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Cousin Henry

TERRI SHANAHAN

In our family, there really was a bogeyman and he even had a name: Cousin Henry. Sight unseen, my brother Jacky and I worshipped him, *not* for the story of what he did to make so many grown-ups hate him; we worshipped him because of the way our mom said his name, *Cousin Henry*, with this sound in her voice that spoke of fear and awe, something that whispered—*evil*

Wicked. Notorious. Naughty.

Fun.

Cousin Henry was the big bad wolf, the monster under Jacky's bed, he was an evil wizard and the bad stranger our mom was always warning us about.

And he liked us. It was for Cousin Henry that Jacky and I did things like dig up the back yard (we were looking for dead bodies) and stepped on the cracks in the sidewalk. It was for Cousin Henry that we collected dead frogs and turtles, mice tails and white feathers, anything that we could think of that had magic. For Cousin Henry, we took turtles away from their water and stole little blue eggs from nests. We even tried to catch cats to get their eyes.

Cousin Henry wore many faces. He was the old man sitting on the park bench, the woman walking down the street, the man in the car driving slowly past us. We knew what his real face would look like: he would have bushy eyebrows and beady little black eyes, he would be entirely bald, with blue veins that stuck out on his bare head, and he would have a nose as big and as crooked as the Bad Witch's in the *Wizard of Oz*.

We tried to guess what it was that he did and thought for sure that it must have something to do with little children. Did he kidnap little children to eat them? Did he cut off their little legs and barbecue them for dinner? Did he tie children to trees and touch them in their secret places? Did he cut off their eyelids and pour honey in their eyes so that when he tied them to the ground, ants would come and eat out their eyes? Did he scalp them so that he could wear their hair?

We knew that whatever it was, it had to be big.

We could hardly believe our luck when we found out that we were going to spend the entire summer living in our grandmother's farmhouse, less than half a mile away from Cousin Henry. *So close.*

We were sorry that she'd died but she was old anyway, and she smelled terrible

and we'd only actually seen her three times in our entire lives. We got over it.

What we liked best about her was her will. She left Jacky the white bear who lived in the trees behind the farmhouse, and to me, she left the three singing doves that sat on her windowsill every morning, and her diamond ring. The best part of all was Cousin Henry's. To Cousin Henry, she left the house he lived in and *all of her nightmares*. Everything else, including several daydreams which she described in great detail, she left to our mom.

All that we could think about was our luck—to spend an entire summer living near and playing with Cousin Henry seemed unimaginable. *The things that he could teach us*

So when our mom told us, during the three hour drive north to the farmhouse, that we were “never-ever to go anywhere near Cousin Henry,” we were sorry that she had to be that way about it, but we knew what we had to do. *We had to find Cousin Henry. Make him be our friend.*

Our grandmother's farmhouse was everything we wanted it to be. As soon as we got out of the car to see the house that our great-great grandfather built, we saw it wasn't anything like the grand plantation our mom had told us about so many times. The yard in front of the house was filled with baby trees and weeds as tall as Jacky. What paint there was left on the boards was peeling and cracked. The front steps were broken, with a cement block replacing the front step. Two windows, the front window and the one on the door, were broken, leaving jagged holes where the glass had been.

Inside the house was even better. The ceilings were covered with spider webs, the windows by thick, yellowed pieces of plastic taped to the walls. We had to step around the stuff on the floors, the dead mice, piles of dirt, baskets of rotten apples, sand, crackly yellow newspapers, broken furniture. It had everything a proper haunted house should have.

We wondered if Cousin Henry needed anything.

Jacky and I spent two days carrying broken furniture, crates of rotten apples, and bags of trash out to the car while our mom cleaned and swept and mopped. We had to tell her that we didn't see anything wrong with the house the way it was, but she just looked at us with this look in her eyes that warned us to shut up. She got pretty dirty before she was done; the handkerchief she wrapped around her hair kept getting sweaty and falling down in her face. Every few hours, whenever the back of the car was filled up, we piled into the front seat and she drove us to the dump. The dump turned out to be one of our favorite places to go, turning out to be a world of its own, mountains built of treasure, old refrigerators and ovens, broken chairs, couches, mattresses, broken toys, bags of wormy, rotten food, even an old Pontiac without any tires. We found a chandelier, made of a thousand shiny pieces of glass, at the top of one of the mountains, and lots of old fashioned toys, but she wouldn't let us bring anything home with us, not even if it was small enough to fit in our pockets, even when we told her that those old toys must be valuable, even antiques.

On our third day living in the farmhouse, we drove into town with the window frames to have the glass replaced. Mom tried to make an adventure out of it, buying us new squirt guns and Batman comic books, taking us to the counter of the five-and-dime for lunch, but we knew there were things that she wasn't telling us, like why our dad didn't come with us, and we weren't going to be bought that cheaply. For the chandelier, maybe, we could be friends again. Jacky and I didn't say anything because we were giving her the silent treatment until she told us what was really going on. The only problem was that she didn't seem to notice. She thought we were being good.

While we were waiting for Cousin Henry to come over and meet us, we explored our new territory as best we could, seeing as it changed every other day. We climbed up the trees, to the loft in the barn, on top of the chicken coop. We dug holes in the ground for Cousin Henry to bury little children in. We spent days looking up every tree in the woods, trying to find Jacky's white bear. Jacky whined about that a lot, said it "had to be here somewhere."

We couldn't find my three singing doves either, but at least I didn't whine about it. I knew they'd show up eventually.

After we did everything we could think of to do, once we'd travelled through all of the back roads of the farm until we came to the oil property fences with KEEP OUT signs on them and once we'd explored the property behind the fences and climbed on the oil well rigs, Jacky and I started to get bored.

Where was Cousin Henry and why didn't he come to meet us?

Didn't he care that we came so far to meet him?

We knew him as soon as we saw him. We didn't expect him to be so old, thirty at least. He was skinny and dirty, wearing old ragged army pants with a sash of cloth tied through the loops and around his waist and a t-shirt with holes and big yellow stains on it. His hair and beard were scraggly, made up of sticky looking clumps of brown hair. He was so skinny that his bones stuck out, especially his face. He looked like a ghoul. He wore little round wire-rimmed glasses and had ugly little black eyes. He *smelled*.

He was everything we wanted him to be.

We only saw him for a second, standing a few feet away from us, at the edge of the woods. He stood there for a long moment, like an animal that has suddenly realized it was trapped, and then he was gone, disappearing into the woods.

We didn't even get a chance to tell him that we brought him presents.

"Never-ever go anywhere near Cousin Henry."

We heard the story of Cousin Henry's car accident at least a hundred times in the month before we left for the farmhouse. It was supposed to scare us. We heard the story so many times, I knew it by heart and told it to Jacky every night after we went to bed. Cousin Henry was in the car accident when he was seven years old and he never got into any car again. His father, our Uncle Joe, took Little Henry out for the

first ride in the family car, planning to go into town and then down by the river. When they didn't come home and it was late and dark, our Aunt Alicia called the police and the hospital, but it wasn't until the next morning that Uncle Joe and Little Henry were discovered, on a dark, lonely, dirt road near the river, where Uncle Joe had driven the car off the road into a ditch. Why he did that we didn't know. It had been an extremely rainy spring and the water flowing through the ditch had a current as strong as the river's. The car was turned on its side and Uncle Joe was trapped in his seat by the bent steering wheel, while the icy water filled the car, inch by inch through its seams, hour after hour, until he was so cold from the freezing water he became too tired to keep his head above the water anymore. Little Henry watched while his father was eaten up by the slimy water.

The best part of the story that we only got by eavesdropping on our parents was about how the police found them. Little Henry was sitting on top of the car, playing with his new Chinese handcuffs, sitting on the passenger door with his feet dangling inside of the car above his father's body. "Why didn't he go for help?" We heard our mother cry. "That little beast just sat there and watched Joe drown. He *murdered* him."

Jacky and I liked this part of the story best.

"Do you know why Uncle Joe died?" I asked.

"Because Cousin Henry *murdered his own father*," Jacky always said in his whiney voice, pulling his blanket over his head.

Until we heard our mom cry, it never occurred to us that Uncle Joe's death was anything but an accident. The word murder fed our fantasies about Cousin Henry; we said the word over and over, savoring it, *murder*. He *murdered* his own father. We'd never known anyone who had murdered their own father.

The pictures mom showed us of our Uncle Joe were all yellowy and blurred and we never understood what she saw when she pointed out his pictures and sighed over how handsome he was. To us, he was just a man, granted a man who had been murdered by his own son, but still, just a man. We didn't see what she saw while we were looking at the same pictures.

What we wanted to know was what Cousin Henry did with his mother.

We found Cousin Henry's house the weekend our dad didn't show up like he was supposed to. We didn't really care that much because he was so bossy anyway, but we were still giving our mom the silent treatment and she still hadn't noticed. After the house was cleaned and returned to what she called "livable," she mostly didn't do anything that we knew of. Sometimes when we came in the house, we found her sitting at the table playing solitaire or sitting in one of the big chairs by the cold fireplace reading a book, but she never seemed to be *really* doing what she was doing. She looked at pages without reading them and played cards without actually touching them. She was just making it seem like she was doing something for our benefit. Jacky said that it was scary, that she was "spooky." Even when she was tear-

ing out the weeds in the front yard, she looked like she was in a trance, sleepwalking through the woods. Every time we came in the house, she asked "Where were you?" but it wasn't like she really cared, because she didn't even listen to what we said. She just said, "Oh, that's nice."

One afternoon when she told us to go play outside so she could take a nap, we took off in the direction she told us never to go, across the street, over the hill, and through the woods. And there it was, Cousin Henry's house, as tall as anything, standing in the clearing, surrounded by pine trees. The house was huge and dark, the curtainless windows black gaping holes. The house was crawling with cats and it even smelled like Cousin Henry, it had the same wet, thick smell of used kitty litter. We thought that there must be a hundred cats, inside and out, sitting in windows, on the porch, out on the grass. Some of them walked in circles around the house. Everywhere, cats. Some of them looked up at us, lazily turning their heads to where we stood at the edge of the clearing. Then they went back to licking their paws. They didn't care about us, didn't know how long we'd been chasing cats to get their eyes. They weren't very smart.

Jacky turned around and ran, whining, and I went after him, trying to catch him before he got back to the farmhouse and told mom everything, so that I could convince him that there was nothing to be afraid of and that Cousin Henry's cats were not an alien army that landed on earth just to eat him.

I caught him but he didn't believe me.

The next day we went earlier in the morning, carrying the shoebox filled with the presents we had been collecting for him, hoping to see Cousin Henry. The house was exactly the same, none of the cats had even moved. *They were waiting for us.*

We crawled to the edge of the woods on our bellies and watched, alert and ready, kamikaze pilots, on a mission. Cousin Henry came out the front door a little while later, wearing the same clothes we saw him in before, and stood on the front porch. One of the cats stood up and walked around his legs, rubbing up against him, until he shoved it away. Jacky started to whine again and I had to put my hand over his mouth, afraid that Cousin Henry would hear him, even through my hand. Cousin Henry suddenly jumped off the porch, in our direction, and I threw myself on top of Jacky to keep him from jumping up and running, screaming, all the way back to the farmhouse. But then Cousin Henry disappeared into the woods again, just like he had the first day we saw him.

We ran up to the house and left the shoebox on his porch.

The next day the shoebox was gone. We hoped that it had pleased him but we were still sorry it didn't have cat's eyes in it, although it seemed like he had a collection of his own. Every day we went back and every day Cousin Henry took off at the same time, carrying his empty potato sack over his shoulder. We watched him from our place in the woods and as soon as he was gone, we ran up to his house and looked in his windows. We wanted to see the trapped little children, and bodies and

broken bones, but it was so dark, especially in the basement, that we couldn't see in the shadows. But we knew all about shadows. We knew shadows had secrets.

Looking in the kitchen window, which was only possible if I climbed up on the rail of the back porch, grabbed the trellis and leaned over to look in, sometimes I would see a huge pot cooking on the stove, simmering away. "Children soup!" I would scream, jumping down and chasing Jacky. We knew it couldn't be anything as simple as chicken soup, or maybe potato. Something about Cousin Henry convinced us *it had to be children*.

We never saw anyone in his house until the one day we got there late and we saw Cousin Henry. I was hanging over the kitchen window when Cousin Henry looked out and saw me, pressing his face against the glass. He was a terrible sight, with his nose smushed and his beard straggling below his chin. I swore to Jacky that he bared his teeth at me, but this was too much even for him. He called me a liar when I told him that Cousin Henry had teeth like a cat's.

When we got tired of looking in his windows, we decided to follow Cousin Henry when he went out for his walk to see what he would do. We stalked him, staying far enough behind so that he couldn't hear us, and off to the sides of the road, hidden in the tall weeds, so that he couldn't see us if he turned around to look. He never turned around to look. Sometimes when he was walking slowly, we were snakes in the grass beside him, trying to get close enough to smell him. He went out every day, before lunch, always wearing the same clothes and carrying the old potato sack. He walked all the way around the edge of the property that was still ours, stopping once in a while to pee on the oil company's fences, unbuttoning his pants and dropping them until his butt hung out, then aiming and peeing. Cousin Henry didn't wear underwear which was something we thought was important. Mom said, "Only heathens don't wear underwear," when we tried to get dressed without putting our underwear on.

On top of everything else, Cousin Henry was also a heathen.

We followed him every day for weeks but he didn't do anything except pick up stuff from the ground, mostly broken glass, rusty tin cans, glass bottles, and sticks, all of which he put into the potato sack and carried home, slinging it over his shoulder like a bad Santa Claus. We wanted him to catch baby rabbits and strangle them, to lead us to Jacky's white bear, to pick up dead animals from the side of the road and eat them raw.

When we noticed that our mom seemed to be doing things again, we started to get nervous. She listened to our answers when she asked us where we'd been and what we had been doing. When we said, "Out playing," she wanted to know, "Playing what?"

"Nothing," just wasn't good enough anymore.

Then we noticed that she was spending a lot of time up in the attic, sorting

through the boxes. She brought two boxes downstairs and we looked in them when she went outside to work in the yard. One of the boxes had old pictures, mostly of weddings, and birth certificates. We never knew she had two other brothers who died and we wondered what Cousin Henry did to them and where he put their bodies. We found baby clothes and a dress we guessed was our grandmother's wedding dress. We didn't know what she wanted it for because it was yellow and had huge holes in it. The other box was mostly filled with old toys, *exactly* like the toys she hadn't let us bring home from the dump: an old china doll missing its eyes and hair, a rusty old doll carriage with squeaky wheels, cars that were missing tires and doors, a heavy play gun, and clay marbles that weren't quite round.

Once she packed the boxes, she had Jacky and me help her carry the rest out to the car and then took them out to the dump. We spent at least three more days making trips to the dump and she still wouldn't let us keep anything. We didn't get to go to Cousin Henry's house even once. It seemed like she was always watching us and asking where we were going.

We started to get the idea that we were leaving, even though we had one more whole month left to the summer, but since she wasn't telling us anything, we didn't really know. The only thing we knew for sure was that even though there was a FOR SALE sign in the front yard, no one had actually come out to buy our farmhouse.

Then she took the suitcases out of the closet.

The next morning, thinking it was our last chance, Jacky and I went straight to Cousin Henry's house, after we told her we were going for a walk. It took forever for Cousin Henry to come out of his house and when he did, we didn't follow him.

Instead, we snuck into his house.

It wasn't locked, all we had to do was open the door and walk in. Jacky started to whine again as soon as we got inside and all of the cats came running up to greet us. As soon as they smelled us, they lost interest and went back to where they came from, except for a couple of them who rubbed up against our legs. In the first room, we saw five television sets, stacked in a pyramid, all of them turned on to different channels, with the sound turned off. As our eyes adjusted to the darkness of Cousin Henry's house, we saw so many things, we didn't know where to look first. Jacky pointed at a pile of rusty old car parts, including an old bent fender, and started whining again. He put his hand over his mouth and started to cry. I knew what he was thinking but I was sure that it couldn't be the car that Cousin Henry murdered his father in. Maybe his mother. Maybe our other uncles.

We saw old red wagons, most of them missing some of their tires, reminding us of the tireless cars that mom had packed in one of her boxes. The entire downstairs was filled with treasures: six-foot-tall stacks of old newspapers like the kind we found in the farmhouse when we moved in, pyramids of tin cans, and hundreds of bottles lined up, like dominoes, weaving circles through the rooms, going out doorways and then coming back in. In one of the corners, a bed was made out of a pile

of clothing, blankets and sheets, all old, dirty, and smelly. Whole walls were filled with pictures cut out of magazines; stacks of magazines went up the stairs, all in neat piles. In the middle of the living room floor, we saw an old chandelier, exactly like the one we'd seen in the dump, sitting as if it had crashed there from above.

What made Jacky scream was the sign painted in black on the living room wall: "DEATH TO ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE (MY HOUSE). SIGNED, HENRY."

Jacky ran out of the house crying and screaming. I stayed to look around the room, knowing that I would never get to see it again, and then went after Jacky, trying to get to him before he got back to the farmhouse.

Cousin Henry was standing in the middle of his front yard, staring at the front door, waiting for us, like he knew, all along, what we were going to do. He just stood there, with his shoulders slumped and his hands open, not saying anything, just standing next to the empty potato sack on the ground.

I stood on the front porch and stared back at him, wondering what he would do, but he didn't say anything and he didn't do anything, he just stood there. While I was standing on his porch, I started to feel sorry for him, when I saw how small his shoulders really were and when I saw the way that they moved up and down, the way they shook with his tears. By the time I ran away, I was crying too, and I didn't even care that my arms were getting scratched nor that my shirt had gotten torn. It didn't matter and I didn't care.

I didn't get to Jacky before he got back to the farmhouse. By the time I got there, he was already sitting on mom's lap, screaming his head off about how he was going to die. As soon as he stopped crying, mom packed our things and threw them in the car, without saying a word to me. We left, of course. We left without ever finding Jacky's white bear or my three singing doves. We left without the treasure boxes and we left without telling Cousin Henry goodbye.