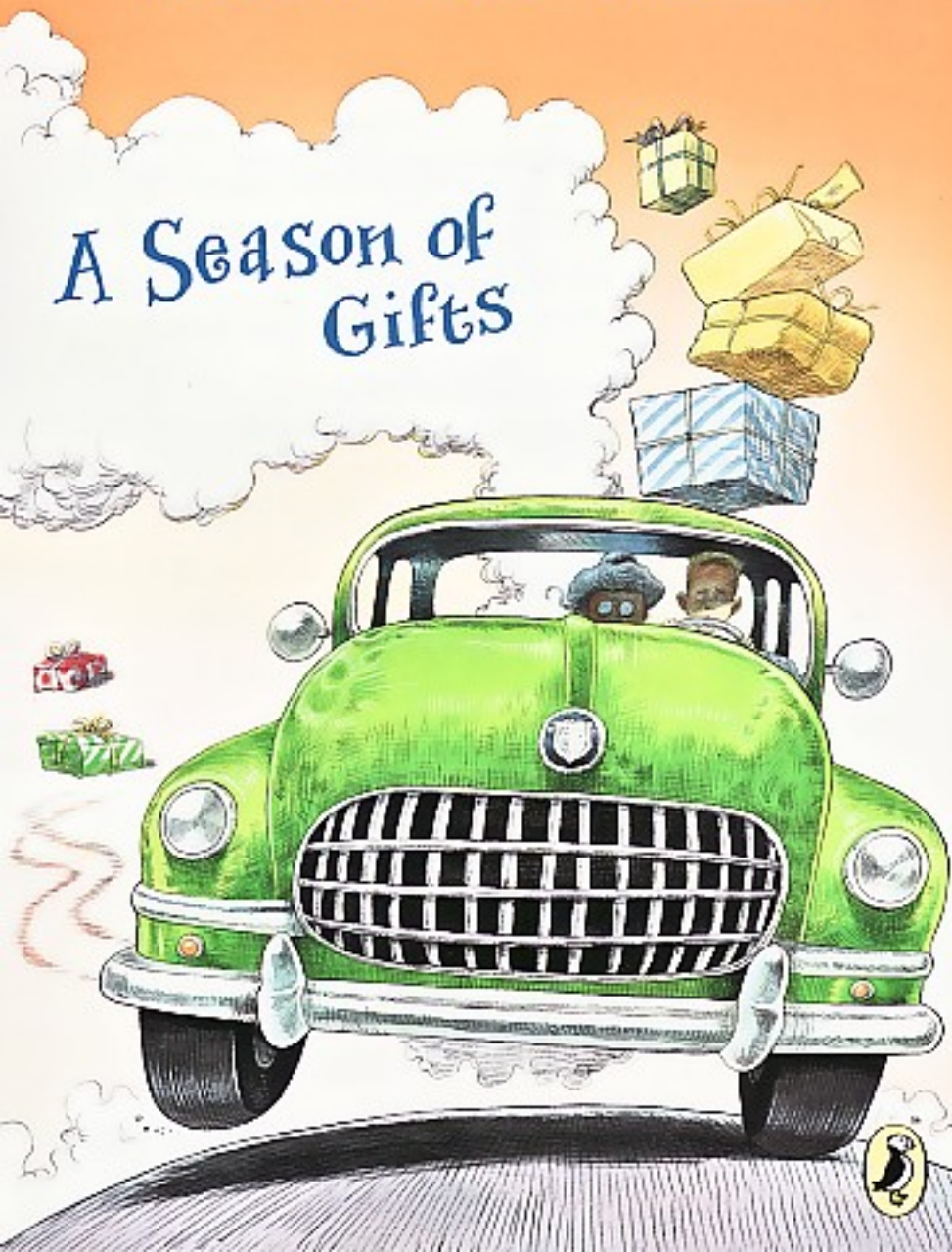


NEWBERY AWARD WINNER AND
TWO-TIME NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

RICHARD PECK

A Season of
Gifts



CHAPTER ONE



Locked and Loaded

You could see from here the house was haunted. Its crooked old lightning rods pointed bony fingers at the sky. It hadn't had a lick of paint since VJ Day, maybe the war before that. A porch sagged off the side. The kitchen screen door hung from a hinge. Only the snowball bushes crowding its foundations seemed to hold the place up.

At night, lights moved from room to room. Every evening just at dusk a light bobbed down the walk to the cobhouse and the privy behind, and back again.

My little sister, Ruth Ann, couldn't take her eyes off the place. She'd rest her chin on the windowsill and plant her nose on screen wire. What else did she have to do?

"It's like Halloween here in August," she'd say. "I betcha there are spooks inside that house."

"No," Mother said behind her. "No spooks."

"What do you think, Bobby?" I was Ruth Ann's big brother, so she thought I knew things. "Spooks or not?"

Over her head, Mother gave me one of her direct looks, so I said, "Probably not."

But even when Ruth Ann took her hula hoop and her doll buggy out on our front walk, she was all eyes. She'd watch the house while she revolved in her hoop and rocked her doll. She spent a lot of time outside, hoping a friend would happen to her.

So we Barnharts had moved in next door to a haunted house, if a house can be haunted by a living being. But the old lady who lived over there had to be just this side of the grave with one foot in it. She looked older than the town. But she was way too solid to be a ghost. You sure couldn't see through her. You could barely see around her.

A long straight garden grew down this side of her property. Every blazing morning she'd tramp off her back porch and down her garden rows with a hoe humped on her shoulder. Her straw hat looked like she'd swiped it off a mule. It hid her face except for the chins. She worked right through high noon in a fog of flies, hoeing, yanking weeds, and talking to her tomato plants.

The heat slowed her some, and the flies. But she could be amazingly light on her big pins. We'd already seen her take a broom and swat a Fuller Brush man off her porch.

She kept right at his heels till he was off her property.

As everybody knew, she didn't neighbor and went to no known church. She was not only real cranky, but well-armed. Word was that she had a regular arsenal of weaponry behind her woodbox. They said it was like Fort Leonard Wood behind her stove. They said she was locked and loaded.

She had to be pushing ninety, so rumors had grown up around her. One was that her property was on top of an ancient Kickapoo burying grounds, and that's spooky right there.

Only a ragged row of fleshy red canna flowers separated her garden from our yard. "You children stay on this side of the cannas," Mother said. "Let's let sleeping dogs lie."

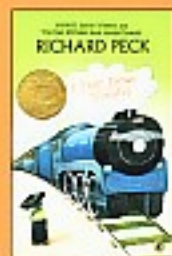
Mother didn't have to worry about me. I was a boy, but not that brave. I wouldn't have set a toe over that line. And she didn't mean my big sister, Phyllis, who was sulking upstairs over having to start high school in a new town. Mother meant Ruth Ann. She was hard to keep track of unless she was following you around.

"Remember who we are," Mother said. "And we're new here. All eyes are upon us."

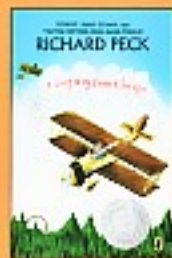
It wasn't going to be the kind of town that rolls out the welcome mat. Still, a few people brought us things to eat just to see us up close. On a good day, an angel food cake. Moore's IGA store sent us out some half-price coupons and



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