

Under a Cheerwine Moon

Today, like every day, he was taking the backyard beeline back from Elam, from the 7-11, where he went to buy a Cheerwine. In his faded jeans with his shirt-tail tucked neatly in and top button buttoned, Henry cast a neater appearance than his surroundings, a diminished neighborhood where junked automobiles were abandoned to rust in overgrown backyards. They sat higgledy-piggledy on uneven blocks, tires removed, staring abjectly into space like old folks. Behind them, in backyard corners castoff appliances and parts were simply dropped and left to age badly. Swingsets teetered with seats missing and chains all awry, their middles sagging. What patchy grass there was did little more than hold dirt together where it struggled to gain a foothold among the litter.

Henry had regard for these left behinds. The broken down vehicles and litter reminded him of how lost and alone he had felt in the days since his mother had died. He too had been left behind. He too was scattered and exposed. He did not know what to do with himself.

He tapped an old Ford as he walked by, admiring its leather interior, and he remembered riding in his mother's Ford Fairlane on a cool night with the windows down and the heat on, gospel music pouring out of the radio and his mother keeping time by

tapping the wheel. "Nice shine you have today," he said, letting his hand fall along the hood of a rusty old Buick from grille to windshield. "Rest easy, Whirlpool," he said to a refrigerator reclining by a fence, giving it a pat.

He paused for a moment by the McCaffrey's garage and turned the bottle of Cheerwine up to the sky and took a long draw, letting it flood his mouth. Bringing it down again, he said "that's good. . . man, that's good," shaking his head, making a mental note to check his supply when he got home. Reaching up, he took his cap off and let what breeze there was cool his head, the air wafting by carrying just a hint of magnolia blooms from the tree in the sideyard.

He leaned down to pet the Griffin's dog, Chief, a mixed-breed mutt who badly needed a bath, his fur matted and dirty. Grif had hit Chief one time too many in the head with a rolled-up newspaper. "Poor 'ol Chief. What's up today?" And there he sat, looking up at Henry with his best nobody home look, tongue out, panting, eyes searching Henry's eyes for a response. "Aw, I know what you want, you rascal." He brought his Cheerwine bottle down and poured a bit into the dog's open mouth. Chief lapped it greedily. "You the only dog I know likes Cheerwine, Chief. You're smart. You're no dummy." He gave Chief a pat, and another, stroking his head for a moment, and walked on across the Griffin's backyard, whistling, Chief tagging along expectantly behind him.

As he walked through the ankle-high grass, Henry remembered Josie Griffin, the little blond-haired girl with the eyes that flashed and the downright foul mouth, that teaser

Josie-miss-big-mouth Griffin. He could hear her now -- "Henry, you retard, you big dummy. Don't you come near me, Henry, go on back home Henry" -- yabbering and jabbering, just being a regular pest. But that was a long time ago, he thought, and Josie grew up and moved away, and when she came home on that rare occasion, driving her shiny convertible, she wouldn't even return his waves or smiles. *Oh, the heck with Josie Griffin,* Henry thought to himself. And yet, he stopped for a moment, the wind catching the seat on Grif's rusted old swing-set, and he remembered Josie laughing there, just a little thing, as he pushed her higher and higher into the sky, the sun catching her hair and making it shimmer, her yelling all the time "faster, Henry, faster," and giggling on and on. Henry shook his head at that. "I'm going home, Chief. Get on now."

As he turned the corner of Grif's house and made for the street, following the cracked front walk of the house down to the sidewalk, Henry looked down the street to where it dead-ended in a vacant lot, the power plant barely visible through the woods, and he remembered. He was on a sled this time, careening down an icy hill, with kids crying "go, Henry, go." There was fire too, a big roaring bonfire, and kids yelling "turn, Henry turn," but he couldn't turn. He couldn't stop in time. Just then his head began to hurt and, like a curtain dropping, the daydream ended. He felt something wet on his bare leg. . . "Chief, go on home, boy! You can't be coming with me now." Well, maybe he was a little harsh, he thought. He got that way sometimes when his head hurt, when he remembered things he didn't want to think about. He looked up at the roof of the Griffins' house and, seeing a lone sparrow there, watched until he flew away. He wished he could fly away too.

Meanwhile, Chief had started to slink away. "Aw, alright, one more sip." Henry sat down on the curb, sticking the bottle right in Chief's mouth, him lapping up the drink. Then he took the bottle and poured it over Chief's head. "I hereby baptize you Chief Griffin, in the name of L.D. Peeler, Salisbury, and Carolina Beverage." The cherry liquid ran down mutt's ears and into his face. His tongue lashed out, trying to catch every drop of it. "There, now it's official. You're in the family. But you definitely ain't going to any church. Nope, that just wouldn't do. Now, you better get on home, Chief."

Henry stood and looked up at Grif's house and noticed the paint peeling, window screens lying propped up by the house where they had fallen out of windows, a rusty bike with an upturned wheel thrown down in the front yard. Looking across the street to his own home, he frowned. The unkempt flowerbeds and grass, the vacant carport, and the dead dogwood in the front yard only made him sad. "This place is looking bad," Henry said, sighing. He took another sip of Cheerwine. Holding the almost empty bottle in front of him, he looked through the green-tinted glass at his own house. It looked blurry, like something in a dream. He looked at the print on the bottle, the white seal and big red letters spelling "C-h-e-e-r-w-i-n-e," and then let it fall to his side.

Henry thought to himself that that Mr. L.D. Peeler must have been a genius. He read that Mr. L.D. Peeler invented Cheerwine right there in the basement of his grocery store. A man with a dream, that man. One night at home, he pulled out the 1999 Rand McNally Road Atlas and found Salisbury, North Carolina. It took him awhile. He

remembered looking for a long, long time at the small dot on the map that was supposed to be Salisbury, with all the squiggly red, blue, and black lines going through and around it. It was beautiful, and confusing too. He couldn't figure out why such a famous place would be so small. He imagined Mr. L.D. Peeler's house. Must be a big one, Henry thought, with a Cheerwine drink machine in every room, little ladies in gray outfits with aprons on bringing a bottle of the red *ambrosia* (his Mama's term, not his own) out whenever you wanted it, whenever you called. Yes, Mr. Henry, they'd say, if he visited. Two drinks Mr. Henry? Yes, certainly Mr. Henry, as many as you want Mr. Henry. He imagined Mr. L.D. Peeler, still working away in the basement, perfecting the already perfect formula for Cheerwine. He'd say "Come on in Henry. Can you hold that Henry? Glad you could come, Henry. . ."

"You plannin' on moving in?"

Henry turned to see his neighbor, Vince Griffith, staring at him, his undershirt riding up on his fat belly, a cigarette drooping from his mouth. While Henry was thinking, Grif had walked up unnoticed behind him on the sidewalk in front of his house. "Huh -- oh, hello Grif. Just messing with Chief. That's a good dog you got there."

"Ain't worth a lick, Henry. And stop giving him that Cheerwine. Bad for his teeth."

"Nah, it ain't bad for his teeth, Grif. Good for fleas, too."

"You're crazy, Henry. You get on home. I got things to do and I gotta give this dog a bath. He's got something sticky all over him."

"Yeah, OK Grif. Be seeing you."

Henry stood up and walked on across the street, mumbling under his breath, "Crazy? I'd rather be crazy than a slob." He began to whistle again. It was rhythmic, the song, his arm swinging the now-empty Cheerwine bottle back and forth in time, back and forth, his feet slapping pavement, as he headed for home.

As he turned into the drive of his house, Henry stopped whistling and started singing. He sang hymns, mostly, and today he thought to himself that given his newly formed bond with Chief, "Blest Be the Ties That Bind" would be appropriate. The song had the additional reputation of being his Mama's favorite hymn, particularly that verse about "When we asunder part, it gives us inward pain, but we shall still be joined in heart, and hope to meet again." He didn't know what "asunder" meant, but it didn't sound good. He stopped to check his mailbox and, finding nothing, he broke into song, his pure tenor voice ringing out, echoing from the carport. When he reached "and hope to meet again," he felt his throat tighten and he sang softer, and then he stopped just short of the door. There, taped to the window pane by the side of the door, was a manila envelope. He pulled it off the glass, turned it over, and looked at its front. "Department of Social Services," it said, in the corner, and there, right in the middle, it said "HENRY DAVID ASKEW." The back of the letter was sealed up tight, with an extra piece of tape over the flap.

Henry raised the envelope to his nose and took a good whiff. "Hmmm. Smells important." He imagined an office somewhere in a big city with a man leaning confidently

back in his desk chair with a good looking secretary, like Josie Griffin, maybe, writing down what he said, just like in one of those courtroom TV shows. He grimaced. That made him worried, thinking about lawyers and men in black robes and big dusty books with lots of important words stacked up on the desks and people arguing over things he didn't understand, long strings of words punctuated by a "Henry" here and a "Henry" there. "Just my luck it's some lawyer," he said out loud. He stuffed the envelope in the pocket of his shorts and opened the screen door and front door, letting the screen door make a whack-whack-whack on the door frame as he dropped it.

He never tired of walking into his house, from outside to inside. He always marveled at how different it was inside from how it was outside, and how he even *felt* different inside. Outside it's hot, inside it's cool; outside he smelled mown grass and hot steamy asphalt, inside he smelled an old smell, slightly musty, and yet somehow reassuring. He remembered the time he got the tape measure and measured and figured out that the walls were only around 12 inches thick, and he marveled that such differences could exist within 12 inches of each other. He felt safe inside, protected from people like the Maniss boys who used to play tricks on him and sit on him, making him name 25 brands of cigarettes before they'd let him go. He shook his head and smiled, reaching down and plucking his elderly tabby cat from the den chair, stroking its fur, eliciting a gravelly vibrato of a purr. Walking to the fireplace mantle, he pulled the empty Cheerwine bottle out of his pocket and added it to the row of bottles already there. There were Cheerwine bottles on the mantle, stacked in cases in the corner, filling the basement downstairs, and lining his bedroom wall. He gave up counting

them, though sometimes he tried to, just for something to do.

Sitting down in a brown recliner, he situated himself so as to cover the rip in the seat of the chair. He needed to get that rip fixed, though he couldn't figure out just how to get it fixed. Lots of things were like that. Like the bathtub that wouldn't drain, or the peeling wallpaper, or the broken furnace. He didn't know what to do about them, who to call. Since his Mama died it was all too much for him.

Leaning back, Sam rolling on his back in his lap, eyes closed, he took the envelope out of his pocket and laid it on the table next to the recliner, smoothing it out where it was wrinkled. "HENRY DAVID ASKEW," it said, and "Department of Social Services." Closing his eyes, he let his head rest on the back of the chair, and before long his chest was rising and falling, rising and falling, Sam oblivious to his motion, his arms dropping to his sides languidly, a slight snore starting, the rays of sun streaming through the back door window getting longer and longer until they were gone, darkness wrapping Henry's house, a darkness with only the light of a full red moon.

Mr. Askew, can you stand up please?"

Henry quickly rose to his feet -- too quickly, maybe, because his legs began to quiver, and for a minute he thought he'd fall. Looking down at his feet, he realized to his surprise that he had no shoes, and his lily white feet stuck out of the ends of his pants legs. Looking up he saw an enormous podium about 20 feet away from him, only much, much higher than

him. There was a person behind the podium who had no face, just an enormous mouth on a white sphere, as if the face had been erased, and sounds were coming from it, angry sounds. He scared Henry.

"Is there something the matter, Mr. Askew? Are you listening to me?"

Henry's head began to throb. He put his hands on each side of his head to try and stop the pounding. Looking down as he did it, he noticed the table he was seated at was like those you find in a preschool, and his chair the kind little kids sit in as they play with puzzles and color, the kind Mrs. Holshouser had in her room at the Center, the kind he used to play on.

Mr. Askew? MR. ASKEW?

Henry looked up, and when he did he saw Cheerwine bottles, no kidding, cases and cases of bottles flying past him and that mouth, that enormous mouth, shouting something that sounded like gibberish to him, all the time getting bigger and bigger. He felt hands on him, squeezing him, shaking him, hurting his arms.

"No, leave me alone. Leave me alone! He began to struggle to get free, thrashing around wildly. "I won't go. I won't. You can't make me." People were talking and saying things he couldn't understand, while a smiling man with a pale face and a needle came towards him.

Henry woke to find himself in complete darkness. For a moment, he didn't know

where he was. Listening, he thought he heard a clock ticking loudly, only he realized it was his heart beating out an exaggerated rhythm. He was breathing heavy, his chest heaving, his body drenched with sweat. Sam was oblivious, still asleep in his lap. "Oh, Sam, that was a doozie, a real bad dream." Sam twitched a bit, enjoying one of his own dreams, apparently. He wondered what kind of things cats dreamed of beyond the usual mice, food, climbing trees, being chased. Whatever they dreamed, it couldn't be as crazy as the things he dreamed. At least that's what he figured.

Carefully laying Sam on the sofa, he walked into the kitchen, turned on the light and opened the bread drawer. He unwrapped the bread and laid two slices of Merita Enriched on the counter. Reaching for the Jiffy peanut butter, he unscrewed the lid and, with a dull knife, began to spread big globs of it on the bread. He carefully slapped the two pieces of bread together and took a bite of one corner. He felt his body calming as he began eating, leaving the dream behind. Henry thought to himself that peanut butter must be one of the finest foods ever developed. "It'll stick to your insides," Henry's mother used to say, glancing back at him from her place at the kitchen counter, flashing a smile as she did, a loose strand of grey hair curling on her cheek. Henry smiled at that. He figured he could eat peanut butter sandwiches for every meal, and sometimes he did. He tried to interest Sam in peanut butter, but he wouldn't touch the stuff. In that uppity cat way he merely sniffed at it and walked away as if he was saying "I can't believe you eat such stuff, Henry. It's beneath me." He liked Sam OK, he guessed, but for an animal that was supposed to be intelligent, he figured he sure was dumb. Any person, and beast, who didn't like peanut butter and

Cheerwine *must* not be too smart.

Finishing his sandwich, he opened the refrigerator door and pulled out a Cheerwine. "*Ambrosia*," he said aloud, savoring his mother's word. *Medicinal*. That was another of her words, he thought. *Make you wanna fight your granny*, she sometimes said, and he laughed aloud at that, as he always did, imagining a white-haired grandma ready for a fist fight. No sir, he thought, nobody messes with their grandma.

For a moment, he just stood with the refrigerator door open looking at the row upon row of bottles lining the shelves, and he felt better, just knowing that he wouldn't run out anytime soon. "*I suspect in Salisbury everybody's got all the Cheerwine they need*," he thought, "*and maybe even use it for shampoo or oiling squeaky doors or such*." He liked thinking about such things. He called it his "L.D. Peeler" moment, because he imagined that Mr. L.D. Peeler lived that way and, inventor that he was, he for sure was busy developing other uses for Cheerwine.

Sitting back down in the brown recliner, he saw the envelope again. He set his Cheerwine on it. "Do you mind if I use you for a coaster, Department of Social Services?" he said out loud. Sam looked up at him from where he reclined on the sofa, as if he wondered to whom Henry was speaking. He reached over and stroked Sam's gray fur absently. He thought to himself that it'd been a long time since anything good came to him in a white envelope. There was a time when bills came to him, papers with numbers on them that confused him. He'd stare at them, not knowing what to do. Then the lady from

the DSS, Mrs. Landry he thought, came and grabbed them all up off the kitchen table where they were littered and took them all away. He never saw one again. No one else wrote him. He didn't get mail.

Sighing heavily, he reached for the envelope, tore the end off, and pulled the letter out, carefully unfolding it and laying it in his lap. As he read, words began jumping off the page -- words like "inform," "terminate," "move," "no choice," and that last phrase, "must reluctantly . . . institutionalize you." He didn't understand it all, but he got the gist of it. They were going to take him away. They were going to make him move away from his home. The words began to blur and run together, swimming in front of his eyes, and his head began to throb and his ears began to ring. Even his head felt hot. He put the paper down in his lap and laid his head back in the chair, remembering green walls and locked doors and his mother crying. God, he missed his mother.

He slept fitfully that night, his legs splayed over the bed where he had fallen asleep in his clothes, momentous things happening in the world outside. Sam was perched on the window sill outside Henry's bedroom, ears alert, eyes flashing the moon's red glow. In his cat-sized soul, Sam could feel it -- the change coming on, something wafting in on the breeze, a blanket of otherworldly change, not evil but altogether mysterious. Sam sniffed at the air, whiskers twitching, intuitively sensing an inarticulable and slight seismic shift in space and time.

In his dream there was Josie Griffin again, laughing, blond hair flapping in the wind as he chased her round and round her house, in and out of the branches of the magnolia tree, and then, there was Josie chasing him round the house, him running in his stumbling clumsy way, only when he looked back he saw it wasn't Josie at all but a white coated, stern Mrs. Landry who had him by the collar, saying "Take these, Henry, now, you'll feel better, Henry," with Henry trying to pull away only to find he was paralyzed, unable to move away. "Now, now, Henry," said Mrs. Landry.

He woke to find himself alone in the dark, his hands clenched, his breathing labored. His chest felt tight. He remembered the letter and was scared. "God, it's me, Henry," he said aloud. "I need some help down here. I need a sign. What can I do?" It took a moment before he even realized that he had said this aloud, the sound of his own voice seeming to echo off the bare walls of the bedroom. 5:15 flashed the oversized numbers of the clock. Henry sat up, lifted the window shade, and pressed his nose to the cool glass of the window pane. Two yellowish cat eyes stared back, startling him until he realized it was Sam -- Sam the mystic, the seer, the cat who knew all but said little. That was what his Mama used to say. "Mama, what's 'mystic' mean?" And she'd just say, "Special, Henry, just special. Sort of like you, Henry." Henry never did quite make the connection between himself -- a pale-skinned two legged being, and Sam, a furry four legged creature much given to sleeping and eating. And yet when he looked in Sam's eyes, he knew what to do. Then he knew what he *had* to do.

Standing up, he switched on the light and quickly dressed -- jeans, shirt, topsiders. He pulled down a jacket, just in case. Then he grabbed his backpack and stuffed in an extra change of clothes. Finally, he reached up to the top of closet shelf and carefully brought down a wooden box, handmade just for him. Opening it, he pulled out all the money inside, counting about \$400.00, and stuffed it in his pocket. It was a large part of what Henry had saved from the check he received each month. He hesitated before putting it back, taking out a fading picture of his mother smiling at him, her glasses perched on the end of her nose like she'd been reading, and he stuffed it into his shirt pocket giving it a reassuring pat. Underneath the picture was a Cheerwine bottle cap. *A sign!*, he thought. He picked it up and placed it in his shirt pocket where he could feel its edges against his skin.

"Mr. L.D. Peeler will know what to do, that's for sure," said Henry to himself. He imagined a kind, grandfatherly kind of man, greeting him at the door of a important looking house, one with big white columns and lights in every window. After all, he's a genius, he thought. He could fix anything.

Turning off the light, he walked down the hall, moving by memory in the dark, letting his hand fall along the wall as he walked. Opening the front door, he let the screen shut behind him, this time letting it close slowly. Pausing, he let his hand rest on the door for a moment. Then he jumped the three steps from the porch in one stride and brushed against the grass as he made for the street. Looking back, he saw Sam sitting on the porch now, watching him with his wise cat eyes. "Sam, I'm going. You'll be OK now. I'll be OK

too." Sam just turned and walked away. He put his hand to his chest and felt the Cheerwine cap against his skin. Of course he'd be OK.