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Sammy

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SAMMY

King: Sammy

by Helen King

"Mr. Kensington! Mr. Kensington!"

Lyle Kensington looked up as Billy Wilde burst into the library.

"What is it, Billy? Why aren't you outside for recess?"

"Sammy Carter just busted Chuck Meyer in the mouth. Knocked him out cold. Boy, is Mr. Adams mad! He grabbed old Sammy by the jacket and dragged him down to his office."

"Is Chuck all right?"

"Yeah, I guess so. . . I bet they expel old Sammy."

"I hope not."

"I hope they do," Billy said, turning to go. "So does every other kid in this dumb school. Well, bye, Mr. Kensington. Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas, Billy," Lyle said absently.

He felt a hot weight in his stomach. He glanced at the clock; it was 1:15. When recess was over, he would talk to Bill Adams. He fingered the rough wood block on his desk. So this was the way it ended. How had it begun?

His first day in his first school — he was struggling with all of the principles and theories he had learned. Remembering, he smiled. He was so nervous, so anxious to do well. Then, in his first hour, came Sammy. The sixth grade class came at 9:10. The last boy in line looked curiously at the books on display, then slouching to a distant table, flopped into a chair. He unzipped his windbreaker, but didn't take it off.

Lyle cleared his throat. "I'm Mr. Kensington. I'll be your librarian this year. I want to get to know all of you. Please answer when I call your name. Robert Allen, Mary Altizer, David Arden, Alice Barber, Susan Beck, Stephen Brown, Samson Carter."

A general giggle was the only answer.

"Samson Carter?" Lyle repeated, looking around. The children were looking toward the far table. The boy in the windbreaker stared sullenly at his notebook. Another boy at his table poked him. He turned fiercely and grabbed the boy's shirt. Lyle crossed the room to separate the boys.

"Okay, cut it out! Are you Samson Carter?"

"I'm Sammy," the boy muttered.

"All right, Sammy. I want to talk to both of you at recess."

"Both of us?" the other boy wailed.

"That's right. It was your fault as much as his."

Sammy smiled as he sat down. Lyle finished the roll call. After reviewing using the card catalog, he helped the class find and sign out books. Sammy only sat staring at the table. Lyle wanted to go talk with him, but he wasn't sure of what to say. By the time he had thought of something, the period was over.

Since his next period was free, Lyle went to pick up his mail. Bill Adams, the principal, beckoned him into his office.

"How'd it go, Lyle?"

Not too bad. Do you know Sammy Carter?"

Bill whistled. "Tangled with Sammy already, huh? That's your initiation."

"What's the story?"

"No family, no friends. He's the terror of the school since he came last spring. They sent him up from the Children's Home in the city. He's been in three foster homes. He can't read; he won't stay out of trouble. If he's not better this year, I don't know what we'll do."

"He seems so alone."

"He is that. He just doesn't respond to friendship from us or the other kids."

"What can we do?"

"I wish I knew. Punishment's not the answer, but that's about all he lets you do to him. Talking to him's like talking to a cinder block."

Lyle nodded. He would talk to Sammy, be his friend. He was sure it would matter that someone cared. Lyle thought all morning about what he wanted to say to Sammy. When Sammy and the other boy, Paul, came, he had Paul write Sammy an apology and took Sammy into the workroom to talk.

"Sit down, Sammy," he began.

"I'd rather stand up."

"Okay. . . I want you to feel free to come to the library, to come talk to me about what bothers you. I want you to trust me."

Sammy stared at the floor.

"Listen, Sammy, you can be a fine man. Nothing has to stop you. Only you can stop yourself. I would hate it if that happened. You're too important to throw away. When you get mad, don't hit somebody, come in and talk it over. Anytime, I'll listen."

Sammy looked up, his eyes still sullen.

"And we'll work on your reading too. We'll tape record it so you can see you're getting better."

Sammy looked interested.

"Okay, Bookman," he said. "Can I go out now?"

"Okay, Sammy. Don't forget. I'll listen."

Lyle let Paul and Sammy go. He felt he had handled it very well. It would make a difference to Sammy that someone cared.

As the weeks passed, Sammy came to the library only with his class. Lyle was discouraged. The only noticeable change in Sammy's behavior was that perhaps he was in fewer fights. He wouldn't read, even for the tape recorder, although it encouraged other slow readers. He still seemed sullen and hostile, resisting Lyle's efforts to arouse his interest.

The leaves fell leaving skeleton trees in the courtyard. Still Sammy came only on necessity. The Tuesday before Halloween, he came in before school.

"Hey, Mr. Kensington, can I make a map like Larry did?"

"Sure. When your class comes today, you can set up the projector in the workroom and draw what you want."

During that class period, Sammy worked happily alone. He traced half a map and some drawings of classic cars. He began coming on rainy recesses, always to trace projections on poster paper. Lyle left him alone during this time, though he found things disturbed or misplaced after his visits. Once he found a snatch of halting reading on the tape recorder.

Lyle was proud of Sammy's progress. By Thanksgiving, he began to think Sammy was settling into school life. He was still a loner, but some younger boys had begun following him around. He seemed to tolerate them, even to be proud of their devotion.

As December began, Sammy started getting into fights again. He was caught stealing and threatening other children — to get money from them. Lyle was crushed. He had been certain that he was making progress. Sammy seemed now to be in the office more often than not. Bill Adams was losing patience. Lyle found pleading with Bill futile; he was busy, he had four hundred children to consider not just Sammy.

"I'm sorry, Lyle. If Sammy hurts another kid, he has got to be expelled. The parents are spitting tacks at me for letting the Children's Home send Sammy up here. They say he's a threat to their precious young'uns, and by God, eighty per cent of the time, I agree. The other twenty per cent I'm with you. I wish we could do something to help him."

As Lyle left Bill's office, he saw Sammy waiting. By his expression, he was in trouble again.

"Sammy, you know what'll happen if you get in more trouble?"

Sammy stared at the floor but nodded.

"Sammy, what's the trouble? Tell me."

"Ain't in no trouble if people'd leave me alone."

Lyle was hurt.

"Okay, I'll leave you alone. I don't want to hassle you. I just want to help."

Bill came to the door of his office.

"Come in on, Sammy."

The Little Lyle. Then, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1983) that. He wasn't sure what it was. Sammy couldn't trust him. He wasn't getting through. He was depressed and discouraged. He would have to find a way to begin again.

Christmas drew nearer, and the school was caught up in programs and projects. Excited children marched noisily through the halls. Bright pictures of rotund Santas and dancing reindeer decorated the classrooms. Happiness was everywhere. Except in Sammy.

He wasn't actually in trouble, but seemed more quiet and withdrawn than usual. He was often in the library, standing silent and alone. Busy with other children, Lyle hardly noticed him. After Christmas, he would begin again, he told himself. He was still smarting from Sammy's refusal to trust him. He had done as much as he could.

With Christmas vacation three days off, Lyle was working long hours to catch up on his statistical reports and book orders. Just before noon, as he was working on a snag in the

book account, Sammy came in.

"Hi, Mr. Kensington."

"Hi, Sammy. What is it?" he said, hardly looking up.

"I made this for you."

He came to Lyle's desk and laid down a small block of wood roughly carved to resemble a book.

Lyle was pre-occupied. He looked at the block, then went on figuring.

"Well, thank you, Sammy, that's very nice."

"You don't really care about me, do you?" Sammy said slowly.

Lyle's head jerked up. Sammy was standing beside him with tears in his eyes.

"It was a lie. All about caring. You don't care. You just want to make yourself feel good."

Lyle felt sick.

"Sammy, I — " he stammered.

"You're just like all the rest of them. Liar! Liar!"

Sammy turned and ran out of the room. Lyle knocked over the chair getting up to follow him.

"Sammy, wait. Let me explain."

Sammy ran outside. Lyle picked up his chair and sank into it. He was shaking. He had failed. Then, he knew why. Sammy was a project to him, never a boy. The wall between them was his own insensitivity. He had never really loved Sammy, but Sammy, often disappointed, had loved him and hoped that this time it would be different. He touched the rough wood block on his desk; he was crying.

The bell rang, jarring Lyle from his thoughts. It was 1:30; recess was over. He went to Bill to explain what had happened.

"Don't blame yourself, Lyle. Sammy was lost before you knew him. It's not your fault."

"It is my fault. I wasn't honest. I treated him like a thing."

"Then you've learned something. Lyle, we have to make mistakes; it's the only proof we've got we're alive. I'm very sorry about Sammy, but even if you had really deeply cared, you might not have helped him. Don't blame yourself."

He paused, then went on slowly.

The car from the Children's Home's on its way for Sammy. They'll take him to his foster home to pack. I want you to see him."

"He doesn't want to see me."

Lyle went back to the library. He couldn't work. He was wondering what would become of Sammy.

Snow had begun to fall steadily when Bill came by the library with Sammy. Lyle went to the door. Sammy stared at the corridor floor.

"I'm going to miss you, Sammy."

Sammy's mouth twitched in a cynical smile. "Yeah," he said.

"Good-bye, Sammy. I was wrong. I'm sorry."

Sammy turned without a word and followed Bill down the hall to the front doors. Lyle watched him get into the waiting car. He imagined he heard the car door slam with a sharp and