

ONE

October 1932

For sure. Henry was going to catch it today. Only nine, and already he knew what failure meant. And being soaking wet, too. He hardly noticed the wet and cold because he was too scared. The truth was he felt scared of his father most of the time. Today would be worse than usual.

Otherwise, it was a typical Friday afternoon in Parkerton, Pennsylvania. It was rainy, as usual, unless it got a little colder, and then there would be snow, especially at the top of the ridges. The Laurel Mountains weren't as high or as rugged as the Rockies or the Alps, but they were just about the highest places in the eastern US. Even if there had been snow, Henry would likely have been out riding his bike. He would ride around for fun, pretending he was Roy Rogers or Gene Autry. But today, he'd been sent on an errand for his father. "Don't forget to bring me my shirts," he'd said. It was a strict assignment, and there would be no excuses if he failed. And he was failing fast.

It just didn't seem right to Henry, being afraid of his own father. Fathers were supposed to take care of their children. Support them. Provide help. Maybe love was too much to ask for, but a kind word now and then would have been nice.

Instead, he gripped the laundry bag tighter, stomach curling.

His father had lost at poker the night before. And he was a lousy loser. Especially when he had bragged at last night's dinner that he was going to land a windfall, which was his father's name for lots of money.

"I feel lucky tonight," George said. "Mrs. Peabody paid her bill in full, the Joneses bought that used Emerson I've been hanging onto for months, and three others dropped off distressed table models that need repaired. A juicy day indeed."

"Juicy" was another of his words for making a whole bunch of money.

"As I've told you before," his father said, "the way rich people get richer is to start that way. Tonight, I'm flush. Time to parlay my good fortune into a big ol' windfall. Maybe a new ice box for you, Isabella. New bikes for younz boys, one red, the other blue, and there's a great looking used four-door Ford at Mel's place that'll be perfect for our trips to Lake Erie."

Henry had been surprised. A new bike. His father was going to buy Henry a new bike. One for Ricky, too. It didn't matter if it was red or blue, just not pink or purple. Those were girly colors. Though his preference was for the red one.

His mother was getting something nice, too. She would like that. And she deserved it, too. There was no other mother like her. When he needed a hug, she was there. When he needed a kind word, she was there. When he needed someone to talk to, she was there. And probably most importantly, she was there when he needed protection from his father's anger. He couldn't love her more than he did.

"Hamburgers tonight, but we'll have steak tomorrow. Making a lot of money brings about a great hunger in a grown man. So, put a large one aside for when I get home from the game."

He buttoned up his coat and gave his mother a sloppy smooch on the cheek. Henry thought it was disgusting. "Yuck," he said softly. And Ricky stuck his finger in his mouth as if to put it down his throat.

"See younuz in the morning. Be ready for some great times."

As he left, he gave Henry a big wink and disappeared into the evening darkness. All this talk was part of his game, the hoped-for money.

His dad stuck his head back into the kitchen and said to Henry, "Don't forget to pick up my shirts after school."

"Don't worry, Dad, I'll get them."

To Henry, it was insulting to be reminded like that. Sometimes, his father treated him like he was younger than he really was.

Henry had been hopeful his father would win. His father was always a generous winner. He would put the loose change from his winnings on their beds for them to find in the morning. And Henry and Ricky were allowed to spend it however they wanted, even though Ricky was a couple of years younger than Henry.

But when he lost, nothing anyone in the family did was right. He growled and snarled. Henry might say his father frequently won, but that wouldn't be true. And one of his father's unbendable rules was to always tell the truth. His backside could attest to that. Spare the rod, spoil the child, he always said as he refastened his belt.

Except for one thing. If the lie was to help keep a secret, then that kind of lie was alright.

This morning, there had been no loose change on Henry's bed. Not on his brother's either. So, it was with great hesitation that he entered his father's radio repair shop after school, soaking wet and empty-handed. If he were to lie, he could say that

the shirts hadn't been ready. That he'd go pick them up later. Of course, his father would be furious. Everyone knew that his shirts were always ready on time. Promptness was why he sent them to Emerald Cleaners in the first place.

Still, there was nothing else for Henry to do. He stood outside the door of his father's back room of the shop, surrounded by radios waiting to be repaired and boxes of spare parts. He hoped for the best, casually shifting his weight from foot to foot, his left hand at his side, the right one on the bike's handlebars. A relaxed position, the calmness on his face hiding his nervousness and fear. He brushed his free hand through his wet hair, wiped it on his pants, and listened.

The phone slammed down in the next room; the chair screeched across the floor as it was pushed away from the desk. The doorknob clicked once, twice, then stopped.

A cough from the next room. Henry's stomach turned a few somersaults, and a couple of twitches attacked his legs. No doubt he'd be dead in a few moments.

The knob jiggled, and the door squeaked. His father held it open with his back, hands on his hips, a scowl on his face.

"So, Henry Molnar, smart ass that you are, did ya get my shirts like I asked?"

Henry looked to the floor, shuffled his feet.

"Well, did ya, wise guy?"

His father towered over Henry; the scowl turned into a sneer. Henry waited.

To Henry, he was The Man. The Man whom he idolized and hated in equal measure.

To protect himself from his father's mean streak, Henry had learned how and when to lie. His lies were usually small and white, hardly different from the truth. They floated gently in the air. They were informative, charming. They provided protection. From his father. From the scolding of the next-door neighbor to the attacks of his teacher's paddle.

But a small half-lie probably would be safe. If only there had been a secret to protect him. But none came to his mind.

"I got a flat," Henry said. He'd had it since the day before yesterday. "See, look here. I fixed it."

His father's face grew red; his hands reached for his belt buckle.

"Really, Dad. I got a flat. Come look. I fixed it myself."

"You lying son of a bitch. Just like your mother. I've told you not to lie to me. This sounds like a two-fer."

A great idea popped into Henry's head.

“But there’s a secret, and I’m not allowed to tell you,” Henry lied again.

“I don’t believe you. There’s no secret. But I’ll tell you one.”

His father laughed.

“I’m going to beat your butt ‘til it’s good and red. That’s the secret.”

His belt was hanging from his right hand folded over itself.

“Henry, you lied twice, and you didn’t bring my shirts. Now, pull your pants down.”

Henry’s legs were shaking. He was on the verge of tears. There was only one thing left for him to do.

Run. Jump on his bike and go.

As the Man screamed profanities behind him, Henry pedaled toward home as fast as possible. He flew down Main Street, around the cars stopped at the red light, up four blocks. He pedaled as if his life depended on it.

His father wouldn’t get him. Not this time.

Because he had found the perfect hiding place. It wasn’t just for escaping his father or getting out of doing one of his mother’s chores. It let him avoid some rougher kids in the neighborhood when they were mad at him. His hiding place was under the next-door neighbor’s, the Williamson’s, porch. He’d found a few loose wooden slats on its right side. When pulled off, they left an opening he could slip right through. He swiped a blanket from a clothesline and found a jug for some water before going in.

Now, he was safe.