

Henry

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He was a tall, loose-built man with big hands and a stoop that made his head hang so he seemed to be looking up at you even if you were just a boy, as I was the day the sheriff brought him over to see my grandfather and grandmother. It was a bright spring morning, the air still chilly, but the grass already greening and my grandmother's flower beds against the house starting to swell where the lilies and hollyhocks would soon come up.

"He's yours if you want him," said the sheriff. "He won't cost you nothing except his keep." At which Henry bent over convulsively, covered his bony face with his hands, and shook with laughter. A horse had kicked him when he was boy, and it had done something to him, people said, though nobody could say just what. Now all his people were dead, and nobody down at the Falls, where he lived, would have him, which was why the sheriff had brought him to us.

"He's got a funny bone," said the sheriff, "but he don't mean no harm."

"I guess he doesn't," said my grandfather. "I guess he can milk and hitch a horse?"

"Maybe he doesn't like horses, Fred," said my grandmother quickly. "Of course we want him. It would be a shame on earth if no one looked out for him when he can't look out for himself. He's a gift, and God means him for us."

"I guess he does, Lola," said my grandfather.

So Henry came to live at the old farm at the top of the hill, where the road bent like an arm around two great maples and a chestnut tree that already showed some buds, and the fields and pastures stretched like invitations down to the slow river. He had a bed in the attic, and the same food as the family (though not at the same table, which neither he nor anyone else would have liked or thought necessary), and clothes when he needed them, and ten cents for a haircut four times a year, and a dollar in the fall to spend at Litchfield Fair (even on the hootchie-cootchie show if he wanted to, which he always did), and five cents to put into the Sunday plate (after which he always covered his face with his hands and bent his forehead to his knees).

When he was sick my grandmother took care of him, and when young men got to teasing Henry too much—usually about his supposed romances with this or that hootchie cootchie girl from the previous summer—my grandfather stopped it. Once during haying down by the river, Eddie Gayton got to teasing Henry more than was right and tripped him up and pushed him into the river to get a laugh. It wasn't very deep, but my grandfather took Eddie by the hair, bent his head to his knees, walked him to the bank like a little boy and threw him in too, which everyone—even Eddie

himself—agreed he deserved. As for Henry, he could hardly get back to the house so shaken was he every few steps by fits of silent laughter.

So my grandparents looked out for Henry, and he looked out for them too, rising every morning before dawn to go to the barn with my grandfather and do with a good will whatever he was told to. He wasn't much of a hand at milking or hitching up the horse, but he could pitch hay out of the mow when the temperature was one hundred degrees up there, and he could muck out frozen manure at ten below as well as any man, in spite of frequent interruptions to exercise his funny bone. My grandmother claimed he was the cheerfulest man she had ever known, and my grandfather liked to say that although Henry didn't have many talents he had the most important one of all—once he knew what had to be done he would do his best to do it.

When my grandparents died and none of their children farmed any more and the farm was sold to people who didn't want Henry, he went into a state home where people sat around all day watching television or the cars going by and not a field or pasture or river in sight. Which was sad—or so I thought, but to my surprise whenever I went to visit, Henry was as cheerful as ever, listening to me carefully as I reminisced about the old days. He especially liked to hear about my grandmother's roast beef, which he ate by himself at his table in the corner, how Eddie Gayton had looked climbing out of the river with the legs of his overalls sluicing like down spouts, and how the sheriff had brought him that chilly morning when spring had been just around the corner.

“You were a gift, and they were glad to take you,” I always said, and he always responded by covering his face with his hands and bending his head to his knees, shaking with pleasure.