

HOW'S YOUR GERBIL MR. AVERY?

A.A. Fouch



How's Your Gerbil, Mr. Avery?

By A.A. Fouch

Edited by Evan Rhoades

Chapter 1 - The Folks of Maple Street

This story takes place many years ago, when movies were just beginning to have voices, a dime was worth a dollar, and neighborhoods were sprawling places for children to explore. Such was the neighborhood of Maple Street.

A giant maple tree, the namesake of the neighborhood, stood at the far end of the street, surrounded by a neat circle of bricks. It was just the sort of tree that children like to climb. To the left of the tree was a picnic table, which was repainted a nice, rusty-brown color every year.

Though you couldn't tell just by looking, Maple Street was special, and the thing that made it special was the people. Out of all the neighborhoods nearby, it was generally agreed that Maple Street had a distinct personality. All the neighbors knew one another, and even if they didn't always get along, it was known among them that if you were in trouble, help was close by.

The house nearest to the big maple tree was the Jason's. Mr. George Jason had an office job at the newspaper. Every morning, he put on a suit and tie. The tie came off quicker than you could say "Jack Robinson" the instant he got home. His son, Roger, had been recently appointed the new paperboy. He was quite proud of his position, being the oldest boy in the neighborhood and having his first real job.

Next to them were the Osbournes. Mr. Osbourne was a factory worker. They had two children, Evie and Mark, Evie being the imaginative one while Mark aspired to be a scientist. Evie was six and still carried around her floppy stuffed rabbit named Wimbledon everywhere she went. Mark didn't have one yet but badly wanted a laboratory kit, complete with a white jacket. He had high hopes for Christmas.

Across the street from them was Mr. Jim Grocer, who seemed like a real grump when you first met him. But once you looked into his twinkly eyes, you could see he was only pretending. He often sat on his porch, looking like a satisfied toad, dozing in a rocking chair until one of the children dared to set foot on his lawn.

When he sat on the porch, he always had a garden hose at hand. As soon as one of the children came too close, he would open one eye and, with a fast trigger finger, shoot a spout of water at them as they ran away, shrieking with pretended fear.

Next to Mr. Grocer was Mrs. Amelia Fairbanks, a retired opera singer. She wore what the children thought looked like very fancy pajamas, complete with a feather boa, and sometimes a hat as well. She would stand on her balcony, place her hand on her heart, and talk to her dearly departed husband, Mr. Evan Fairbanks, saying, "Oh darling, if only we could sing one last time."

She rather loved being melancholy.

There were several other neighbors; Hank Gregory the professor, Zeb and Min Lighthouse who were both retired, and the Everstones who had two girls named Rosie and baby Ella who had just celebrated her first birthday. The neighborhood was noisy with living during the day, and peaceful at night. That is, until Mr. Avery moved in...

It all began a year ago, when Mrs. Marmalade moved away and left the house across the street from Amelia Fairbanks quite empty. Mrs. Marmalade was a favorite of the children, and practically the neighborhood grandmother. She always had a supply of fresh chocolate chip cookies and a humongous jug of lemonade in her kitchen. When she grew too old to live by herself, her daughter sent for her so they could live together in the country. The house was empty for nearly an entire year, until Mr. Avery arrived.

The children had hoped that the house would be occupied by another friend like Mrs. Marmalade, who had always been so kind and generous. However, Mr. Avery did not seem, at first, to be the friendly type. When the moving van arrived, the children all waited close to the house, hoping to see who was moving in.

Jonathan B. Avery emerged from his car and the children inspected him. He was a tall, lean, gentle-featured fellow with a light pepper-grey vest and trousers. It looked as if he had been working hard all morning. His white sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and his bow tie hung a little askew from his collar. He adjusted his cap so that the brim wouldn't fall down about his eyes. Roger thought that if one word could describe this man, it would be antsy.

Mr. Avery looked this way and that, but didn't acknowledge anyone and simply kept taking bundles of things into the house as fast as he could. He mumbled directions to the two movers who drove the van, then darted into the house, locked the door, and said nothing to anyone. The children felt disappointed. They wished Mrs. Marmalade could come back.

All was quiet in the house for a few days, until one night there came a series of bangings and clangings from Mr. Avery's house. Mrs. Fairbanks was all in a huff the next morning and spoke to Jim Grocer as he watered his plants.

"I tell you, Mr. Grocer," said Mrs. Fairbanks, "I have never heard such a noise like that in all my born days. What a racket! I didn't get a wink of sleep last night, not one wink. What was he thinking, making such a noise at night!"

"I'll speak to him if you like, Mrs. Fairbanks."

Mrs. Fairbanks didn't speak to men much since her husband had passed away, but for Mr. Grocer, she made an exception.

“I would appreciate it, Mr. Grocer.”

“All right...” Mr. Grocer sighed. He would have to leave his porch. And his hose. He grabbed a watering can. Perhaps it was his old military ways, but he firmly believed in always being armed.

He walked down the street and rapped on Mr. Avery’s door. There was no answer. Apparently he wasn’t home. In fact, he was seldom home. He left early every morning, while nearly everyone else was still sleeping, wearing neat pants and a shirt that had at least the sleeves and collar ironed (no one knew if there were wrinkles under his vest).

He would come home late, looking very tired and discouraged. No noise came from his house until late in the evening, probably past your bedtime. Then, the clanging would start, and sometimes something that sounded like a whirring, blending sort of noise, usually followed by a howling or a loud pop.

Mrs. Fairbanks had had enough of it one night, and as hesitant as she was to speak to a new man in the neighborhood, she stormed over to Mr. Avery’s.

Just before she could knock at the door, the noise quieted down instantly, almost as if her arrival had been anticipated. She looked around suspiciously and said nothing, but kept glancing this way and that. No more noise came from the house that night.

Mr. Avery had in fact seen her storming across her lawn from his window, and not wanting to meet the pink-clad hurricane, put everything away and darted off to bed without making a noise (we’ve all done this when our parents are coming home from an evening out and we were supposed to have our chores done).

The next day, Mr. Avery came home early, looking dejected. The neighborhood children had just come home from school and were playing catch near his house when they saw him pull up, step out of his car, and sit on his front porch step with his hat in his hands.

“Why do you think he’s so sad?” Mark whispered to Roger.

“I don’t know,” Roger answered, “But he sure seems down today. I wonder why he’s home early from work...”

“Maybe he’s sick!” said Mark.

“Maybe,” said Roger. “But then why doesn’t he go into the house?”

“Maybe he lost something,” Evie piped up from the sidewalk, holding a little tighter to Wimbledon. Mr. Avery *did* have the look of someone who’d lost something.

“Why don’t you go ask him?” Mark nodded towards Roger with a look that said, “*You’re the oldest!*”

“I don’t know...” said Roger, “He doesn’t seem like he’s in the mood to talk to anyone at all.”

While the boys were talking, Evie walked up a little closer to Mr. Avery’s front door. She waved a little bit, but Mr. Avery just stared blankly in front of him.

Something was very wrong.

Chapter 2 - The Invitation

Mr. Avery no longer left the house every morning. The nightly bangings and clangings had moved to the afternoon. After a few days, the noises stopped altogether. No one could remember the last time they had seen Mr. Avery step outside—no one except for the children.

They could've told you that Mr. Avery left his house every other Thursday at four o'clock, and came back at five o'clock with groceries and a soda which he was always sipping as he walked up to the front door. Other than this, he seemed never to leave the house.

Folks began to worry about him, even Mrs. Fairbanks, who had grown somewhat accustomed to the noises, and wondered what had happened to make them stop.

The Jason family pondered Mr. Avery's predicament over supper one night.

"He seems like he could be such a nice fellow," said Roger's mother, Thelma. "I spoke with him just once at the grocery store, but he seemed pleasant enough."

"It would be nice if someone would check in on him," Roger's father, George, mused. "Only I've heard he doesn't answer the door very often. I hope nothing's terribly wrong. Some folks clam up and don't know how to ask for help when things don't go well. Roger, would you put in some extra effort this week towards delivering Mr. Avery's paper? Sometimes a friendly hello at the right time will do the trick."

"That's a wonderful idea, George!" praised Thelma, "Perhaps I could send him with a plate of fresh cookies!"

"Let's try a hello first, dear. Man-to-man hellos don't usually involve sweets, although your cookies *are* the very best in the whole world."

Thelma smiled, “Why thank you, darling... And you’re right, but he should share a meal with us. Why not invite him to the neighborhood summer picnic?”

“I think that’s the ticket!” George winked at Thelma. “What do you say to that, Roger?”

“Well, I’ll try,” said Roger. “But he doesn’t seem very friendly...”

George set down his fork for a moment and paused before speaking. “Don’t expect him to say yes, and don’t expect him to say no. Just make the offer. If he wants to stay inside all the time, that’s his decision, and you’ll have done your best to make him feel welcome. You don’t know what he’s thinking. Maybe he just needs an invitation.”

“Alright...” Roger said, feeling somehow responsible for Mr. Avery.

The next morning, when Roger delivered his papers, he left Mr. Avery’s house for last. Roger’s imagination was getting a little carried away with him, and his mind began to make up stories of why Mr. Avery was such a hermit. Perhaps he was on the run from the law, or maybe he was a mad scientist, or some sort of axe murderer! Roger shook his head. No, he didn’t need to be afraid. He would solve the mystery of Mr. Avery, somehow...

Roger rolled his bike up to the front door, parked it by the curb, and grabbed the last paper out of his basket. Taking a deep breath, he walked up to the door. Then he gathered his courage, and knocked loudly. A few moments passed in which he almost wanted to sprint off the front porch and high-tail it out of sight, but he made his feet stick to the ground as if he were standing on wads of bubblegum and waited for Mr. Avery.

At last, the front door opened. Roger’s heart almost went into his throat, but he would never tell that to the other kids.

“Yes?” Mr. Avery answered the door, looking disheveled and sounding exhausted. It looked like he had slept in his clothes, they were so terribly wrinkled, and he had thrown a cap on top of his uncombed hair.

Roger held out the newspaper. “Here’s your paper, Mr. Avery!”

Mr. Avery looked slightly confused. “Oh, thank you, but... don’t you usually just leave on the porch?”

“Yes,” Roger nodded, “But we—I mean I—I mean, my family and I wanted to invite you to the neighborhood picnic next Saturday at noon. We meet down there, at the end of the street.”

Roger pointed to the old maple tree. There, he had made the invitation!

Mr. Avery looked rather shy. “That... that’s very kind of you. It sounds like fun, only... do I have to bring any food? I’m not much of a cook...”

Roger hadn’t thought of this. “Well, everyone usually brings something to share, even if it doesn’t get eaten. Mrs. Fairbanks, she lives across from you, she always brings some kind of pudding that no one likes.”

“Doesn’t anyone have the heart to tell her?” Mr. Avery asked, and would you believe it, he almost smiled.

Roger shook his head and laughed. “Only Mr. Grocer, but she doesn’t mind him. You could bring something like chips, or vegetables, or something else you don’t have to cook.”

Mr. Avery stared into space for a moment. “Well... alright. I’ll try to be there.”

“Great!” Roger smiled. Now that he had spoken with Mr. Avery, his curiosity and boldness were growing. This was his chance to ask Mr. Avery what all the noises were that came

from his house. He didn't want to pry or be rude, but how could he miss an opportunity to ask what everyone in the neighborhood was dying to know? He cleared his throat.

"Um, Mr. Avery?"

Again, Mr. Avery looked confused, almost as though he thought he was invisible and was wondering how Roger could see him.

"Yes?"

"I was just wondering... what are all those noises that come from your house?" Roger half expected Mr. Avery to run inside and slam the door. But Mr. Avery stayed on the porch.

"Oh, that... I'm sorry about all the noise. I sometimes forget how loud they can be... I'm an insurance salesman, or I was until a few days ago. Seems I'm no good at sales, so they let me go. I hate talking on the phone, and... well... talking in general." He seemed surprised with himself for being able to say such things out loud.

"I'm sorry to hear that..." Roger shook his head. "Mr. Johnson was let go two years ago, and he was very sad until he could work again. He said it felt like being lost at sea."

"That's a good way to put it, I suppose... I do have my own work, but I don't think I'm any better at it than being an insurance salesman."

"What kind of work?" Roger asked, wide-eyed.

"I'm an inventor. Sort of... not really, though. I have ideas, and I try to make them work, but nothing I do seems to quite come together." He sighed. "Something always falls apart or breaks down, and I just can't seem to find any way to make them work." A very sad look fell across Mr. Avery's face, like a shadow over a still pond.

“That’s too bad,” Roger said, worrying at his postman’s jacket. This seemed like a very big problem. Then he had a thought! “Say, do you have anything you’re working on that you could bring to the picnic? I’m sure people would like to see what kind of work you do, and then maybe they could help you with your ideas!”

“I don’t know about that...” Mr. Avery suddenly looked like a turtle that wanted to pull back into its shell.

Roger paused. He didn’t want to scare Mr. Avery away, but he felt sure that being cooped up in his house all the time was a terrible thing.

“Well, *I’d* like to see one of your inventions, anyway. See you at the picnic, Mr. Avery!”

Roger took off down the street, feeling a sense of accomplishment, having interviewed the neighborhood hermit.

Mr. Avery stood on the porch in a quandary—or, as the children would say, a pickle—apparently now expected to bring some sort of dish and an invention for everyone to see and probably laugh at. He trudged up the steps and sighed. He shouldn’t have answered the door...