

A Mystery Man [Nightmare on the Tracks, #1]

by Penelope Codrington



John Henry was a **mighty** guy!

He raised his hammer to the sky!

And dug those tunnels on the strength of his back John Henry built the railroad tracks!

That big man!

That strong man!

That brave man!

Ohhh, yes, John Henry

"Stop singing that annoying song!" James Jenkins yelled at his little sister as she bounced and sang on her bed in their shared room. It was well past bedtime, but Veronica seemed determined to annoy James till the moment he fell asleep... if he **managed** to fall asleep at all.

Six-year-old Veronica looked over at her big brother lying in his bed and laughed. The little red beads on her shoulder-length braids clinked every time she bounced... which annoyed

nine-year-old James even more.

"Ughhhh, why are you like this?" he grumbled, covering his ears with his hands.

"*Ohh, yes, John Henry!*" she sang again, making sure to direct her voice his way as James tugged the sheets over his head.

James was in a bad mood. The first full week of summer vacation would begin tomorrow, and he had been looking forward to relaxing on the couch with his video games. He was shocked at dinner time last Friday when his mother told him that he and Veronica were going to West Virginia on the train at the start of the week to stay with Grandfather and Grandmother.

"Nooo!" he had groaned. "I don't want to go. Grandfather will talk all day and night about how he used to work on railroad tracks, and sing that awful John Henry song... *blah blah blah*. And then he'll make us feed his mean chickens and milk his ugly cow."

"Well, I can't wait to go!" exclaimed Veronica, waving her knife and fork above her head. "I love trains and Grandfather and all the animals at his farm!" Then she began singing Grandfather's song about John Henry, clinking her utensils together to keep the beat. She sang it during dinner on Friday and every meal after that, and now here she was on Sunday night, singing it in bed, too.

"Make it stop!" groaned James from beneath his sheets. He punched his pillow a couple of times, thinking, "*This is going to be the most boring summer ever!*"

He finally drifted off to sleep, **muttering** complaints to himself.

Later that night James awoke with a jump to a loud banging noise. He forced his eyes open, straining to find the source of the noise in the darkness. He was shocked to see a stranger sitting in the chair next to his bed.

The man was tall and muscular, wearing blue denim overalls and work boots and wielding a large hammer as though it were as light as a pencil. He brought the hammer down to the floor again and again so forcefully that James could feel the sound throughout his whole body.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

James lay terrified, his chest clenched like a fist, unable to move or make a peep. **Suddenly**, the strange man stood up and raised his gleaming silver hammer.

"*HELP!*" James tried to scream... but his throat tightened, and no sound came out.

Horrified, he watched as the tall man began to swing the giant hammer down... straight at him!

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Ed. : *The tale continues in Part 2, "Follow Me!"*

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What is James' sister Veronica singing about at the beginning of the story?

- A. her grandfather and how he loves his farm animals
- B. a stranger who wakes children up in the middle of the night
- C. a strong man named John Henry who built the railroad tracks
- D. a way to make large hammers for building railroad tracks

2. How does James feel about visiting his grandparents?

- A. excited and happy
- B. annoyed and frustrated
- C. calm and peaceful
- D. nervous and scared

3. Read the following sentences from the text.

"Well, I can't wait to go!" exclaimed Veronica, waving her knife and fork above her head. 'I love trains and Grandfather and all the animals at his farm!' Then she began singing Grandfather's song about John Henry, clinking her utensils together to keep the beat. She sang it during dinner on Friday and every meal after that, and now here she was on Sunday night, singing it in bed, too.

'Make it stop!' groaned James from beneath his sheets. He punched his pillow a couple times, thinking, '*This is going to be the most boring summer ever!*'"

What conclusion can be drawn from this evidence?

- A. Veronica's constant singing about John Henry adds to James' frustration about the upcoming trip.
- B. Veronica enjoys eating quietly at dinner with her family and James as a way to relax.
- C. James wants to hear Veronica sing their Grandfather's song about John Henry more often.
- D. It is very easy for James to fall asleep, even when it is at a Friday dinner with his family.

4. The strange man who appears next to James' bed wears blue denim overalls and work boots, and carries a hammer. Based on this description, what can you infer about him?

- A. He probably works in an office with other people.
- B. He probably works outside or makes things with his hands.
- C. He probably is a scientist who works inside a lab.
- D. He probably likes singing songs and playing music.

5. What is the main idea of the text?

- A. James thinks cows and chickens on his grandfather's farm are mean and annoying, while Veronica loves to be on the farm getting to spend time with all of the animals.
- B. Digging tunnels to build a railroad takes a lot of strength, is very hard work, and requires many tools, like large silver hammers, work boots, and blue denim overalls.
- C. James is not looking forward to visiting his grandparents with Veronica, but things take an unexpected turn when he wakes up to find a stranger swinging a hammer at him.
- D. James Jenkins is very excited to play video games, relax on the couch, and eat lots of snacks with his sister Veronica during his first full week of summer vacation.