

Brother Henry G's Sad Short Life

Memphis, between *The River* and Beale Street.

Henry sat on the splintered front porch, pulling at a rusty nail protruding from a rotting plank.

A small girl passed, struggling to keep upright on a two-wheeler too large for her. Henry thought, '*Lil girl, what you doin' out in this swelter?*'

The screen door screeked open and hit Henry's back.

"Damn, what you do that for, Mama?" Mama's lick was light compared with what he got as a child, his back a tapestry of scars from lashings with an electric cord.

"Thought maybe you get a job."

"Why don't *you* get a job, 'stead of stayin' in collecting your checks?"

"You ingrate. You know I worked before I got blowed up legs. *You ain't got no disability, Henry.*"

"Yeah, you got your disability working for the white man."

"Yes, I cooked for white folks. Kept you and your brother from going hungry. You think in my time comin' up I was gonna be a chef in a fine hotel like the Peabody? Listen, boy, there's a job fair downtown. Get your ass down there and talk to folks. Gotta be something you can get paid for."

"Like janitor work."

"They'll show you how to use a broom. Go learn a trade, and buy your mama a cooler for my bedroom window."

"You lived this long without one."

"You going down to that job fair or not?"

"Nah, jes' end up working for the white man."

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“Okay, if you too lazy to get your ass downtown, go up to the corner store. I saw a Help Wanted sign out. Colored man, Mose, runs the store.”

“Mose don't own the store.”

“But you be working with Mose, not a white man.”

“White man don't own it either. Dot Indians. Mose soon gonna be outa work, 'cause a boatload of relations just come to town. There goes that girl again.”

“What's that bitty gal doin' out in this heat. She gonna fall off that bike.” Where's her mama?”

“Prob'ly sitting home on disability.” Mama let that slide. She was accustomed to Henry's insults.

“Henry, what you gonna do to get me a cooler?”

“I know where I can get you a cooler.”

“I don't want a stole one.”

“Why don't you ask James to buy you a cooler? He got money.”

“He got a lot bills.”

“James got A/C, but he ain't piping none of it your way.”

“But he movin' up. You jes sittin' on your ass the way your daddy did.”

“I wouldn't know 'bout my daddy.”

“He was shiftless, too. But half your blood is my blood, and my blood pumps and gets me up to work in this house now, even on disability. You got no disability, 'cept laziness.”

“I guess I got my daddy's bad seed, then.”

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Mama turned and went back in the house. Henry went out to the street to wait for the little girl.

Later, Mama came back out looking for Henry. A woman came up asking if Mama had seen Shaquita.

“Who?”

“My little girl. She was ridin’ her bike around here.”

“No. Saw her earlier this afternoon. She ain’t come home?”

“No.”

“I’ll keep an eye out.”

That evening, Shaquita came home alone.

“Where you been, girl?” her mother demanded.

“Oh, mama, Henry ax’d me if I wanted to see the magic castle downtown. He wanted me to see the ducks. We went inside to the lobby. Ten of our house would fit in that one room. And a big gushing water fountain in the middle. Henry told me we couldn’t go upstairs because that’s where the ducks live.”

“Did you see the ducks?” her mama asked.

“Yes, lots. They came down on their own elevator. We jes’ watched the ducks and lots of white folks all dressed up, just standin’ ‘round with glasses in their hands, watching the ducks and laughing. And they was looking at me and Henry but pretending to just be looking at the ducks. Them ducks woulda’ made fine dinners. And there was a piano, big and stretched out flat,

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and shiny black. And a man was playing it, all dressed up in a fancy black suit like the funeral man.”

“Where’s Henry?” his mama asked.

“He walked me back here. Told me, ‘Go home to your mama.’” Then he went away.

After taking Shaquita back home, Henry walked south. He walked up the ramp to the expressway. After a while, he stepped out onto the road.

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