

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 the rotting plank that formed the first and only step-up from the crackled pathway leading from the street.

A small girl with four pigtails passed on the street, 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 his back.

"Damn, what you do that for, Mama?"

"Thought maybe it get you to get a job," and she swept the scratching straws of her broom across Henry's back. This lick was light compared with what he got as a child, his back a tapestry of raised scars from lashings with a looped electric cord. Henry hit back with words:

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

"You ingrate. You know I worked for you and your brother, before I got sick with blowed up legs. Those checks for disability. *You ain't got no disability, Henry, and you ain't got no money.*"

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

"Yes, I cooked for white folks. That was good work. 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."

"If it's a janitor job they give you, they'll show you how to use a broom."

"Like you, swinging that broom at my back."

“Go back to school, then. Learn a trade. Make some money 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.”

“Okay, if you too lazy to get your ass all the way downtown, less than a mile, go up to the corner and ask to work at the store. I saw a Help Wanted sign out. Colored man, Mose, runs the store.”

“Yeah, he runs the store, but he don’t own it.”

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

“White man don’t own it either. Indians. Dot Indians. Any day now, Mose gonna be outa work too, ‘cause a boatload of relations just come to town, and they be working at the store. 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’s older brother, James, had treated her well after he got to a certain age and had a vision of getting out, of getting a job and even going to college.

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

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

“I know you can go out and steal one, but I don’t want a stole one.”

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

“I don’t want to ask James. He got money, but he got a lot bills of his own.”

“Oh, yeah, he rich. *Nigga* rich. Big car, no house. Just that tiny rent apartment in town. *He* 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.”

“You keep pickin’ at that nail you gonna take off my porch step.”

“You mean the good half.”

“You take off the good half, there won’t be no step at all.”

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 skinny 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. “I been worried ‘bout you.”

“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. It was so big, and clean. Ten of our house would fit in that one room. Carpets all over 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, not like the one in church. This piano was big and stretched out flat, 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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