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Stanley angrily dug his shovel into the dirt. He was angry at everyone—Mr. Pendanski, the Warden, Zigzag, X-Ray, and his no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather. But mostly he was angry at himself.

He knew he never should have let Zero dig part of his hole for him. He still could have taught him to read. If Zero could dig all day and still have the strength to learn, then he should have been able to dig all day and still have the strength to teach.

What he should do, he thought, was go out after Zero.

But he didn't.

None of the others helped him dig Zero's hole, and he didn't expect them to. Zero had been helping him dig his hole. Now he had to dig Zero's.

He remained out on the lake, digging during the hottest part of the day, long after everyone else had gone in. He kept an eye out for Zero, but Zero didn't come back.

It would have been easy to go out after Zero. There was nobody to stop him. He kept thinking that's what he should do. Maybe they could climb to the top of Big Thumb.

If it wasn't too far away. And if it was really the same place where his great-grandfather found refuge. And if, after a hundred years or so, water was still there.

It didn't seem likely. Not when an entire lake had gone dry.

And even if they did find refuge on Big Thumb, he thought, they'd still have to come back here, eventually. Then they'd both have to face the Warden, and her rattlesnake fingers.

Instead, he came up with a better idea, although he didn't have it quite all figured out yet. He thought that maybe he could make a deal with the Warden. He'd tell her where he really found the gold tube if she wouldn't scratch Zero.

He wasn't sure how he'd make this deal without getting himself in deeper trouble. She might just say, Tell me where you found it or I'll scratch you, too. Plus, it would mean X-Ray would get in trouble, too. She'd probably scratch him up as well.

X-Ray would be out to get him for the next sixteen months.

He dug his shovel into the dirt.

By the next morning, Zero still hadn't returned. Stanley saw one of the counselors sitting guard by the water spigot outside the shower wall.

Mr. Pendanski had two black eyes and a bandage over his nose. "I always knew he was stupid," Stanley heard him say.

Stanley was required to dig only one hole the next day. As he dug, he kept a constant watchout for Zero, but never saw him. Once again he considered going out on the lake to look for him, but he began to realize that it was already too late.

His only hope was that Zero had found God's thumb on his own. It wasn't impossible. His great-grandfather had found it. For some reason his great-grandfather had felt the urge to climb to the top of that mountain. Maybe Zero would feel the same urge.

If it was the same mountain. If water was still there.

He tried to convince himself it wasn't impossible. There had been a storm just a few days ago. Maybe Big Thumb was actually some kind of natural water tower that caught and stored the rain.

It wasn't impossible.

He returned to his tent to find the Warden, Mr. Sir, and Mr. Pendanski all waiting for him.

"Have you seen Zero?" the Warden asked him.

"No."

"No sign of him at all?"

"No."

"Do you have any idea where he went?"

"No."

"You know you're not doing him any favors if you're lying," said Mr. Sir. "He can't survive out there for more than a day or two."

"I don't know where he is."

All three stared at Stanley as if they were trying to figure

out if he was telling the truth. Mr. Pendanski's face was so swollen, he could barely open his eyes. They were just slits.

"You sure he has no family?" the Warden asked Mr. Pendanski.

"He's a ward of the state," Mr. Pendanski told her. "He was living on the streets when he was arrested."

"Is there anyone who might ask questions? Some social worker who took an interest in him?"

"He had nobody," said Mr. Pendanski. "He was nobody."

The Warden thought a moment. "Okay, I want you to destroy all of his records."

Mr. Pendanski nodded.

"He was never here," said the Warden.

Mr. Sir nodded.

"Can you get into the state files from our computer?" she asked Mr. Pendanski. "I don't want anyone in the A.G.'s office to know he was here."

"I don't think I can erase him completely from all the state files," said Mr. Pendanski. "Too many cross-references. But I can make it so it would be very difficult for anyone to ever find a record of him. Like I said, though, no one will ever look. No one cares about Hector Zeroni."

"Good," said the Warden.

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Two days later a new kid was assigned to Group D. His name was Brian, but X-Ray called him Twitch because he was always fidgeting. Twitch was assigned Zero's bed, and Zero's crate.

Vacancies don't last long at Camp Green Lake.

Twitch had been arrested for stealing a car. He claimed he could break into a car, disconnect the alarm, and hot-wire the engine, all in less than a minute.

"I never plan to, you know, steal one," he told them. "But sometimes, you know, I'll be walking past a real nice car, parked in a deserted area, and, you know, I'll just start twitching. If you think I twitch now, you should see me when I'm around a car. The next thing I know, I'm behind the wheel."

Stanley lay on his scratchy sheets. It occurred to him that his cot no longer smelled bad. He wondered if the smell had gone away, or if he had just gotten used to it.

"Hey, Caveman," said Twitch. "Do we really have to get up at 4:30?"

"You get used to it," Stanley told him. "It's the coolest part of the day."

He tried not to think about Zero. It was too late. Either he'd made it to Big Thumb, or . . .

What worried him the most, however, wasn't that it was too late. What worried him the most, what really ate at his insides, was the fear that it *wasn't* too late.

What if Zero was still alive, desperately crawling across the dirt searching for water?

He tried to force the image out of his mind.

The next morning, out on the lake, Stanley listened as Mr. Sir told Twitch the requirements for his hole: ". . . as wide and as deep as your shovel."

Twitch fidgeted. His fingers drummed against the wooden shaft of his shovel, and his neck moved from side to side.

"You won't be twitching so much after digging all day," Mr. Sir told him. "You won't have the strength to wiggle your pinkie." He popped some sunflower seeds in his mouth, deftly chewed them, and spat out the shells. "This isn't a Girl Scout camp."

The water truck came shortly after sunrise. Stanley got in line behind Magnet, ahead of Twitch.

What if it's not too late?

He watched Mr. Sir fill X-Ray's canteen. The image of Zero crawling across the hot dry dirt remained in his head.

But what could he do about it? Even if Zero was somehow

alive after more than four days, how would Stanley ever find him? It would take days. He'd need a car.

Or a pickup truck. A pickup truck with a tank of water in the back.

Stanley wondered if Mr. Sir had left the keys in the ignition.

He slowly backed away from the line, then circled over to the side of the truck. He looked through the window. The keys were there, dangling in the ignition.

Stanley felt his fingers start to twitch.

He took a deep breath to steady himself and tried to think clearly. He had never driven before.

But how hard could it be?

This is really crazy, he told himself. Whatever he did, he knew he'd have to do it quickly, before Mr. Sir noticed.

It's too late, he told himself. Zero couldn't have survived.

But what if it wasn't too late?

He took another deep breath. *Think about this*, he told himself, but there wasn't time to think. He flung open the door to the truck and climbed quickly inside.

"Hey!" shouted Mr. Sir.

He turned the key and stepped on the gas pedal. The engine revved.

The truck didn't move.

He pressed the pedal to the floor. The engine roared, but the truck was motionless.

Mr. Sir came running around the side of the truck. The door was still open.

"Put it in gear!" shouted Twitch.

The gear shift was on the floor next to the seat. Stanley pulled the lever back until the arrow pointed to the letter D, for Drive.

The truck lurched forward. Stanley jerked back against the seat and tightly gripped the wheel as the truck accelerated. His foot was pressed to the floor.

The truck went faster and faster across the dry lake bed. It bounced over a pile of dirt. Suddenly Stanley was slammed forward, then instantly backward as an airbag exploded in his face. He fell out of the open door and onto the ground.

He had driven straight into a hole.

He lay on the dirt staring at the truck, which stuck lopsided into the ground. He sighed. He couldn't blame his no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather this time. This time it was his own fault, one hundred percent. He had probably just done the stupidest thing he had ever done in his short and miserable life.

He managed to get to his feet. He was sore but didn't think he had broken any bones. He glanced back at Mr. Sir, who remained where he was, staring at Stanley.

He ran. His canteen was strapped around his neck. It banged against his chest as he ran, and every time it hit against him, it reminded him that it was empty, empty, empty.