

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? Ptuui!"

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 di-

rectly 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 oth-

erwise 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 shoul-

ders, 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.



87

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.