

The Haint*

*A term coming from the Gullah language spoken on the barrier islands of South Carolina and meaning a ghost, spirit or specter.

Mr. Stanley Payton always calls me Henry, and I have never told him otherwise. My mouth would not my folly be — a black child sucks that with his mother's milk.

To the women testifying with their upraised palms, the young men with their streetcar strut, the children chasing chickens, I am *Mr. Henry*, the honorific sitting on my shoulders like an old shawl. As much as my "Henry" has deceived Mr. Stanley, it has deceived them.

Perhaps that's my greater sin, deceiving my own people. I always thought certainty in old age would be my recompense for so much misery, but this morning, when I put my hand in my wisdom pocket, I felt only a hole.

I looked out the window and saw Mars stalking the sliver moon, and, now, this evening the leaves hang as still as ice. If I touch one, it will feel as dead as leather.

The artifice of my "Henry" must stop — dissembling is the tool of those who need it to survive. The testifiers, chasers, and strutters, they are the ones who must bob and grin letting all the Mr. Stanleys call them whatever they please.

But for me, "Henry" is a burden. I want to lay it down. I want to own what's mine. I want Henri, the name my mother gave me, the name she called me in the secret of this little house in the back end of the Payton property.

Once a house slave on Lake Pontchartrain, but later a free woman, she carried her headful of French north to Baltimore along with her Bible, four silver spoons, and a blue velvet bonnet. On Baltimore's streets she walked with a prideful step and trailed a silk scarf of envious eyes behind her. But none dared criticize her because she worked for Mr. Harrison Payton whose son

Stanley would have need of the ancient and indispensable art she practiced in the back room of our little house, a house that Mr. Harrison said would be hers forever.

She spoke French to me in secret — the testifiers, chasers and strutters, they would have rolled their eyes, not even bothering to hide their smirks. And white people, well, my mother was suspect enough.

The French, like the reading and beautiful script I learned from her girded her secret dream for me. At night, alone, we'd work, my mother pinching my arm, saying, "Henri, *fais attention! Tu écoutes? Fais attention!* A man can carry a fortune in his head. He can use it to make something of himself."

But, for all her saunter, my mother could never give shape to her ambition. That "something" that I, a black boy in Jim Crow Baltimore, was supposed to make of myself remained as formless as the clouds. And over the years, my mother's insistence grew as weak as an invalid's tea. As if, on her trek from Louisiana, she had burned up a generation's worth of energy. And when she passed away, keeping the Bible for myself, I buried her with her blue velvet bonnet and four silver spoons and made myself as helpful to Mr. Harrison Payton as I could and then to his son, Mr. Stanley Payton, about whom I knew a thing or two.

I just stayed in this little house, finding, as the years passed, more wonder in the syncopated pods of woolly bears than in the source of the sun. Or in the beckoning stars.

I don't need much: my Bible, my little garden, my books, which I still keep hidden . . . this little house. My days are rich, crammed with birdsong, the gray squirrels' flicking tails and randy ways. The turning of the willow by the stream where my mother bent and buried.

Before the testifiers, chasers and strutters hear them, the seasons speak to me. Soon after the winter solstice, beneath her snows, the earth pushes and I hear her groans. The solstice

again, and the earth laughs, a full-throated woman having replaced spring's blushing girl. I hear the earth stirring her thunder. Snapping her lightening.

And now? . . . this moment, what do I hear? A silence so solid a man can touch it. Not even the testifiers, for all the warm blood in their upturned palms, know what I do.

A mighty change walks this way. Yes, a mighty change.

It carries a silver-headed walking stick, perhaps the one it used upon the son who walks beside him. A father and his son. Mr. Stanley Payton the first and Mr. Stanley Payton the second, coming down to my little house. The two of them carrying change between them with such import it might as well be a cask of gold.

Mr. Stanley the first is florid faced, gray haired and black browed. A roué my mother would say. It is easy to see why the ladies loved him so. Still do, as I hear.

The son is a shadow, more so since he returned from the war. Small enough to begin with, he must have sliced off a piece of his self and buried it in a trench near the Argonne Forest. Whatever his father will have him do, his heart is not in it. Still, he is beside him, because that is what a Payton son does.

As for Henri, I must forget him. I see this is not the time to claim what's mine, even if it is my true name. I slap a smile on my face and scarcely have time to tilt my head so my grin trickles down and dribbles off my chin. I step outside: *"Why Mista Payton, sir, and, Mista Stanley, wha you be doin' down heya? Wha you be doin' down heya? On this beautiful evnin', wha you be doin' comin' all the way down heya, 'cept to make an ole man happy?"*

Gwennie

Exactly what I am doing that's supposed to be so wrong? That's what I want to know. It's not like I have AIDs or some other God-awful disease.

When I open a client's closet, touch their clothes, what harm have I done? Not a single, solitary iota. So I count their loose change, the pills in their bathrooms, and I feel around to find how much cereal they've left in the bottom of the box. Not a thing is hurt. Not one single, solitary thing.

The truth is, as much as I hate to confess it, I love the risk. When I go through a client's laundry or touch their pajamas, I must feel something like that zone athletes say they feel. Or a doctor when he probes a comatose patient and knows more about that patient than he'll even know about himself.

Besides, I truly believe knowing about a client's private things makes me a better realtor — I know all their little secrets.

For months, I've been prepared for the day Mr. Stram calls me into his office. I always imagine it's the younger Mr. Stram — Ritchie. He'll be pulling on his stiff cuffs — in the office Ritchie Stram never wears his suit coat, and his pants fit tight. He'll raise his fist to his mouth as if he were going to blow through it and clear his throat and he'll study the picture of his earnest little wife and daughters. Then he'll raise his eyes for a full blast of Gwennie and say that a client has complained. Things have been disturbed.

Then I will cross my legs and lay a little Carolina on him: "You know, Mr. Stram, I was afraid something like this was going to happen. There was this couple . . . somehow I just didn't trust them further than you can toss a pig's ear. You're experienced; you know how you get a feeling for who's really serious, and this couple just didn't seem that interested. Then I heard

someone else come in and I wanted to be sure to have them sign the book, so I left the first couple in the master bedroom. Why? Was anything missing?”

And, of course, poor little Richie Stram, suffering as he does under the yoke of his father, will just want the whole thing to go away. But I'll play the fiddle with my legs — I always invest in good stockings, the kind that swish when you cross them — and Richie Stram will clear his throat and say there must have been a mistake . . . he doesn't want to keep me any longer.

No it's not a violation of the client's trust that worries me. It's the things that I touch . . . am I violating *them*? . . . leaving parts of myself on them? When I leave my fingertip cells on the scarves stacked in the corner of a widow's dresser drawer? My hairs on a divorcee's brush, the wet from my tongue on her teenage son's T-shirt, what have I left behind? Have the things I touched assumed some part of myself saying, “Gwennie was here. Gwennie was here”?

When I opened the house this afternoon, the rain was whipping so, I could hardly get the blue and yellow balloons tied to the For Sale sign — no one will come today. It's a pity. This house is so elegant. Solid plaster walls. Marble surrounds around all the fireplaces, the one in the living room with an overmantel. Italian tiles on the floors of both sunrooms. Double doors into the library. The windows have real mullions — all the houses around St. Bart's Road do. Not those cheesy snap-out ones McMansions have.

Still, I think, for all their good taste and money, the Paytons had secrets to drown. This was their house, and there's a sense of hard drinking here. An old shaker near the dining room wet bar and all kinds of glasses in the highboy. Cigarette burns on the carpet near the leather wingback and more on the wicker in the living room sun porch. And I noticed bottle rings on that linoleum-covered old shelf in the mudroom. If I put my tongue to them, I know I'd taste rum and bourbon. Maybe Maryland rye.

