

# MACLEAN'S

CANADA'S NATIONAL MAGAZINE

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## CONTENTS

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### Articles

SHOULD CHRIST BE ALLOWED IN THE CLASS-ROOM? Fred Bodsworth .....	5
BUCK HOUSE, Eva-Lis Wuarie .....	6
BIG DONALD AT THE THROTTLE, Blair Fraser .....	8
THE EMPIRE'S DUTIFUL DAUGHTERS, McKenzie Parter .....	10
SHOW GIRL, Jane Callwood .....	12
THE SALTY SPELL OF ST. ANDREWS, Ian Sclanders .....	16
THE PORCUPINE GETS AWAY WITH MURDER, Robert Thomas Allen .....	18
COMPLAINT DEPARTMENT, Paul Steiner .....	22

### Fiction

CORA AND THE GREAT WIDE WORLD, Ray Bradbury .....	14
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### Departments

EDITORIAL .....	1
IN THE EDITORS' CONFIDENCE .....	1
LONDON LETTER, Beverley Baxter .....	2
BACKSTAGE IN THE U. S. ELECTIONS, Blair Fraser .....	3
MACLEAN'S MOVIES, Conducted by Clyde Gilmour .....	20
HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR CHILD, Cartoons by Peter Whalley .....	23
WIT AND WISDOM .....	52
MAILBAG .....	54
PARADE .....	56

### PHOTOGRAPHS IN THIS ISSUE

By—Miller (pages 2, 6, 7), Reuterphoto (7), CNR (8, 9), Capital Press (9), Paul Rockett (10, 11), Benny Jacques (12, 13), Wheeler (12), Koshi Rukenaga—Black Star (16, 17).



Benjy came for the summer and the letters followed, fat and important, into the new mailbox.

But when he left  
the world he had made real  
seemed to go with him



# Cora and the Great Wide World

By RAY BRADBURY

ILLUSTRATED BY BRUCE JOHNSON

IT WAS A DAY to be out of bed, to pull curtains and fling open windows. It was a day to make your heart bigger.

It was early, the sun barely on the horizon, but already the birds were stirring from the pines and ten billion red ants milled free from their bronze hills by the cabin door. Cora's husband Tom slept like a bear in a snowy hibernation of bedclothes beside her. Will my heart wake him up? she wondered.

And then she knew why this seemed a special day.

"Benjy's coming!"

She imagined him far off, fording streams where spring was pushing itself in cool colors of moss and clear water toward the sea. She saw his great shoes dusting and flicking the stony roads and paths. She saw his freckled face. "Benjy, come on!" she thought, opening a window swiftly. Wind blew her hair like a grey spider web about her cold ears. . . "Now Benjy's at Iron Bridge, now at Meadow Pike, now up Creek Path, over Chesley's Field. . ."

Somewhere in the mountains was Benjy. Cora blinked. Those strange high hills beyond which twice a year she and Tom drove their horse and wagon to town, and through which she had once wanted to run forever, saying, "O, Tom, let's just drive and drive until we reach the sea." But Tom had looked at her as if she had slapped his face, and he had turned the wagon around and driven on home, talking to the mare. And if people lived by shores where the sea came like a storm, now louder, now softer, every day, she did not know it. And if there were cities where neons

were like pink ice and green mint and red fireworks each evening, she didn't know that either. Her horizon, north, south, east, west, was this valley, and had never been anything else.

"But now, today," she thought, "Benjy's coming from that world out there, he's seen it, heard it, smelt it, he'll tell me about it. And he can write." She looked at her hands. "He'll be here a whole month and teach me. Then I can write out into that world and bring it here to the mailbox I'll make Tom build today. Get up, Tom! You hear?"

She put her hand out to push the bank of sleeping snow.

By nine o'clock the valley was full of grasshoppers flinging themselves through the blue piney air while smoke curled into the sky.

Cora, singing into her pots and pans as she polished them, saw her face bronzed and freshened in the copper bottoms. Tom was grumbling the sounds of a sleepy bear at his breakfast, while her singing moved all about him, like a bird in a cage.

"Someone's mighty happy," said a voice.

Cora made herself into a statue. From the corners of her eyes she saw a shadow cross the open door. "Mrs. Brabban?" asked Cora of her scouring cloth.

"That's who it is!" And there stood the widow woman, her gingham dress dragging the warm dust, her letters in her chickeny hand. "Morning! I just been to my mailbox. Got me a real beauty of a letter from my Uncle George." Mrs. Brabban fixed Cora with a gaze like a silver needle. "How long since you got a letter from your uncle, Missus?"

"My uncles are all dead." It was not Cora

herself, but her tongue, that lied. When the time came, she knew, it would be her tongue alone that must take communion and confess earthly sinning.

"It's certainly nice, getting mail." Mrs. Brabban waved her letters in a straight flush on the morning air.

Always twisting the knife in the flesh. How many years, thought Cora, had this run on, Mrs. Brabban and her smiley eyes, talking loud of how she got mail; inferring that nobody else for miles around could read. Cora bit her lip and almost threw the pot, but set it down, laughing. "I forgot to tell you. My nephew Benjy's coming; his folks are poorly, and he's here for the summer, today! He'll teach me to write. And Tom's building us a postal box, aren't you, Tom?"

Mrs. Brabban clutched her letters. "Well, isn't that fine? You lucky lady." And suddenly the door was empty. Mrs. Brabban was gone.

But Cora was after her. For in that instant she had seen something like a scarecrow, something like a flicker of pure sunlight, something like a brook trout jumping upstream, leap a fence in the yard below. She saw a huge wand wave and birds flush in terror from a crab-apple tree. Cora was rushing, the world rushing back of her, down the path. "Benjy!"

They ran at each other like partners in a Saturday dance, linked arms, collided, and waltzed, jabbering. "Benjy!"

She glanced swiftly behind his ear. Yes, there was the yellow pencil.

"Benjy, welcome!"

"Why, ma'am." He held *Continued on page 22*



She watched him turn the pencil in his fingers. The first words formed themselves slowly on the incredible paper.

## Cora and the Wide World

Continued from page 14

her off at arm's length. "Why, ma'am, you're crying."

HERE'S my nephew," said Cora. Tom scowled up from spooning his corn-meal mush.

"Mighty glad," smiled Benjy. Cora held his arm tight so he couldn't vanish. She felt faint, wanting to sit, stand, run, but she only beat her heart fast and laughed at strange times. Now, in an instant, the far countries were brought near. Here was this tall boy, lighting up the room like a pine torch, this boy who had seen cities and seas and gone places when things had been better for his parents.

"Benjy. I got peas, corn, bacon, mush, soup, and beans for breakfast."

"Hold on!" said Tom. "Hush, Tom, the boy's down to the bone with walking." She turned to the boy. "Benjy, tell me all about yourself. You did go to school?"

Benjy kicked off his shoes. With one bare foot he traced a word in the hearth ashes.

Tom scowled. "What's it say?" "It says," said Benjy, "C and O and R and A. Cora."

"My name, Tom, see it! Oh, Benjy, it's good you really write, child. We had one cousin here, long ago, claimed he could spell upside down and backwards. So we fattened him up and he wrote letters and we never got answers. Come to find out he knew just enough spelling to mail letters to the dead-letter office. Lord, Tom knocked two months' worth of vittles out of that boy bating him up the road with a piece of fence." They laughed, anxiously.

"I write fine," said the serious boy. "That's all we want to know." She shoved a cut of berry pie at him. "Eat."

By ten-thirty, with the sun riding higher, after watching Benjy devour heaped platters of food, Tom thundered from the cabin, jamming his cap on. "I'm going out and cut down half the forest!" he said angrily.

But no one heard. Cora was seated in a breathless spell. She was watching the pencil behind Benjy's peach-fuzz ear. She saw him finger it casually, lazily, indifferently. Oh, not so casual. Benjy, she thought, handle it like a spring robin's egg. She wanted to touch the pencil, but hadn't touched one in years because it made her feel foolish and then angry and then sad. Her hand twitched in her lap.

"You got some paper?" asked Benjy. "Oh, land, I never thought," she walked, and the room walls darkened. "What'll we do?"

"Just happens I brought some." He fetched a tablet from his little bag. "You want to write a letter somewhere?"

She smiled outrageously. "I want to write a letter to . . . to . . ." Her face fell apart. She looked around for someone in the distance. She looked at the mountains in the morning sunshine. She heard the sea rolling off on yellow shores a thousand miles away. The birds were coming north over the valley, on their way to multitudes of cities and indifferent to her need.

"Benjy, why, I never thought, until this moment, I don't know anybody in all that world out there. Nobody but my aunt. And if I wrote her it'd make her feel bad, a hundred miles from here, to have to find someone else to read the letter to her. She's got the whalebone corset sort of pride. Make her nervous the next ten years, that letter setting in her house on the mantel. No, no letter to her." Cora's

eyes moved from the hills and the unseemly ocean. "Who then? Where? Someone. I just've got to get me some letters."

"Hold on." Benjy fished a dime magazine from his coat. It had a red cover of an unpressed woman screaming away from a green monster. "All sorts of addresses in here."

They leafed the pages together. "What's this?" Cora tapped an ad. "HERE'S YOUR POWER PLUS FREE MUSCLE CHART. Send name, address," read Benjy. "To Dept. M-3 for Free Health Map!"

"And what about this one?" "DETECTIVES MAKE SECRET INVESTIGATIONS. PARTICULARS FREE. WRITE: G.D.M. DETECTIVE SCHOOL."

"Everything's free. Well, Benjy." She looked at the pencil in his hand. He drew up his chair. She watched him turn the pencil in his fingers. She saw him bite his tongue, softly. She saw him squint his eyes. She held her breath. She bent forward. She squinted her own eyes and clamped her tongue.

Now, now Benjy raised his pencil, licked it, and set it down to the paper. "There it is!" thought Cora.

The first words. They formed themselves slowly on the incredible paper. "Dear Power Plus Muscle Company, Sirs," he wrote.

THE morning blew away on a wind, the morning flowed down the creek, the morning flew off with some ravens, and the sun burned on the cabin roof. Cora didn't turn when she heard a shuffle at the blazing sunspot. Tom was there, but not there, nothing was before her but a series of filled pages, a whispering pencil, and Benjy's careful Palmer Penmanship hand. Cora moved her head around, around, with each O, each L, with each small hill of an M, each tiny dot made her head peck like a chicken, each crossed T made her tongue lick across her upper lip.

"It's noon and I'm hungry!" said Tom, almost behind her. She watched the pencil as one watches a snail leaving an exceptional trail across a flat stone in the early morning.

"It's noon," cried Tom, again. Cora glanced up, stunned. "Why, it seems only a moment ago we wrote to that Philadelphia Coin Collecting Company, ain't that right, Benjy?" Cora smiled a dazzling smile. "While you wait for your vittles, Tom, just can't you build that mailbox? Bigger than Mr. Brabban's, please?"

"I'll nail up a shooebox." "Tom Gibbs." She rose pleasantly. Her smile said, better run, better work, better do. "I want a big pretty mailbox, all white, for Benjy to paint our name on in black spelling. I won't have any shooebox for my very first real letter."

And it was done. Benjy lettered the finished mailbox: MRS. CORA GIBBS, while Tom stood grumbling behind him. "What's it say?" "MR. TOM GIBBS," said Benjy, quietly, raising his hand.

Tom blinked at it for a minute, quietly, and then said, "I'm still hungry. Someone light the fire."

There were no stamps. Tom was made to hitch up the horse and drive to Green Fork to buy some red ones, a green, and ten pink stamps with dignified gentlemen printed on them. But Cora rode along to be certain Tom didn't hurl these first letters in the creek. When they rode home the first thing Cora did, face glowing, was poke in the new mailbox.

"You crazy?" said Tom. "No harm looking?"

That afternoon she visited the mailbox six times. On the seventh, a

woodchuck jumped out. Tom stood laughing in the door, pounding his knees. Cora chased him out of the house still laughing.

Then she stood in the window looking down at her mailbox right across from Mrs. Brabham's. Ten years ago the widow woman had plunked her letterbox right under Cora's nose almost, when she could as easily have built it up nearer her own cabin. But it gave Mrs. Brabham an excuse to float like a flower on a river, down the hill path, flip the box wide with a great rustling, from time to time spying up to see if Cora was watching. Cora always was. When caught, she pretended to sprinkle flowers with an empty water can, or dig mushrooms in the wrong season.

**N**EXT morning Cora was up before the sun had warmed the strawberry patch or the wind had stirred the pines. Benji was sitting up in his cot when Cora returned from the mailbox. "Too early," he said. "Postman won't drive by yet."

"Drive by?"  
"They come in cars, this far out."  
"Oh," Cora sat down.

"You sick, Aunt Cora?"  
"No, no." She blinked. "It's just, I don't recall in twenty years seeing no mail truck whistle by here. It just came to me. All this time I never seen no mailman at all."

"Maybe he comes when you're not around."

"I'm up with the fog-spunks, down with the chickens. I never really gave it a thought, of course, but—." She turned to look out the window, up at Mrs. Brabham's house. "Benji, I got a kind of sneaking hunch." She stood up and walked straight out of the cabin, down the dust path, Benji following, across the thin road to Mrs. Brabham's mailbox. A hush was on the fields and hills. It was so early it made you whisper.

"Don't break the law, Aunt Cora!"  
"Shh. Here." She opened the box, put her hand in like someone fumbling in a gopher hole. "And here, and here." She rattled some letters into his cupped hands.

"Why, these been opened already! You open these, Aunt Cora?"

"I never touched them." Her face was stunned. "This is the first time in my life I ever even let my shadow cross this box."

Benji turned the letters around and around, cocking his head. "Why, Aunt Cora, these letters, they're ten years old!"

"What!" Cora grabbed at them.  
"Aunt Cora, she's been getting the same mail every day for years. And they're not even addressed to Mrs. Brabham, they're to some woman named Ortega in Green Fork."

"Ortega, the Mexican grocery woman! All these years," whispered Cora, staring at the worn mail in her hands.  
"All these years."

They gazed up at Mrs. Brabham's sleeping house in the cool quiet morning.

"Oh, that sly woman, making a commotion with her letters, making me feel small. All puffed out she was, swishing along, reading her mail."

Mrs. Brabham's front door opened.

"Put them back, Aunt Cora!"  
Cora slammed the mailbox shut with time to spare.

Mrs. Brabham drifted down the path, stopping here or there, quietly, to peer at the opening wild flowers.

"Morning," she said, sweetly.

"Mrs. Brabham, this is my nephew Benji."

"How nice." Mrs. Brabham with a great swivel of her body, a flourish of her flour-white hands, rapped the mail-

box as if to shake the letters loose inside, flipped the lid, and extracted the mail, covering her actions with her back. She made motions, and spun about, merrily, winking. "Wonderful! Why just look at this letter from dear Uncle George!"

"Well, ain't that nice!" said Cora.

**T**HEN the breathless summer days of waiting. The butterflies jumping orange and blue on the air, the flowers nodding about the cabin, and the hard constant sound of Benjy's pencil scribbling through the afternoons. Benjy's mouth was always packed with food and Tom was always stomping in to find lunch or supper late, cold, both, or none at all.

Benjy handled the pencil with a delicious spread of his bony hands, lovingly inscribing each vowel and consonant as Cora hovered about him making up words, rolling them on her tongue, delighted each time she saw them spring out on the paper. But she wasn't learning to write. "It's so much fun wat-hing you write, Benjy. Tomorrow I'll start learning. Now take another letter!"

They worked their way through ads about Asthma, Trusses, and Magic, they joined the Rostercians, or at least sent for a free sealed book all about the Knowledge that Had been Damned to Oblivion, Secrets from Hidden Ancient Temples and Buried Sanctuaries. Then there were free packets of Giant Sunflower seeds, and something about HEARTBURN. They had worked back to page 127 of Quarter Murder Magazine, on a bright summer morning when . . .

"Listen," said Cora.

They listened.

"A car," said Benjy.

And up the blue hills and through the tall fiery green pines and along the dusty road, mile by mile, came the sound of a car riding along and along, until finally, at the bend, it came full thundering and in an instant Cora was out the door running and as she ran she heard and saw and felt many things. First, from the corner of her eye, she saw Mrs. Brabham gliding down the road from the other direction. Mrs. Brabham from when she saw the bright green car boiling on the grade, and there was the whistle of a silver whistle and the old man in the car leaped out just before Cora arrived and said, "Mrs. Gibbs?" "Yes!" she cried. "Mail for you, ma'am," he said, and held it toward her. She put out her hand, then drew back, remembering. "Oh," she said, "please, would you mind, would you put it, please . . . in my mailbox." The old man squinted at her, at the mailbox, back at her, and laughed. "Don't mind," he said, and did just that—put the mail in the box.

Mrs. Brabham stood where she was, not moving, eyes wild. "Any mail for Mrs. Brabham?" asked Cora.

"That's all." And the car dusted away down the road.

Mrs. Brabham stood with her hands clenched together. Then, without looking in her own letterbox, turned and rustled swiftly up her path, out of sight.

Cora walked around her mailbox twice, not touching it for a long time.

"Benjy, I've got me some letters!" She reached in, delicately, and took them out and turned them over. She put them quietly in his hand. "Read them to me. Is my name on the front?"

"Yes'm." He opened the first letter with due carefulness and read it aloud in the summer morning: "Dear Mrs. Gibbs . . ."

He stopped and let her savor it, her eyes half shut, her mouth moving the words. He repeated it for artistic

emphasis, and then went on: "We are sending you our free folder, enclosed, from the Intercontinental Mailing Schools concerning full particulars on how you, too, can take our Correspondence Course in Sanitary Engineering—"

"Benjy, Benjy, I'm so happy! Start over again!"

"Dear Mrs. Gibbs," he read.

**A**FTER that the mailbox was never empty. The world came rushing and crowding in, all the places she had never seen or heard about or been to. Travel folders, spice cake recipes, and even a letter from an elderly gentleman who wished for . . . lady

—fifty years old, gentle disposition, money; object matrimony." Benjy wrote back, "I am already married, but thank you for your kind and thoughtful consideration. Yours truly, Cora Gibbs." And the letters continued to pour across the hills: coin collectors' catalogues, novelty books, magic list numbers, arthritis charts, flea killer samples—the world filled up her letterbox and suddenly she was not alone or remote from people. If a man wrote a form letter to Cora about the Mysteries of Ancient Maya Revealed, he was likely as not to receive three letters from Cora in the next week budding out their formal meeting into a warm friendship. After one particularly hard day of writing Benjy was forced to soak his hand in Epsom salts.

By the end of the third week Mrs. Brabham no longer came down to her mailbox. She didn't even come to the front door of her cabin to get the air, for Cora was always down at the road, leaning out, smiling for the mailman.

All too quickly the summer was at an end, or, at least, that part of the summer that counted most, anyway: Benjy's visit. There was his red bandanna handkerchief on the cabin table, sandwiches folded fresh and oniony in it, tied with a mint-sprig to keep it clean to the smell; there on the floor, freshly polished, were his shoes to get in to, and there on the chair, with his pencil, which had once been long and yellow but was now stubby and chewed, sat Benjy. Cora took hold of his chin and tilted his head, as if she were testing a summer squash of an unfamiliar variety.

"Benjy, I owe you an apology. I don't think I looked at your face once in all this time. Seems I know every wart on your hand, every hangnail, every bump and every crinkle, but I might pass your face in a crowd and miss you."

"It's no face to look at," said Benjy, shyly.

"But I'd know that hand in a million hands," Cora said. "Let anyone shake my hand in a dark room, a thousand people, and out of all those I'd say, Well, *this one's* Benjy." She

smiled quietly and walked away to the open door. "I been thinking." She looked up at a distant cabin. "Ain't seen Mrs. Brabham in weeks. Stays in all the time now. I've got a guilty feeling. I've done a pridelful thing, a thing more sinful than she ever done me. I took the bottom out of her life. It was a mean and spiteful thing and I'm ashamed." She gazed up the hill toward that silent locked place. "Benjy, would you do me one last favor?"

"Yes'm."

"Write a letter for Mrs. Brabham."

"Ma'am?"

"Yes, write some of those companies, a free chart, a sample, something, and sign Mrs. Brabham's name."

"All right," said Benjy.

"Th't way in a week or a month the postman'll come by and whistle and I'll tell him to go up to her door, special, and deliver it. And I'll be sure and be out in my front yard where I can see and Mrs. Brabham can see I see. And I'll wave my letters to her and she'll wave her letters to me and everybody'll smile."

"Yes'm," said Benjy.

He wrote three letters, licked the envelopes carefully, stuck them in his pocket. "I'll mail them when I get to Saint Louis."

"It's been a fine summer," she said. "It sure has."

"But, Benjy, I didn't learn to write, did I? I was after the letters and made you write late nights, and we were so busy sending labels and getting samples, land, it seemed there wasn't time to learn. And that means . . ."

He knew what it meant. He shook her hand. They stood in the cabin door. "Thanks," she said, "for every-thing."

Then he was running off. He ran as far as the meadow fence, leaped it easily, and the last she saw of him he was still running, waving the special letters, off into the great world over the hills.

THE letters kept coming for some six months after Benjy went away. There would be the postman's little green car and the sharp ice-rimed shout of good morning, or the whistle, as he clapped two or three pink or blue envelopes in that fine mailbox.

And there was that special day when Mrs. Brabham received her first real letter.

After that the letters were spaced a week apart, then a month, and finally the postman didn't say hello at all, there was no sound of a car coming up that lonely mountain road. First a spider moved into the mailbox, then a sparrow.

And Cora, while the letters still lasted, would clutch them in her bewildered hands, staring at them quietly until the pressure of her face muscles squeezed clear round shiny drops of water from her eyes. She'd hold up one blue envelope. "Who's this from?"

"Don't know," said Tom.

"What's it say?" she wailed.

"Don't know," said Tom.

"What's going on in that world out there, oh, I'll never know, I'll never know now," she said. "And this letter, and this one, and *this*." She tumbled the stacks and stacks of letters that had come since Benjy ran off. "All the world and all the people and all the happenings, and me not knowing. All that world and people waiting to hear from us, and us not writing, and them not ever writing back."

And at last the day came when the wind blew the mailbox over. In the mornings again Cora would stand at the open door of her cabin brushing her hair with a slow brush, not special, looking at the hills. And in all the years that followed she never passed the fallen mailbox without stooping aimlessly to fumble inside and take her hand out with nothing in it before she wandered on again into the fields. ★