



*Note: I wrote this as a little author extra for the release day of "Catching Christmas." Find out more about the Catching Out world at my website!*

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Petey arrives at the rail yard hungry and alone. In his gear he has a battered old stewpot and very little else.

His friend Pest bounces up and asks, "What's in the pot, Petey?"

"Nothing," replies Petey with a forlorn sigh.

Undaunted, Pest grins. "We'll fix that! Hey, Sledge, you got that water pump working?"

For such a wee person, Pest sure has a set of lungs!

Pest's burly girlfriend hollers back that the old water pump is finally running clear so Pest and Petey hie over with the pot.

"What about a fire?" Petey asks.

"First things first," Sledge cautions. "Gotta get some'a these folks to give up some fixin's. What do you say, Woody?"

Woody's been on the road longer than anybody and catches Sledge's drift right away. With a wink, he pulls his guitar out of his gig bag and sets himself down on an overturned milk crate. "What do you want to hear, boyo?"

Petey thinks for a minute. His favorite song is kind of embarrassing. "Do you know 'The Unicorn Song?'" he whispers in Woody's ear.

That ear twitches as Woody grins. "Good choice! Gather round, folks!"

By the second chorus, a few other travelers have wandered over and a few even know the words: "There were green alligators and long-necked geese, humpty-backed camels and some chimpanzees..." Whenever Woody sang, "but the loveliest of all was the unicorn," he looked right at Petey, until Petey felt he could heat the water in the stewpot with just his burning cheeks and the fire in his belly.

"Dude, play 'The Hammer Song!'" one guy calls out as Woody finishes 'The Unicorn Song.'

Woody fixes the guy with that Woody stare, halfway between friendly and...not. "No request unless you give up something for the pot."

The guy grumbles a bit, but digs around in his pack for a bit with his back turned. Out come two knobby potatoes. "Was savin' 'em for special," the guy says.

Woody nods respectfully. Pest collects the 'taters from the guy and carries them over to the pot, careful not to let the guy see his offering all alone in the water – he'd be liable to take it back then, wouldn't he? Petey and Sledge make the rounds of old hoppers and coal tips gathering gravelly lumps of coal and the odd bit of wood. Before Woody can "hammer out a song," there's a humble fire going.

Franklin and Dino come up with some onions from the community garden and request "Big Rock Candy Mountain," which is a long enough ditty that by the time Woody's played the

last chords, the water in the pot is bubbling and the taters and onions are chopped and dancing.

If Woody's sweet tunes weren't enough to bring folks round, the good smell from the pot grabs 'em for sure. Coupla carrots from Crazy Nell -- tops and all, for flavor, Pest insists -- follow a can of navy beans from Old Jim into the pot. Petey dips into his precious salt and pepper stash and soon the pot smells like supper and the music makes the old rail yard sound like home.

A little of this, a little of that, and the song requests come fast and furious. Petey's just thinking how nice some chicken or something would be in the soup when -- wouldn't you know it -- somebody comes up with a sack of frozen chicken wings he cadged from the pizza place on River Road. It's a coupla days past expiration, but that sack earns the fella two songs anyhow.

There's not a song Woody doesn't know, and he only takes a break to accept his share of the soup in his old enamel cup. He and Petey eat together, crunching through some hoarded Saltines to fill in the extra places in their bellies.

Petey doesn't need the crackers, though. Stone soup and singing right past dusk with his most special friend fill him right up.

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