

Silas

Silas did not know how to cook and preferred not to talk about it, so he became a vegan. Actually, that is what his friend Hermine started calling Silas when he began eating raw foods, mostly vegetables, to avoid the embarrassment of getting carryout all the time. The unforeseen consequence of this decision was to draw attention to himself, but being "as stubborn as a carrot" as he declared himself to be, hoping to draw more attention to the carrot, he was able to carry it off, and became a vegan, if that made people stop talking about his dormant kitchen, which it did, their being swept up into debates about the relative personalities of root vegetables. Silly people, Silas thought, let them be that way. He got good at chewing with his mouth closed. Some of his friends tried to get him to commit to being a non-egg-eating sort of vegan, but Silas thought that was too much of a good thing, and he *could* boil water. Hoping to change the subject, he started talking about cow manure and how it really helped his garden flourish. Big mistake. The more militant friends argued that a vegan couldn't eat from a garden fertilized by animal manure. What about vegetable manure? he asked. That's compost, they said. So he went around to his neighbors asking for any compost they could spare. Hermine said he shouldn't worry so much what other people thought about what he ate or how he grew it even. Silas breathed a sigh of relief, because that is what he thought too and didn't want to argue about the finer points of food. Then he realized he should just eat alone and most of these problems would go away of their own accord. Like the cow manure he now dug into his melon patch in the dead of night.

Sitting at the dining room table under the grandfather clock ticking back and forth, Silas noticed a pattern in the rain pinging the downspout where it bent away from the house, a pattern that circled back on itself with small inflections, a pattern that proclaimed "intelligence!" to his fervid imagination, too fast to be deciphered, just fast enough to harmonize with his need for order. He wished he played the piano, envisioning the rapture of catching up with the symphony outside his window, so he could prove it, play it, articulate it for even the most skeptical members of his students. But he had no students. All these bursts of insight could not be put back into crates of unlit fireworks for future delivery. He had to find a way to show what he heard.

What Silas really liked to do was cure and carve wood. His friend Sal would cut any piece of tree that Silas brought over to her barn into any size or shape that he wanted. Silas then stacked all the different types of wood that he collected in his shed, which he tried to keep somewhat warm in the winter with a woodstove, so they would dry out evenly, separated by little spacers to let the air flow through. Sometimes Silas wanted blocks, really thick chunks of wood, and Sal worried how they would dry evenly and not check, but Silas said that was OK if they checked, just so long as they didn't warp all over the place. Once the wood had dried enough to keep its shape, Silas would carve different images on it, and sometimes even carved tunnels through to the other side, with fish lurking in the shadows. When some of his friends saw the buffalo and birds that he had carved on a particularly nice piece of yellow cedar, they accosted him and said how could he be a vegan if he had meat carved into his wood? Go away and think about what you are really saying, he shouted at them, waving his chisel and mallet in as

vegan a manner as he could muster. Silas liked his animal farming friends. They didn't care if he couldn't cook, or what he ate, and they always hung his wooden sculptures on their porch or the side of their barn. Silas was especially fond of the pigs' tails he had intertwined with apple branches on the one carving he did for Hermine's cousin, Fell. Pigs and apples, a really good combination, if you asked him.

Silas decided if he didn't have a piano to replicate the message in the downspout then at the very least he could carve his impression of the cadence on the longest board he had. Sal had needed his help to cut the piece of tulip poplar that Fell gave him last year. Fell said it was too thin a tree to make the kind of siding he wanted for his hunting cabin. Silas was pretty sure that Fell could have gotten some very nice boards for his cabin and was just being generous. The piece Sal cut was almost fourteen feet long and about four inches on a side; a really tall and skinny poplar that was fighting its way up through the taller trees when Fell cut it down. Silas sometimes named the pieces of wood; one, to keep them straight, and two, because they had personalities as far as he was concerned. He even named one Moose because the grain was kind of wavy and it was a dark walnut. He made sure not to mention this to the other vegans. The poplar piece, Popsicle, began to sprout carved notches and divots that only meant something to Silas, and this went on all summer, into the fall, and through the winter. There was a lot of intelligence in that downspout, and Silas could remember **all** of it. He wondered about this as he ruminated on a slice of rutabaga. How could he remember so much of the message, especially since it was so lengthy and didn't repeat itself? Hermine said maybe he was a *griot* and he asked what that was, wasn't being a vegan enough? She just

laughed and said it had nothing to do with food or cooking, and no one would care if he was a *griot* or not, they would probably think it was grits or gruel or something like that. So, what is a *griot* he asked, and how do you know about it? A storyteller who knows the whole story, she said. The whole story? he asked. How do you know if it is the whole story and not just part of it? Like a chapter, or the first volume. Silas was no dumb potato; he knew about things. A *griot* knows it's the whole story because they listened to it being told by another *griot* who was older and knew the story before they did. So not adding anything to it, and not leaving anything out of it, that made it the whole story. Silas was satisfied with this explanation; it made sense to him. He forgot to ask Hermine how she knew about what a *griot* was in the first place because he got sidetracked telling her and Fell that Popsicle had been stacked on top of Moose for the entire drying time. And now Popsicle would have the entire message from the rain in the downspout carved all the way down one side and back up the other, back and forth until all four sides were completed. Popsicle riding on Moose's back all that time wasn't part of the message. It was part of a different story. You really must be a *griot*, Hermine said, keeping all these stories straight. Silas was pretty sure the stories were doing just fine keeping themselves sorted, and went on sweeping up the wood scraps to put in the stove.