and straight up like a fountain. Arnie and I couldn't believe it, and we laughed some more and started swimming with him.

I think Arthur took Arnie's shove into the creek as a gesture of friendship, which it definitely was. That's just how Arnie shows his friendship, by doing something like getting you all muddy then getting himself just as muddy or muddier or punching you in the arm. Arnie knew about Arthur not having a mom anymore, of course, and he knew I was bummed about my mom having cancer. He knew Arthur and I both needed a laugh that day because there sure weren't many in either of our houses. We laughed, shivered and squeaked all the way home, and from that day on we haven't teased Arthur in gym and he's become a friend of Arnie and me and we could care less what anyone else thinks.

