

The Sign of the Cat

by Sandra Havriluk

“Chet, pass the fried chicken to our guests,” Grandma said. 1

My eyes lingered on the plumper pieces. I knew that after our “guests” served themselves, only the scrawniest parts would be left. Guests like these men knocked on our door almost every day, asking for handouts. They were hopping trains, looking for jobs. 5

Everyone called them “askers” or “hoboes” but not Grandma. She’d remind me, “If your dad hadn’t gotten the job at Uncle Will’s shop in Florida, he could be riding the rails, too.”

Not my dad! He dressed in neatly pressed clothes. His razor-clean face smelled like Burma-Shave. Those men wore stained, wrinkled clothes and had scraggly beards. 10

Ray, Tony, and Sal had been the ones to knock on our door tonight. It felt strange to call grown-ups by their first names, but Tony explained, “No need for last names in Hooverville.” People blamed President Hoover for our country’s hard times, so “Hooverville” is what they called the places where hoboes set up camp. 15

“Mmmm-mmm,” Ray passed the chicken plate to me. Only a small drumstick and a tiny wing were left.

“Your turn, Chet,” Grandma smiled.

Her eyes weren’t smiling, though. Worry weighed down on her like a wet woolen shawl. The days were getting even tougher. Dad sent less money each month. We bartered eggs and milk for flour and sugar. When I outgrew my shirts, Grandma sewed me new ones using feed sacks. 20

Staring at the food, I thought of one way I could try to cheer her up. I put the drumstick onto Grandma’s plate and put the tiny wing on mine. 25

“I filled up on apples I picked today,” I said, hoping she couldn’t hear my stomach growl.

She smiled again, and this time so did her eyes.

Over a dessert of apple pie, Grandma invited the men to bunk on our porch. 30

Pie stuck in my throat. Now we’d have to share breakfast, too! I’d be lucky to get a spoonful of egg or half a biscuit.

Grandma patted my shoulder. “Fetch some covers for them, Chet.”
 I snatched quilts from the chest and marched to the porch. Tony and Ray were playing cards with a tattered deck. Sal was whittling. 35
 “Ever whittled, son?” he asked.
 “No, sir, I ain’t.”
 “You *haven’t*,” Ray corrected me. Seeing my surprise, he winked. “I may not look like it, but I used to be a college professor.”
 Sal smiled, “Watch and learn.” 40
 He shaved bits and pieces from the chunk of wood until a cat formed. He handed it to me. “Your gatepost is marked with the sign of a cat. It means the kind lady of the house won’t turn you away.”
That’s why so many askers knocked on our door! An idea flashed in my head. “What’s a sign that would make people stay away?” I asked. 45
 Tony slashed three diagonal lines through the air. “It means it’s not a safe place.”
 After our guests left in the morning, I checked the gatepost. On the bottom slat, a tiny cat, drawn in black coal stared at me. I scrubbed it off with Grandma’s detergent, then drew the symbol Tony had shown me. 50
 That night, Grandma and I ate alone. I stuffed myself with sliced ham and buttermilk corn bread, trying not to think about askers going hungry.
 When I crawled into bed, I had a hard time falling asleep. I’d eaten too much, and my thoughts kept returning to the sign on the gatepost. Part of me wanted to go outside and scrub it off. But I finally drifted to sleep. 55
 “Chet.”
 A deep voice interrupted my dreams. I cracked open an eye. Moonlight was streaming through my window.
 “Son.”
 I bolted up. Even with his beard and tattered clothing, I recognized him. 60
 “Dad! You’re back!”
 “Yes-siree.” He mussed my hair. “Uncle Will’s shop closed. I hopped a dozen trains to get back home.”
 Soon we were digging into a midnight snack of Grandma’s flapjacks. Showered and shaved, Dad looked like himself again. I wondered how many doors he had knocked on asking for food, the way Tony, Ray, and Sal had. 65
 “What’ve you got there, Chet?” Dad pointed to Sal’s wooden cat sitting by my plate.

“A guest whittled it for me,” I said, picking it up. I explained about the sign of the cat, feeling guilt wash over me again. 70

Dad nodded, looking at me closely. “I kept an eye out for those signs, too.” Had he seen the symbol on our gatepost?

When the sun came up, I grabbed the detergent and did what I’d already known I had to do. Soon the sign of the cat again announced a kind lady’s welcome. And this time, mine, too. 75

Hobo Code

In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, close to one million men, women, and teens, known as “hoboes,” “askers,” or “tramps,” jumped aboard freight trains to travel the country looking for work. To share tips or warning with one another, they developed a system of signs. Using chalk or coal, they’d draw these signs on fence posts, mailboxes, or trees.



“Good place for a handout”



“Free telephone”



“Barking dog here”



“No use going this way”

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