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# "From The Hour I First Believed"

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# From *The Hour I First Believed*

WALLY LAMB

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SOMETIMES MY SCARY DREAMS ARE ABOUT DADDY, and sometimes they're about Mr. Zadzilko. Our school used to have a different janitor, Mr. Mpipi, but he got fired. And I was mad because Mr. Mpipi was *nice*. The teachers think Mr. Zadzilko's *nice*, too, because he brings them these stupid doughnuts that his mother makes called *poonch-keys*. Mr. Zadzilko's *not nice*, though. When the teachers go to the toilet, he peeks at them through this secret hole.

Before Mr. Mpipi got fired, he came to our class once, and he told us about these people called the Bushmen that are his relatives or his ancestors or something. He showed us where they live on the world map--in Africa, near the bottom. You know what Bushmen hunt and eat? *Jackals*. And *desert rats*. And when they see a praying mantis, they think it's God!

Mr. Mpipi had our class all sit on the floor, even Miss Hogan. Us kids sat cross-legged, but Miss Hogan knelt on her knees and her skirt made a big circle around her. Mr. Mpipi told us a story about how Mantis made the moon by throwing fire into the night sky, and how he married a snake. And you know how Mantis travels around? Between the toes of an antelope, because that's his favorite animal. Mr. Mpipi talked Bushman talk, with these little clicky noises before the words. Everyone laughed, even Miss Hogan, and Mr. Mpipi laughed his high, squealy laugh, too. Mr. Mpipi is colored, I think, except he doesn't have chocolate skin. It's more orangey like the dried apricots Grandpa eats.

After his visit, our class wrote Mr. Mpipi a thank you letter on big easel paper, and we all signed it. And it made him so happy that he gave us a present: a praying mantis egg case. It was supposed to hatch in April, but it didn't. Then, after the assembly, Mr. Mpipi got fired. Miss Hogan was going to throw out the egg case, but I asked her if I could have it. She said yes, and I brought it home, and put it on my window sill.

I caught Mr. Zadzilko peeking. That's how I know about the hole. It's in the big second-floor closet, where the buckets and mops and the Spic'n'Span are. Miss Hogan wrote me a pass and sent me

down to help him because I was the first one done with my Social Studies questions, and I had ants in my pants and kept bothering my neighbors. I opened the closet door and Mr. Zadzilko was peeking through the hole. He jumped when he saw me, and fixed his pants and his belt, and he was laughing *like heh heh heh*. "Look at this," he said. "Mop handle musta poked a hole in the wall. Gotta patch it when I get a free minute." He gave me a sponge and told me to wet it in the boys' room and then go downstairs and wipe the cafeteria tables.

And after, when the recess bell rang, I went back upstairs to return my sponge. Mr. Zadzilko wasn't there, so I turned a bucket upside down and climbed up and looked through the hole. And there was the principal, Miss Anderson, sitting on the toilet, smoking a cigarette. You could see her girdle.

I knew it was naughty to look, so I closed my eyes and got down off the bucket. And when I turned toward the door, Mr. Zadzilko was standing there.

"My, my, my," he said. "Aren't *you* the dirty boy?"

He yanked the pull chain and the closet light went on. Then he pulled the door closed behind him. He came over and sat down on the bucket, so that he was whispering right in my face. The hole was a secret between me and him, he said. If I said anything, he'd tell the teachers he caught me looking. "You were just curious," he said. "I understand that, but the teachers won't. They'll probably have you arrested. And everyone will know you're Dirty Boy."

He reached behind him and took a greasy paper bag off the shelf. He opened it and held it out to me. "Here," he said. "Help yourself." I reached in and pulled out one of those doughnut things his mother made.

"They're called *poonchkeys*," he said. "Take a bite. They're delicious."

I didn't want to, but I did.

"What are you, a little mouse nibbling on a crumb? Take a *big* bite."

So I did. The stuff inside looked like bloody nose.

"What kind did you get? Raspberry or prune?" I showed him where I'd bitten. "Oh, raspberry," he said. "That's my favorite, too. What are you shaking for, Dirty Boy?"

I tried to stop shaking, but I couldn't. He kept looking at me.

"You know what *poonchkey* means? In Polish?"

I shook my head.

"It means 'little package.' Because the doughnut makes a little package around the stuff that's inside, see?"

"Oh," I said. "Can I go now? It's recess."

"Like us men carry the stuff that's inside *us*. In our sacs. Get it?"

I didn't know what he was talking about, but I nodded.

"You don't *look* like you get it. Point to where your *poonchkee's* at?"

"What?"

"Your 'little package.' Where is it, Dirty Boy? Point to it."

I could hear kids playing outside, but they sounded farther away than just the playground. I was trying not to cry.

Mr. Zadzilko made an O with his thumb and his pointing finger. "Here's the woman's hole, see?" he said. "Otherwise known as her snatch, or her pussy." He leaned closer and dropped his hand down. "And this, my dirty boy, is where your 'little package' is." He flicked his finger, hard, and it *hurt*.

"It's recess," I said. "I'm supposed to go."

"Go, then," he said. "But just remember what happens to dirty boys with big mouths."

The hallway was empty. There was laughing coming out of the teachers' room. I went downstairs to the boys' room. I hadn't swallowed that bite he made me take; I'd hid it against my cheek. I spit it into the toilet and threw the rest of my *poonchkey* in after it. I kept flushing, and it kept swirling around and looking like it was going to go down, but then it would bob back up again, and by the time I got out to the playground, I had a stomachache, and then the recess bell rang two seconds later, and we had to go in.

That night, I was lying in bed, thinking about Mr. Zadzilko, and Mother came in my room in the dark. "Caelum?" she said. "Are you asleep or awake?"

I didn't answer for a long time. Then I said, "Awake."

"I heard you crying. What were you crying about?"

I almost told her, but then I didn't. "I was thinking about Jesus dying on the cross," I said. "And it made me sad." I knew she'd like that answer.

Mother goes to Mass every morning before work. That's why she can't get me ready for school. Aunt Lolly gets me ready, once she finishes morning milking. Except, if there's a problem, she calls me from the barn phone and I have to get myself ready, and not dawdle or I'll miss the bus. One time some of our cows got loose and started running up Bride Lake Road. Aunt Lolly had to go get them, because they could have got hit by a car, and she forgot to call me. And I started watching *Captain Kangaroo*. I'm not supposed to watch TV in the morning. And then, the bus came and I was still in my pajamas. Mother had to leave work, drive back to the farm, and then drive

me to school. She was crying and yelling, because now Mr. McCully probably wouldn't pick her to be head teller, thanks to me. At the stop signs and red lights, she kept reaching over and whacking me. And by the time we got to school, we were both crying. I had to roll the window down and air out my eyes before I went in, because the school doesn't need to know about our private family business.

On Saturdays, Mother vacuum-cleans the priests' house for free and takes home their dirty clothes in pillow cases because Monsignor Guglielmo's helping her get annulled. After Sunday dinner, Mother irons the priests' clean clothes and drives them back. And *if* she finishes in time, *then* we can go to the movies. My favorite movie is *Old Yeller*, except for the part where Travis had to shoot *Old Yeller* because he got hydrophoby. Mother's favorite movie is *The Song of Bernadette*. She says Jesus sends messages to the boys he picks to become priests, and that I should always look and listen for signs.

"What kind of signs?" I said.

"It could be anything. A voice, a vision in the sky."

One time I saw a cloud that looked like a man with a big Jimmy Durante nose. When I sing "Inka Dinka Do" with my Jimmy Durante voice, the grownups always laugh. And at the end, I go, "Good night, Mrs. Callabash, wherever you are!" and they clap and tell me to do it again. Mother never laughs, though. She says that Jimmy Durante cloud was *not* a sign from Jesus. I told Mother the Bushmen think God is a praying mantis and she said that was just plain silly.

Miss Hogan? At my school? She used to be our *second* grade teacher and now she's our *third* grade teacher, on account of she switched grades. And I'm glad, because Miss Hogan's nice. Plus, she's pretty. She drives a green Studebaker and likes cats instead of dogs. I like her, but I don't *love* her.

Miss Hogan's fiance, Mr. Foster, used to play football at Fordham University, and now he's a cameraman at a television studio in New York City. Miss Hogan's favorite TV show is *I've Got a Secret* because that's the show where Mr. Foster works at. And you know what? When Mr. Foster visited us that time, Rhonda Buntz raised her hand and said, "Can you and Miss Hogan kiss for us?" And she had to go stand in the cloak room until recess.

One time, during vacation week, Mother let me stay up late and watch *I've Got a Secret*. One man's secret was that he got struck by lightning and didn't die. Another man had this long, long beard and his secret was that, at night, he slept with his whiskers *inside* the covers, not *outside*. They guessed the whiskers guy, but not

the lightning guy. Last year, one of our best milkers got struck by lightning. Dolly, her name was. And you know what the vet said? That Dolly's heart *exploded*. Grandpa had to bulldoze her across the road and down into the gravel pit. All week long, vultures kept flying over our south field.

*I've* got a secret. Someone in our grade keeps spitting in the drinking fountain in the main hallway, and Miss Hogan thinks it's Thomas Birdsey, but it's not. It's me. Last week, our whole class wasn't allowed to get a drink until someone admitted they were the spitter. And everyone got madder and madder at Thomas because he wouldn't admit it. Even *I* was mad at him, because I was thirsty and I kind of forgot who the *real* secret spitter was. Then Thomas made a load in his pants, the way he used to in first grade, and the office made his mother come get him. Our whole classroom stunk, and Miss Hogan had to send for Mr. Zadzilko, and we all went outside and played dodgeball. And after? When we came back in the building? Miss Hogan let us all get drinks. In the hallway, Mr. Zadzilko always looks at me, and I want to say, What are *you* looking at, Mr. Big Fat Glasses Face? I don't, though. I just look away.

Sometimes, when I try to hand in my paper early, Miss Hogan goes, "It's not a race, Caelum. Go back to your desk and check your work." If I check my work and I'm *still* waiting and waiting, and distracting the other kids, that's when I have to take the pass and go help Mr. Zadzilko. After Mr. McCully picked Mother to be head teller, now she always has to stay late at the bank because of her extra responsibilities. She won't let me go on the bus, because Aunt Lolly's already working at the prison and Grandpa's getting ready for milking. But she doesn't pick me up until way after all the other kids go home. She had to talk to Miss Anderson about letting me stay and wait, and Miss Anderson lets me because Mother's divorced. Sometimes, I get to stay in our room with Miss Hogan, but sometimes I have to go be Mr. Zadzilko's helper.

He has me clap erasers, or empty the wastebaskets into the big barrel in the hallway, or wipe down blackboards with the big sponge. One time, after an assembly, I had to go to the auditorium and help him fold all the folding chairs. We stacked them on these flat carts that have wheels. You know where all the folding chairs go? Under the stage. This door I never even noticed before opens, and the chairs roll in on the carts and stay there until the next assembly.

After the United Nations assembly was when Mr. Mpipi got fired. After he did his dance. First, Miss Anderson gave a speech about the

U.N. Then the fourth graders sang, "Around the World in Eighty Days." Then some lady who went on a trip to China showed us her China slides. Anthony Chiangi started tickling me, and Miss Hogan made us sit between her and Miss Anderson. The China lady talked so long that the projector melted one of her slides, and some of the sixth graders started clapping.

Mr. Mpipi came on near the end. He walked out on the stage, and instead of his janitor clothes, he was wearing this big red cape and no shoes. He told everyone how the Bushmen hunted jackals, and prayed to their praying mantis god, and he talked their clicking talk. The sixth graders started being rude. It's okay if you laugh *with* someone, but it's bad if you laugh *at* them. Mr. Mpipi thought everyone was laughing *with* him, so he started laughing, too — his squealy laugh — and that made things worse. Miss Anderson had to stand up and give the sixth graders a dirty look.

Mr. Mpipi said he was going to show us two Bushman dances, the Dance of the Great Hungering and the Dance of Love. But he wasn't going to stop in between, he said; one dance was just going to turn into the other. "Because what does all of us hunger for?" he asked. No one in the audience said anything, so Mr. Mpipi waited, and then finally he said, "Love!"

He untied his cape and dropped it on the floor, and all's he was wearing was this kind of diaper thing. I saw Miss Anderson and Miss Hogan look at each other, and Miss Anderson said, "Good god in Heaven." Mr. Mpipi was shouting and yipping and doing this weird, shaky dance. He had a pot belly and a big behind, and the sixth graders were laughing so hard, they were falling off their chairs. Then someone yelled, "Shake it, Sambo!" Mr. Mpipi kept dancing, but Miss Anderson walked over and started flicking the auditorium lights on and off. Then she went up on the stage, handed Mr. Mpipi his cape, and said the assembly was over. "Everyone except the sixth graders should proceed in an orderly fashion back to their rooms," she said.

Later, during silent reading, Miss Hogan had me bring a note down to Miss Anderson's office. Her door was closed, but I could hear Mr. Mpipi in there. He was saying, "But *why* I'm fired, Mrs. Principal? Please say the *why*?"

When the teachers are around, Mr. Zadzilko's all nice to me. He calls me his best helper and stuff. But when it's just him and me, he calls me, "Dirty Boy," and he keeps flicking his finger at me down there. "That's to remind you that if you ever blab about certain things, I'll tell everyone that Little Dirty Boy likes to look at his teachers'

twats." And I think that means their girdles.

One time, I had a scary dream that Daddy was giving me a ride in a helicopter. We were flying over our farm, and he said, "Hang on. Something's wrong. We're going to crash!" And then I woke up. And in this other scary dream I had, Mr. Zadzilko grabbed me and put me in that dark space under the stage where the folding chairs go. He locked that little door and nobody knew I was there. When I tried to scream, nothing came out.

Mr. Zadzilko told me he killed a dog once, by tying a rope around the dog's neck and throwing the other end over a tree branch, and then yanking. "You oughta have seen the way that dog was dancing," he said. "You got a dog. Don't you, Dirty Boy?" he said.

I said no, I didn't.

"Yes, you do. He's brown and white. I saw him that time my mother and me drove out to your farm for cider. Maybe if Dirty Boy tells certain secrets, his dog will get the Stan Zadzilko rope treatment."

"How come you have a mother but no wife?" I said, and he got all red, and told me that was *his* business.

And then last week? Miss Hogan made an announcement. "We have to be extra tidy for the next several days," she said. "Poor Mr. Zadzilko's mother passed away over the weekend. He's going to be absent all week."

She passed around a sympathy card and said to make sure we signed in cursive, in pen not pencil, and as neat as possible. When the card got to me, I wrote "Caelum Quirk," but Mr. Glasses Face probably doesn't even know my name. All's he ever calls me is "Dirty Boy."

All day, I kept thinking about Mr. Zadzilko being absent. And after school — after I emptied our wastebasket and washed our board and I was still waiting for Mother to come — I went up to Miss Hogan's desk. "What is it, Caelum?" she said.

"I've got a secret."

"You do, do you? Well, would you like to tell me what it is?"

"Miss Anderson smokes," I said. "When she sits on the toilet. I seen her from Mr. Zadzilko's peeking hole."

For a long time she just looked at me — like I said it in Chinese or something. Then she got up, took my hand, and had me show her.

And you know what? The next morning, when I woke up? The egg case on my windowsill had hatched. There were these tiny little praying mantises scrambling all over the sill, and on the floor, and even in my bed.

Hundreds of them. Thousands. Maybe even millions.