

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Sign of the Cat

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Sandra Havriluk has written for Highlights. In this short story, a boy name Chet sees his grandmother open their home to people who are in need during the Great Depression. The Great Depression was a time period in America during the 1930s. People had a hard time finding jobs and making money. As you read, take notes on how Chet feels about their guests and why.

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

My eyes lingered¹ 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.² They were hopping trains, looking for jobs.

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.”



[“The sign of the cat means the kind lady of the house won’t turn you away.”](#) by Joshua Nash is used with permission.

Not my dad! He dressed in neatly pressed clothes. His razor-clean face smelled like Burma-Shave. These men wore stained, wrinkled clothes and had scraggly³ beards.

- [5] 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.

“Mmm-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 bartered⁴ eggs and milk for flour and sugar. When I outgrew my shirts, Grandma sewed me new ones using feed sacks.

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1. **Linger (verb):** to stay or do something longer than necessary
 2. something given for free
 3. **Scraggly (adjective):** thin or untidy in form or appearance
 4. **Barter (verb):** to trade or swap something

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. "I filled up on apples I picked today," I said, hoping she couldn't hear my stomach growl.

[10] 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.

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.⁵

[15] "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." 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.

[20] 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.

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.

"Chet."

[25] A deep voice interrupted my dreams. I cracked open an eye. Moonlight was streaming through my window.

5. to carve wood into an object

"Son."

I bolted up. Even with his beard and tattered clothing, I recognized him. "Dad! You're back!"

"Yes-siree." He mussed⁶ 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.

[30] "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.

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.

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6. to make someone's hair messy

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which sentence describes the theme of the short story?
 - A. Not everyone can help others with food and lodging.
 - B. It's important to be kind and share what you can with others.
 - C. Wealthy people should help those who are in need.
 - D. Don't judge a person based solely on their appearance.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "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."(Paragraph 3)
 - B. "We bartered eggs and milk for flour and sugar. When I outgrew my shirts, Grandma sewed me new ones using feed sacks." (Paragraph 8)
 - C. "Seeing my surprise, he winked. 'I may not look like it, but I used to be a college professor.'" (Paragraph 17)
 - D. "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." (Paragraph 33)

3. What does this line from paragraph 8 reveal about the grandmother: "Worry weighed down on her like a wet woolen shawl"?
 - A. The grandmother is very stressed.
 - B. The grandmother is crying.
 - C. The grandmother's worry is temporary.
 - D. The grandmother is able to ignore her worries.

4. How does paragraph 23 contribute to the story?
 - A. It stresses how much food the guests eat when they come.
 - B. It reveals that Chet and his grandmother have more than enough food to share.
 - C. It shows that Chet feels bad for washing away the sign of the cat.
 - D. It shows that Chet doesn't truly care about others going hungry.