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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 run-down 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 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.

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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 babysit 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. Pendanski 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 José, 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 Theodore," 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 fig-

ure 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.

6

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.

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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.

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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.

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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."