

By the Pool

Soledad is a town in California. A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas river forms a deep pool, close to the side of the hill. The water is green, but warm – it has just flowed over the long yellow sands in the hot sun.

On one side of the pool, there are hills. These hills are the beginning of the Gabilan mountains. On the other side, there are trees and a sandy bank. A path leads through the trees to the water.

One evening, after a hot day, two men came along the path to the pool. They were wearing denim³ trousers, denim coats and black hats. They were carrying rolled-up blankets on their shoulders. The first man was called George. He was small and quick, with a dark face, restless eyes and a thin nose. The other man was called Lennie. He was a huge man with a large face, pale eyes and wide shoulders.

George stopped by the pool and took off his hat. Lennie dropped his blankets, lay down and started drinking greedily¹ from the pool. George went to him, shook him by the shoulder and said sharply¹: ‘Lennie, don’t drink so much. You’ll be sick like last night.’

Lennie was still wearing his hat, but he put his whole head under the water, then sat up on the bank and smiled. ‘That’s good,’ he said. ‘You drink some, George. Take a good big drink.’

George put his blankets down on the bank. ‘I’m not sure it’s good water,’ he said. ‘It looks dirty.’

George knelt down by the pool and drank a little water from his hand. ‘It tastes all right,’ he said, ‘but the water’s not running. You shouldn’t drink water when it’s not moving, Lennie. You don’t take enough care.’

George then quickly washed, put his hat on again and sat down on the bank. Lennie watched and then imitated George exactly. He pulled his hat down over his eyes, just as George had done.

George was in a bad temper. He said angrily: 'That bus driver made us get out at the wrong place. He told us that we would only have to walk a little way down the road to get to the ranch³. We must have walked about four miles – on a hot day, too.'

Lennie looked at him and asked nervously¹: 'George, where are we going?'

'Have you forgotten? Do I have to tell you again?'

'I'm sorry, George. I tried hard not to forget, but I don't remember things easily.'

'OK,' said George, 'I'll tell you again. Now listen. Listen hard so that we don't get into trouble. Do you remember when we got bus tickets and work cards from the agency³ in Soledad?'

'Of course I do, George.' Lennie put his hands into his coat pockets. Then he said, 'George, I haven't got my work card, I think I've lost it.'

'You fool, you never had your card. I've got it. Do you think I'd give it to you and let you carry it?'

'I thought I put it in my pocket,' said Lennie, putting his hand in his pocket again.

'What have you just taken out of your pocket?' George asked.

'There's nothing in my pocket,' replied Lennie.

'I know,' said George. 'It's in your hand. What are you hiding?'

'Nothing, George. Honestly.'

'Give it to me.'

Lennie held his closed hand away from George. 'It's only a mouse, George. It's dead. I didn't kill it. I found it dead.'

'Give it to me,' George said again.

'Let me keep it.'

'Give it to me!' repeated George angrily.

Lennie slowly handed the mouse to George. George took the mouse and threw it to the other side of the river. 'Why do you want to keep a dead mouse?' he asked.

'I like stroking it while we are walking along.'

'Well, you're not going to stroke any mice when you're walking with me. Do you remember where we're going now?'

Lennie was embarrassed. He hid his face against his knees and said, 'I've forgotten again.'

'For God's sake! Listen. We're going to work on a ranch. We worked on a ranch in Weed.'

'Weed?' Lennie asked.

'The town in the north,' replied George.

'Oh yes, I remember.'

'The ranch we're going to is a quarter of a mile away,' George continued. 'We're going to see the boss and I'll give him the work cards, but you've got to keep quiet. If the boss finds out how stupid you are, we won't get the job. But if he sees you working first, we'll be OK. Do you understand?'

'Yes, George, yes.'

'So what are you going to do when we see the boss?'

Lennie concentrated. Then he said, 'I'm going to keep quiet.'

'Good boy,' said George. 'That's fine. Say it two or three times so that you don't forget.'

Lennie repeated quietly: 'I'm going to keep quiet . . . I'm going to keep quiet . . . I'm going to keep quiet.'

'OK,' George said. 'And don't do any bad things like in Weed.'

'Like in Weed?' Lennie asked.

'Have you forgotten that too? Well, I'm not going to remind you. I don't want you to do it again.'

Lennie suddenly understood. 'Oh yes, we had to run away from Weed. They didn't catch us. I remember that.'



Lennie slowly handed the mouse to George.

George lay back on the sand and crossed his hands under his head. Lennie imitated him.

'You're a lot of trouble,' George said. 'If I didn't have you with me all the time, I could have an easier life.'

'We're going to work on a ranch, George,' Lennie said.

'Yes, you know that now. But we're going to sleep here.'

The daylight was quickly disappearing now and the night was coming.

'George, why don't we go to the ranch for supper? We could have supper there.'

'We're going there tomorrow,' said George. 'I like it here.'

'Aren't we going to have any supper?' asked Lennie.

'Of course we are,' said George, 'If you gather some wood for a fire. I've got three cans of beans. Get a fire ready, then we'll heat the beans and have supper.'

Lennie stood up and went away. George lay back on the bank, whistling quietly. 'Poor fool,' he said.

After a minute Lennie came back carrying one small stick of wood in his hand. George sat up. 'All right,' he said sharply, 'give me that mouse.'

'What mouse?' Lennie asked innocently¹. 'I haven't got a mouse.'

George held his hand out. 'Come on, you're not fooling me. Your feet are wet. I know you've walked across the river to get the mouse back. Give it to me.'

Lennie hesitated and stepped backwards.

'Give me that mouse or I'll hit you,' George said coldly¹.

Lennie reluctantly¹ put his hand in his pocket. 'Why can't I keep it? It doesn't belong to anybody. I didn't steal it. I found it by the road.'

George was still holding his hand out. Lennie came forward slowly and gave the mouse to him.

Lennie started crying.

'Crying like a baby, a big man like you,' George said. He

put his hand round Lennie's shoulder. 'Lennie, I didn't take the mouse from you because I wanted to be cruel. I took the mouse because it wasn't fresh. You stroked it too hard and now it's dead. If you get another mouse that's fresh, I'll let you keep it for a while.'

Lennie sat down on the sand and said miserably¹, 'I don't know where there is another mouse. I remember a lady who used to give me mice, but she isn't here now.'

George laughed. 'A lady? Have you forgotten who that was? It was your Aunt Clara. She stopped giving you mice because you always killed them.'

As the two men sat talking, the sun set and darkness came into the valley. A big fish swam up to the surface of the pool to get some air and then disappeared into the dark water again. Rings spread across the water where the fish had been. The wind blew gently through the trees.

'Are you going to get that wood?' George asked. 'There's plenty behind that tree over there. Now go and get it.'

Lennie went to collect wood for the fire.

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Supper Time

After he had lit the fire, George put three cans of beans close to it to heat them. 'We've got enough beans for four men,' he said.

Lennie said, 'I like them with ketchup⁵.'

'I've already told you we haven't got any!' George said angrily. 'You always want what we haven't got! If I lived alone I could have a really easy time. I could get a job without any trouble. I