

The Color of George

By Anka Lampe

I see another pretty stone. I bend over to grab it and hear a large sound. It is loud, but it is large, too, and it sounds purple and ripping and school, and it sounds the yard and smiles, but not real smiles, not like the one Mr. Larabee had. It sounds laughing, and then I do hear laughing, and I stand back up. It is Ricky and Fred and the pale man and they are laughing. I laugh too, which makes them laugh more. I am glad, because laughing means I am funny, and friends, it means friends too. Friends are good to have, except for when they throw things, but maybe that's what friends do. That's what my friends do.

Today a woman comes. She is very pretty and smells like oranges and she says her name is Shelley. I smile at her, and she smiles back, and it's not as real as Mr. Larabee, but she is trying and I like Shelley. Then Shelley says "Can I ask you some questions, George?", and they are nice

questions, not like the questions Ricky and Fred and the pale man ask me. She asks me what is my favorite food and why did I sign up for working in the factory, which means the long building with lots of noises. I tell her I signed up for the factory because of the man on the sign, and she nods and writes with her red pencil.

I am watching her hand move on the paper and she has curly writing that looks like smoke and flowers, and flowers in smoke, and a big table with lots of food and laughing. But then Shelley looks up from her writing, and then she asks me more questions, questions I don't like, about my mother and my father and my little sister and I say that I don't have a little sister but that my father is gone and I don't know where he is, and my mother doesn't either, at least that's what she said, and then I think about my mother and a tear comes out of my eye because my mother is violets but she is also red and hurt and and a closed door.

I look at Shelley and she has tears coming out of her eyes too so I jump and I say No, Shelley, no, don't cry, no, don't be sad! and she says no George, I'm not sad and thank you and no more questions right now but I'll see you later.

So I leave Shelley who smells like oranges and go back to the barrack, even though I'm supposed to be at the factory but Shelley said take the day off. I count my pretty rocks, all different colors, yellow and orange and green and black and brown, and then I line them all up on my bed. I watch my rocks for a while, but then the bell rings which means food and all the chairs and tables and Anne who gives out lunch.

I am walking to lunch and I remember the man on the sign and I smile, because the man on the sign is my goal. That's what Mr. Larabee said, when he was sitting under the sign. I walked to him and he said "George, where are you going?"

I smiled at him and said, "To the grocery."

"You go to the grocery store often?"

"Yes, for my mother."

"Ain't you supposed to be in school?"

I didn't smile anymore then, and I told the man how the school didn't want me anymore. I'm getting too big for school, anyway. I said, all proud. Tomorrow is my birthday, and there's cake, and candles, and maybe presents, and- Then I realized that I was talking too much.

“George, you see my sign here?” Mr. Larabee asked, and so I looked up at the sign and there was a man there, a strong man and he looked like miles of days on a farm with rough hands and a stone mountain. Under the man were some words, and I sounded them out till I got them all right, *We Soldiers of Supply pledge fighting men shall not want!*

I stood looking up at the sign until Mr. Larabee tapped my shoulder and said, “You want a job?”

It was like apples had come rolling out of Mr. Larabee’s mouth and I stared and stared and my mouth hung open because nobody wanted me to have a job, that was what my mother said, nobody wants someone whose brain is all mixed up but Mr. Larabee asked if I wanted a job and yes I did I did so I stared at Mr. Larabee until he said -

“We need everyone who can to work in the factories now, makin guns and all that, to send to the front.”

I am smiling walking to lunch and remembering Mr. Larabee and the man on the sign because now I am the man on the sign and that makes me walk prouder. I am still walking proud when I get into the lunch room and get my lunch from Anne with the hairnet, and as I walk to the table

with all my friends, and I am so excited to laugh with my friends, like we do every day. My friends think I am very funny. They like when I dance. Then they laugh and laugh and sometimes they laugh so hard that a bread roll flies out of Fred's hand, or Ricky. After that Anne looks sad and water comes out of her eyes, and I don't know why but maybe she doesn't like when I dance.

Today no one is laughing. I even start dancing a little so maybe we can have fun but Ricky tells me to shut up and sit down, everyone's going to lose their job anyway so no point in having fun. Then I am confused and a man walks into the room. I hear the man with the pale face whisper Mr. Dalton to Ricky.

“Men, I am sorry to let you know that you are all being let go.”

Everybody's voices go loud and the room is filled with red and spikes and a big, dirty green car down a dusty road until Mr. Dalton waves his arms.

“All of you, calm down! This is not my choice! The foreman has decided to send a few men to the munitions factory in Choperell, but besides that, all of you will have to go home. I'm sorry, there are no jobs available. The three men I call, come up here. I'll show you how to get to

Choperell.” Mr. Dalton takes a piece of paper from his back pocket and starts reading names.

The three men are Peter Descoudres, Benjamin Armstrong, and- No one talks or laughs because everybody wants a job so they can have money and be important. George Canmore.

I burst with firecrackers and blue squares and a big smile, except the smile is on the outside of my face. Anne with the hairnet gives me a wink, and I grin back at her. I am the man on the sign! I am a Soldier of Supply!

Then I notice everyone around me. They are quiet. They are not cheering. Ricky and Fred are not smiling, like I am. The pale man is even quieter than they are, and then I notice that he has fat tears rolling down his face. When he sees me looking at him he turns away. Fred mutters something under his breath, like, Poor chap, got five kids at home.

I straighten up and march over to Mr. Dalton. He looks at me in surprise.

“What do you need, George?”

“Mr. Dalton, I - I wanted to be like the man on the sign and be important with money but I don’t think I can do that. I think the pale man -

I mean, Robert should go to the other factory.” Then I march right back to my seat, and the pale man stares at me. He stares at me as we leave the room, and as we go in two separate lines on two separate trains, me with my stones, him with a small smile, a real smile, crawling onto his face. And as both trains roll away from the depot, I know that I don’t have to be the man on the sign. I can be me.