

He was awakened one night by a strange noise. At first he thought it might have been some kind of animal, and it frightened him. But as the sleep cleared from his head, he realized that the noise was coming from the cot next to him.

Squid was crying.

"You okay?" Stanley whispered.

Squid's head jerked around. He sniffed and caught his breath. "Yeah, I just . . . I'm fine," he whispered, and sniffed again.

In the morning Stanley asked Squid if he was feeling better. "What are you, my mother?" asked Squid.

Stanley raised and lowered one shoulder. "I got allergies, okay?" Squid said. "Okay," said Stanley.

"You open your mouth again, and I'll break your jaw."

Stanley kept his mouth shut most of the time. He didn't talk too much to any of the boys, afraid that he might say the wrong thing. They called him Caveman and all that, but he couldn't forget that they were dangerous, too. They were all here for a reason. As Mr. Sir would say, this wasn't a Girl Scout camp.

Stanley was thankful that there were no racial problems. X-Ray, Armpit, and Zero were black. He, Squid, and Zigzag were white. Magnet was Hispanic. On the lake they were all the same reddish brown color— the color of dirt.

He looked up from his hole to see the water truck and its trailing dust cloud. His canteen was still almost a quarter full. He quickly drank it down, then took his place in line, behind Magnet and in front of Zero. The air was thick with heat, dust, and exhaust fumes.

Mr. Sir filled their canteens.

The truck pulled away. Stanley was back in his hole, shovel in hand, when he heard Magnet call out. "Anybody want some sunflower seeds?"

Magnet was standing at ground level, holding a sack of seeds. He popped a handful into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed, shells and all.

"Over here," called X-Ray.

The sack looked to be about half full. Magnet rolled up the top, then tossed it to X-Ray.

"How'd you get them without Mr. Sir seeing you?" asked Armpit.

"I can't help it," Magnet said. He held both hands up, wiggled his fingers, and laughed. "My fingers are like little magnets."

The sack went from X-Ray to Armpit to Squid.

"It's sure good to eat something that doesn't come from a can," said Armpit. Squid tossed the sack to Zigzag.

Stanley knew it would come to him next. He didn't even want it. From the moment Magnet shouted, "Anybody want some sunflower seeds," he knew there

would be trouble. Mr. Sir was sure to come back. And anyway, the salted shells would only make him thirsty.

"Coming your way, Caveman," said Zigzag. "Airmail and special delivery . . ."

It's unclear whether the seeds spilled before they got to Stanley or after he dropped the bag. It seemed to him that Zigzag hadn't rolled up the top before throwing it, and

that was the reason he didn't catch it.

But it all happened very fast. One moment the sack was flying through the air, and the next thing Stanley knew the sack was in his hole and the seeds were spilled across the dirt.

"Oh, man!" said Magnet.

"Sorry," Stanley said as he tried to sweep the seeds back into the sack. "I don't want to eat dirt," said X-Ray.

Stanley didn't know what to do.

"The truck's coming!" shouted Zigzag.

Stanley looked up at the approaching dust cloud, then back down at the spilled seeds. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

What else is new?

He dug his shovel into his hole, and tried to turn over the dirt and bury the seeds.

What he should have done, he realized later, was knock one of his dirt piles back into his hole. But the idea of putting dirt into his hole was unthinkable.

"Hello, Mr. Sir," said X-Ray. "Back so soon?" "It seems like you were just here," said Armpit. "Time flies when you're having fun," said Magnet. Stanley continued to turn the dirt over in his hole.

"You Girl Scouts having a good time?" asked Mr. Sir. He moved from one hole to another. He kicked a dirt pile by Magnet's hole, then he moved toward Stanley. Stanley could see two seeds at the bottom of his hole. As he tried to cover them up, he unearthed a corner of the sack.

"Well, what do you know, Caveman?" said Mr. Sir, standing over him. "It looks like you found something."

Stanley didn't know what to do.

"Dig it out," Mr. Sir said. "We'll take it to the Warden. Maybe she'll give you the rest of the day off."

"It's not anything," Stanley muttered.

"Let me be the judge of that," said Mr. Sir.

Stanley reached down and pulled up the empty burlap sack. He tried to hand it to Mr. Sir, but he wouldn't take it.

"So, tell me, Caveman," said Mr. Sir. "How did my sack of sunflower seeds get in your hole?"

"I stole it from your truck." "You did?"

"Yes, Mr. Sir."

"What happened to all the sunflower seeds?" "I ate them."

"By yourself." "Yes, Mr. Sir."

"Hey, Caveman!" shouted Armpit. "How come you didn't share any with us?"

"That's cold, man," said X-Ray.

"I thought you were our friend," said Magnet.

Mr. Sir looked around from one boy to another, then back to Stanley. "We'll see what the Warden has to say about this. Let's go."

Stanley climbed up out of his hole and followed Mr. Sir to the truck. He still held the empty sack.

It felt good to sit inside the truck, out of the direct rays of the sun. Stanley was surprised he could feel good about anything at the moment, but he did. It felt good to sit down on a comfortable seat for a change. And as the truck bounced along the dirt, he was able to appreciate the air blowing through the open window onto his hot and sweaty face.

20

It felt good to walk in the shade of the two oak trees. Stanley wondered if this was how a condemned man felt on his way to the electric chair— appreciating all of the good things in life for the last time.

They had to step around holes to get to the cabin door. Stanley was surprised to see so many around the cabin. He would have expected the Warden to not want the campers digging so close to her home. But several holes were right up against the cabin wall.

The holes were closer together here as well, and were of different shapes and sizes.

Mr. Sir knocked on the door. Stanley still held the empty sack. "Yes?" the Warden said, opening the door.

"There's been a little trouble out on the lake," Mr. Sir said. "Caveman will tell you all about it."

The Warden stared at Mr. Sir a moment, then her gaze turned toward Stanley. He felt nothing but dread now.

"Come in, I suppose," said the Warden. "You're letting the cold out."

It was air-conditioned inside her cabin. The television was going. She picked up the remote and turned it off.

She sat down on a canvas chair. She was barefoot and wearing shorts. Her legs were as freckled as her face and arms.

"So what is it you have to tell me?"

Stanley took a breath to steady himself. "While Mr. Sir was filling the canteens, I snuck into the truck and stole his sack of sunflower seeds."

"I see." She turned to Mr. Sir. "That's why you brought him here?"

"Yes, but I think he's lying. I think someone else stole the sack, and Caveman is covering up for X-Ray or somebody. It was a twenty-pound sack, and he claims to have eaten them all by himself." He took the sack from Stanley and handed it to the Warden.

"I see," the Warden said again.

"The sack wasn't full," said Stanley. "And I spilled a lot. You can check my hole."

"In that room, Caveman, there's a small flowered case. Will you get it for me, please?" She pointed to a door.

Stanley looked at the door, then at the Warden, then back at the door. He slowly walked toward it.

It was a kind of dressing room, with a sink and a mirror. Next to the sink he saw the case, white with pink roses.

He brought it back out to the Warden, and she set it on the glass coffee table in front of her. She unclasped the latch and opened the case.

It was a makeup case. Stanley's mother had one similar to it. He saw several bottles of nail polish, polish remover, a couple of lipstick tubes, and other jars and powders.

The Warden held up a small jar of dark-red nail polish. "You see this, Caveman?" He nodded.

"This is my special nail polish. Do you see the dark rich color? You can't buy that in a store. I have to make it myself."

Stanley had no idea why she was showing it to him. He wondered why the Warden would ever have the need to wear nail polish or makeup.

"Do you want to know my secret ingredient?" He raised and lowered one shoulder.

The Warden opened the bottle. "Rattlesnake venom." With a small paintbrush she began applying it to the nails on her left hand. "It's perfectly harmless . . . when it's dry."

She finished her left hand. She waved it in the air for a few seconds, then began painting the nails on her right hand. "It's only toxic while it's wet."

She finished painting her nails, then stood up. She reached over and touched Stanley's face with her fingers. She ran her sharp wet nails very gently down his cheek. He felt his skin tingle.

The nail on her pinkie just barely touched the wound behind his ear. A sharp sting of pain caused him to jump back.

The Warden turned to face Mr. Sir, who was sitting on the fireplace hearth. "So you think he stole your sunflower seeds?"

"No, he says he stole them, but I think it was— "

She stepped toward him and struck him across the face.

Mr. Sir stared at her. He had three long red marks slanting across the left side of his face. Stanley didn't know if the redness was caused by her nail polish or his blood.

It took a moment for the venom to sink in. Suddenly, Mr. Sir screamed and clutched his face with both hands. He let himself fall over, rolling off the hearth and onto the rug.

The Warden spoke softly. "I don't especially care about your sunflower seeds." Mr. Sir moaned.

"If you must know," said the Warden, "I liked it better when you smoked."

For a second, Mr. Sir's pain seemed to recede. He took several long, deep breaths. Then his head jerked violently, and he let out a shrill scream, worse than the one before.

The Warden turned to Stanley. "I suggest you go back to your hole now."

Stanley started to go, but Mr. Sir lay in the way. Stanley could see the muscles on his face jump and twitch. His body writhed in agony.

Stanley stepped carefully over him. "Is he— ?" "Excuse me?" said the Warden.

Stanley was too frightened to speak.

"He's not going to die," the Warden said. "Unfortunately for you."

21

It was a long walk back to his hole. Stanley looked out through the haze of heat and dirt at the other boys, lowering and raising their shovels. Group D was the farthest away.

He realized that once again he would be digging long after everyone else had quit.

He hoped he'd finish before Mr. Sir recovered. He didn't want to be out there alone with Mr. Sir.

He won't die, the Warden had said. Unfortunately for you.

Walking across the desolate wasteland, Stanley thought about his great-grandfather— not the pig stealer but the pig stealer's son, the one who was robbed by Kissin' Kate Barlow.

He tried to imagine how he must have felt after Kissin' Kate had left him stranded in the desert. It probably wasn't a whole lot different from the way he himself felt now.

Kate Barlow had left his great-grandfather to face the hot barren desert. The Warden had left Stanley to face Mr. Sir.

Somehow his great-grandfather had survived for seventeen days, before he was rescued by a couple of rattlesnake hunters. He was insane when they found him. When he was asked how he had lived so long, he said he "found refuge on God's thumb."

He spent nearly a month in a hospital. He ended up marrying one of the nurses. Nobody ever knew what he meant by God's thumb, including himself.

Stanley heard a twitching sound. He stopped in mid-step, with one foot still in the air.

A rattlesnake lay coiled beneath his foot. Its tail was pointed upward, rattling. Stanley backed his leg away, then turned and ran.

The rattlesnake didn't chase after him. It had rattled its tail to warn him to stay away. "Thanks for the warning," Stanley whispered as his heart pounded. The rattlesnake would be a lot more dangerous if it didn't have a rattle.

"Hey, Caveman!" called Armpit. "You're still alive." "What'd the Warden say?" asked X-Ray.

"What'd you tell her?" asked Magnet.

"I told her I stole the seeds," said Stanley. "Good going," said Magnet.

"What'd she do?" asked Zigzag.

Stanley shrugged one shoulder. "Nothing. She got mad at Mr. Sir for bothering her."

He didn't feel like going into details. If he didn't talk about it, then maybe it didn't happen.

He went over to his hole, and to his surprise it was nearly finished. He stared at it, amazed. It didn't make sense.

Or perhaps it did. He smiled. Since he had taken the blame for the sunflower seeds, he realized, the other boys had dug his hole for him.

"Hey, thanks," he said.

"Don't look at me," said X-Ray.

Confused, Stanley looked around— from Magnet, to Armpit, to Zigzag, to Squid. None of them took credit for it.

Then he turned to Zero, who had been quietly digging in his hole since Stanley's return.

Zero's hole was smaller than all the others.