

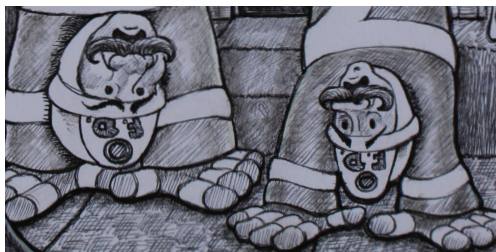




The Handwalkers

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The Handwalkers

Chapter 1

Lonesome Sam looked up from his math paper and wondered what the problem was. His teacher, who had been smiling at him, was frowning.

He looked at his teacher. He could not see her face clearly because desks were in his way, but from what he could see—her lips turned up at the edges and the inner parts of her eyebrows arching up—she must be upset.

Sam hoped he was not in trouble again. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ms. Narrow rise from her desk and walk towards him in her usual style of walking. She stopped beside him.

Looking down at her face, Sam did his best to remember which of her expressions were good, and which were bad. It was not easy to tell the differ-

ence.

Her lips turned up more and her eyes seemed narrower. Her eyebrows arched higher forming perfect peaks. It looked just like a smile. That was a danger sign—Sam knew he was in trouble. Trying to avoid a scolding, he stared up at her feet.

“Lonesome! Why have you been frowning while you do your work?” Ms. Narrow stared up at Sam and tapped her hand. A pencil on top of her chin slipped and, without taking her eyes off Sam, she quickly picked it up and put it back on her chin.

“Don’t you like math?” she demanded.

“But Ms. Narrow, I have not been frowning. I have been smiling the whole time that I have been sitting here.”

For a moment, Ms. Narrow paused and Sam could see the confusion on her face. The angry peak of her eyebrows disappeared, and the corners of her mouth became straight. Then they turned down and Sam breathed more easily.



“Oh, that’s right. I got confused about you again, Lonesome.”

“Yes, Ma’am. And I would not say that I like math, but I don’t mind doing it. And I have already finished my homework for today.”

“That’s good, Lonesome. Please turn it in when you finish—I’m sure you will make a good grade like you always do. But we only have a few more minutes before the bell rings.”

Ms. Narrow turned around and began to step back toward her desk. She stopped again. “It would be much easier, Lonesome, if you were more like everybody else. But...I suppose there is nothing we can do about that.”

Sam chewed on his pencil and hoped the eraser would still work.

The bell rang. In a flash, the other students hopped out of their low desks and rushed to the door, leaving Sam behind.

Sam stood and picked up his books. He looked back at his desk which—like all his special desks at school—was in the back of the room, its seat higher

than the seats of the other desks. And sometimes he had no desk at all, but had to sit at another student's desk, which meant almost sitting on the floor with his knees in the air, which made the other kids laugh at him.

Sam shrugged. Maybe if he hurried he could catch up with some of the other kids and watch them play.

He walked to the door and into the hallway. Most of the other kids had already run to the playground but a few remained in the hall. As he stepped into the hall, swinging his two long legs, he noticed two faces gazing up at him.

"Hi, Lonesome," said one.

"Hi, Alice," said Sam. He gazed down at Alice, trying to watch for the corners of her lips to turn down like a frown. That meant friendly. Alice's face was even harder to see than Ms. Narrow's face because Alice wore thick glasses that she wore under her ears instead of over her ears. But she seemed to enjoy talking to Sam, so Sam smiled back.

Alice stopped smiling as the other kid grinned.

The other kid slapped the ground with his hand and laughed loudly. "What do we have here?" Ralph stared up at Sam, his two eyes going up and down as he looked Sam over. "What's *wrong* with you?"

Sam tried to look at Ralph's eyes. It was easier to look into the eyes of grown-ups than the eyes of other kids because grownup faces were closer to Sam's face. With kids, Sam had to stare even further down towards the floor.

"What do you mean 'wrong'?" Sam shifted his weight from one leg to the other, and swung his arms. "I think I look fine. And I feel fine."

"Ha ha ha!" Ralph snorted. "That's rich! Why there's no one looks more goofy than you. You can barely walk. I'll bet I can beat you in a race anytime. I'll bet anyone can."

Upset and not sure if he should say anything back, Sam tapped his foot and folded his arms.

"See?" said Ralph. "You know you can't win a race. People like you can't win at anything. Why, you even wear