

## **Henry the Caretaker**

He had done this work before.

Caretaking.

Most of the time the work took him a way outside of Pinnacle County. To farm country or some far-off suburb. Last summer, for example, he had made a good bit looking after two square blocks of new homes at the very edge of Pinnacle County. They had not been sold – except for a few – and the builder was worried that someone would come and rip out the granite countertops or the exotic wooden floors. Or even worse, squatters would prepare food on the granite countertops and walk on the wooden floors. Henry spent all summer moving from massive house to massive house with his little camp stove and bundle of linens, setting up timers, watering gardens, moving a few cars (supplied by the builder) and generally trying to bring a luxury ghost town to fake life. It was harder work than it sounded. It kept you busy and on a schedule. But it paid.

The current job was something very different. He was now in the middle of Pinnacle County in a foot-dragging neighborhood. His job was to watch some 1200 square feet of house and the little city lot it sat upon. There was a list of minor repairs and improvements to be made. All of it was chargeable to Mr. Michael Williams who also gave him a modest monthly check. Mr. Williams had inherited the property –138 Glenwood – from his grandmother, his mother being impossible to locate after she had moved to the Baltimore area after an abbreviated stay at a

rehabilitation center. Williams had gotten Henry's name from a Mr. Dunn whose farm Henry had caretaked a winter ago.

Henry had only met Mr. Williams twice. Both times he seemed a little chagrined about owning property in the City. At their first meeting he was all talk of selling the house quickly. The second time Mr. Williams seemed more at peace with his new acquisition. He made mention of renting the place or giving it to his son. "Give the kid a little stake," he said before he rolled away in a green Buick Regal.

Odd as it was to be caretaking a little house in the middle of the city, Henry didn't mind the work. Utilities were on and paid for. He drank hot coffee each morning. At night he used a giant microwave – the size of a TV --- to heat his dinner. The repairs were basic and he had the tools he needed. The second floor was looking better and he had only been at it two weeks. There was an old and heavy television in the front room. It got cable. (Bless you Mr. Williams.) Henry added canvas picnic chair and passed his evenings in peace.

At least most of the time. The neighborhood – which he had dubbed Glenwood –had what the news people called a declining population. More people left than moved in. By Henry's estimates, the remaining population of Glenwood had taken this to heart and decided to make up for their decreasing gross population by increasing the net cacophony proportionally. Though small in number Glenwood residents were deep in per capita grievances. The few occupied houses and the street between them crackled each night with business disputes, marital disputes, we-are-not married disputes, get-in-this-house-disputes, claims to moneys owed and threats of repercussions arising from any and all of them. Nothing ever came of

it but maybe a rise in collective blood pressure. Of course the neighborhood's children now had a whole selection of nasty behaviors and prime insults from which they could pick and chose. This was an important arsenal if the were to stay in Glenwood, or in a Glenwood, for the rest of their lives.

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Henry realized his frequent musings about the job, past jobs, Glenwood, its inhabitants young and old, and its happenings were all evidence that the Disease was still with him. That, by itself, was not cause for concern. It had been with him for decades. A briny wet towel that he wore like an invisible shroud. It had made his appearance on many a morning a dicey proposition, darkened his dreams, smothered a few relationships and even got him kicked out of junior college. (That's right. *Junior college.*) And that was just the stuff Henry could put his finger on.

No the Disease was with him. Henry faithfully took the pill prescribed by the VA, but he knew that his only true ally in his battle was the Work. Each morning he could arise with the expectation of progress. A list of matters necessary to caretaking. Matters that required a schedule, an organized mind. Like it or not, battling the Disease made you a Serious Man. Forced you to cogitate over small things. Required that problems be resolved, and the environment be controlled as much as possible. To stay ahead of the Disease you had to patrol and progress. With a cup of hot coffee in the morning Henry plotted his moves, assessed his prospects. Measured twice and cut once. The Disease fed on sloppiness, carelessness and failures. It threw them back at you as bedizened examples of both its power and the

defective nature of your own soul. The Work was Henry's Wall Against Invaders. Hot coffee was just a bonus.

With the Work in mind, Henry climbed off of his mattress Monday morning. He put on his working jeans and a hoodie he bought at a Salvation Army store in Newberg, outside Pinnacle County. He didn't like the team (a perennial NFC also-ran) but he thought he looked good in the colors. The night before, he had watched Sportscenter, drank a single beer and went to bed in one of the upstairs bedrooms. (Always safer on the second floor. It bought you time.) Except for a long and very public dispute a few houses down about whether being home at ten o'clock required presence in the actual house or just the front lawn, the night was uneventful. And Henry didn't see the argument as unreasonable.

By all accounts and prognostications, Monday's weather was not suitable for outdoor work in the gardens or shrubs. Henry re-filed that work in his mental calendar. Pushed it to the back of spring and moved painting into its place. Painting the two upstairs bedrooms would require a trip to the home improvement store to get paint, brushes, rollers, and trays. The hardwoods in the rooms also merited a serious drop cloth, not just newspapers on the floor.

Henry collected his wallet. He then placed his keys and his billfold on the cracked Formica counter. He removed his cellphone from his coat pocket and hung the coat on the back of a kitchen chair. Crooked. Henry pulled one shoulder until symmetry was achieved.

First his morning phone calls to Leon and Sharon. Contact with Leon and Sharon on a daily basis was essential. Although they were grown, and much more

partial to their mother than to Henry (see above about relationships), Henry called each one at least once a day. It was part of his offensive against the Disease. He knew it travelled in families. One look at the short and toxic lives of his parents confirmed that. He had to be vigilant about Leon and Sharon. He remained ever watchful for signs of the Disease in them. The cellphone was not perfect, but you could hear tones, or no tones (“flat affect” said the brochure at the VA). You could tell whether commitments were being met, whether a life was being lived.

With Sharon it was easy. Henry would ask about her children. If he heard the familiar lilt in her voice or even a little exasperation, that was a good sign. Business as usual. Both trials and tribulations bubbling to the surface. Leon was a different story. Like a lot of the boys he had grown up with, Leon was fiercely protective of what he termed “his business.” He would offer the most ambiguous answers to simple questions. Worse, Leon’s active social life often left him sounding hungover or very tired. Hard signs to read. Henry was always left with the unresolved issue of whether his son was flat-affecting him or if he simply didn’t appreciate calls from a been-gone-so-long-and-contributed-so-little-and-calling - after-so-late-a-night father. Talking to Leon was like trying to interpret the graffiti sprayed on Glenwood’s long abandoned schools. Good luck. But this work occupied him.

That morning, Sharon had come off easily, as expected. A little cold in one of the children had left her tired and frustrated. But she had the matter in hand. All was well. Leon was Leon. He had obviously decided that Henry was a mind reader. He answered every question by saying “Well you know...” Not a great sign. Those

kind of lazy and resigned comments merited special note in Henry's mind. The conversation took a turn for the better though. Leon announced he had to get to work. He had a meeting. Good sign. Keeping appointments. Looking to make a dollar. Leon's business was in order.

Sailing atop a verified even keel, Henry locked up the house and unlocked his truck. He backed on to Glenwood and pivoted toward Highland Avenue. He nudged the car past the vacant lot immediately next to his adopted home. The city had razed the house that was once there. But no one had filled in the basement. Mud now covered what looked like checkerboard tiling, and the hole acted like a magnet for debris blowing around the neighborhood. If you looked close you could see a card table and an old weight bench half buried. Good intentions down there.

As Henry turned his attention back to the street, he slowed to a coast and applied the brakes. Standing on the lawn in front of the very next house was a young man. Maybe thirteen or fourteen. Baggy jeans and a red t-shirt that hung almost all the way to his knees. He was gangly, but Henry could sense he was filling out in the chest and shoulder. He stood with his legs spread shoulder width apart. His white sneakers looked like giant pale beetles. The boy was staring at the house in front of him. He looked like he was slowly summoning the mental power to levitate the shabby bungalow.

Henry slowed to a roll and, after a half second's hesitation, lowered the passenger side window.

"Need some help young fella?"

Young Fella turned around and looked into the cab of the truck.

“Who you talkin’ to, old man?”

Henry let it roll over him. (The Disease loved anger.)

“Talkin’ to you young fella. Looks like you need some help. If that’s right, I might be able to help. If not, I’ll be on my way.” Henry resisted the urge to lean over toward the passenger side of the car. Stopping was one thing, but no need to appear eager. Young Fella will do what he wants.

“I ain’t got a key. Can’t get in the house.”

“Well, when will your moms be home?”

A shrug. Young Fella was now looking up and down the truck.

“You got a phone? You can call her?”

“Out of juice. I ‘d a done that.” He was knitting his eyebrows now, looking up and down the street.

“Do you know where she is?” Henry was not blind to the fact that at nine o’clock on a Monday morning, the child should be in school.

“She work up at Griffins.”

“The one off the highway.”

A nod.

“Well, I’m heading there for some supplies. I can give you a ride up there. You can get a key and I’ll drop you off at home.”

Young Fella shifted his eyes to the ground. Henry realized that, these days, the offer of a ride by a middle-aged stranger was not something any child would rush to accept.

“Tell you what. You got her number? I’ll call her and tell we are coming.”

A pause. Then digits.

Henry called the number and got the standard phone company voicemail. He left his name, number and said he was driving to Griffins with the phone owner's son.

Young Fella kept his eyes on the passenger side rear view mirror the whole ride out to Griffins. He sat low in the seat, like he was hoping not to be seen. He didn't even question the steady stream of R&B hits from the 60s and 70s coming out of the truck's radio. The OJays. The Ohio Players. Marvin.

They arrived at Griffins. The store's enormous parking lot had only a few cars in it, and Henry was able to park fairly close to the store's yawning entrance. Once they got inside, Henry guided Young Fella to the customer service counter. Behind it was an enormous woman, maybe a little younger than Henry. She wore a red Griffins smock over a white t-shirt. She had deep purple lipstick that, Henry noticed, was an exact match to the frames of her half moon glasses. Young fella stood apart from them, looking around the store. His hands were in his pockets, which were down around the middle of his thighs. This gave him a rounded back that Henry associated with very old men.

"Excuse us, but we are looking for this youngster's mother. He needs a key to get in his house. "

The woman (her nametag said "Rosalind") picked up the handset to her phone and touched a button.

"What's the name."

Rosalind looked at Henry. Henry looked at Young Fella.

“Delores Filson” he said, barely audible.

Rosalind squinted behind her glasses. She looked at Henry. She looked at a computer screen and quickly tapped on the keyboard in front of her.

“Nobody by that name is working today,” she said.

Young Fella backed further away. But Henry pressed on.

“You sure? Maybe she you know, switched shifts with someone, or maybe she got called in at the last minute?”

Rosalind paused. She breathed. Henry noticed that she had small trees etched on the frames of her glasses. Rosalind glanced at Young Fella. She cocked her head forward in said in a very low and deliberate voice:

“Delores Filson doesn’t work here anymore. She did. But not anymore. You see what I am telling you?”

Henry both saw and heard. He ambled back to Young Fella.

“You and your moms must have gotten crossed up. She’s probably at home. Just let me get my stuff and we’ll go back.” Henry thought about asking some questions, but decided they wouldn’t do any good right then.

The two of them loaded a shopping cart. Henry checked off the items from a written list. He had spoken to the paint people first. Mr. Williams was not going fancy with the paint, so it did not take long to mix. Henry and Young Fella leaned on the little counter and watched the automatic mixer shake the can in wide circles. Henry paid in cash, aware that he had made a row of bills very visible when he tucked the receipt into his wallet. He clapped it shut and they left.

Young Fella continued his supervision of the rearward traffic all the way back to Glenwood. He jumped out of the car when they rolled to the curb in front of his house. He popped up the steps and pounded on the door. (Doorbells, Henry had noticed, were a rarity in Glenwood.) Nothing. Overcoming a bit of reluctance, Henry turned off the truck and approached the house. He looked in the front window, shading his eyes like an Indian scout. Nothing going on. He thought about trying the back door, but recalling Leon, decided to avoid the static caused by the appearance of getting in a young man's business.

"Suppose you can wait with me inside if you want," offered Henry.

Young Fella shrugged. But he hitched up his jeans and climbed back in the truck. Henry hit the re-dial on his phone. He let who he hoped was Delores Filson know where her son was.

To Henry's mild surprise, Young Fella helped him unload the supplies and carry them upstairs. Henry thought about telling Young Fella that he could watch TV while he waited, but thought better of it. Leaving Young Fella unsupervised did not seem like a good idea. Besides, he sensed a wealth of TV had been watched already. Henry was about to broach the topic of putting Young Fella to work when Young Fella broke the silence himself.

"What choo do here anyway?"

"Caretaker. Looking after the property. Getting it ready to rent. Can't do that now because it looks a little shabby."

"You get paid for that?"

“A little. And I get to stay here.” Henry was wary of offering specifics.

Young Fella took it in. Hands still in his pockets.

Enough ice had been broken for Henry’s comfort.

“I’m Henry Depute,” said Henry. “What’s your name?”

“Carl.”

“Glad to meet you Carl.” Henry stuck out his hand. He got a limp handshake as Carl’s eyes slid over him like baleful penitentiary spotlights.

“Well Carl, since you are here, may as well be useful. Open up that tarp and spread it on the floor. Get tight up against the walls. We don’t want to have to scrape paint off these hardwoods.”

Henry registered his own “we.” It was a little dangerous. Almost inviting a “who’s we” comeback. Henry braced himself. Blessedly, Carl grabbed the package of tarp and set to work. Henry worried the paint with a stir and watched. It took Carl a few minutes to figure out the complicated map-like folds of the tarp. But by the time Henry poured paint into a roller bin, Carl was using his feet to push the tarp’s edges snug against the wall.

Carl returned to Henry’s side.

“See those baseboards above the floor? That’s probably real oak. Those baseboards are worth something in a house like this. You want that two-tone look. Looks rich. We don’t want to paint on them. So look here.” Henry took out some painter’s tape and showed Carl how to protect the baseboards and still cover every inch of wall above them. In minutes they had the four walls taped and prepped.

Henry felt a faint glow in his confidence. So far the “we” was holding.

“Well ... lets have at it,” Henry gestured toward the paint trays. No ice cracked beneath his feet. Carl took a roller and a bin and headed for the west wall.

Rolling paint is easy work. Tedious, but fundamentally simple as long as you watched the evenness of your stroke.

“Long and tall,” he offered Carl. Carl went long and tall.

They painted in silence. Mostly. Henry offered a few comments on the benefits of plaster walls. He did not really check to see if they fell on deaf ears. By five o'clock the room was done except for some brushwork at the edges.

“Plenty of paint left for a second coat. I guessed right, “ said Henry. “We’ve done a day’s work.” He looked at Carl who was looking past him.

“I gotta go,” said Carl.

He was down the stairs before Henry could say a word.

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The next day, Carl arrived at about 10 am. He nodded at Henry and took up a roller. They finished the second coat.

Before he went to sleep that night, Henry gauged the situation. Carl was certainly not interfering with the Work or his calls to Leon and Sharon. In fact, he moved the days along. Henry decided to roll with the current. Not his usual decision as currents had turned bad for him in the past. Caretaking was, in essence, a one-man business at least as Henry had experienced it. This was not crew work. Not the type of thing where a bunch of guys spent the day sweating and smartassing with each other. But the caretaking was getting done. Before he left, Carl had

ambled down to the second and third bedrooms, each of which would need two coats. Apparently Carl wanted to take a measure of the work. May as well press on.

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The first coat was on in the second bedroom. Sharon was doing some mom thing at the kid's school. Leon was watching a basketball game when he called. No flat affecting about missed free throws.

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The next day was different. Henry was well into his prep work on the third bedroom when there was a knock on the door. Wasn't Carl. He didn't knock like that. Henry went downstairs and peeked out the front windows toward the door. He sighed. Henry took a deep breath and opened the front door. He was greeted by the same man he had met one thousand times before. He was tall but his chest ran into his belly without the slightest differentiation. He wore low-slung jeans that formed little clouds of denim at his feet. Jordans. Baseball cap to the side, oddly with the gold size sticker still attached. Toothpick jutting out of epoxy teeth. He had his hands tucked into his waistband. His flannel shirt jacket had seen better days.

"Can I help you?" Always start on the high ground.

"So is you the one who is putting Carl to work painting?"

Henry saw the trap in front of him. The Disease loved it when you went hollering off headlong all full of piss and fire. It feasted when you lost the higher ground.

"I don't think we've met. I'm Henry. Are you Carl's father?" Higher ground maintained thus far.

A pause. The toothpick dipped and dived.

"I be over there with Carl. He said you got him painting and not pay him anything."

*"Over there with Carl?"* Henry had heard these words or a variation a thousand times. No implication of actual relation or responsibility. No claim to Carl as his own.

"Well.... I'm sorry, what's your name again?" The Disease dictated he have these conversation on close to his own terms.

"I'm Tyree."

"Well Tyree, Carl has been working with me over here pretty much because I get the sense he wants to. So I am happy to oblige... seeing that he doesn't seem to be in school. "

Henry waited. Let his words settle in. The minds of the Tyrees ran a few steps behind their mouths and years behind their fists.

"You know Tyree, this all got started when Carl was looking for his mom a few days back. We drove out to Griffins looking, but she wasn't there. Tried her cell twice."

Tyree had now fixed his eyes on a spot high in the doorframe. Some more duck and dive from the mouth timber. Henry pressed on:

"Is she around? Delores? I'd like to talk to her."

"She out, " said Tyree for probably the millionth time in his life. Henry figured Tyree frequently did not know the whereabouts of people in his life. "But lookit - Carl ain't no slave. You owe him some money, see what I am saying."

“Well Carl never asked for any money. If he wants some, we can maybe work something out. But I mean me and Carl. We get on fine.”

“What you doing here anyway?”

“You mean in this house? I am the caretaker. Looking after things. Doing some work.”

“Caretaking?”

“Mmmm hmmm.” Henry knew Tyree rarely found himself on the business end of an action word unless it was sleeping, fucking or smoking.

“Well ... you new here,” began Tyrell his eyes still fixed above Henry’s head. “Folks around here mind their own business.”

“Tyree, what can I tell you. Carl or his mom wants to talk, I am more than happy to. But right now, I ‘ve got work.”

Henry nodded and closed the door. He turned the deadbolt. He went upstairs and walked to the front bedroom. He stood a few feet back from the window and watched. Tyree hitched up his pants, walked down the steps and across the vacant lot. He threw his toothpick in the open cellar and proceeded to Carl’s house.

Slappy Motherfucker.

Henry ruminated. He had pushed Tyree a little bit with the school thing. But the disease hated cowardice as much as it hated arrogance. Best not to be found weak and licking your wounds. No real choice in the matter. He reassessed for a moment, but stuck with his conclusion. He went back to the Work.

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Carl showed up the next day. He made no mention of Tyree. Carl watched as Henry re-wired outlets. (A lot of the outlets in the house had only one working plug.) Carl even managed a laugh when Henry asked him what would happen if you didn't pull a fuse before you worked on a plug.

"Damn, you get lit up. Burned inside out. Like electrocuted."

Henry re-wired the outlets in the living room. Then he watched as Carl did the two in the dining room. As usual, Carl left with a nod after taking a Coke from the fridge. (The Coke being the real thing. Henry had no proof, but he thought that diet sodas might in some way feed the Disease.)

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. The weather turned warm in the afternoon, so Henry busied himself in the garage, which had become like a giant lint trap, capturing leaves, garbage, dust, and the occasional empty bag of chips. Henry found some old tools including a cold chisel and a crowbar. He left both by the back door of the house, they being in the category of tools that no one wanted to pay for but were nonetheless essential. You could not just throw them out. He worked the big broom, but knew the job would just have to be repeated until he replaced the broken window at the side of the garage.

The window proved critical. Like all the houses on Glenwood, the garage was located in the back and opened on to a gravel alley, which in turn led to the street. Henry had no cause thus far to pay any attention to the alley except to roll out the garbage can. But today, as Henry was examining the broken window in order to

estimate its repair, he noticed that he could see past the leveled garage of the home next to him and right into Carl's backyard.

And there was Tyree. Sitting in a lawn chair near the side door of the garage, eating something out of a bag. Henry was going to move on when he heard the roll of a tire on the pebbles and gravel that lined the alley. Henry watched. Tyree took notice of the car when it was halfway down the alley. He went in the garage. The car slowed and stopped at the garage's car door. Horn tap. Tyree now reappeared from another door beside the main garage door. He ducked his head in the car. One hand in the pocket of his flannel. He ducked out again, now tucking something in his pocket.

Henry became aware that he was highly visible in the window. He backed away and to the side a few steps. For good measure he squatted a little bit. Over a two-hour period he watched the same scene played out three more times. Roll of the car. Tyree went to the garage. Honk. Tyree reappeared on the other side. In and out. Carl never had a good feeling about any meeting that took place over a car window. He also was skeptical that a man like Tyree had so many friends who dropped in so close in time together. When he finally left the garage his legs were sore from squatting below the window.

That night Henry used the microwave to heat up a burrito far too large for him to eat. He left half of it on his plate spewing refried beans and brownish green chili sauce out its open end. It looked like an animal that had been suddenly bitten in half. He drank his single beer and sat in his chair watching basketball on TV. He

called Sharon (no news is good news) and Leon (“does anyone call three second fouls anymore?”). No flat affecting in either camp.

About 9:30 someone knocked on the door. Mindful of his last experience with knockers, Henry girded himself before getting up.

She was not a big woman, or at least she had not always been a big woman by Henry’s gauge. But standing in the doorway she was overwhelming. Her bosom leaked out of her overmatched tube top at the front and sides. Thick and angry stretch marks flashed at him from her flanks. Her eyes seemed to have an extra set of irises bent on confusing and disorienting anyone who dared look into her heavily appointed pools. She wore a pair of short pants which, like her top, could only vainly hope to contain her. Her uncovered arm bore an etching of some beast along her sizeable and quivering bicep. Although she had not crossed his threshold, Henry felt like he was being invaded by an army of undisciplined and wanton flesh.

Before Henry could get a word out, the woman raised a hand that looked like a small dragon, pointed a blood etched finger and said, “So you the one who’s been asking about me.” Both question and conclusion.

Henry still stood mute, his mind rising to calculate the possible identity of this overstuffed visitor. Fortunately, the question was answered for him.

“I’m Delores Filson. You know my Carl.” No hand was extended. Instead her claw went to her throat around which hung a gold rope suspending a larger diamond encrusted “D.”

“Oh Carl. Why sure. You know we tried to find you up at Griffins ...”

“Don’t even get me started on those people. Changing the schedule without telling anyone then saying you were supposed to work... They put me on my last nerve. I told them, well, you gonna have some trouble on your hands...”

Delores broke off as she examined the inside of the living room. (Henry had no recollection of her actual entrance to the house.) Henry could not discern any particular point of focus. He began anew:

“Well, Carl not being in school....”

“Oooh that school. Tryin’ tell me that he needs to take some tests and then they follow him around until they find him doing something. You tell me how you going to suspend someone after you follow them all day and only then do you say anything about it.”

Henry felt the wave of the familiar wash over him as it had with Tyree. Same old. As Delores weaved around the room with no apparent destination, Henry realized the only menace she carried was a large pot of fully cooked, seasoned and hand-braised horseshit that she now felt had to be shared with Henry. He tucked his hands in his pockets.

“I always told Carl he should learn a trade. Don’t depend on these schools. I told him to mind you. He doesn’t, you let me know and I’ll wear him out.” Delores was now making her way back to Henry, her double irises fixed on him like sonar. She had a hitch in her gait that caused her left leg to remain straight throughout her step. She lurched more than she walked.

“Well I’m happy to have Carl’s help but I wouldn’t want to interfere with school...”

“This is a nice house. I bet you are going to fix it up just fine. Somebody is going to *want* this.” She said, emphasizing “want” as though being wanted was a reoccurring aspiration and wanting, a constant and familiar state in her life.

Henry was thinking about raising the issue of Tyree when Delores suddenly turned and pointed her force-of-nature-body squarely at the dining room table.

“What choo got here. Little tostada?”

“I guess my eyes were a little bigger than my stomach,” said Henry.

“Oh well then, don’t mind if I do. Thanks so much. You know my blood sugar gets low when I don’t eat. And I like this Messican food. You can’t always get good food around here. There used to be a deli on Highland Ave., but it closed. The owner said he couldn’t make any money but I heard he needed to get out of the neighborhood because he was keeping time with one of his employees and her daddy got mad so he had to leave soon.....”

With that, she scooped up the remains of his badly bleeding burrito and started for the door, the gourmand history of Glenwood still falling from her mouth.

“You let me know if you have any problems with Carl. I live two doors down. It was nice to meet you.”

And she was gone. Henry was flummoxed. What either of them had accomplished by this encounter was not clear. Henry allowed the possibility that this was a case and that Delores and Tyree, maybe even Carl, were planning an uninvited and covert visit to the home. For whatever reason, Henry let this slip down the ladder of possibilities. Carl could have gotten all the information he needed with a single visit. Tyree, despite his obvious sidelight, had never actually

entered the home. Delores seemed more fuck-up than thief, although he was going to leave the answer blank on that one for a bit.

That night the weather turned inexplicably cold again. Before getting on his mattress Henry took stock. He mentally inventoried his possessions from money in the bank to the contents of his duffel. The Disease meant you took nothing for granted. Not the blanket that protected you from the chill or the hot coffee you drank each morning. You were accountable for everything and felt its absence or presence with intensity. Still, Henry could not help but think that his little inventory was the end result of feeling a little unsettled or even threatened. ("A trigger" they called it at the VA.) He treated himself to another beer with high hopes of sleep.

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The sleep never came really, and Henry found himself confronting the morning armed with nothing but distraction. The world had shifted a little bit. Henry could feel it. He was in the mud, not deep, but enough to slow him up. All of sudden the Work was crowded out by thoughts of Tyree and Delores, the particular political economy of places like Glenwood and the roles it assigned to boys like Carl. Henry was suddenly impatient. He did not want to wait for the coffee to brew. Calls to Leon and Sharon took on almost insurmountable pain in the ass status. Henry registered what was going on. A constant and attentive focus on The Work had sustained him for some time. Now he was distracted, his mind wandering not only to the how and whats of Carl's situation, but the how and whats of the universe more generally and what they required of him.

Henry strongly suspected that Tyree and Delores rarely battled such thoughts, but yet went through their lives triggering them in others. Henry tried not to dwell on ironies. They always contained a hint of unfairness and unmatched expectations. These piqued the interest of The Disease.

Carl arrived at his usual time. No mention of his mother. The two set back to work on the third and smallest bedroom in the house. A small afterthought off the kitchen on the first floor with only one small window facing the backyard. The room held no furniture so they could get to the main event without any muscle work. As they painted, Henry noticed that Carl looked tired. His shoulders slumped even further than usual; his brushstrokes were tentative and accompanied by sighs.

Henry had made half a promise to pry no further and slow his descent into whatever mess inflicted Carl's life. He cited the usual excuses: Carl wasn't his son; his nose didn't belong in other people's business; The Disease did not reward this type of thing; the Glenwoods of the world had been producing and resolving these types of things without Henry for sometime. All were valid in Henry's mind right until the very point when he discarded them.

"So I met your moms last night."

Silence. Carl did not lift his attention from the wall in front of him. Though they were painting the smallest room in the house, Carl appeared almost swallowed by it.

Henry walked over to Carl. He began rolling paint a few feet away from where Carl started his stroke.

"So you and your mom and Tyree all stay together?"

“I’m over there with them.” Replied Carl. He wasn’t admitting anything on the “together” part.

Is Tyree your dad?”

Pregnant pause. Carl seemed to lean into the wall for a minute.

“I live with my mom. Tyree just stay with us.”

“And how you like that?” The Big Ask. Henry prepared to be shot down or get The Shrug that in Glenwood meant the situation was miserable, but not miserable in a way unique enough to merit discussion.

And thus the Shrug.

Henry continued painting and again rejected every possible reason not to get himself involved in Carl’s situation.

“ You know Carl, it’s just like this house. If you don’t like something, you can change it. It may be hard. May be a tremendous pain in the ass, but in the end you can knock it down and build it back up. I’m not trying to give any rah-rah –late night-tv bullshit. I’m not gonna tell you walk on coals or buy real estate. I’m just telling you something a lot of people don’t seem to know.”

Having got The Shrug, Henry now fully expected the Eye Roll. But when he glanced over at Carl, the boy was looking straight at him. Before Henry could continue, Carl turned back to his work. Henry finished up his section and returned to another wall.

By five, the first and second coats were done.

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Sharon's boss had switched around her schedule. Passion ensued. Leon was not home.

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That night the police came. Henry was awake due to his restless contemplation about his bout of advice giving. Henry was neither qualified (ask Leon) nor obliged (ask Tyree) to offer any advice to Carl. Yet here he had done so and offered advice of the most philosophical sort that would either be useless or life changing. Had he really said "its like this house?" Fuck that. He should have stuck with teaching him how to wire.

Henry had just begun mapping an exit strategy when the argument began. A rager covering a number of topics. Henry instantly recognized the voices. Tyree and Delores. Tyree sounded just about how you would imagine. Sort of whiny. Delores on the other hand bore no resemblance to the nattering foolish woman who had visited Henry. She was on fire. She began her campaign with a series of shouted inquiries regarding Tyree's whereabouts over the day. Tyree responded with a spirited argument that he was a man not accountable to her ("I'M A MAN"), that she was being a bitch ("YOU A BITCH"), and moreover he deserved her trust ("WHEN I LIE TO YOU? TELL ME").

Things went on in this fashion. Steady volleys interrupted by short intervals that Henry rapidly realized were used for refueling the crazy fire with liquor. Gradually they moved on to a series of accusations about the other's lack of contribution to the common household. Delores was accused of "SPENDING MY

FUCKING MONEY ON ALL SORTS OF SHIT.” Delores rebounded with a loaded inquiry into the source of Tyree’s money. Tyree apparently took this as a rhetorical question. Doors were opened and slammed and finally the sirens. Carl apparently did not merit mention by either.

From the upstairs window, Henry could see the police officers get out of the black and white. One white. One black. Both adjusted their caps and let their hands hang over their garrison belt. Even at a distance he could feel the thinly veiled intimidation roll off each of them. Tyree, wearing green boxer shorts and a sleeveless t-shirt, was the first to appear on the porch, an officer’s arm resting on shoulder. He was deposited on the steps, his skinny legs illuminated by the porch light. Delores appeared next; however, once out the door she scooted down the stairs and into the street. There she let loose another volley regarding Tyree’s supposed transgressions. Delores was wearing only a t-shirt and her massive breasts rolled like waves under a thin sheet of cotton. Her hair—or at least the hair she had yesterday -- was gone, replaced by a skinny helmet of black with gold accents. As one officer walked calmly toward her holding a flashlight and still pawing his belt, Delores let loose again.

“WHY DON’T YOU ASK HIM HOW HE MAKES HIS MONEY? GO AHEAD. SEE WHAT HE SAY.”

Delores’ whole body seemed to contort and twist like she was fighting an invisible magnetic force.

Henry’s chest jumped a bit. The fact that his own suspicions were now confirmed was one thing. The fact that Delores released such an innuendo in front of

the police was another. This was not going to please Tyree. Sure enough. Tyree responded with a series of statements aimed at showing the officers that Delores' identity as a BITCH and all the bitch behavior that came with it rendered her completely unbelievable, in sum, a LYING BITCH.

The cops' calm voices took over. A lot of "sirs" and "ma'am's." Reassurances that their only intention was to make everyone safe. Their "everyone" did not appear to include Carl, who had not been mentioned by anybody. Delores and Tyree were separated. He remained on the steps. She was guided out to the cruiser where she leaned on the trunk and smoked cigarettes cursing semi-loudly whenever she ground a butt into the street. Each time she did so, an officer would say, "Ma'am, Ma'am?"

Glenwood was just starting to come alive with doors opening and windows sliding up and down the block when one of the officers finally emerged from the house. He stood in front of Tyree and spoke in a low voice, his face close to Tyree's. Tyree put his hands on the sides of his head and shook his head fiercely. The officer responded, now in a standing position both hands on his belt. Finally, after what seemed to be a one-sided discussion, Tyree stood up and obediently put his hands behind his back. He was led to the cruiser just as Delores was led back to the house. They passed no more words. The cruiser rolled off. House doors could be heard closing. Henry went back toward his mattress, but instead sat on the office chair with his head against the wall. He stayed there for a while.

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Henry woke up sore. He could have easily attributed this to a long night in a small chair, but instead interpreted it as The Disease flexing its muscle on his physical being. Just as he had decided to extricate himself, last night's events had seemingly foreclosed that possibility. Delores, and by association Carl, had made an enemy last night and so the situation had become more pressing. This triggered some of the worst agony of The Disease. You either slunk away, protecting your own hide or you took some sort of action virtually guaranteed to leave you with less than you had before. Coward or fool. Either one would live with you and slowly make you the Disease's little Court Jester. Poked and prodded on to the stage for amusement's sake.

The morning was an iffy proposition and offered little hope for any real progress on the Work. He had a feeling that expecting and experiencing the fallout from last night would dominate his day. As a result he was slow to rise. His back and joints fought him. His coffee was inexplicably weak and he had no enthusiasm for his morning phone calls.

Henry was just beginning to formulate the beginnings of a schedule when he glanced out the kitchen's back window and at the home's (newly clean) garage. He watched as the side door opened. Out walked Carl with a glance across the lots to his own home. Carl bent low and came to the back steps. He pondered the tools Henry had placed on the back step for a moment and then came in the back door. He looked at Henry and sat down at the table. He made no mention of the early hour or his appearance in the garage.

“Carl. How you doin?”

Carl responded with a distant cousin of The Shrug and said, Leon-like, “Well you know ..”

Henry froze. For reasons not yet apparent to his frontal lobe the comment shocked him. That Carl would continue his commitment to brevity under the circumstances hurt Henry. Carl, he thought, should be clamoring to tell any and all of his predicament. He should, reasoned Henry, be exercising some basic survival instincts. Instead he was eyeing the orange juice. Carl’s lack of faith in the appearance of a cavalry and his filing of recent events under the apparent heading “Shit Happens” was a wrapped up gift for The Disease.

Still, certain facts needed to be nailed down.

“Does your moms know you are staying in my garage?”

“Don’t know.”

“ You tell her?”

“Don’t know where she is at.”

“She’s gone?”

Carl looked at Henry as though trying to comprehend the older man’s opaqueness.

“Tyree gonna make bail. He gonna be pissed.”

“Where is Tyree?”

“I dunno. Still in jail? Felony in possession. “

“So they found a gun?”

A nod.

Henry was tempted to ask Carl if he had a plan. If he had at all contemplated his next move. Before he spoke, he realized the melancholy stupidity of asking a child if he had a survival plan in what was obviously a sadly fucked situation created entirely by people twice his age, one of whom had pushed him into this world. Henry could not decide which would depress him more: the presence or absence of a plan. The presence of a plan suggested that Carl had somehow normalized the situation and acclimated himself to the Deloreses and Tyrees. The absence of a plan would only underscore the direness of events.

And so they attended to the Work. Carpeting was pulled up in the last of the bedrooms to reveal scarred but serviceable hard wood floors. The pulled the entire carpet in one pull, more or less. As Henry used the claw on his hammer to remove tacks and the carpet strips, Carl busied himself cutting the rug into smaller strips and tying them with twine. They communicated mostly with their heads and a few sounds.

Around four thirty Henry was doing his last inspection of the floor for errant tacks. He bent to feel a suspect area and spied Carl under his arm. Carl had just finished cutting and roping up a strip of carpet. Henry watched as Carl pushed it into the pile of rolls with his feet while sliding Henry's box cutter into the pocket of his denim shorts.

A half hour later, Carl nodded at him and took off through the backdoor. By the time Henry looked out the back window he was gone. Not at all pleased with Carl's quiet departure, Henry rolled out the back door and into the garage. No Carl. Henry walked back to the house. As he opened the back door, his senses were

pricked. For two days Henry had come in and out the back door and for two days his peripheral vision had registered familiar objects. Today it registered an absence. Henry looked at the back stoop. There sat the cold chisel he had recovered from the garage. The crowbar was nowhere to be seen. Henry glanced down the lots into Carl's backyards.

Nope.

Henry walked around the front of the house to Carl's front yard.

Nope.

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That night, Glenwood's usual soundtrack incorporated a new percussion session. Days ahead of the Fourth of July holiday the neighborhood took to celebrating their own dubious notion of freedom, mostly with small strings of fireworks and bottle rockets. Every now and again the boom of a serious firework made Henry sit up and take notice. He sat in his chair all evening and into the night. Sleep was not a possibility. The Disease had taught Henry to weigh the pros and cons of everything, but the various scenarios that flickered through his head showed little on the plus side of his ledger. This is where the Disease fed, he realized. In those moments when a focus on the Work or an attention to the details of life would not suffice. When the whys and wherefores got dicey, you could count on it looking over your shoulder sowing doubt and reminding you not so subtly that you were not really up to the task.

Sometime after two am Henry was badly in need of some movement. He had not resolved himself to any particular course of action, but decided that some fact-

finding was going to be necessary no matter what course he took. He hoisted himself out of his chair, went to the kitchen and looked out over the backyard. Quiet. Henry unlatched the backdoor and went to the garage, it being very possible that Carl had come back after dark.

Nothing.

Henry paused for a moment, recalling the point at which he had decided that Tyree was an actual menace and not simply your Glenwood-variety -thug -of opportunity. He finally turned to leave when he heard the drag of a chain link gate. He looked out his window and there was Tyree. He had entered Carl's backyard from the alley. He'd had a change of clothes since the previous night. Henry watched as he plucked a cigarette from behind his ear, lit up and took his station in a folding chair behind the garage.

Henry squatted down behind his window. What went through Tyree's mind was a topic of keen interest to him right now and Tyree himself was doing little to satisfy Henry's curiosity. Henry had always associated a cigarette held behind the ear with a certain mental softness. The Glenwood equivalent of a hayseed. But the felony in possession bit seemed to foul that calculus. Henry remembered his character assessment of Tyree as a Slappy Motherfucker, and started to shift his bets. Tyree could indeed, perhaps by sheer power of his slappiness be a dangerous man.

Henry's legs and lower back began to ache and his thoughts turned to the possibility of an unseen retreat to his home. Then the crunch of tires on gravel. Carl watched a set of high set headlights bore down the alley. A blue Sliverado rolled up

to Carl's garage and tapped its horn. Henry watched as Tyree, in full slappiness, entered the garage and re appeared out the front.

As before, Tyree leaned in the window, then withdrew. He seemed to be keeping up some conversation with the occupants. As Tyree backed up toward the garage door laughing, a head emerged from the truck followed by a shoulder and arm, the whole thing looking like one of those cobras that rise from a basket.

*"Te gustas les petards Tyree? Me gusto les petards!"*

A strip of fireworks dropped from the pick-up's cab, and began their pop and crackle dance on the asphalt. For a second Henry was focused on the fireworks, but then he noticed that Tyree seemed to be doing a dance of his own. His body jumped first and then seemed to go limp while his arms flailed and his head moved in a wide arc from shoulder to shoulder. For a split second he seemed suspended in the air. Ultimately, he collapsed as though the world had opened under his feet.

Henry ducked lower as the truck sped past his own garage and toward Highland Avenue.

Time passed. Maybe five minutes. Maybe two hours. Henry finally exited the garage. He decided against going into the alley, and instead walked to the vacant lot. He circumvented the open basement and then hauled himself over a fence and into Carl's yard. He opened the garage and stepped across the concrete floor. The garage's backdoor was still ajar although the car entrance was closed. Henry took stock of Tyree's body. His TV training told him he should probably bend over the body, but Henry was unclear on what more he would discern. Tyree's chest was

stone still and a thread of blood wandered haphazardly down his cheek and onto the ground.

Henry reached into his back pocket for his phone when his peripheral vision fed him a second snack of the day. There stood Carl, on the other side of the garage. He looked none the worse for wear except his pants were soaked from the knee down. Henry put his phone away.

Carl turned and exited the garage only to reappear second later with a parcel under his arm. He nudged past Henry without a word and dropped a paint stained drop cloth on the ground next to Tyree. He glanced at Henry for a second and then began unrolling it.

Henry went to fetch his truck keys.

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The police came. Same two as before. Henry supposed questions were asked, but none were directed at him. No one seemed to take much of an interest in the alley even though a strong petroleum smell still emanated from the ground in front of Carl's garage. Undoubtedly a spilled gallon gas can or a leaky hooptie left in place too long.

Just as Henry began to wonder if any questions were going to be asked about Carl, Delores reappeared, a rather miraculous survivor of Glenwood's natural selection. She was trailed by someone Carl later identified as his Aunt Etta, with whom his mother had hidden. Etta said little and Henry sensed a roiling anger over

the state of affairs wafting from between her cornrows. "Precisely," thought Henry. An angry sister may be just what the situation needed.

Henry punched up Sharon. She had a plumber visiting. Henry was careful to read her his new address. In a week he would be moving on to a set of townhouses near Pinnacle County's island park. He had a new gig.

Caretaking.

He had done that work before.

