

## A TALK WITH HENRY

I had driven past that certain Interstate off-ramp more times than I cared to count. This day was different. An unexplained force from nowhere took control of the car, guiding me down a winding southern byway to a place long buried beneath the shifting sands of time - a journey I had long anticipated I soon realized.

I followed the road until pitted country blacktop melded into a tree-lined boulevard leading to a six-block college rectangle. I stopped the car, got out and stared. Little had changed in twenty years. The old college, devoid of even a single student, was a vision that assaulted my mind. I could not turn away and did not try.

The rapidly waning summer had left a pall in the air, the place deserted except for a pigeon pecking at a cigarette butt and a lone jogger bent over in a huff. Grass in front of the student union had turned brown and a lazy water sprinkler did little more than cast slow motion rainbows against the sidewalk. If the campus had been a corpse, then I was a curious child peeking through the mortuary window. A honking car ended my trance.

Just off campus, I found what had drawn me - a barroom catering to college students. The vision caused a broken crux of faded memory to flash like southern lightning. I took a humid breath and wheeled the car into the parking lot.

Except for a coat of garish paint, the outside of the building had barely changed. The same railing of rusted steel surrounded the parking lot's pea gravel and broken oyster shell. Familiar faded warehouses framed either side. Instead of the name I remembered, Mike's Place now flashed in purple and gold lettering from a neon billboard. For a moment I thought I had found the wrong place, but for only a moment. A weather-beaten sign askance the roof proclaimed the bar's rightful name - Trianon. The sign beckoned me out of the car, causing my heart to race. I hastened to accept its invitation.

Hot Louisiana air threatened to suck the oxygen from my lungs as I strolled across the parking lot. I had just pulled out my handkerchief to

dab my sweaty forehead when a rattling explosion of trashcans erupted on the side of the building. A brindle cat followed the noise, screeching as he bounded from the heap, neck hair standing on end. The big tom skipped past me in a frightened sideways motion, then disappeared in a rush behind the building. I watched him go as the trash can lid revolved like a percussive top before falling silent against broken concrete.

The silence returned me to reality as I reached the ominous black-painted door. Feeling suddenly light-headed from the humid heat, or maybe from the past's suffocating demons, I grabbed the handle and pulled. Icy refrigerated air blasted my face and engulfed me in a dry wave. It chilled my neck, reviving memories of sweltering southern summers.

"Come in heah," the little man behind the bar drawled.

Before complying, I took a quick glance around the room. I could see how things had changed. Once dark, walls were now vivid white, decorated with randomly spaced black stripes. Fluorescent brightness, reminiscent of a New York bistro, replaced the dim coolness of my memory. I sat on a tall stool and waited for the bartender, the only other occupant of the establishment. Sun bleached hair and a mortician's complexion perfectly described the little man. His black shirt was the color and texture of a typewriter ribbon and his white double-pleated linen pants matched the barroom's theme. Interconnecting diamond designs decorated his tie. When he smiled, his eyes seemed to focus on a spot between my eyes.

"What can I get you, big guy?" he said.

Continuing to polish a glass with his white cloth, he waited patiently for my answer. I looked at the colorful illustrations of many specialty drinks taped to the smoked-glass mirror behind him and pointed to the picture of a large glass.

"Hurricane, the house specialty, three-fifty with the souvenir glass, or two-fifty without." he said, beaming.

"With," I said.

"You bet," he said with a wink. "Everybody needs a memory. Where are you from?"

"Oklahoma," I answered tersely, more interested in the bar than conversation.

"Oweeee, boomer sooner! What'cha do up there?"

"I work for an oil company."

"Got a cousin in Enid that's in oil," he said above the whining blender. "Jake Perkins. Know him?"

My grin and shake of the head did not seem to surprise him. He continued pouring the icy pink concoction into a large glass garishly decorated in reds and greens. Adding a straw, cherry and an orange slice, he placed it on the polished counter in front of me.

"Not too fast," he warned. "My name's Mike. What's yours?"

"John Tolliver."

"What brings you to town, Mr. Tolliver?"

"I went to school here, years ago."

With a knowing grin, he returned to his aimless glass polishing. "It's summer vacation," he explained. "Not many people around now."

"When I lived here, an old black man waited bar."

"Henry," he said. "He died a few years back."

Before I could question him further on the subject, a couple entered the bar, sitting on the opposite end of the long counter. The man made a production of lighting his woman's cigarette as the little bartender smiled and popped the cotton cloth across his arm.

"Yell when you need another," he said, moving away quickly.

Hot and thirsty, I sipped the syrupy drink and pivoted on the stool to have a look around the place. Then, either the rum or the moment it hit me. Maybe it was both. Like a motion picture fading into another scene, my imagination began recreating the room as I remembered it. Somewhere in the recesses of my brain, fluorescent lighting dimmed and the walls began to darken. From somewhere in back, the jarring ring of pinball machines and labored strains of Mick Jagger began to emanate. Scratched Formica set on corroded chrome replaced Mike's white plastic tables, and his black and white tile turned to dark oiled wood. Blinking twice, I turned around.

Gone were the bartender and his two customers, replaced in my mind by an old black man with short, snowy white hair and a tiny white mustache. A bow tie loosely girded the collar of his starched white shirt as he polished a glass with a soft cloth clutched in his gnarled hands. When he noticed me, he pushed his wire-framed glasses up on his forehead, leaving two burnished dents in the sides of his nose. He grinned, revealing a full set of shining teeth still firmly set in his sunken cheeks as I stared in disbelief.

"Henry? Is that you?"

"Sure is. Where you been?"

"Away. I wasn't sure you'd be here."

Henry's chuckle dissolved into a rheumatic cough, and he stopped polishing the glass, leaning for a moment against the marble-surfaced bar. "Where else would I be? Ol' Henry's always here." It was no lie from the old man. Henry had seemed a permanent fixture of the place as surely as the stools and dark wood. I could not recall visiting the Trianon without seeing his ageless face behind the bar. "What'cha gonna have?"

"Draw one," I said.

Winking, Henry took a frosted mug from the freezer, filling it from the tap until a foamy head poured over the lip.

"You remembered," he said, chuckling.

I did remember. During my first visit to the Trianon - I was only seventeen - I had found myself anxious about what to order. "A beer," I had said when asked what I was having.

"What kind of beer?" Henry replied, eyeing me over his wire-rims.

"Tap," I had said, spying the spigot.

"You mean a draw," he had corrected. "Next time you want a beer, just say Henry, draw one. That's all you gotta do."

I smiled as the recollection evoked a much deeper memory that sent a melancholy wave cresting across my bow.

"Your lady friend never came," he said, handing me the draw.

"No."

The loose layer of ebony skin on Henry's neck wriggled. I nodded when he asked, "You made it anyway, didn't you?"

Once, long ago, I had tutored a girl in math. Not just any girl, she was the college homecoming queen, a lovely young woman that normally would not have noticed a certain shy, mathematically inclined sophomore. She was flunking math and resorted to asking for my help. With my assistance, she had made an A. She elated me with a warm kiss bestowed on my forehead after she had seen her grade, and I had invited her for a beer at the Trianon.

I felt the flush of heat spreading downward from my face, just as it had when she kissed me so many years before. That night, I had waited alone at the Trianon until it closed, hoping for an explanation that, like my beautiful lady fair, never arrived. I suddenly remembered Henry's commiseration.

"She musta got sick or something."

We both knew she hadn't, but the old man had helped ease me through the crisis and I had never forgotten.

"Can I getcha another?"

My eyes popped open and I straightened on the stool, leaning against the counter for support, trying to focus on the smiling man bedecked in black and white. Henry was gone, as was the dark interior of the bar I'd once frequented. I gasped for a reply to the little man's question.

"No," I finally managed, seeing the empty glass in front of me. "How much do I owe you?"

"Three-fifty," he said.

I handed him a five and started for the door, advising him to keep the change.

"Wait," he called. "You forgot your glass."

"You keep it," I said.

The little man scratched his head and returned to wiping the bar as I walked out the door.

Glaring sunlight, along with a blast of humid air, struck me when I stepped outside. Still light-headed from three ounces of rum, I wobbled back to the car, my dilated eyes burning because of the smoky barroom. I found the brindle cat perched on the Mustang.

When I opened the door, the stray tom bounded off the hood in a single fluid motion, finally stopping at a safe distance to yawn and lick his paws. Then, after a leisurely stretch, he strolled behind the bar on his way to view the garbage cans waiting in proper rows for His Majesty's late afternoon inspection.

As I drove away, I watched him in the rear-view mirror, until his graceful image melted into a warm summer daydream.

**END**