

Charles Hayes

Henry's or Before Leaving Appalachia

Large black Turkey Vultures rise from the railroad tracks, their ugly bone colored beaks trailing pieces of offal from a dead opossum. Catching the New River Gorge updraft, they soar aloft and hover into the wind.....watching. Looking like the black silk kites that children flew above the muddy Mekong, they call me back to other dead things.

Stepping around the mashed opossum and its messy gore, I bind my thoughts back to regaining my rhythm of two ties a stride and getting on into the little town of Hillton. The river along my rail trek is clean and clear for this part of the Appalachian coal digs. Maybe that's because there is no coal right here. But there is enough of it close by to have made this place a big deal back in the day. Even now the town mostly survives on the bones that the coal industry can throw it. At least it's a place where I can get out of the sticks some, learn to talk to other people again. Up the hollow I am like two people sometimes. Part of me homes and likes being alone and the other part is shocked by how funny the words come out when I have to talk to the mail carrier. Like a grafted tree with two fruits, I get to feeling schizy. I figure this trip into town will help me with that. I was riding my big half Arabian the last time I was here. Three sheets to the wind, and feeling fine, I got arrested for drunk driving but they couldn't handle the horse without me. So they broke it down to pulling into the face of traffic and let me go with my promise that I would ride back out of town and mail in the fine later. That got me on their list, I expect, but the people that I gave rides to enjoyed it, maybe even became fans of a sort. I always have had a hard time believing that parts of this earth are off limits to those of lesser means, be it old game and Indian trails through posted land or the public streets of man.



Off the tracks and going past the library where I discovered the warmth of Wilbur Smith books during a tough winter, I notice the signs of an approaching let down. A small gathering of other yokels are starting to loaf around the only bars in town. One leg cocked and leaning against the bar fronts, like ranch hands around an empty corral, they wait for something to happen. Like the appearance of a little generous money. Or similar party gratuities. Except for their eyes they can't seem any more laid back. Casual Fridays I think they call it in the cities. Here it's already casual, and the let down pace is a little more pronounced. Perhaps pursued.

Catching a couple of 'whoops' as I walk by, tales of my horse ride having spread it seems, I throw my hand up and pass on down toward the railroad tracks and the only "other" bar in town, Henry's.



An old half blind World War Two veteran, Henry lives in the back of a nondescript brick building next to the switching yards and runs an old bar from the railroad's heyday in the front part, on occasion. Like when the Friday Amtrak is due with friends and a little money down from D.C. Many are originally from this area so they know the score. Good times are

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cheap. Even for them.

Henry's gives those who don't cotton to the redneck bars up the street a place to have some fun. In the dimly lit interior, with the noise of the jukebox drowning out the racket of the passing coal trains, we on the fringe can party a little and forget about the poverty that blankets us. Henry is also my friend and a passable cook who will put food and drinks on a tab until I can pay. And even when I have money I prefer his bar. Less arrogance.

Starting to feel a little anxious, I can see that the dead-end street in front of his place is empty. Maybe I have walked all this way only to find that my oasis is not open. However, looking down the alley, I take heart when I see a thick plume of black smoke coming from the stove pipe that pokes out the back side of his building. Henry is a little frail and he likes it plenty warm. Plus he keeps his cooking warm atop an old Warm Morning coal stove near the back living space.

Pushing on the front door, I am delighted to see it swing open into an almost dark and deserted bar, the only light coming from some liquor and beer neon signs and their reflections in the long mirror that backs the nice mahogany bar. Going inside, I am met with a sight that uplifts my down home spirit. At the far end of the rich dark wood, eating a plate of what smells like refried beans, fried chicken, and cabbage, sits Henry. My long perspective down the bar, like looking through the big end of a hand telescope, shows him squinting back at me through his thick glasses. The separation it emphasizes, Henry having his meal and me fresh off the tracks, is unavoidable. Figuring that he can see me well enough but in a hurry to add my voice to his senses, I say, "What's cooking Henry, think you can start me a tab for a meal and some drinks?"

In his cantankerous way, not being a slight, just his dislike for the niceties that he considers a useless drain on his remaining years, Henry pushes himself up, goes over to his Warm Morning and returns with a plate of cornbread, beans, and cabbage. Muttering to himself as if self directing, he places the food atop the bar a few feet from where he is sitting and returns to his plate before finally speaking to me.

"Where'd you get that big bastard horse?"

My first bite of cornbread already halfway to my mouth, I pause and look over at Henry as he sits back down.

Eyes averted, grinning at his plate while his bald head slightly shakes, Henry is having a little fun.

Certainly not the first ribbing I've experienced, I smile until he sees that he got me.

"Over in Raleigh County," I say. "It broke me for a while, I guess you know."

"Yeah, I know," he says, while mopping up his plate with his last bit of corn bread. "Ain't no chicken left. I ate the last piece. Eat up, I'll carry you."

Enough said, Henry stands and takes his dishes to the sink, reaches into the cooler and comes out with a bottle of Stroh's, opens it, and slides

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it over by my plate. Seriously eating now that I got something to chase it down with, I finish my food as Henry putters around his bar chuckling and muttering about that big bastard horse.

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By my second beer other people begin to drift in. Some I know and trust pretty well, others I have seen around, and some are just off the Amtrak, joined by their friends from around here. With the new money from the rails and the emptied change jars of the rest of us, Henry is actually doing a little business.

Looking over at the front door as it swings open again, I see a smiling, very loose Lizzy Jean sashay in.

Lizzy Jean is the youngest of a family that I am acquainted with. Her brother and I were in the Nam at the same time. Now he spends most of his time in his room at their widowed mother's house. Sometimes I stop by there and spend some time with him, setting on the floor of his room and piecing together his rap while trying to share some of mine. My visits lift his mother a bit. She likes it when her boy has company that he will talk to. Unlike before the war, he rarely speaks now.

Flying high as usual, Lizzy Jean engages me in one of her give a shit chats and shares a couple of laughs. She is alone but I hear that she has a new boyfriend. A guy named Skeeter, described as a mean little man who has terminal liver disease. Seems like an unfair description to me but maybe it's just a way to explain his meanness. Or maybe it's a way to say that if Skeeter's got it, then the odds of it occurring again close by are less. It all depends on what's made of it. Small town gossip travels strange paths.

Having caught up on all the not so newsy stuff around town, Lizzy Jean and I are just listening to the jukebox and doing our drinks when in comes Skeeter with a couple of other guys. Leaving his companions by the jukebox, he walks over to Lizzy Jean with this sour look on his face and says, "What the hell you whoring around here for? I been looking all over for you, Lizzy."

Lizzy Jean, no respecter of touchy situations, nor much else either, laughs in his face and replies, "Fuck you man, I ain't whoring around. I'm just having some fun like everybody else here. Look around, Skeeter. This is a happening night and I just want to be part of it."

Noticing Skeeter's eyes turn cold as an embarrassed blush crosses his face, I quickly study the bar in front of me, not wanting to appear to be a fan of Lizzy Jean's smack talk. Already off her stool, Lizzy Jean starts to walk away but Skeeter grabs her by the arm, pulls a little buck knife, and puts it to her throat.

"You listen here, Lizzy. I'll cut your God damned throat, you fuck with me. You hear me?"

Thinking this is enough from someone I don't much care for anyway, I slide off my stool and stand with Lizzy. It is none of my business but I hate the fact that a white boy is about to ruin a good time.

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"Hey man, take it easy. She ain't done nothing," I say.

Faster than I can imagine, Skeeter, a head shorter and not as heavy by far, quarters around on me and puts the knife to my throat.

"I'll cut you too if you don't back off. This ain't none of your business. Got it?"

I can feel the pressure of the blade against my throat enough to tell that it is sharp. It is just about to break the skin and from what I hear, I figure he will do it. With one foot already in the grave, he is not someone to gamble with. The rest of the place, except for Henry who must be in the can, is now all eyes as the only two white boys in the place look to get it on. Not caring if I disappoint, I think it best that I just get out of this situation without getting cut.

"Ok, ok. I got it. Let's forget it," I say.

Lizzy Jean shows that she is not as wasted as she would suggest when she takes this opportunity to quickly move down the bar closer to where Henry usually stations himself.

Stepping back with the knife still held high, Skeeter allows his two companions to get him away and out the door. Looks exchanged all around, the crowd goes back to mingling and getting loose. I go back to my beer and make a note of Skeeter. He is mean.

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Outside the bar on the dead end street it's like a private open air extension of the bar. Clear views of all activity coming or going on the only street to the town proper gives us a feeling of security that our drinks certainly do not hinder. Dwarfed by the black hulks of the empty coal cars at our backs, we pass the home grown around under the yellowish glow of a single street lamp. And an autumn breeze flowing down the steep mountains that surround us lends an air of being poor ain't so bad when there is no capitulation. However this speck of poor but happy doesn't last long for me.

Aware only that no vehicles are about, I don't pay much attention to foot traffic, seeing that it's not far to the other bars and their like minded customers. Joints are seldom bogarted so it is not unusual for different bar crowds to mix by the tracks.

Having forgotten all about the nasty encounter with Skeeter, I pass the joint on and turn to find that he and his companions have joined the mix. Recognizing each other at the same time, we start swinging. I get lucky first as Skeeter goes down flat. Thinking that wasn't so hard, I am ready to pack it in and call it even, being that the killer instinct of utterly finishing someone off never did find a place with me. But Skeeter intends to show me the error of my ways. Sitting up and shaking his head while I just stand off, he is into his pocket, out with that buck knife and leaping to his feet even before I can realize that I might be in a dangerous pose. Closing, and swinging that knife, Skeeter quickly shows me that it is far from over. Jumping back, I can see the glint of the blade coming in a wide arc that just misses. And again he comes, me jumping and yelling at the guys

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with him to call him off. Being friends of mine as well, maybe they figure Skeeter got what he deserved since they get him to back off and go inside Henry's. No longer grooving on the autumn air and the home grown depleted, I thank my luck and do the same.

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Setting on a bar stool and talking to Henry at one end of the bar while Skeeter nurses his swollen and discoloring eye down at the other end, I am starting to calm down some until I feel something warm and wet running down my hand. Looking down, I see that the cuff of my shirt is neatly parted. Not thinking very clear, I am a bit confused about how I dressed without seeing that my shirt sleeve was cut. I actually finger the cut wondering what could have made such a precise cut. That's when I see the cut on my wrist below the shirt. About an inch long and oozing enough blood to run. He cut me.

Seeing red, I charge down the crowded bar and onto Skeeter with the intention of hurting him bad, no instinct needed. But before I can do this several of his crowd grab me and pull me off while others pick him up and get him out the door again. This time he does not come back.

Seeing my small wound and hearing what happened, Henry puts some iodine on it, wraps it, and tells me and anybody else that will listen that I did the right thing.

By the tracks and on our own, that is plenty good enough for the marginal, as the jukebox plays on.

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At first light, walking the tracks back upstream, feeling hungover and tired, I almost piss myself when a muskrat streaks out from under the rails, across my foot, and off into the brush along the river bank. A little further on, with only the stains of death left behind, the train kill is gone. Maybe to a worthy fox den with hungry cubs. Or maybe the horrid looking Turkey Vultures returned and finished the job. Any feeling of lethargy suddenly gone, I wonder at the wild poverty of this land. No longer worried about my isolation, I figure that I have mixed enough to carry me far, and look to the hills to lighten my soul along the way. Maybe having little to nothing just comes with the territory and all things are as they should be. Getting my mind around this thought with miles yet to go is opportune, no doubt. Plus my hangover seems to wane. And as the sun finally breaks the ridgeline and the leafless limbs begging from the sky, I figure that after all that is, my poverty is not uncalled for. Nor is it cowed. I am just poor. And that ain't nothing.

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