

Please spend Monday and Tuesday reading chapter 37 – 40. Take note of any words you are unsure of and look this up.

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"We're almost there," said Stanley. He could see the base of the mountain. Now that they really were almost there, it scared him. Big Thumb was his only hope. If there was no water, no refuge, then they'd have nothing, not even hope. There was no exact place where the flat land stopped and the mountain began. The ground got steeper and steeper, and then there was no doubt that they were heading up the mountain. Stanley could no longer see Big Thumb. The slope of the mountain was in the way. It became too steep to go straight up. Instead they zigzagged back and forth, increasing their altitude by small increments every time they changed directions. Patches of weeds dotted the mountainside. They walked from one patch to another, using the weeds as footholds. As they got higher, the weeds got thicker. Many had thorns, and they had to be careful walking through them. Stanley would have liked to stop and rest, but he was afraid they'd never get started again. As long as Zero could keep going, he could keep going, too. Besides, he knew they didn't have much daylight left. As the sky darkened, bugs began appearing above the weed patches. A swarm of gnats hovered around them, attracted by their sweat. Neither Stanley nor Zero had the strength to try to swat at them. "How are you doing?" Stanley asked. Zero pointed thumbs up. Then he said, "If a gnat lands on me, it will knock me over." Stanley gave him some more words. "B-u-g-s," he spelled. Zero concentrated hard, then said, "Boogs." Stanley laughed. A wide smile spread across Zero's sick and weary face as well. "Bugs," he said. "Good," said Stanley. "Remember, it's a short 'u' if there's no 'e' at the end. "Okay, here's a hard one. How about, l-u-n-c-h?" "Luh— Luh-un—" Suddenly, Zero made a horrible, wrenching noise as he doubled over and grabbed his stomach. His frail body shook violently, and he threw up, emptying his stomach of the sploosh. He leaned on his knees and took several deep breaths. Then he straightened up and continued going. The swarm of gnats stayed behind, preferring the contents of Zero's stomach to the sweat on the boys' faces. Stanley didn't give him any more words, thinking that he needed to save his strength. But about ten or fifteen minutes later, Zero said, "Lunch." As they climbed higher, the patches of weeds grew thicker, and they had to be careful not to get their feet tangled in thorny vines. Stanley suddenly realized something. There hadn't been any weeds on the lake. "Weeds and bugs," he said. "There's got to be water around somewhere. We must be getting close."

A wide clown-like smile spread across Zero's face. He flashed the thumbs-up sign, then fell. He didn't get up. Stanley bent over him. "C'mon, Zero," he urged. "We're getting close. C'mon, Hector. Weeds and bugs. Weeds and boogs." Stanley shook him. "I've already ordered your hot fudge sundae," he said. "They're making it right now." Zero said nothing.

Stanley took hold of Zero's forearms and pulled him upright. Then he stooped down and let Zero fall over his right shoulder. He stood up, lifting Zero's worn-out body off the ground. He left the shovel and sack of jars behind as he continued up the mountain. Zero's legs dangled in front of him. Stanley couldn't see his feet, which made it difficult to walk through the tangled patches of weeds and vines. He concentrated on one step at a time, carefully raising and setting down each foot. He thought only about each step, and not the impossible task that lay before him. Higher and higher he climbed. His strength came from somewhere deep inside himself and also seemed to come from the outside as well. After focusing on Big Thumb for so long, it was as if the rock had absorbed his energy and now acted like a kind of giant magnet pulling him toward it. After a while he became aware of a foul odor. At first he thought it came from Zero, but it seemed to be in the air, hanging heavy all around him. He also noticed that the ground wasn't as steep anymore. As the ground flattened, a huge stone precipice rose up ahead of him, just barely visible in the moonlight. It seemed to grow bigger with each step he took. It no longer resembled a thumb. And he knew he'd never be able to climb it. Around him, the smell became stronger. It was the bitter smell of despair. Even if he could somehow climb Big Thumb, he knew he wouldn't find water. How could there be water at the top of a giant rock? The weeds and bugs survived only by an occasional rainstorm, like the one he had seen from camp. Still, he continued toward it. If nothing else, he wanted to at least reach the Thumb. He never made it. His feet slipped out from under him. Zero's head knocked against the back of his shoulder as he fell and tumbled into a small muddy gully. As he lay face down in the muddy ditch, he didn't know if he'd ever get up again. He didn't know if he'd even try. Had he come all this way just to . . . You need water to make mud! He crawled along the gully in the direction that seemed the muddiest. The ground became gloppier. The mud splashed up as he slapped the ground.

Using both hands, he dug a hole in the soggy soil. It was too dark to see, but he thought he could feel a tiny pool of water at the bottom of his hole. He stuck his head in the hole and licked the dirt. He dug deeper, and as he did so, more water seemed to fill the hole. He couldn't see it, but he could feel it—first with his fingers, then with his tongue. He dug until he had a hole that was about as deep as his arm was long. There was enough water for him to scoop out with his hands and drop on Zero's face. Zero's eyes remained closed. But his tongue poked out between his lips, searching out the droplets. Stanley dragged Zero closer to the hole. He dug, then scooped some more water and let it pour out of his hands into Zero's mouth. As he continued to widen his hole, his hand came across a smooth, round object. It was too smooth and too round to be a rock. He wiped the dirt off of it and realized it was an onion. He bit into it without peeling it. The hot bitter juice burst into his mouth. He could feel it all the way up to his eyes. And when he swallowed, he felt its warmth move down his throat and into his stomach. He only ate half. He gave the other half to Zero. "Here, eat this." "What is it?" Zero whispered. "A hot fudge sundae."

Stanley awoke in a meadow, looking up at the giant rock tower. It was layered and streaked with different shades of red, burnt orange, brown, and tan. It must have been over a hundred feet tall. Stanley lay awhile, just looking at it. He didn't have the strength to get up. It felt like the insides of his mouth and throat were coated with sand. And no wonder. When he rolled over he saw the water hole. It was about two and a half feet deep and over three feet wide. At the bottom lay no more than two inches of very brown water. His hands and fingers were sore from digging, especially under his fingernails. He scooped some dirty water into his mouth, then swished it around, trying to filter it with his teeth. Zero moaned. Stanley started to say something to him, but no words came out of his mouth, and he had to try again. "How you doing?" It hurt to talk. "Not good," Zero said quietly. With great effort, he rolled over, raised himself to his knees, and crawled to the water hole. He lowered his head into it and lapped up some water. Then he jerked back, clutched his knees to his chest, and rolled to his side. His body shook violently.

Stanley thought about going back down the mountain to look for the shovel, so he could make the water hole deeper. Maybe that would give them cleaner water. They could use the jars as drinking glasses. But he didn't think he had the strength to go down, let alone make it back up again. And he didn't know where to look. He struggled to his feet. He was in a field of greenish white flowers that seemed to extend all the way around Big Thumb. He took a deep breath, then walked the last fifty yards to the giant precipice and touched it. Tag, you're it. Then he walked back to Zero and the water hole. On the way he picked one of the flowers. It actually wasn't one big flower, he discovered, but instead each flower was really a cluster of tiny little flowers that formed a round ball. He brought it to his mouth but had to spit it out. He could see part of the trail he had made the night before, when he carried Zero up the mountain. If he was going to head back down and look for the shovel, he realized, he should do it soon, while the trail was fresh. But he didn't want to leave Zero. He was afraid Zero might die while he was gone. Zero was still lying doubled over on his side. "I got to tell you something," he said with a groan. "Don't talk," said Stanley. "Save your strength." "No, listen," Zero insisted, then he closed his eyes as his face twisted with pain. "I'm listening," Stanley whispered. "I took your shoes," Zero said. Stanley didn't know what he was talking about. His shoes were on his feet. "That's all right," he said. "Just rest now." "It's all my fault," said Zero. "It's nobody's fault," said Stanley. "I didn't know," Zero said. "That's okay," Stanley said. "Just rest." Zero closed his eyes. But then again he said, "I didn't know about the shoes." "What shoes?" "From the shelter." It took a moment for Stanley to comprehend. "Clyde Livingston's shoes?" "I'm sorry," said Zero. Stanley stared at him. It was impossible. Zero was delirious. Zero's "confession" seemed to bring him some relief. The muscles in his face relaxed. As he drifted into sleep, Stanley softly sang him the song that had been in his family for generations.

"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."

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When Stanley found the onion the night before, he didn't question how it had come to be there. He ate it gratefully. But now as he sat gazing at Big Thumb and the meadow full of flowers, he couldn't help but wonder about it. If there was one wild onion, there could be more. He intertwined his fingers and tried to rub out the pain. Then he bent down and dug up another flower, this time pulling up the entire plant, including the root.

"Onions! Fresh, hot, sweet onions," Sam called as Mary Lou pulled the cart down Main Street. "Eight cents a dozen." It was a beautiful spring morning. The sky was painted pale blue and pink—the same color as the lake and the peach trees along its shore. Mrs. Gladys Tennyson was wearing just her nightgown and robe as she came running down the street after Sam. Mrs. Tennyson was normally a very proper woman who never went out in public without dressing up in fine clothes and a hat. So it was quite surprising to the people of Green Lake to see her running past them. "Sam!" she shouted. "Whoa, Mary Lou," said Sam, stopping his mule and cart. "G'morning, Mrs. Tennyson," he said. "How's little Becca doing?" Gladys Tennyson was all smiles. "I think she's going to be all right. The fever broke about an hour ago. Thanks to you." "I'm sure the good Lord and Doc Hawthorn deserve most of the credit." "The Good Lord, yes," agreed Mrs. Tennyson, "but not Dr. Hawthorn. That quack wanted to put leeches on her stomach! Leeches! My word! He said they would suck out the bad blood. Now you tell me. How would a leech know good blood from bad blood?" "I wouldn't know," said Sam. "It was your onion tonic," said Mrs. Tennyson. "That's what saved her." Other townspeople made their way to the cart. "Good morning, Gladys," said Hattie Parker. "Don't you look lovely this morning." Several people snickered. "Good morning, Hattie," Mrs. Tennyson replied. "Does your husband know you're parading about in your bed clothes?" Hattie asked. There were more snickers. "My husband knows exactly where I am and how I am dressed, thank you," said Mrs. Tennyson. "We have both been up all night and half the morning with Rebecca. She almost died from stomach sickness. It seems she ate some bad meat." Hattie's face flushed. Her husband, Jim Parker, was the butcher.

"It made my husband and me sick as well," said Mrs. Tennyson, "but it nearly killed Becca, what with her being so young. Sam saved her life." "It wasn't me," said Sam. "It was the onions." "I'm glad Becca's all right," Hattie said contritely. "I keep telling Jim he needs to wash his knives," said Mr. Pike, who owned the general store. Hattie Parker excused herself, then turned and quickly walked away. "Tell Becca that when she feels up to it to come by the store for a piece of candy," said Mr. Pike. "Thank you, I'll do that." Before returning home, Mrs. Tennyson bought a dozen onions from Sam. She gave him a dime and told him to keep the change. "I don't take charity," Sam told her. "But if you want to buy a few extra onions for Mary Lou, I'm sure she'd appreciate it." "All right then," said Mrs. Tennyson, "give me my change in onions." Sam gave Mrs. Tennyson an additional three onions, and she fed them one at a time to Mary Lou. She laughed as the old donkey ate them out of her hand.

Stanley and Zero slept off and on for the next two days, ate onions, all they wanted, and splashed dirty water into their mouths. In the late afternoon Big Thumb gave them shade. Stanley tried to make the hole deeper, but he really needed the shovel. His efforts just seemed to stir up the mud and make the water dirtier. Zero was sleeping. He was still very sick and weak, but the sleep and the onions seemed to be doing him some good. Stanley was no longer afraid that he would die soon. Still, he didn't want to go for the shovel while Zero was asleep. He didn't want him to wake up and think he'd been deserted. He waited for Zero to open his eyes. "I think I'll go look for the shovel," Stanley said. "I'll wait here," Zero said feebly, as if he had any other choice. Stanley headed down the mountain. The sleep and the onions had done him a lot of good as well. He felt strong. It was fairly easy to follow the trail he had made two days earlier. There were a few places where he wasn't sure he was going the right way, but it just took a little bit of searching before he found the trail again. He went quite a ways down the mountain but still didn't find the shovel. He looked back up toward the top of the mountain. He must have walked right past it, he thought. There was no way he could have carried Zero all the way up from here. Still, he headed downward, just in case. He came to a bare spot between two large patches of weeds and sat down to rest. Now he had definitely gone too far, he decided. He was tired out from walking down the hill. It would have been impossible to have carried Zero up the hill from here, especially after walking all day with no food or water. The shovel must be buried in some weeds.

Before starting back up, he took one last look around in all directions. He saw a large indentation in the weeds a little farther down the mountain. It didn't seem likely that the shovel could be there, but he'd already come this far. There, lying in some tall weeds, he found the shovel and the sack of jars. He was amazed. He wondered if the shovel and sack might have rolled down the hill. But none of the jars were broken, except the one which had broken earlier. And if they had rolled down the hill, it is doubtful that he would have found

the sack and shovel side by side. On his way back up the mountain, Stanley had to sit down and rest several times. It was a long, hard climb.