

2800 words

HENRYTOWN

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CASEY JARRETT sensed that he was waking up. His eyelids were so heavy that he didn't try to open them. It seemed he wasn't in his bed at home, but then there had been times he had thought the same before opening his eyes to find that he indeed was at home. The pain in his hand reminded him of putting it through the back door window as his mother drove off and his father stood behind him screaming that he – Casey – could replace it in the morning when he had calmed down.

Breaking the glass had actually required two punches. The first one didn't do anything – they must use some special kind of thin glass in the movies. He punched harder on his second try, which broke it though his hand didn't go all the way *through* the window. If it had, there would have been a lot more blood. Only the back of his hand got bloody. He ran some water on it, dried it with a paper towel and then held another paper towel over the cuts as he ran out the door, glass crunching under his sneakers and his father yelling at him the whole time. He found duct tape in the garage and ran that around his hand several times to keep the paper towel in place. He'd forgotten to grab the car keys, besides which it wasn't really his car, so he walked out to the road and stuck his thumb out, keeping his taped hand hidden. He hadn't looked closely to see how bad it was but it would definitely be hurting more eventually.

The first car to come by was Benny Parsons' father. Casey was glad to see him stop, because his father would come out to keep him from leaving as soon as he had time to think about what had happened. His father always had to worry something before doing it.

"Hi Mr. Parsons," Casey said through the open passenger window, forcing a calm voice meant to convince both himself and Mr. Parsons.

"Afternoon, Case." Benny's father glanced across the road, probably wondering if there was any reason he shouldn't be giving Casey a ride.

Casey opened the door and spoke in order to draw Mr. Parsons' attention away from his house. "Where you headed?"

"Henrytown."

His parents had always warned him away from Henrytown, a city of textile mills, which had either migrated south or were in the process of doing so. A city on a

downward slope. His family only ever went there for the eye doctor or the furniture store for a couch or carpets. Definitely leave before dark.

“Great,” Casey said and climbed in.

Although he hadn't opened his eyes yet, Casey was becoming more certain that he wasn't in his own bed. Nothing else made sense. He'd heard a train whistle and there were no tracks near Cooper's Mill. His eyes felt almost glued shut, but now he opened the right one as if he were winking. The wall he stared at was orange. It seemed to be daytime. A large picture hung on the wall. When he focused some more, he saw four guys with wild hair. It was a poster of some rock group he'd never heard of – *The Texas Strangers*. He closed his eye to consider his next move.

Mr. Parsons didn't ask about Casey's taped hand. They crossed the bridge over the Huygens Kill, passed the paper mill, Cecil's bar and after a few houses were out of town.

“More kids hitching these days,” Mr. Parsons said. He'd been Casey's Little League coach.

“Yeah. My father needed the car.”

“I passed your mother going the other way.” Mr. Parsons said the last time he'd hitched was when he was discharged after returning from Japan. “Had enough saved when I got home to buy my first car.”

Casey welcomed the conversation, glad he hadn't been asked where his mother was going. She was gone. *Gone* gone. He asked Mr. Parsons what model car he'd bought.

“A rattle trap Model T. Imagine that.”

* * *

Still with his eyes closed, Casey remembered his injured left hand and reached for it with his right. Had he intentionally hit the glass with his left hand because he was right-handed? He couldn't remember. The movement made him aware of a weight on his

shoulder. He opened both eyes and saw a hand dangling there. He had no memory of following a girl home. He *wanted* to remember her, but couldn't. In moving to see whose hand he was looking at, he realized his pants were pulled down – and it hurt down there.

They came out of the hills and crossed the Taconic Parkway. Soon there were apple orchards on both sides of the road. Mr. Parsons pressed in the cigarette lighter. When the lighter pushed out Mr. Parsons held it up to the cigarette in his mouth. After one puff he said, "I don't know about this thing in Vietnam. Benny's safe in college for now." After another drag, "You?"

Casey was a year behind Benny, still in high school. Casey had a few friends at school – Benny had been one of them – but none he hung out with. He came straight home from school unless he had baseball practice. "Don't know. I got too much else to think about now." He didn't want to talk about himself.

The girl who owned the hand hadn't moved a muscle. He flicked it with his own good hand. Still nothing. What had happened last night? A wine bottle lay on the floor. He pushed the arm away and rolled out of bed, falling to the floor because his pants were around his ankles. Then he saw. It was a *guy* – passed out – with *his* pants down. Now Casey knew the source of the pain.

Mr. Parsons left him off at McDonald's in Henrytown. Casey was glad to be alone. No adults to make excuses to. He headed for the city park where he'd heard hippies hung out. It was in the middle of town, so he'd passed it a few times over the years with his parents. There was plenty of traffic on the main street, which ran by the park. He didn't hear the guitar music until he was almost there. Big trees towered over benches placed here and there, with some kind of monument in the center. A train track ran behind a fence and crossed the street.

He walked toward the music. Three guitars played “Hey Jude” and about a dozen other kids close to him in age were singing along. Casey found a bench twenty feet away from the music. One of the singers was sitting on the far end of the bench. Casey sat on the other end. He was drawn to sing with them, but didn’t want anyone to know it – which didn’t make any sense, because he didn’t know anyone there.

Casey grabbed hold of a chair to steady himself and stood up to pull on his pants. It was the first time he’d been queered. No, first and *only*. The *last* time. He took two steps toward the motionless body, swung hard with his good hand and caught the bastard square on the jaw. It was the first time he’d ever hit anyone like that. Another first in the same 24-hour period. It was immensely satisfying for ten seconds and then his hand began to hurt. But it was worth it. The body remained motionless, though it wasn’t stiff so the guy was alive. Casey knew that from finding a dead dog once. Also, the jaw had felt warm. He confirmed he had all his stuff and went out the door, glad to be on the street.

Two guys sat next to him on the bench, already singing along. Lately he’d been letting his hair grow longer, but nearly everyone there in the park had it shoulder-length. The girls all seemed to have straight hair – no curls. Nearby, a guy with a red ball on his nose began to juggle three bigger red balls. Casey couldn’t understand how he kept track of them all. Sometimes he went under a leg. Someone sitting on his bench held a hand-rolled cigarette out to him. “Take a hit?” He knew it was marijuana even though he’d never smoked any. He hesitated, but then took it. If he could be sitting there watching a juggler while listening to music, then anything was possible. One puff gave him a coughing fit. He handed it back, thinking they’d all laugh at him. Instead the guy said, “Like this.” Casey watched him slowly draw it in. The tip glowed and crinkled. He held the smoke in his lungs when he handed the cigarette back to Casey. This time Casey managed without coughing. Holding the smoke in, he glanced around at the guitars, the singers, the juggler, everyone else – the scene – and everything that had happened earlier

in the day faded into the background. After another draw he was sure he could live right there in the park for the rest of his life.

Whoever was playing the guitars knew a lot of songs. “Blowing in the Wind,” “Puff the Magic Dragon” and some he didn’t know. A while after they had finished the joint, two cops walked by and asked if anyone was smoking pot. Casey wondered if there would be trouble, but they seemed satisfied with the negative answers and moved on. “Good stuff,” said the guy next to him on the bench after the cops left.

Initially, Casey concentrated on walking *away* from the house as fast as he could. He was on a long uphill street that ended at a stoplight about five blocks away. Cars were passing through that intersection going both ways, so he headed toward it. He had pain in three places, but that didn’t lessen his desire to walk, to put some distance between himself and where he had slept. He began to remember what had come after smoking the pot. Two new guys sat down next to the one with the pot. They had something special to share. Casey asked what it was. “Acid, man.” Casey had heard of it – LSD. It made you see things that weren’t there. He didn’t know why he was even talking to these guys, but it was cool. Take a seat and everyone’s a friend. So he swallowed what they handed him. *Dropped* it. Nothing happened. They said to give it time. The guitars played “Mr. Tambourine Man” and Casey sang along on the chorus. He realized it was getting dark. A girl walked by the bench on her hands, feet in the air. She seemed to be with the juggler. Her hair dragged on the ground. The juggler started throwing three circles in the air – like juggling the rings of Saturn. When the lights came on in the park they almost blinded him. The rings became hula-hoops and sailed above the trees. A loud whistle blew. He knew it was a train because he’d seen the track. Every thing was cool. What’s more weird than a train running through a park? He couldn’t believe it when the locomotive turned and came toward them. It was huge and they were going to get run over. “Watch out!” he remembered yelling. Somebody said, “Run,” and everyone on the bench – maybe others too – took off. Casey struggled to make his legs move. He thought someone grabbed his elbow to keep him from falling and that’s all he remembered.

Wasn't LSD supposed to enlighten you? What had he learned except that a locomotive can hop the tracks and change direction like a car? Yeah, he felt *real* enlightened. Hanging out with all those people had been cool though. He just wanted to know how he'd come to be in that house. That must be what they mean by blacking out. No, he didn't want to think about that ever again. One thing he'd been enlightened about – LSD wasn't for him. He remembered being terrified when they were all running.

When he reached the intersection he found himself on the road to Cooper's Mill. He turned right and began walking, sticking out his thumb whenever a car approached. As long as Casey could remember, his parents had argued. It could be minor things, like what color to paint a room. Or bigger things, like "Why don't you get a better job?" "No, why don't *you*?" "No, you." His father worked at the paper mill, but was quick to tell you he wasn't a "millworker." He worked in the office doing all the financial stuff. His mom worked in the library in Tilburg. From the arguments, he knew she made less, but – also from the arguments – she did more around the house.

He didn't want to think about that. Today – that's what he wanted to think about. And the next day. Right now he wanted to get out of Henrytown, but vowed to go back to the park real soon. He'd never been around so many friendly people. The pain in his right hand was worse every time he held it out to grab a ride. He'd swung as hard as he could, but didn't think that would have broken it. Walking had worked some of the stiffness out of the rest of his body.

When a pickup pulled over Casey was on his guard. He'd been hoping for a woman, but most women wouldn't pick up a hitcher.

"Where you headed?" the driver asked. He seemed nice enough.

"Cooper's Mill. You?"

"Dutchtown, but I can go that way."

"Thanks," Casey said, still wary. As they picked up speed he kind of folded his hands and worked the fingers around.

"Had some bad luck?" the driver said, nodding at Casey's hands. The duct tape bandage was looking ragged.

Casey pulled them apart and hid them as best he could. "That's not the worst of it." Why'd he say that? It would only lead to another question. He turned to look out the

window and avoid the driver's gaze. They were passing an apple orchard. Once he'd heard that Jamaicans came all the way up here to pick apples every year and thought how that didn't make any sense when there must be people around here willing to pick apples. When he looked across to the other side of the road, he realized the driver was looking at his left hand again.

"My mother just left me. Glad you asked?"

"Sorry to hear it. Left *you*?"

"Well, me and my father." Of course Casey could blame his father, but she'd left him too. It sounded selfish to think it, because he knew the reasons she'd left – sort of – but she was being selfish too.

The driver again nodded at Casey's hand. "Reminds me of my boy. He lost his left arm to the elbow in a highway accident last year. Hitching."

Now Casey sympathized with him. "Sorry to hear it."

"Why I picked you up," the driver said after a pause. "Thought I could get you there safe."

Casey didn't know what to say to that.

"I know," the driver said. "Doesn't make sense, does it? Neither does losing half an arm."

"I'm having trouble keeping count of all the bad things that've happened lately. Now I'm going back to Cooper's Mill where I really don't want to go."

"You're counting in the wrong direction."

"Huh?"

"You're healthy. Hands'll heal up and you'll have two good arms again. My boy's back at college. He'll do alright."

Casey didn't like pep talks. They always dodged around what was really going on. Or worse, they sugar-coated what was going on. Like his father would say, *You can't polish a turd.*

They coasted down the long hill into town. His father was going to be pissed. Maybe he'd reported Casey missing. So what? It was all his father's fault – what had happened last night. He, Casey, was the one deserving to be pissed.

He thanked the driver and walked past the Shermans' house and the Taylors' – still a little stiff – before reaching his own. His father was fixing the broken window, pressing glazing compound around the pane with a putty knife. Casey's surprise must have shown on his face.

His father shrugged his shoulders. "I don't blame you for wanting to break something."

"Why'd she leave us?"

"She left *me*."

"*Me too*."

His father seemed to partially concede that. "You'll have to ask *her* some day."

"Well. You were always arguing."

"We didn't argue that much."

No? Then why?

"How's the hand?"

Casey tried to push his father's hand away with his own right hand, but flinched from the pain in *that* hand.

His father pulled back. "Where'd you stay last night?"

Casey was trying to keep that out of his mind, but said, "Henrytown."

"*Henrytown?! They ought to cut it off and float it downriver to the ocean. Don't ever go back there. Especially at night.*"

Casey said, "Okay." But he would.

THE END