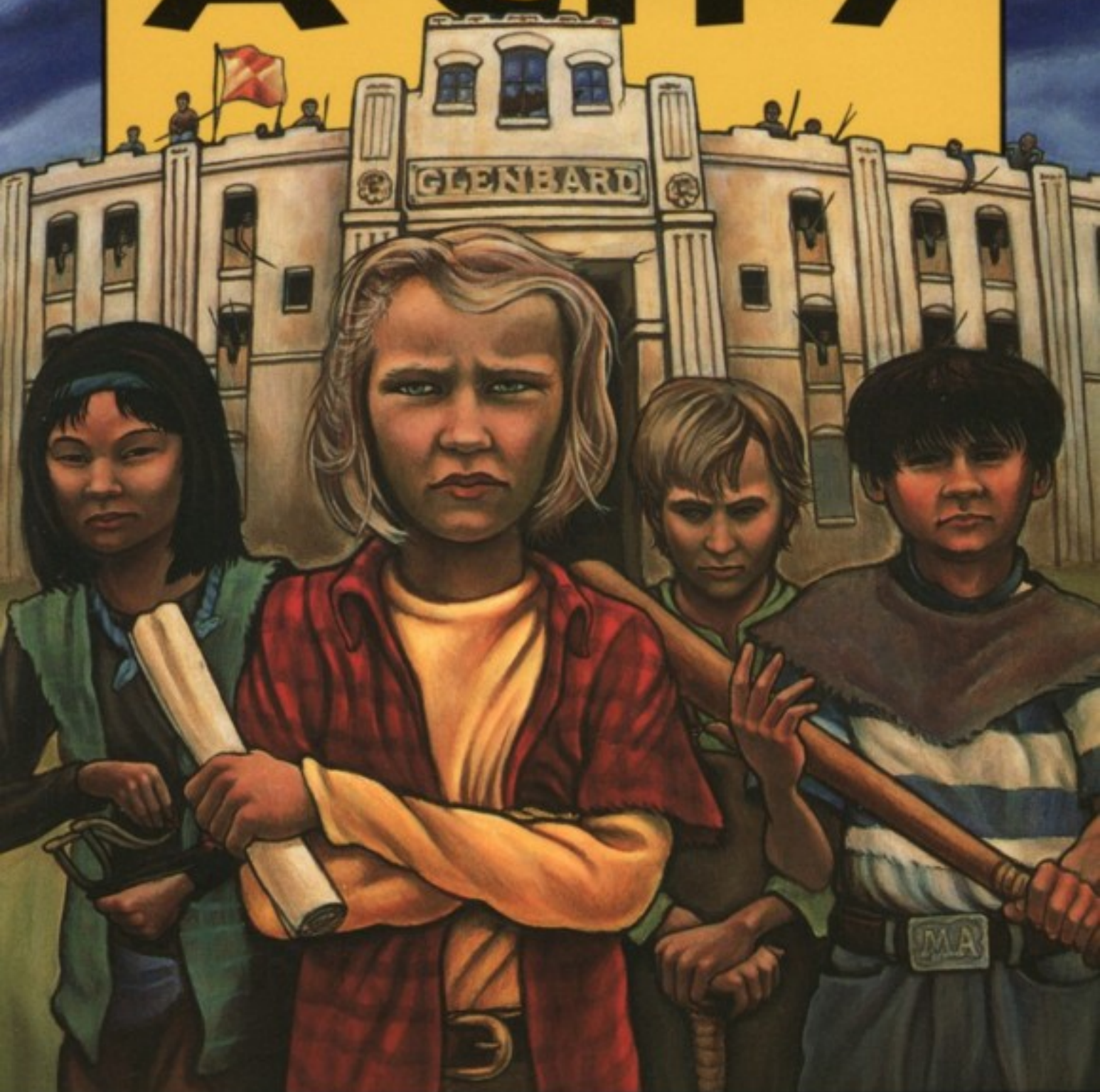


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THE GIRL WHO OWNED A CITY



O. T. NELSON

C H A P T E R

ONE

Good! The house was empty. While Lisa waited outside in the cold to be sure, she relaxed for a moment and let herself think about the past.

At this time a few weeks ago, she had been sitting quietly in her fifth-grade social studies class. There had been no reason to believe that her life would change. Now it was the middle of December. The whole world had changed, and now life seemed terrible.

What will happen to me? she wondered. Then she swung her leg with all her might. Her boot crashed through the wooden frame and glass of the front door.

The shattering sound rang in her ears as she reached through the broken pane for the latch. Her movements were quick. She was becoming a good thief.

Her eyes struggled to adjust to the strange dimness

of the room. Lucky I didn't cut myself that time, she thought, inspecting her hand. But the hand was trembling, and that made her angry.

There is nothing to be afraid of here! They're dead, and gone for good. Lisa promised herself never to be afraid again, and to prove it, she screamed at the top of her voice, "I'm here, *nobody*. I'm here!"

Not even an echo replied.

The living room was filled with expensive, comfortable furniture. The big futon seemed especially inviting and made the girl realize how tired she was.

Not thinking very clearly, she searched the room for a light switch. When she finally found one, she flipped it on. Nothing.

Dummy! she thought. There isn't any electricity anymore.

The odor of spoiled food was coming from the kitchen. The garbage container was crawling with little white maggots. They seemed to be in every kitchen, like tiny ghosts that had moved in to haunt the empty houses.

The refrigerator was filled with rotten food. She started to reach for some apples that still looked good, but she stopped, guessing that they had picked up the taste of the bad food.

She went to the pantry and loaded her sack almost to the top with canned food, mostly soup. In the bathroom, she added toothpaste, Tylenol, Kleenex, and two bars of soap.

Can opener! she remembered. She hunted around

in the kitchen until she found one. Her bag was full. After grabbing some candles from the dining room table, she headed for the front door.

Her actions had become almost automatic. But she was still amazed that she could do the things she had to do—things that the world just hadn't taught her. She had heard the word "looting" before and knew that it was a kind of stealing. They had looted in the Los Angeles riots just a few years ago.

But this wasn't really looting, was it? Whoever owned this house would never be back to claim it. The food and supplies would just go to waste or be taken by some other children. Besides, the things she took would save her life—and Todd's.

Lisa moved to the light of a window to look at her watch. It was getting close to four, and Todd would be worried about her. The little brother that she used to think was a pest now depended on her for everything. She didn't mind. He had become the best thing in her strange life.

After tucking the watch into her coat pocket, she started toward the door again. She noticed a small writing desk near the window and paused. How neatly the papers were arranged on it! She couldn't resist the temptation to discover something about the people who had lived in the house. When she sat down at the desk, she suddenly felt very tired. She glanced again at the futon.

If only I were Goldilocks, she thought, laughing at herself. Then I could have a bowl of warm porridge and

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Life in a quiet suburban town changes drastically for Lisa and her younger brother Todd when they survive a terrible plague that has swept across the earth. Every person older than 12 has died, and now Lisa and Todd must find a way to remain alive in a very dangerous world. Set in the near future, *The Girl Who Owned a City* is a compelling tale of survival against nearly impossible odds.



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