

Chapter 34

During his second night in the cabin, Maniac Magee heard the enchanting chatter of two boys, reflecting the innocent banter of childhood, even as they joked about their surroundings. Upon waking to a bleak January morning, he stumbled out, cold and weary. As he approached the next cabin, he found two young boys huddled together. Their playful taunts and antics instantly filled the cabin with energy, contrasting his solitude.

The boys, Missing Tooth and Screecher, both around eight years old, energetically teased Maniac for his blanket. Their spirited bickering evolved into a playful wrestle that amused Maniac. Once they settled, their banter revealed their plan: to run away to Mexico. This unexpected ambition prompted a grin from Maniac, realizing their innocence and naivety regarding the distance they would need to cover.

As they revealed their stash of stolen goodies—from candy to cupcakes—Maniac's hunger sparked, and he felt compelled to inquire about their origins, leading them to inadvertently reveal their act of theft. Despite their initial suspicion of him, Maniac cleverly evaded their doubts by spinning a tale of being a pizza delivery boy with a contest prize waiting for them. The boys' curiosity over whether they'd actually won a pizza or if he was just tricking them sparkled in their childish eyes.

Encouraged by Maniac's suggestion of a shortcut back to their home in Two Mills, they embarked on the journey together. Reaching Cobble's Corner, Maniac claimed his reward for conquering Cobble's Knot, leading to an exciting pizza feast for Russell and Piper, while he refrained, opting instead for some Krimpets and water.

Their laughter and camaraderie soon disrupted when the formidable Big John McNab burst onto the scene, demanding to know where the boys had been. Behind Maniac, the boys looked slightly sheepish but still defended him, saying he was no threat. As John finally focused on Maniac, a smile hinted at recognition before solidifying into an inquiry about his brothers' escapade, merging uncertainty with the thread of sibling loyalty.