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holes

BLOOMSBURY

PART ONE YOU ARE ENTERING CAMP GREEN LAKE

1

There is no lake at Camp Green Lake. There once was a very large lake here, the largest lake in Texas. That was over a hundred years ago. Now it is just a dry, flat wasteland. There used to be a town of Green Lake as well. The town shriveled and dried up along with the lake, and the people who lived there. During the summer the daytime temperature hovers around ninety-five degrees in the shade—if you can find any shade. There's not much shade in a big dry lake. The only trees are two old oaks on the eastern edge of the "lake." A hammock is stretched between the two trees, and a log cabin stands behind that. The campers are forbidden to lie in the hammock. It belongs to the Warden. The Warden owns the shade. Out on the lake, rattlesnakes and scorpions find shade under rocks and in the holes dug by the campers. Here's a good rule to remember about rattlesnakes and scorpions: If you don't bother them, they won't bother you. Usually. Being bitten by a scorpion or even a rattlesnake is not the worst thing that can happen to you. You won't die. Usually. Sometimes a camper will try to be bitten by a scorpion, or even a small rattlesnake. Then he will get to spend a day or two recovering in his tent, instead of having to dig a hole out on the lake. But you don't want to be bitten by a yellow-spotted lizard. That's the worst thing that can happen to you. You will die a slow and painful death. Always. If you get bitten by a yellow-spotted lizard, you might as well go into the shade of the oak trees and lie in the hammock. There is nothing anyone can do to you anymore.

2

The reader is probably asking: Why would anyone go to Camp Green Lake? Most campers weren't given a choice. Camp Green Lake is a camp for bad boys. If you take a bad boy and make him dig a hole every day in the hot sun, it will turn him into a good boy. That was what some people thought. Stanley Yelnats was given a choice. The judge said, "You may go to jail, or you may go to Camp Green Lake." Stanley was from a poor family. He had never been to camp before.

3

Stanley Yelnats was the only passenger on the bus, not counting the driver or the guard. The guard sat next to the driver with his seat turned around facing Stanley. A rifle lay across his lap. Stanley was sitting about ten rows back, handcuffed to his armrest. His backpack lay on the seat next to him. It contained his toothbrush, toothpaste, and a box of stationery his mother had given him. He'd promised to write to her at least once a week. He looked out the window, although there wasn't much to see—mostly fields of hay and cotton. He was on a

long bus ride to nowhere The bus wasn't air-conditioned, and the hot, heavy air was almost as stifling as the handcuffs. Stanley and his parents had tried to pretend that he was just going away to camp for a while, just like rich kids do. When Stanley was younger he used to play with stuffed animals, and pretend the animals were at camp. Camp Fun and Games he called it. Sometimes he'd have them play soccer with a marble. Other times they'd run an obstacle course, or go bungee jumping off a table, tied to broken rubber bands. Now Stanley tried to pretend he was going to Camp Fun and Games Maybe he'd make some friends, he thought. At least he'd get to swim in the lake. He didn't have any friends at home. He was overweight and the kids at his middle school often teased him about his size. Even his teachers sometimes made cruel comments without realizing it. On his last day of school, his math teacher, Mrs Bell, taught ratios. As an example, she chose the heaviest kid in the class and the lightest kid in the class, and had them weigh themselves. Stanley weighed three times as much as the other boy Mrs. Bell wrote the ratio on the board, 3:1, unaware of how much embarrassment she had caused both of them. Stanley was arrested later that day. He looked at the guard who sat slumped in his seat and wondered if he had fallen asleep. The guard was wearing sunglasses, so Stanley couldn't see his eyes. Stanley was not a bad kid. He was innocent of the crime for which he was convicted He'd just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was all because of his no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather! He smiled. It was a family joke. Whenever anything went wrong, they always blamed Stanley's no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather. Supposedly, he had a great-great-grandfather who had stolen a pig from a one-legged Gypsy, and she put a curse on him and all his descendants. Stanley and his parents didn't believe in curses, of course, but whenever anything went wrong, it felt good to be able to blame someone Things went wrong a lot. They always seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He looked out the window at the vast emptiness. He watched the rise and fall of a telephone wire. In his mind he could hear his father's gruff voice softly singing to him

"If only, if only," the woodpecker sighs, "The bark on the tree was just a little bit softer."
While the wolf waits below, hungry and lonely, He cries to the moo—oo—oon, "If only, if only."

It was a song his father used to sing to him. The melody was sweet and sad, but Stanley's favorite part was when his father would howl the word "moon " The bus hit a small bump and the guard sat up, instantly alert. Stanley's father was an inventor. To be a successful inventor you need three things: intelligence, perseverance, and just a little bit of luck. Stanley's father was smart and had a lot of perseverance. Once he started a project he would work on it for years, often going days without sleep. He just never had any luck. Every time an experiment failed, Stanley could hear him cursing his dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-grandfather. Stanley's father was also named Stanley Yelnats. Stanley's father's full name was Stanley Yelnats III. Our Stanley is Stanley Yelnats IV. Everyone in his family had always liked the fact that "Stanley Yelnats" was spelled the same frontward and backward. So they kept naming their sons Stanley. Stanley was an only child, as was every other Stanley Yelnats before him. All of them had something else in common. Despite their awful luck, they always remained hopeful. As Stanley's father liked to say, "I learn from failure." But perhaps

that was part of the curse as well. If Stanley and his father weren't always hopeful, then it wouldn't hurt so much every time their hopes were crushed. "Not every Stanley Yelnats has been a failure," Stanley's mother often pointed out, whenever Stanley or his father became so discouraged that they actually started to believe in the curse. The first Stanley Yelnats, Stanley's great-grandfather, had made a fortune in the stock market. "He couldn't have been too unlucky." At such times she neglected to mention the bad luck that befell the first Stanley Yelnats. He lost his entire fortune when he was moving from New York to California. His stagecoach was robbed by the outlaw Kissin' Kate Barlow. If it weren't for that, Stanley's family would now be living in a mansion on a beach in California. Instead, they were crammed in a tiny apartment that smelled of burning rubber and foot odor. If only, if only . . . The apartment smelled the way it did because Stanley's father was trying to invent a way to recycle old sneakers. "The first person who finds a use for old sneakers," he said, "will be a very rich man." It was this latest project that led to Stanley's arrest. The bus ride became increasingly bumpy because the road was no longer paved.

Actually, Stanley had been impressed when he first found out that his great-grandfather was robbed by Kissin' Kate Barlow. True, he would have preferred living on the beach in California, but it was still kind of cool to have someone in your family robbed by a famous outlaw. Kate Barlow didn't actually kiss Stanley's great-grandfather. That would have been really cool, but she only kissed the men she killed. Instead, she robbed him and left him stranded in the middle of the desert. "He was lucky to have survived," Stanley's mother was quick to point out. The bus was slowing down. The guard grunted as he stretched his arms. "Welcome to Camp Green Lake," said the driver. Stanley looked out the dirty window. He couldn't see a lake. And hardly anything was green.

4

Stanley felt somewhat dazed as the guard unlocked his handcuffs and led him off the bus. He'd been on the bus for over eight hours. "Be careful," the bus driver said as Stanley walked down the steps. Stanley wasn't sure if the bus driver meant for him to be careful going down the steps, or if he was telling him to be careful at Camp Green Lake. "Thanks for the ride," he said. His mouth was dry and his throat hurt. He stepped onto the hard, dry dirt. There was a band of sweat around his wrist where the handcuff had been. The land was barren and desolate. He could see a few rundown buildings and some tents. Farther away there was a cabin beneath two tall trees. Those two trees were the only plant life he could see. There weren't even weeds. The guard led Stanley to a small building. A sign on front said, YOU ARE ENTERING CAMP GREEN LAKE JUVENILE CORRECTIONAL FACILITY. Next to it was another sign which declared that it was a violation of the Texas Penal Code to bring guns, explosives, weapons, drugs, or alcohol onto the premises. As Stanley read the sign he couldn't help but think, Well, duh! The guard led Stanley into the building, where he felt the

welcome relief of air-conditioning. A man was sitting with his feet up on a desk. He turned his head when Stanley and the guard entered, but otherwise didn't move. Even though he was inside, he wore sunglasses and a cowboy hat. He also held a can of soda, and the sight of it made Stanley even more aware of his own thirst. He waited while the bus guard gave the man some papers to sign. "That's a lot of sunflower seeds," the bus guard said Stanley noticed a burlap sack filled with sunflower seeds on the floor next to the desk. "I quit smoking last month," said the man in the cowboy hat. He had a tattoo of a rattlesnake on his arm, and as he signed his name, the snake's rattle seemed to wiggle "I used to smoke a pack a day. Now I eat a sack of these every week "

The guard laughed. There must have been a small refrigerator behind his desk, because the man in the cowboy hat produced two more cans of soda. For a second Stanley hoped that one might be for him, but the man gave one to the guard and said the other was for the driver. "Nine hours here, and now nine hours back," the guard grumbled. "What a day." Stanley thought about the long, miserable bus ride and felt a little sorry for the guard and the bus driver. The man in the cowboy hat spit sunflower seed shells into a wastepaper basket. Then he walked around the desk to Stanley. "My name is Mr. Sir," he said "Whenever you speak to me you must call me by my name, is that clear?" Stanley hesitated. "Uh, yes, Mr. Sir," he said, though he couldn't imagine that was really the man's name. "You're not in the Girl Scouts anymore," Mr. Sir said.

Stanley had to remove his clothes in front of Mr. Sir, who made sure he wasn't hiding anything. He was then given two sets of clothes and a towel. Each set consisted of a long-sleeve orange jumpsuit, an orange T-shirt, and yellow socks. Stanley wasn't sure if the socks had been yellow originally. He was also given white sneakers, an orange cap, and a canteen made of heavy plastic, which unfortunately was empty. The cap had a piece of cloth sewn on the back of it, for neck protection. Stanley got dressed. The clothes smelled like soap. Mr. Sir told him he should wear one set to work in and one set for relaxation. Laundry was done every three days. On that day his work clothes would be washed. Then the other set would become his work clothes, and he would get clean clothes to wear while resting. "You are to dig one hole each day, including Saturdays and Sundays. Each hole must be five feet deep, and five feet across in every direction. Your shovel is your measuring stick. Breakfast is served at 4:30." Stanley must have looked surprised, because Mr. Sir went on to explain that they started early to avoid the hottest part of the day. "No one is going to baby-sit you," he added. "The longer it takes you to dig, the longer you will be out in the sun. If you dig up anything interesting, you are to report it to me or any other counselor. When you finish, the rest of the day is yours." Stanley nodded to show he understood. "This isn't a Girl Scout camp," said Mr. Sir. He checked Stanley's backpack and allowed him to keep it. Then he led Stanley outside into the blazing heat. "Take a good look around you," Mr. Sir said. "What do you see?" Stanley looked out across the vast wasteland. The air seemed thick with heat and dirt. "Not much," he said, then hastily added, "Mr. Sir." Mr. Sir laughed. "You see any guard towers?" "No."

"How about an electric fence?" "No, Mr. Sir." "There's no fence at all, is there?" "No, Mr. Sir." "You want to run away?" Mr. Sir asked him. Stanley looked back at him, unsure what he

meant. "If you want to run away, go ahead, start running. I'm not going to stop you." Stanley didn't know what kind of game Mr. Sir was playing. "I see you're looking at my gun. Don't worry. I'm not going to shoot you." He tapped his holster. "This is for yellow-spotted lizards. I wouldn't waste a bullet on you." "I'm not going to run away," Stanley said. "Good thinking," said Mr. Sir. "Nobody runs away from here. We don't need a fence. Know why? Because we've got the only water for a hundred miles. You want to run away? You'll be buzzard food in three days." Stanley could see some kids dressed in orange and carrying shovels dragging themselves toward the tents. "You thirsty?" asked Mr. Sir. "Yes, Mr. Sir," Stanley said gratefully. "Well, you better get used to it. You're going to be thirsty for the next eighteen months."

5

There were six large gray tents, and each one had a black letter on it: A, B, C, D, E, or F. The first five tents were for the campers. The counselors slept in F. Stanley was assigned to D tent. Mr. Pendanski was his counselor. "My name is easy to remember," said Mr. Pendanski as he shook hands with Stanley just outside the tent. "Three easy words: pen, dance, key." Mr. Sir returned to the office. Mr. Pendanski was younger than Mr. Sir, and not nearly as scary looking. The top of his head was shaved so close it was almost bald, but his face was covered in a thick curly black beard. His nose was badly sunburned. "Mr. Sir isn't really so bad," said Mr. Pendanski. "He's just been in a bad mood ever since he quit smoking. The person you've got to worry about is the Warden. There's really only one rule at Camp Green Lake: Don't upset the Warden." Stanley nodded, as if he understood. "I want you to know, Stanley, that I respect you," Mr. Pendanski said. "I understand you've made some bad mistakes in your life. Otherwise you wouldn't be here. But everyone makes mistakes. You may have done some bad things, but that doesn't mean you're a bad kid." Stanley nodded. It seemed pointless to try and tell his counselor that he was innocent. He figured that everyone probably said that. He didn't want Mr. Pen-dance-key to think he had a bad attitude.

"I'm going to help you turn your life around," said his counselor. "But you're going to have to help, too. Can I count on your help?" "Yes, sir," Stanley said. Mr. Pendanski said, "Good," and patted Stanley on the back. Two boys, each carrying a shovel, were coming across the compound. Mr. Pendanski called to them. "Rex! Alan! I want you to come say hello to Stanley. He's the newest member of our team." The boys glanced wearily at Stanley. They were dripping with sweat, and their faces were so dirty that it took Stanley a moment to notice that one kid was white and the other black. "What happened to Barf Bag?" asked the black kid. "Lewis is still in the hospital," said Mr. Pendanski. "He won't be returning." He told the boys to come shake Stanley's hand and introduce themselves, "like gentlemen." "Hi," the white kid grunted. "That's Alan," said Mr. Pendanski. "My name's not Alan," the boy

said. "It's Squid. And that's X-Ray." "Hey," said X-Ray. He smiled and shook Stanley's hand. He wore glasses, but they were so dirty that Stanley wondered how he could see out of them. Mr. Pendanski told Alan to go to the Rec Hall and bring the other boys to meet Stanley. Then he led him inside the tent. There were seven cots, each one less than two feet from the one next to it. "Which was Lewis's cot?" Mr. Pendanski asked. "Barf Bag slept here," said X-Ray, kicking at one of the beds. "All right, Stanley, that'll be yours," said Mr. Pendanski. Stanley looked at the cot and nodded. He wasn't particularly thrilled about sleeping in the same cot that had been used by somebody named Barf Bag. Seven crates were stacked in two piles at one side of the tent. The open end of the crates faced outward. Stanley put his backpack, change of clothes, and towel in what used to be Barf Bag's crate. It was at the bottom of the stack that had three in it. Squid returned with four other boys. The first three were introduced by Mr. Pendanski as Jose, Theodore, and Ricky. They called themselves Magnet, Armpit, and Zigzag. "They all have nicknames," explained Mr. Pendanski. "However, I prefer to use the names their parents gave them—the names that society will recognize them by when they return to become useful and hardworking members of society." "It ain't just a nickname," X-Ray told Mr. Pendanski. He tapped the rim of his glasses. "I can see inside you, Mom. You've got a big fat heart." The last boy either didn't have a real name or else he didn't have a nickname. Both Mr. Pendanski and X-Ray called him Zero. "You know why his name's Zero?" asked Mr. Pendanski. "Because there's nothing inside his head." He smiled and playfully shook Zero's shoulder. Zero said nothing. "And that's Mom!" a boy said.

Mr. Pendanski smiled at him. "If it makes you feel better to call me Mom, Theodore, go ahead and call me Mom." He turned to Stanley. "If you have questions, Theodore will help you. You got that, Theodore. I'm depending on you." Theodore spit a thin line of saliva between his teeth, causing some of the other boys to complain about the need to keep their "home" sanitary. "You were all new here once," said Mr. Pendanski, "and you all know what it feels like. I'm counting on every one of you to help Stanley." Stanley looked at the ground. Mr. Pendanski left the tent, and soon the other boys began to file out as well, taking their towels and change of clothes with them. Stanley was relieved to be left alone, but he was so thirsty he felt as if he would die if he didn't get something to drink soon. "Hey, uh, Theodore," he said, going after him. "Do you know where I can fill my canteen?" Theodore whirled and grabbed Stanley by his collar. "My name's not Thee-o-dore," he said. "It's Armpit." He threw Stanley to the ground. Stanley stared up at him, terrified. "There's a water spigot on the wall of the shower stall." "Thanks . . . Armpit," said Stanley. As he watched the boy turn and walk away, he couldn't for the life of him figure out why anyone would want to be called Armpit. In a way, it made him feel a little better about having to sleep in a cot that had been used by somebody named Barf Bag. Maybe it was a term of respect.

Stanley took a shower—if you could call it that, ate dinner—if you could call it that, and went to bed—if you could call his smelly and scratchy cot a bed. Because of the scarcity of water, each camper was only allowed a four-minute shower. It took Stanley nearly that long to get used to the cold water. There was no knob for hot water. He kept stepping into, then jumping back from, the spray, until the water shut off automatically. He never managed to use his bar of soap, which was just as well, because he wouldn't have had time to rinse off the suds. Dinner was some kind of stewed meat and vegetables. The meat was brown and the vegetables had once been green. Everything tasted pretty much the same. He ate it all, and used his slice of white bread to mop up the juice. Stanley had never been one to leave food on his plate, no matter how it tasted. "What'd you do?" one of the campers asked him. At first Stanley didn't know what he meant. "They sent you here for a reason." "Oh," he realized. "I stole a pair of sneakers." The other boys thought that was funny. Stanley wasn't sure why. Maybe because their crimes were a lot worse than stealing shoes. "From a store, or-were they on someone's feet?" asked Squid.

"Uh, neither," Stanley answered. "They belonged to Clyde Livingston." Nobody believed him. "Sweet Feet?" said X-Ray. "Yeah, right!" "No way," said Squid.

Now, as Stanley lay on his cot, he thought it was kind of funny in a way. Nobody had believed him when he said he was innocent. Now, when he said he stole them, nobody believed him either. Clyde "Sweet Feet" Livingston was a famous baseball player. He'd led the American League in stolen bases over the last three years. He was also the only player in history to ever hit four triples in one game. Stanley had a poster of him hanging on the wall of his bedroom. He used to have the poster anyway. He didn't know where it was now. It had been taken by the police and was used as evidence of his guilt in the courtroom. Clyde Livingston also came to court. In spite of everything, when Stanley found out that Sweet Feet was going to be there, he was actually excited about the prospect of meeting his hero. Clyde Livingston testified that they were his sneakers and that he had donated them to help raise money for the homeless shelter. He said he couldn't imagine what kind of horrible person would steal from homeless children. That was the worst part for Stanley. His hero thought he was a no-good-dirty-rotten thief.

As Stanley tried to turn over on his cot, he was afraid it was going to collapse under all his weight. He barely fit in it. When he finally managed to roll over on his stomach, the smell was so bad that he had to turn over again and try sleeping on his back. The cot smelled like sour milk. Though it was night, the air was still very warm. Armpit was snoring two cots away.

Back at school, a bully named Derrick Dunne used to torment Stanley. The teachers never took Stanley's complaints seriously, because Derrick was so much smaller than Stanley. Some teachers even seemed to find it amusing that a little kid like Derrick could pick on someone as big as Stanley. On the day Stanley was arrested, Derrick had taken Stanley's notebook and, after a long game of come-and-get-it, finally dropped it in the toilet in the boys' restroom. By the time Stanley retrieved it, he had missed his bus and had to walk

home. It was while he was walking home, carrying his wet notebook, with the prospect of having to copy the ruined pages, that the sneakers fell from the sky. "I was walking home and the sneakers fell from the sky," he had told the judge. "One hit me on the head." It had hurt, too. They hadn't exactly fallen from the sky. He had just walked out from under a freeway overpass when the shoe hit him on the head.

Stanley took it as some kind of sign. His father had been trying to figure out a way to recycle old sneakers, and suddenly a pair of sneakers fell on top of him, seemingly out of nowhere, like a gift from God. Naturally, he had no way of knowing they belonged to Clyde Livingston. In fact, the shoes were anything but sweet. Whoever had worn them had had a bad case of foot odor. Stanley couldn't help but think that there was something special about the shoes, that they would somehow provide the key to his father's invention. It was too much of a coincidence to be a mere accident. Stanley had felt like he was holding destiny's shoes. He ran. Thinking back now, he wasn't sure why he ran. Maybe he was in a hurry to bring the shoes to his father, or maybe he was trying to run away from his miserable and humiliating day at school. A patrol car pulled alongside him. A policeman asked him why he was running. Then he took the shoes and made a call on his radio. Shortly thereafter, Stanley was arrested. It turned out the sneakers had been stolen from a display at the homeless shelter. That evening rich people were going to come to the shelter and pay a hundred dollars to eat the food that the poor people ate every day for free. Clyde Livingston, who had once lived at the shelter when he was younger, was going to speak and sign autographs. His shoes would be auctioned, and it was expected that they would sell for over five thousand dollars. All the money would go to help the homeless. Because of the baseball schedule, Stanley's trial was delayed several months. His parents couldn't afford a lawyer. "You don't need a lawyer," his mother had said. "Just tell the truth." Stanley told the truth, but perhaps it would have been better if he had lied a little. He could have said he found the shoes in the street. No one believed they fell from the sky. It wasn't destiny, he realized. It was his no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather! The judge called Stanley's crime despicable. "The shoes were valued at over five thousand dollars. It was money that would provide food and shelter for the homeless. And you stole that from them, just so you could have a souvenir." The judge said that there was an opening at Camp Green Lake, and he suggested that the discipline of the camp might improve Stanley's character. It was either that or jail. Stanley's parents asked if they could have some time to find out more about Camp Green Lake, but the judge advised them to make a quick decision. "Vacancies don't last long at Camp Green Lake."

7

The shovel felt heavy in Stanley's soft, fleshy hands. He tried to jam it into the earth, but the blade banged against the ground and bounced off without making a dent. The vibrations ran up the shaft of the shovel and into Stanley's wrists, making his bones rattle.

It was still dark. The only light came from the moon and the stars, more stars than Stanley had ever seen before. It seemed he had only just gotten to sleep when Mr. Pendanski came in and woke everyone up. Using all his might, he brought the shovel back down onto the dry lake bed. The force stung his hands but made no impression on the earth. He wondered if he had a defective shovel. He glanced at Zero, about fifteen feet away, who scooped out a shovelful of dirt and dumped it on a pile that was already almost a foot tall. For breakfast they'd been served some kind of lukewarm cereal. The best part was the orange juice. They each got a pint carton. The cereal actually didn't taste too bad, but it had smelled just like his cot. Then they filled their canteens, got their shovels, and were marched out across the lake. Each group was assigned a different area. The shovels were kept in a shed near the showers. They all looked the same to Stanley, although X-Ray had his own special shovel, which no one else was allowed to use. X-Ray claimed it was shorter than the others, but if it was, it was only by a fraction of an inch. The shovels were five feet long, from the tip of the steel blade to the end of the wooden shaft. Stanley's hole would have to be as deep as his shovel, and he'd have to be able to lay the shovel flat across the bottom in any direction. That was why X-Ray wanted the shortest shovel. The lake was so full of holes and mounds that it reminded Stanley of pictures he'd seen of the moon. "If you find anything interesting or unusual," Mr. Pendanski had told him, "you should report it either to me or Mr. Sir when we come around with the water truck. If the Warden likes what you found, you'll get the rest of the day off." "What are we supposed to be looking for?" Stanley asked him. "You're not looking for anything. You're digging to build character. It's just if you find anything, the Warden would like to know about it." He glanced helplessly at his shovel. It wasn't defective. He was defective. He noticed a thin crack in the ground. He placed the point of his shovel on top of it, then jumped on the back of the blade with both feet. The shovel sank a few inches into the packed earth. He smiled. For once in his life it paid to be overweight. He leaned on the shaft and pried up his first shovelful of dirt, then dumped it off to the side. Only ten million more to go, he thought, then placed the shovel back in the crack and jumped on it again. He unearthed several shovelfuls of dirt in this manner, before it occurred to him that he was dumping his dirt within the perimeter of his hole. He laid his shovel flat on the ground and marked where the edges of his hole would be. Five feet was awfully wide. He moved the dirt he'd already dug up out past his mark. He took a drink from his canteen. Five feet would be awfully deep, too. The digging got easier after a while. The ground was hardest at the surface, where the sun had baked a crust about eight inches deep. Beneath that, the earth was looser.

But by the time Stanley broke past the crust, a blister had formed in the middle of his right thumb, and it hurt to hold the shovel.

Stanley's great-great-grandfather was named Elya Yelnats. He was born in Latvia. When he was fifteen years old he fell in love with Myra Menke. (He didn't know he was Stanley's great-great-grandfather.) Myra Menke was fourteen. She would turn fifteen in two months, at which time her father had decided she should be married. Elya went to her father to ask for her hand, but so did Igor Barkov, the pig farmer. Igor was fifty-seven years old. He had a red nose and fat puffy cheeks. "I will trade you my fattest pig for your daughter," Igor offered. "And what have you got?" Myra's father asked Elya. "A heart full of love," said Elya.

"I'd rather have a fat pig," said Myra's father. Desperate, Elya went to see Madame Zeroni, an old Egyptian woman who lived on the edge of town. He had become friends with her, though she was quite a bit older than him. She was even older than Igor Barkov. The other boys of his village liked to mud wrestle. Elya preferred visiting Madame Zeroni and listening to her many stories. Madame Zeroni had dark skin and a very wide mouth. When she looked at you, her eyes seemed to expand, and you felt like she was looking right through you. "Elya, what's wrong?" she asked, before he even told her he was upset. She was sitting in a homemade wheelchair. She had no left foot. Her leg stopped at her ankle. "I'm in love with Myra Menke," Elya confessed. "But Igor Barkov has offered to trade his fattest pig for her. I can't compete with that." "Good," said Madame Zeroni. "You're too young to get married. You've got your whole life ahead of you." "But I love Myra." "Myra's head is as empty as a flowerpot." "But she's beautiful." "So is a flowerpot. Can she push a plow? Can she milk a goat? No, she is too delicate. Can she have an intelligent conversation? No, she is silly and foolish. Will she take care of you when you are sick? No, she is spoiled and will only want you to take care of her. So, she is beautiful. So what? Ptui!" Madame Zeroni spat on the dirt. She told Elya that he should go to America. "Like my son. That's where your future lies. Not with Myra Menke." But Elya would hear none of that. He was fifteen, and all he could see was Myra's shallow beauty. Madame Zeroni hated to see Elya so forlorn. Against her better judgment, she agreed to help him. "It just so happens, my sow gave birth to a litter of piglets yesterday," she said. "There is one little runt whom she won't suckle. You may have him. He would die anyway."

Madame Zeroni led Elya around the back of her house where she kept her pigs. Elya took the tiny piglet, but he didn't see what good it would do him. It wasn't much bigger than a rat. "He'll grow," Madame Zeroni assured him. "Do you see that mountain on the edge of the forest?" "Yes," said Elya. "On the top of the mountain there is a stream where the water runs uphill. You must carry the piglet every day to the top of the mountain and let it drink from the stream. As it drinks, you are to sing to him." She taught Elya a special song to sing to the pig. "On the day of Myra's fifteenth birthday, you should carry the pig up the mountain for the last time. Then take it directly to Myra's father. It will be fatter than any of Igor's pigs." "If it is that big and fat," asked Elya, "how will I be able to carry it up the mountain?" "The piglet is not too heavy for you now, is it?" asked Madame Zeroni. "Of course not," said Elya. "Do you think it will be too heavy for you tomorrow?" "No." "Every day you will carry the pig up the mountain. It will get a little bigger, but you will get a little stronger. After you give the pig to Myra's father, I want you to do one more thing for me." "Anything," said Elya. "I want you to carry me up the mountain. I want to drink from the stream, and I want you to sing the song to me." Elya promised he would. Madame Zeroni warned that if he failed to do this, he and his descendants would be doomed for all of eternity. At the time, Elya thought nothing of the curse. He was just a fifteen-year-old kid, and "eternity" didn't seem much longer than a week from Tuesday. Besides, he liked Madame Zeroni and would be glad to carry her up the mountain. He would have done it right then and there, but he wasn't yet strong enough.

Stanley was still digging. His hole was about three feet deep, but only in the center. It sloped upward to the edges. The sun had only just come up over the horizon, but he already could

feel its hot rays against his face. As he reached down to pick up his canteen, he felt a sudden rush of dizziness and put his hands on his knees to steady himself. For a moment he was afraid he would throw up, but the moment passed. He drank the last drop of water from his canteen. He had blisters on every one of his fingers, and one in the center of each palm. Everyone else's hole was a lot deeper than his. He couldn't actually see their holes but could tell by the size of their dirt piles.

He saw a cloud of dust moving across the wasteland and noticed that the other boys had stopped digging and were watching it, too. The dirt cloud moved closer, and he could see that it trailed behind a red pickup truck. The truck stopped near where they were digging, and the boys lined up behind it, X-Ray in front, Zero at the rear. Stanley got in line behind Zero. Mr. Sir filled each of their canteens from a tank of water in the bed of the pickup. As he took Stanley's canteen from him, he said, "This isn't the Girl Scouts, is it?" Stanley raised and lowered one shoulder. Mr. Sir followed Stanley back to his hole to see how he was doing. "You better get with it," he said. "Or else you're going to be digging in the hottest part of the day." He popped some sunflower seeds into his mouth, deftly removed the shells with his teeth, and spat them into Stanley's hole.

Every day Elya carried the little piglet up the mountain and sang to it as it drank from the stream. As the pig grew fatter, Elya grew stronger. On the day of Myra's fifteenth birthday, Elya's pig weighed over fifty stones. Madame Zeroni had told him to carry the pig up the mountain on that day as well, but Elya didn't want to present himself to Myra smelling like a pig. Instead, he took a bath. It was his second bath in less than a week. Then he led the pig to Myra's. Igor Barkov was there with his pig as well. "These are two of the finest pigs I've ever seen," Myra's father declared. He was also impressed with Elya, who seemed to have grown bigger and stronger in the last two months. "I used to think you were a good-for-nothing book reader," he said. "But I see now you could be an excellent mud wrestler." "May I marry your daughter?" Elya boldly asked. "First, I must weigh the pigs." Alas, poor Elya should have carried his pig up the mountain one last time. The two pigs weighed exactly the same.

Stanley's blisters had ripped open, and new blisters formed. He kept changing his grip on the shovel to try to avoid the pain. Finally, he removed his cap and held it between the shaft of his shovel and his raw hands. This helped, but digging was harder because the cap would slip and slide. The sun beat down on his unprotected head and neck. Though he tried to convince himself otherwise, he'd been aware for a while that his piles of dirt were too close to his hole. The piles were outside his five-foot circle, but he could see he was going to run out of room. Still, he pretended otherwise and kept adding more dirt to the piles, piles that he would eventually have to move. The problem was that when the dirt was in the ground, it was compacted. It expanded when it was excavated. The piles were a lot bigger than his hole was deep. It was either now or later. Reluctantly, he climbed up out of his hole, and once again dug his shovel into his previously dug dirt.

Myra's father got down on his hands and knees and closely examined each pig, tail to snout. "Those are two of the finest pigs I have ever seen," he said at last. "How am I to decide? I have only one daughter." "Why not let Myra decide?" suggested Elya. "That's

preposterous!" exclaimed Igor, expelling saliva as he spoke. "Myra is just an empty-headed girl," said her father. "How can she possibly decide, when I, her father, can't?" "She knows how she feels in her heart," said Elya. Myra's father rubbed his chin. Then he laughed and said, "Why not?" He slapped Elya on the back. "It doesn't matter to me. A pig is a pig." He summoned his daughter. Elya blushed when Myra entered the room. "Good afternoon, Myra," he said. She looked at him. "You're Elya, right?" she asked. "Myra," said her father. "Elya and Igor have each offered a pig for your hand in marriage. It doesn't matter to me. A pig is a pig. So I will let you make the choice. Whom do you wish to marry?" Myra looked confused. "You want me to decide?" "That's right, my blossom," said her father. "Gee, I don't know," said Myra. "Which pig weighs more?" "They both weigh the same," said her father. "Golly," said Myra, "I guess I choose Elya— No, Igor. No, Elya. No, Igor. Oh, I know! I'll think of a number between one and ten. I'll marry whoever guesses the closest number. Okay, I'm ready." "Ten," guessed Igor. Elya said nothing. "Elya?" said Myra. "What number do you guess?" Elya didn't pick a number. "Marry Igor," he muttered. "You can keep my pig as a wedding present."

The next time the water truck came it was driven by Mr. Pendanski, who also brought sack lunches. Stanley sat with his back against a pile of dirt and ate. He had a baloney sandwich, potato chips, and a large chocolate-chip cookie. "How you doin'?" asked Magnet. "Not real good," said Stanley. "Well, the first hole's the hardest," Magnet said. Stanley took a long, deep breath. He couldn't afford to dawdle. He was way behind the others, and the sun just kept getting hotter. It wasn't even noon yet. But he didn't know if he had the strength to stand up. He thought about quitting. He wondered what they would do to him. What could they do to him? His clothes were soaked with sweat. In school he had learned that sweating was good for you. It was nature's way of keeping you cool. So why was he so hot? Using his shovel for support, he managed to get to his feet.

"Where are we supposed to go to the bathroom?" he asked Magnet. Magnet gestured with his arms to the great expanse around them. "Pick a hole, any hole," he said. Stanley staggered across the lake, almost falling over a dirt pile. Behind him he heard Magnet say, "But first make sure nothing's living in it."

After leaving Myra's house, Elya wandered aimlessly through the town, until he found himself down by the wharf. He sat on the edge of a pier and stared down into the cold, black water. He could not understand how Myra had trouble deciding between him and Igor. He thought she loved him. Even if she didn't love him, couldn't she see what a foul person Igor was? It was like Madame Zeroni had said. Her head was as empty as a flowerpot. Some men were gathering on another dock, and he went to see what was going on. A sign read:

DECK HANDS WANTED FREE PASSAGE TO AMERICA

He had no sailing experience, but the ship's captain signed him aboard. The captain could see that Elya was a man of great strength. Not everybody could carry a full-grown pig up the

side of a mountain. It wasn't until the ship had cleared the harbor and was heading out across the Atlantic that he suddenly remembered his promise to carry Madame Zeroni up the mountain. He felt terrible. He wasn't afraid of the curse. He thought that was a lot of nonsense. He felt bad because he knew Madame Zeroni had wanted to drink from the stream before she died.

Zero was the smallest kid in Group D, but he was the first one to finish digging. "You're finished?" Stanley asked enviously. Zero said nothing. Stanley walked to Zero's hole and watched him measure it with his shovel. The top of his hole was a perfect circle, and the sides were smooth and steep. Not one dirt clod more than necessary had been removed from the earth. Zero pulled himself up to the surface. He didn't even smile. He looked down at his perfectly dug hole, spat in it, then turned and headed back to the camp compound. "Zero's one weird dude," said Zigzag. Stanley would have laughed, but he didn't have the strength. Zigzag had to be the "weirdest dude" Stanley had ever seen. He had a long skinny neck, and a big round head with wild frizzy blond hair that stuck out in all directions. His head seemed to bob up and down on his neck, like it was on a spring. Armpit was the second one to finish digging. He also spat into his hole before heading back to the camp compound. One by one, Stanley watched each of the boys spit into his hole and return to the camp compound.

Stanley kept digging. His hole was almost up to his shoulders, although it was hard to tell exactly where ground level was because his dirt piles completely surrounded the hole. The deeper he got, the harder it was to raise the dirt up and out of the hole. Once again, he realized, he was going to have to move the piles. His cap was stained with blood from his hands. He felt like he was digging his own grave.

In America, Elya learned to speak English. He fell in love with a woman named Sarah Miller. She could push a plow, milk a goat, and, most important, think for herself. She and Elya often stayed up half the night talking and laughing together. Their life was not easy. Elya worked hard, but bad luck seemed to follow him everywhere. He always seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. He remembered Madame Zeroni telling him that she had a son in America. Elya was forever looking for him. He'd walk up to complete strangers and ask if they knew someone named Zeroni, or had ever heard of anyone named Zeroni. No one did. Elya wasn't sure what he'd do if he ever found Madame Zeroni's son anyway. Carry him up a mountain and sing the pig lullaby to him? After his barn was struck by lightning for the third time, he told Sarah about his broken promise to Madame Zeroni. "I'm worse than a pig thief," he said. "You should leave me and find someone who isn't cursed." "I'm not leaving you," said Sarah. "But I want you to do one thing for me." "Anything," said Elya. Sarah smiled. "Sing me the pig lullaby." He sang it for her. Her eyes sparkled. "That's so pretty. What does it mean?" Elya tried his best to translate it from Latvian into English, but it wasn't the same. "It rhymes in Latvian," he told her. "I could tell," said Sarah. A year later their child was born. Sarah named him Stanley because she noticed that "Stanley" was "Yelnats" spelled backward. Sarah changed the words of the pig lullaby so that they rhymed, and every night she sang it to little Stanley.

"If only, if only," the woodpecker sighs, "The bark on the tree was as soft as the skies." While the wolf waits below, hungry and lonely, Crying to the moo—oo—oon, "If only, if only."

Stanley's hole was as deep as his shovel, but not quite wide enough on the bottom. He grimaced as he sliced off a chunk of dirt, then raised it up and flung it onto a pile. He laid his shovel back down on the bottom of his hole and, to his surprise, it fit. He rotated it and only had to chip off a few chunks of dirt, here and there, before it could lie flat across his hole in every direction.

He heard the water truck approaching, and felt a strange sense of pride at being able to show Mr. Sir, or Mr. Pendanski, that he had dug his first hole. He put his hands on the rim and tried to pull himself up. He couldn't do it. His arms were too weak to lift his heavy body. He used his legs to help, but he just didn't have any strength. He was trapped in his hole. It was almost funny, but he wasn't in the mood to laugh. "Stanley!" he heard Mr. Pendanski call. Using his shovel, he dug two footholds in the hole wall. He climbed out to see Mr. Pendanski walking over to him. "I was afraid you'd fainted," Mr. Pendanski said. "You wouldn't have been the first." "I'm finished," Stanley said, putting his blood-spotted cap back on his head. "All right!" said Mr. Pendanski, raising his hand for a high five, but Stanley ignored it. He didn't have the strength. Mr. Pendanski lowered his hand and looked down at Stanley's hole. "Well done," he said. "You want a ride back?" Stanley shook his head. "I'll walk." Mr. Pendanski climbed back into the truck without filling Stanley's canteen. Stanley waited for him to drive away, then took another look at his hole. He knew it was nothing to be proud of, but he felt proud nonetheless. He sucked up his last bit of saliva and spat.

8

A lot of people don't believe in curses. A lot of people don't believe in yellow-spotted lizards either, but if one bites you, it doesn't make a difference whether you believe in it or not. Actually, it is kind of odd that scientists named the lizard after its yellow spots. Each lizard has exactly eleven yellow spots, but the spots are hard to see on its yellow-green body. The lizard is from six to ten inches long and has big red eyes. In truth, its eyes are yellow, and it is the skin around the eyes which is red, but everyone always speaks of its red eyes. It also has black teeth and a milky white tongue. Looking at one, you would have thought that it should have been named a "red-eyed" lizard, or a "black-toothed" lizard, or perhaps a "white-tongued" lizard. If you've ever been close enough to see the yellow spots, you are probably dead. The yellow-spotted lizards like to live in holes, which offer shade from the sun and protection from predatory birds. Up to twenty lizards may live in one hole. They have strong, powerful legs, and can leap out of very deep holes to attack their prey. They eat small animals, insects, certain cactus thorns, and the shells of sunflower seeds.

9

Stanley stood in the shower and let the cold water pour over his hot and sore body. It was four minutes of heaven. For the second day in a row he didn't use soap. He was too tired. There was no roof over the shower building, and the walls were raised up six inches off the ground except in the corners. There was no drain in the floor. The water ran out under the walls and evaporated quickly in the sun. He put on his clean set of orange clothes. He returned to his tent, put his duty clothes in his crate, got out his pen and box of stationery, and headed to the rec room. A sign on the door said WRECK ROOM. Nearly everything in the room was broken; the TV, the pinball machine, the furniture. Even the people looked broken, with their worn-out bodies sprawled over the various chairs and sofas. X-Ray and Armpit were playing pool. The surface of the table reminded Stanley of the surface of the lake. It was full of bumps and holes because so many people had carved their initials into the felt. There was a hole in the far wall, and an electric fan had been placed in front of it. Cheap air-conditioning. At least the fan worked. As Stanley made his way across the room, he tripped over an outstretched leg. "Hey, watch it!" said an orange lump on a chair. "You watch it," muttered Stanley, too tired to care. "What'd you say?" the Lump demanded. "Nothin'," said Stanley. The Lump rose. He was almost as big as Stanley and a lot tougher. "You said something." He poked his fat finger in Stanley's neck. "What'd you say?" A crowd quickly formed around them. "Be cool," said X-Ray. He put his hand on Stanley's shoulder. "You don't want to mess with the Caveman," he warned. "The Caveman's cool," said Armpit. "I'm not looking for trouble," Stanley said. "I'm just tired, that's all." The Lump grunted. X-Ray and Armpit led Stanley over to a couch. Squid slid over to make room as Stanley sat down. "Did you see the Caveman back there?" X-Ray asked. "The Caveman's one tough dude," said Squid, and he lightly punched Stanley's arm. Stanley leaned back against the torn vinyl upholstery. Despite his shower, his body still radiated heat. "I wasn't trying to start anything," he said. The last thing he wanted to do after killing himself all day on the lake was to get in a fight with a boy called the Caveman. He was glad X-Ray and Armpit had come to his rescue. "Well, how'd you like your first hole?" asked Squid. Stanley groaned, and the other boys laughed. "Well, the first hole's the hardest," said Stanley.

"No way," said X-Ray. "The second hole's a lot harder. You're hurting before you even get started. If you think you're sore now, just wait and see how you feel tomorrow morning, right?" "That's right," said Squid. "Plus, the fun's gone," said X-Ray. "The fun?" asked Stanley. "Don't lie to me," said X-Ray. "I bet you always wanted to dig a big hole, right? Am I right?" Stanley had never really thought about it before, but he knew better than to tell X-Ray he wasn't right. "Every kid in the world wants to dig a great big hole," said X-Ray. "To China, right?" "Right," said Stanley. "See what I mean," said X-Ray. "That's what I'm saying. But now the fun's gone. And you still got to do it again, and again, and again." "Camp Fun and Games," said Stanley. "What's in the box?" asked Squid. Stanley had forgotten he had brought it. "Uh, paper. I was going to write a letter to my mother." "Your mother?" laughed Squid. "She'll worry if I don't." Squid scowled. Stanley looked around the room. This was the

one place in camp where the boys could enjoy themselves, and what'd they do? They wrecked it. The glass on the TV was smashed, as if someone had put his foot through it. Every table and chair seemed to be missing at least one leg. Everything leaned.

He waited to write the letter until after Squid had gotten up and joined the game of pool.

Dear Mom, Today was my first day at camp, and I've already made some friends. We've been out on the lake all day, so I'm pretty tired. Once I pass the swimming test, I'll get to learn how to water-ski. I

He stopped writing as he became aware that somebody was reading over his shoulder. He turned to see Zero, standing behind the couch. "I don't want her to worry about me," he explained. Zero said nothing. He just stared at the letter with a serious, almost angry look on his face. Stanley slipped it back into the stationery box. "Did the shoes have red X's on the back?" Zero asked him. It took Stanley a moment, but then he realized Zero was asking about Clyde Livingston's shoes.

"Yes, they did," he said. He wondered how Zero knew that. Brand X was a popular brand of sneakers. Maybe Clyde Livingston made a commercial for them. Zero stared at him for a moment, with the same intensity with which he had been staring at the letter. Stanley poked his finger through a hole in the vinyl couch and pulled out some of the stuffing. He wasn't aware of what he was doing. "C'mon, Caveman, dinner," said Armpit. "You coming, Caveman?" said Squid. Stanley looked around to see that Armpit and Squid were talking to him. "Uh, sure," he said. He put the piece of stationery back in the box, then got up and followed the boys out to the tables. The Lump wasn't the Caveman. He was. He shrugged his left shoulder. It was better than Barf Bag.

10

Stanley had no trouble falling asleep, but morning came much too quickly. Every muscle and joint in his body ached as he tried to get out of bed. He didn't think it was possible but his body hurt more than it had the day before. It wasn't just his arms and back, but his legs, ankles, and waist also hurt. The only thing that got him out of bed was knowing that every second he wasted meant he was one second closer to the rising of the sun. He hated the sun. He could hardly lift his spoon during breakfast, and then he was out on the lake, his spoon replaced by a shovel. He found a crack in the ground, and began his second hole. He stepped on the shovel blade, and pushed on the very back of the shaft with the base of his thumb. This hurt less than trying to hold the shaft with his blistered fingers. As he dug, he

was careful to dump the dirt far away from the hole. He needed to save the area around the hole for when his hole was much deeper. He didn't know if he'd ever get that far. X-Ray was right. The second hole was the hardest. It would take a miracle. As long as the sun wasn't out yet, he removed his cap and used it to help protect his hands. Once the sun rose, he would have to put it back on his head. His neck and forehead had been badly burned the day before. He took it one shovelful at a time, and tried not to think of the awesome task that lay ahead of him. After an hour or so, his sore muscles seemed to loosen up a little bit. He grunted as he tried to stick his shovel into the dirt. His cap slipped out from under his fingers, and the shovel fell free. He let it lie there. He took a drink from his canteen. He guessed that the water truck should be coming soon, but he didn't finish all the water, just in case he was wrong. He'd learned to wait until he saw the truck, before drinking the last drop. The sun wasn't yet up, but its rays arced over the horizon and brought light to the sky.

He reached down to pick up his cap, and there next to it he saw a wide flat rock. As he put his cap on his head, he continued to look down at the rock. He picked it up. He thought he could see the shape of a fish, fossilized in it. He rubbed off some dirt, and the outline of the fish became clearer. The sun peeked over the horizon, and he could actually see tiny lines where every one of the fish's bones had been. He looked at the barren land all around him. True, everyone referred to this area as "the lake," but it was still hard to believe that this dry wasteland was once full of water. Then he remembered what Mr. Sir and Mr. Pendanski had both said. If he dug up anything interesting, he should report it to one of them. If the Warden liked it, he would get the rest of the day off. He looked back down at his fish. He'd found his miracle.

He continued to dig, though very slowly, as he waited for the water truck. He didn't want to bring attention to his find, afraid that one of the other boys might try to take it from him. He tossed the rock, face down, beside his dirt pile, as if it had no special value. A short while later he saw the cloud of dirt heading across the lake. The truck stopped and the boys lined up. They always lined up in the same order, Stanley realized, no matter who got there first. X-Ray was always at the front of the line. Then came Armpit, Squid, Zigzag, Magnet, and Zero. Stanley got in line behind Zero. He was glad to be at the back, so no one would notice the fossil. His pants had very large pockets, but the rock still made a bulge. Mr. Pendanski filled each boy's canteen, until Stanley was the only one left. "I found something," Stanley said, taking it out of his pocket. Mr. Pendanski reached for Stanley's canteen, but Stanley handed him the rock instead. "What's this?" "It's a fossil," said Stanley. "See the fish?" Mr. Pendanski looked at it again. "See, you can even see all of its little bones," said Stanley. "Interesting," said Mr. Pendanski. "Let me have your canteen." Stanley handed it to him. Mr. Pendanski filled it, then returned it. "So do I get the rest of the day off?" "What for?" "You know, you said if I found something interesting, the Warden would give me the day off." Mr. Pendanski laughed as he gave the fossil back to Stanley. "Sorry, Stanley. The Warden isn't interested in fossils." "Let me see that," said Magnet, taking the rock from Stanley. Stanley continued to stare at Mr. Pendanski. "Hey, Zig, dig this rock." "Cool," said Zigzag. Stanley saw his fossil being passed around.

"I don't see nothing," said X-Ray. He took off his glasses, wiped them on his dirty clothes, and put them back on. "See, look at the little fishy," said Armpit.