

24

Stanley was half asleep as he got in line for breakfast, but the sight of Mr. Sir awakened him. The left side of Mr. Sir's face had swollen to the size of half a cantaloupe. There were three dark-purple jagged lines running down his cheek where the Warden had scratched him.

The other boys in Stanley's tent had obviously seen Mr. Sir as well, but they had the good sense not to say anything. Stanley put a carton of juice and a plastic spoon on his tray. He kept his eyes down and hardly breathed as Mr. Sir ladled some oatmeal-like stuff into his bowl.

He brought his tray to the table. Behind him, a boy from one of the other tents said, "Hey, what happened to your face?"

There was a crash.

Stanley turned to see Mr. Sir holding the boy's head against the oatmeal pot. "Is something wrong with my face?"

The boy tried to speak but couldn't. Mr. Sir had him by the throat.

"Does anyone see anything wrong with my face?" asked Mr. Sir, as he continued to choke the boy.

Nobody said anything.

Mr. Sir let the boy go. His head banged against the table as he fell to the ground.

Mr. Sir stood over him and asked, "How does my face look to you now?"

A gurgling sound came out of the boy's mouth, then he managed to gasp the word, "Fine."

"I'm kind of handsome, don't you think?"

"Yes, Mr. Sir."

Out on the lake, the other boys asked Stanley what he knew about Mr. Sir's face, but he just shrugged and dug his hole. If he didn't talk about it, maybe it would go away.

He worked as hard and as fast as he could, not trying to pace himself. He just wanted to get off the lake and away from Mr. Sir as soon as possible. Besides, he knew he'd get a break.

"Whenever you're ready, just let me know," Zero had said.

The first time the water truck came, it was driven by Mr. Pendanski. The second time, Mr. Sir was driving.

No one said anything except "Thank you, Mr. Sir" as he filled each canteen. No one even dared to look at his grotesque face.

As Stanley waited, he ran his tongue over the roof of his mouth and inside his cheeks. His mouth was as dry and as

parched as the lake. The bright sun reflected off the side mirror of the truck, and Stanley had to shield his eyes with his hand.

"Thank you, Mr. Sir," said Magnet, as he took his canteen from him.

"You thirsty, Caveman?" Mr. Sir asked.

"Yes, Mr. Sir," Stanley said, handing his canteen to him.

Mr. Sir opened the nozzle, and the water flowed out of the tank, but it did not go into Stanley's canteen. Instead, he held the canteen right next to the stream of water.

Stanley watched the water splatter on the dirt, where it was quickly absorbed by the thirsty ground.

Mr. Sir let the water run for about thirty seconds, then stopped. "You want more?" he asked.

Stanley didn't say anything.

Mr. Sir turned the water back on, and again Stanley watched it pour onto the dirt.

"There, that should be plenty." He handed Stanley his empty canteen.

Stanley stared at the dark spot on the ground, which quickly shrank before his eyes.

"Thank you, Mr. Sir," he said.

25

There was a doctor in the town of Green Lake, one hundred and ten years ago. His name was Dr. Hawthorn. And whenever people got sick, they would go see Doc Hawthorn. But they would also see Sam, the onion man.

"Onions! Sweet, fresh onions!" Sam would call, as he and his donkey, Mary Lou, walked up and down the dirt roads of Green Lake. Mary Lou pulled a cart full of onions.

Sam's onion field was somewhere on the other side of the lake. Once or twice a week he would row across the lake and pick a new batch to fill the cart. Sam had big strong arms, but it would still take all day for him to row across the lake and another day for him to return. Most of the time he would leave Mary Lou in a shed, which the Walkers let him use at no charge, but sometimes he would take Mary Lou on his boat with him.

Sam claimed that Mary Lou was almost fifty years old, which was, and still is, extraordinarily old for a donkey.

"She eats nothing but raw onions," Sam would say, holding up a white onion between his dark fingers. "It's nature's magic vegetable. If a person ate nothing but raw onions, he could live to be two hundred years old."

Sam was not much older than twenty, so nobody was quite sure that Mary Lou was really as old as he said she was. How would he know?

Still, nobody ever argued with Sam. And whenever they were sick, they would go not only to Doc Hawthorn but also to Sam.

Sam always gave the same advice: "Eat plenty of onions."

He said that onions were good for the digestion, the liver, the stomach, the lungs, the heart, and the brain. "If you don't believe me, just look at old Mary Lou here. She's never been sick a day in her life."

He also had many different ointments, lotions, syrups, and pastes all made out of onion juice and different parts of the onion plant. This one cured asthma. That one was for warts and pimples. Another was a remedy for arthritis.

He even had a special ointment which he claimed would cure baldness. "Just rub it on your husband's head every night when he's sleeping, Mrs. Collingwood, and soon his hair will be as thick and as long as Mary Lou's tail."

Doc Hawthorn did not resent Sam. The folks of Green Lake were afraid to take chances. They would get regular medicine from Doc Hawthorn and onion concoctions from Sam. After they got over their illness, no one could be sure, not even Doc Hawthorn, which of the two treatments had done the trick.

Doc Hawthorn was almost completely bald, and in the morning his head often smelled like onions.

Whenever Katherine Barlow bought onions, she always bought an extra one or two and would let Mary Lou eat them out of her hand.

"Is something wrong?" Sam asked her one day as she was feeding Mary Lou. "You seem distracted."

"Oh, just the weather," said Miss Katherine. "It looks like rain clouds moving in."

"Me and Mary Lou, we like the rain," said Sam.

"Oh, I like it fine," said Miss Katherine, as she rubbed the donkey's rough hair on top of its head. "It's just that the roof leaks in the schoolhouse."

"I can fix that," said Sam.

"What are you going to do?" Katherine joked. "Fill the holes with onion paste?"

Sam laughed. "I'm good with my hands," he told her. "I built my own boat. If it leaked, I'd be in big trouble."

Katherine couldn't help but notice his strong, firm hands.

They made a deal. He agreed to fix the leaky roof in exchange for six jars of spiced peaches.

It took Sam a week to fix the roof, because he could only work in the afternoons, after school let out and before night classes began. Sam wasn't allowed to attend classes because he was a Negro, but they let him fix the building.

Miss Katherine usually stayed in the schoolhouse, grading papers and such, while Sam worked on the roof. She enjoyed what little conversation they were able to have, shouting up

and down to each other. She was surprised by his interest in poetry. When he took a break, she would sometimes read a poem to him. On more than one occasion, she would start to read a poem by Poe or Longfellow, only to hear him finish it for her, from memory.

She was sad when the roof was finished.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"No, you did a wonderful job," she said. "It's just that . . . the windows won't open. The children and I would enjoy a breeze now and then."

"I can fix that," said Sam.

She gave him two more jars of peaches and Sam fixed the windows.

It was easier to talk to him when he was working on the windows. He told her about his secret onion field on the other side of the lake, "where the onions grow all year round, and the water runs uphill."

When the windows were fixed, she complained that her desk wobbled.

"I can fix that," said Sam.

The next time she saw him, she mentioned that "the door doesn't hang straight," and she got to spend another afternoon with him while he fixed the door.

By the end of the first semester, Onion Sam had turned the old run-down schoolhouse into a well-crafted, freshly painted jewel of a building that the whole town was proud of. People passing by would stop and admire it. "That's our schoolhouse. It shows how much we value education here in Green Lake."

The only person who wasn't happy with it was Miss Katherine. She'd run out of things needing to be fixed.

She sat at her desk one afternoon, listening to the pitter-patter of the rain on the roof. No water leaked into the classroom, except for the few drops that came from her eyes.

"Onions! Hot sweet onions!" Sam called, out on the street.

She ran to him. She wanted to throw her arms around him but couldn't bring herself to do it. Instead she hugged Mary Lou's neck.

"Is something wrong?" he asked her.

"Oh, Sam," she said. "My heart is breaking."

"I can fix that," said Sam.

She turned to him.

He took hold of both of her hands, and kissed her.

Because of the rain, there was nobody else out on the street. Even if there was, Katherine and Sam wouldn't have noticed. They were lost in their own world.

At that moment, however, Hattie Parker stepped out of the general store. They didn't see her, but she saw them. She pointed her quivering finger in their direction and whispered, "God will punish you!"