THE HAINT*

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

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

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 wooly 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 to the ground and buried what she had to.

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 blackbrowed. 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 evenin', 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've got some Godawful disease and will infect everything.

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 the patient will ever 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 was once so elegant. Could be again. 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 Way 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.

There's a haint in this house, I swear it. You can almost smell it.

The man who died here, Lawrence Payton, was the grandson of the original builder. This will be the first time the house will pass out of the Payton family—a selling point. People are so scattered these days, instant history seduces them. They think they can anchor themselves by living in the house of someone else's past.

Lawrence Payton must have lived here alone for some time after his wife died—that he was married I have no doubt— someone had to set the crystal candy dish near the green-silk sofa. And someone did the needlepoint.

But the contents of the medicine cabinet off the master bedroom have that scatter-shot approach I've noticed in other single men's. Almost everything, over-the-counter: Nasal decongestants, daytime cold relief, nighttime

cold relief, tubes of anti-inflammatories, four brands of aspirin, old ace bandages, an anti-itch ointment—no one to nag the poor man to get to a doctor.

Behind a box of digestion tablets I find three prescriptions. All for Constance Payton. Restoril. Valium. And one for the medicine my mother took to keep food down during her chemotherapy. When I close it, the medicine cabinet makes a click. The house is so quiet, I almost wish the haint would talk just so I could hear something.

The rain is fierce, and even at two-thirty in the afternoon I need to turn on the bedroom light. I open Constance's dresser. All the things that touched her, her slips and bras and underwear, the things that would have retained her smell and molded themselves to the shape of her breasts and behind, are gone. I run my fingertips over the pale purple lining her empty drawers and smell. Lavender. Maybe its scent drove Lawrence mad with desire. Or maybe he never cared for it. Maybe he was the spice-and-jasmine sort but never told his wife. Maybe he told someone else.

I open his middle drawer and the labels on his polo shirts have the crossed-racquet logo of an old Baltimore shop. Neither Richard Stram senior or junior would buy shirts there, but the bankers financing the mortgages for the houses they sell do.

His T-shirts, I notice, are folded neatly, but are dingy. Maybe he washed them himself. Maybe he thought it would violate his modesty for a cleaning woman to handle them. What if she saw his chest hairs?

Something in back of the T-shirts rattles. I reach; it rattles again. My fingers touch a vial. Viagra! Did Lawrence use it to pleasure Constance? Or for someone after her? As if it makes a difference now.

Out the window the rain is battering the balloons—I'm certain no one will come. I take a T-shirt, press it to my cheek. It smells like old soap and something else, something raw. In the armpit. I close my eyes and lick it. I feel it getting wet from my tongue and know that my lipstick must be getting on it, but I cannot stop. I open my blouse and undo my bra and rub Lawrence Payton's wet shirt on my breasts. I put it between them and press them tight.

When I open my eyes the shirt is smeared with red, and I have no choice but to put it in my briefcase under Stram and Stram brochures. I swear this is the first time I've ever taken anything. I just touch things. I just touch.

HENRI

The Messrs. Stanley Payton stand with their legs apart and firm not three yards from my front door. The older one smiles. I peer into his eyes and see uncertainty there: he knows that I have not forgotten his deepest secrets, sees that I remember the three women he brought to my mother in the night.

But he does not know if this knowledge has given me power; that is his uncertainty. The air is so still I can almost hear his thumb as he rubs, rubs, rubs the silver head of his walking stick.

"Hello, Henry. Nice evening, isn't it? … beautiful evening." *"Yessir. Yessir. That it is.Very fine evenin'."*

"You getting on all right these days, Henry? I just wanted to make certain."

"*Yes sir, Mr. Stanley. Ole man like me don' need much. I gets on just fine."* The younger Stanley Payton clears his throat. I breathe deep and inhale the scent of rye—now I know his secrets as surely as I know his father's.

"You've ever been on the streetcar, Henry? … The one where the line ends near the Presbyterian church?" the older Mr. Stanley says.

"*Oh once or twice, Mr. Stanley. The Presbyterian church, that's quite a ways for an ole man. An' I don' have no need to go ridin' around. Nothin' I need."*

"Well, that's what I've come to tell you, Henry. They're going to be extending the streetcar line out this way. I wanted you to hear it from me before the surveyors come. The line is going to come right about where we're standing now."

"*You don't say, Mr. Stanley. Right about where you're standin' now, you say?"* Whatever smile I had has dribbled away and I'm careful to replace it with wide-eyed disbelief. My mind is scrambling to use what I know about the older Stanley Payton so I can stop the change I sense tunneling my way.

"But why do they want to bring the line out here? Aint nothin' out here. Me? Well, I don't need no streetcar."

The younger Mr. Stanley shifts his weight a little and clears his throat again. He has the studied movements of a man playing sober—I've seen it in the strutters. The older one says, "It's not just streetcars that are coming, Henry. We're going to build houses out here. Fine, fine houses. We already have the plans. All over these hillsides and down to the stream—what you'll see are beautiful houses. We even have a name for the principal street … someplace in the Caribbean where Mrs. Payton's brother keeps his boat." He turns to his son: "What's it called?" "St Bart's."

I look in the younger Mr. Stanley's eyes, but they are dead to this. If I were to snap a twig he'd bolt like a deer. Three years and still war-spooked.

"All this is comin' heya? Fine houses and the streetcar, too? Right by my little house?"

"That's why we've come to see you, Henry. We need to see your deed. We need to know exactly where your property line is. We need to see your deed."

"Oh, Mr. Stanley, you know I don' have no deed. Your father, Mr. Harrison, he gave this little house to my mother, an' I just stayed.
So long as the Lord gave me strength I worked for Mr. Harrison an' then for you. You know that, Mr. Stanley."

"I know that, Henry, and you were a good worker, too. But that was a while ago. Times change. We just need the deed to check the property line, that's all. Just the property line. Isn't that right?" He turns to his son.

"That's right. We just need to check. That's all," the son says. He clears his throat.

And then I know what I must do. The leavings my mother scooped, she buried by the stream. Oh, I know what I must do. Only a sliver moon last night; only a sliver moon tonight. No difference. I am an old man so blind I can see in the dark. I am eager for them to go. I want to get to the stream, to Mother Willow, to what I know is buried beneath her. To touch it.

GWENNIE

I honestly don't care that many of the women buying houses around St. Bart's Way are younger than I am. Most of them were born old — tight-lipped and dull-haired — doctors, lawyers, who can't buy a handbag worth of style for all the money they earn.

When they're poking in closets or mentally measuring windows for swags, I see their husbands glance my way and I try to give the poor men something for their thirty years worth of mortgage-payments. I give them a full Gwennie when I bend over to show how the fireplace damper works or reach to show how the windows were rehung.

It fascinates the husbands that I know such things. As if a realtor couldn't have some college. As if she couldn't have a surgeon for a father who's owned houses this fine, or finer.

In fact, during the brief time he was married to the woman I called Mommy Moron, my father's house was on the Charleston Showhouse Candlelight tour. My friends would come over just to snicker while Mommy Moron, skinny as a spider, harangued the painters and paperhangers. We were supposed to be doing our trigonometry or French, but we'd be watching her out lay out upholstery samples in this light and that.

"Girls," she'd say, "which do you think? Now, remember, it's for a candlelight tour. It must look good in c*andlelight."*

And just to watch her spaz, Krista would pick the *fleur de lis* damask, and Allison the cut velvet. That fall, we drove Mommy Moron to tuck up her legs into her favorite yellow linen armchair and her second martini before Daddy pulled in the driveway.

Allison, Krista, and I were all drinking the afternoon Mommy Moron's son came home from the Citadel. Even with his tunic unbuttoned, Donovan looked sharp. Dark haired and broad chested. We were laughing—I don't know about what —maybe about the Showhouse Tour, when I spilt my drink, bourbon all over the champagne-colored couch.

I didn't know what to do; but Donovan just sat there. "It's okay, Gwennie. It's okay. I'll just tell Mom I did it … I made Dean's List and I'm Battalion Commander: she'll let me get away with anything. Even that stain."

"You'd do that for me?"

He smiled. "You're my stepsister, aren't you?"

When Allison and Krista left, he was still smiling. "Come here, Gwennie."

"Maybe we can just turn the pillows over."

"Come here, Gwennie." I heard him pull his zipper down. "Do you know all organs are organs of touch," he said. "You'd touch my ear, wouldn't you? My arm? Why not touch this? Just come here and touch it. It's just another organ. That's all you have to do. Just touch it. I won't touch you unless you want me to. Come here, Gwennie."

I don't know why I should think of that now. Maybe it's the rain. Or the haint I feel blowing through my hair like air stirred by leather wings.

If I cough, or make the bedsprings creak, the silence will shatter like a crystal vase.

I should see if the attic leaks. The roof is slate; beautiful, but hard to repair. I need to know if there are any holes … what's coming through.

HENRI

I learned a thing or two of my mother's silver-spoon ways. When Mr. Stanley's scatter-brained wife was showing me how to set the chairs for her spring cocktail party, the hired girl stepped away from the silver she'd been polishing. A repoussé, serving spoon caught my eye. Big and inelegant. Quick as a hawk to a rabbit, I took it.

All these years, I never knew why. Until tonight, when I take it to the willow by the stream.

It has not rained for weeks and the earth is hard. To soften it, I scoop water from the stream—willow leaves to stream's water; stream's water to willow's roots. I scoop.

When the spoon begins to bend, I claw my way—repoussé, useless as well as ugly.

I don't know what I am even looking for … all those bones … all those baby bones my mother scooped from those three woman Mr. Stanley brought to our little house, they would be gone by now, sucked into the marrow of their Mother Willow. Sprung into the glory of leaves, washed away by Father Stream.

But, still, I dig, my fingers, searching the soil for something that testifies to a life ended before it began.

I touch something. A rag…rags. That would be the last one he brought. A young thing, blonde, frail-boned. The sort of girl working behind a counter for her father or uncle and waiting for her destiny to cross a threshold and ring the little bell over the door. When Mr. Stanley handed her over, wide-eyed with terror, to my mother, she might have been a loaf of bread, a bag of biscuits.

With that last one, worse than the moans and screams was the silence. And then blood. So much blood, all her sisters before her might have pumped theirs into her and she was losing that too.

"Sheets, sheets," my mother said, and I was ripping as fast as I could, then going into the little back bedroom for more, tearing them off the bed, seeing the flash of Mr. Stanley's silver flask in the moonlight. Moonlight, too, later, when we buried the sheets.

They are old and rotted now and might tear if I rip them from where my mother buried them, so I clear the earth away carefully with the Paytons' spoon. I cannot tell if the stains on them are blood or dirt

When they are free, I will have to braid them so they hold. The Paytons want my deed—I will give them my deed.

I will wrap braided sheets stained with Payton blood around an arm of Mother Willow. And leap. My feet to Father Stream. My neck to Mother Willow. Let my last thought be a curse lasting beyond any memory of its cause. The curse the Bible gives—the one to the fourth generation. Let the Paytons have that for their deed.

GWENNIE

Once my mother was married to a man she told me to call Daddy Austin. On rainy Saturdays, especially if Mama had a luncheon or something, Daddy Austin would let me play in the attic. Sometimes I pretended a ghost was chasing me and I just ran from one end to the other, but Daddy Austin never said a word about the racket. Only Mama did, when she came home, calling from the bottom of the stairs, "Gwennie, you are going to wake the dead. Come down here, now. I brought the table favors, come see." And Daddy Austin would be smiling behind her as if he, too, had done something a little naughty. I was sorry to see him go. He was the only one to send me a note when Mama passed away. Sorry for my loss, he wrote, and that he was living in Houston.

I wonder if Lawrence Payton ever played up here. There certainly is room. The whole expanse is floored and gable —it could have been bedrooms, except there are so many below, there's no need—even the maid's room is below.

The rain on the slate is the rain's own sound, the cry of drops. The slate is silent. Maybe it knows it can't win. In water over stone, water will always win. It just takes time. I listen for another sound, the steady plop of water on wood … the sound of a leak. But there's none. For, now, at least, the roof is tight.

Everything has been cleared out, probably to an auctioneer's, except for a cardboard carton far under one gable. Even in this dreary light, I can see its sides have begun to sag. Its corners, edges, haven't been crisp for years.

The only thing in it is an old brown accordion folder tied with a frayed gray cord. I work at the knot until it gives—my nails are naturally strong, and I have my manicurist double coat—my polish never chips. The pile of newspaper clippings I pull out might as well be dried leaves, they're that frail.

All of them are about a single life. Stanley Payton the Second's. The first article has a picture; he's wearing a blazer and white slacks and is standing with his Princeton classmates. He's smiling but not as broadly as the others. The next says that on the night before he went off to the First World War, his parents gave a party. A hundred and fifty guests, oysters, crab, fresh strawberries and Baltimore Lady cake. There was a band with a Negro singer.

When he was wounded and came home, he recuperated with his uncle down on St. Bart's. They watched a regatta.

And, then, there's his wedding. A small girl, tentative, like himself. I wonder what pressure, if any, did she feel when Stanley Payton the Second spooned his body around hers to cut the cake. Next, the announcement of their baby son, Lawrence. Then one that Stanley has been elected secretary of the Baltimore Chamber of Commerce. Another, to the board of a hospital. The board of the symphony. All those years, the same haunted eyes.

I can't tell how old he is in the last. Maybe forty? … fifty? It's a studio shot, appropriately dignified for the story: **Heir to Real Estate Fortune Ends Life**. "Yesterday afternoon, Stanley Payton, World War I hero, and heir to a real estate firm founded by his father, ended his life in the family home on St. Bart's Way … . "

The clipping is weightless. I can't feel my fingers letting go when I put it in the folder. Or when I tie the cord. I don't feel even the knob when I pull the attic door shut. Or the railing under my palm as I go down the stairs.

The whole house—those rings on the linoleum-covered shelf, those cigarette burns—testifies to the secret of that dusty folder. Why did Lawrence stay here, in this home, for so long? Did he think he could outlive memory?

The rain is beating harder, and I don't hear the front door open—only voices. A mother, father and two little boys are standing in the foyer, all of them dripping, and slightly breathless, as if surprised to find themselves there. The father smiles: "Whew, I'm glad you're still here. The ad said 1 to 3. We're cutting it close, I know … a colleague of mine in Cleveland said 'If you're moving to Baltimore, you should check out the houses around St. Bart's Way,' but we almost didn't make it … we got caught in traffic … the Ravens game. And Timmy, here, came down with a stomachache."

Without fresh lipstick, I feel half myself, but I give him my best smile.

"You all take your time. There's no rush. I'm in no hurry."

The mother is fussing with the little boys' dripping hoods, so I have no choice but to extend my hand to the father.

"I'm Gwennie Aldridge. And I just think it's a pity that you all came to Baltimore on the one God-awful day we have a year." The man, ruddy-faced and lanky, laughs. His hand is large and cold. And when he lets mine go, his nails trail down my palm to my fingertips; his thumb, the last to leave, slides over the red smooth nail of my middle finger.

From the foyer, the mother is looking into the living room. "Remember, boys, I told you not to touch anything." Her tone is full of admonition, but from her eyes, I can tell that she's already set Christmas candles on the sills and holly on the mantle.

Out the window, I see a yellow balloon has broken free.
Like a big old implacable moon, it rises against the rain.