

# Commiserating the World with Henry

by D.G. Crum

Sometimes, when the devil gets hold of a body, it just won't let go. Case in point being that young boy right there," Reverend Henry Holmes declares with a high level of religious certitude. Henry – that's what I call him – should know. He's the minister of the all black congregational Church of God and Christ, located on Route 75 just around the bend from Coldwater. "I know, for a fact, Satan is making trouble for that boy, trouble for him and his whole family. Busy lips keep saying if he don't leave, he will be dead before my coming Sunday sermon." Henry continues to point at a young black man climbing into the back of a pickup truck parked across the road from us, our vantage point being the bench on the front porch of the Coldwater Dry Goods Store. It was as if Henry was pointing his finger toward the devil himself, as if to say, "I see you, Satan."

"Henry, is that the Rawlings boy?" His revelation sets me back a bit. The Rawlings family is a black family that lives less than a quarter down the road from us. I see this boy walking past our house time and again, shuffling along, as if he has nowhere to go, but has all the time in the world to get there. In fact, the only places I have ever seen him, with the exception of walking in front of our house, is at the Coldwater Store and in various cotton fields in and around the community. He doesn't go to school—isn't allowed to—and from what I can tell, that shack they call their house is where he spends most of his time—that is to say, where he spends his time when he isn't chopping and picking cotton.

Funny thing is that even though I know the Rawlings family—by their last name—as far as I know not one of them has a first name. And I am pretty certain that if the mother and father

are missing a first name, the two Rawlings boys won't have one either. How does that happen – how can a person not have a first name? "Henry," I ask, stirring the moment of quiet, "Why do the two Rawlings boys not have first names?"

Henry looks at me like I'm crazy, like I'm challenging myself to ask him the stupidest question I can think of. "Mister Ricky, why did you ask me that?" He almost chuckles. His smile slashes across his black face, cutting deep wrinkles through his weathered cheeks. I love it when Henry smiles, but the trouble is I don't think his comment complies with what I've come to know is the *Southern Racial Etiquette Rule* which states it is wrong for black folk—elderly man, pillar of his community, minister of the local black church, and all that aside—to look at a young white boy as if he's taken leave of his senses. That might just fall outside the rules; I'll have to find out, come Monday.

Back to the question at hand. Because he's my friend, I politely ignore his infraction of the aforementioned rules and forthrightly inform Henry that, "Because neither one of those boys has a first name. Do you think anyone in that family has a first name?" I think I can make him see my point with an example, "Look, my name is Richard Preston Summerset, right? And your name is Henry Holmes, right? So why don't those boys have complete names like you and me?"

"You live next to them, Mister Ricky. From your front yard, you can almost hit their house with a rock. Don't you know their names?"

I'm thinking Henry, himself, might be confused. "Okay, Henry, what's that boy's name—the one that's got the devil all knotted up inside him, and is gonna' die by your reckoning in just over two days. What's his first name?"

“Thomas.”

“Hmm.” I’ve heard Mother mention the name Thomas around our house before; I just never knew who she was talking about at the time. “Could be,” I quietly concede. “What’s his older brother’s name?” I am, by my thinking, challenging Henry’s creative ability to come up with a reasonable first name for the older Rawlings boy.

“Cleo.”

“Wait. Cleo? That’s an odd name. Where does a name like Cleo come from, Henry?”

The conversation is becoming a challenge between a 12 year old white boy and a black minister who is well into his sixties. The *Southern Racial Etiquette Rule* dictates that the young white boy must win in such contests. Those are the rules. What kind of game is Henry playing? We fought a war in this country and that rule, the *Southern Racial Etiquette Rule*, was part of the peace agreement. I am pretty sure of it. That’s why they decided to call it “The Civil War” ‘cause we got rules on how to be civil out of it. Henry has told me on more than one occasion that he has no recollection of there being such a set of published rules, but I’ll find something about it later in a book and I’ll show it to him. For now, I am moving forward with the name challenge.

”Seriously, Henry, where did you come up with the name Cleo? Ain’t nobody ever had a name like that. I’m thinking you made that one up.”

“Cleopatra had that name, and she was the Queen of Egypt.”

“Yeah, but she’s a woman. Right? And that’s a woman’s name. Right? And that Rawlings boy ain’t a queen and he certainly ain’t a woman.”

“I think it comes from Greece, might be short for Cleophus. If you want to, you can read about it when you start back to school next week.”

I forgot, Henry told me some time back that he can read. I decide to take shorter strides

in my argument with him. “Cleo . . . so his name is Cleo? Have you ever called him that to his face, Henry?” I’ve got him now: twelve year old white boy wins.

Henry turns to the truck that hasn’t left yet and calls out, “Thomas, is Cleo working today?”

“I couldn’t say, Brother Holmes, but he never made mention of it.”

“Thank you.” Henry waves off Thomas Rawlings, the soon to be dead Thomas Rawlings, as if to dismiss him. Thomas acknowledges the dismissal and turns back to talking to the other three black men in the back of the truck. They’re probably heading off to a cotton field somewhere.

Henry turns toward me, but before he can see that I have seen that look of victory in his face, I turn to look up the road a bit to see if there is something else we can talk about. Nothing new up that way—nothing Henry and I ain’t already talked about. I know one thing, come Monday, when I start back to school, I have to remember to ask the librarian if she can help me find a copy of the *Southern Racial Etiquette Rules*. Somebody setting next to me on this bench needs to do some reading.

“So, how is Thomas supposed to die, Henry? Any talk coming out of those busy lips on that?”

“Ain’t been a word on that subject. Probably just people talking when they ought not be.” Henry stands up and lays a gentle hand on my shoulder. “I gotta’ go home, Mister Ricky. I suppose you’re looking forward to going back to school—tired of the summer, tired of this old porch and mostly tired of me.”

“Not so, Henry. That part about being tired of you, it’s not so. I like commiserating the world with you.”

Henry smiles again.

“I gotta’ go home, too, Henry. Say hi to Aunt Bertha for me.” Aunt Bertha is Henry’s wife—a woman with enough mass to make up two Henries. Don’t know exactly why, but I love Aunt Bertha without ever a thought to the

contrary; and for some reason, I always feel as if the world is at peace when I am at her house. No need for commiserating when I'm there. I jump on my bike and head home. As usual, Mother will be wondering why I stayed at the store so long. But as long as I tell her I was on the porch of the Coldwater Store with Henry, it'll be okay.

Coldwater is a small community, stretched up and down this part of Rt. 75. Everybody knows something about everybody else and somehow, whenever something happens, we all find out about it like it was on television or something – that doesn't happen for real – but it's like that. You know how television gets from Memphis to your house and you can't see it but it just arrives? That's how it is around here. I can do something up at the store or somewhere where there ain't a soul around who should be telling anyone anything about me; and by the time I get home, my mother already knows every little detail. I've gotten several whippings because of that mystery –because somehow my mother knew things even when it wasn't logical that she would.

Today, it's Sunday and that thing I was talking about must have been working really hard. I sat down at the table to eat my Sunday breakfast and Mother tells me I need to be careful and to be on the lookout for anything strange because, as she put it, "Sometime early this morning they found Thomas Rawlings dead, caught up in some brush along the river bank."

"What the hel..." I almost say a bad word out loud. Mother looks at me with a raised eyebrow. Oh, God, I am so happy. There ain't many things I hate worse than getting a whipping for using profanity. Time to redirect Mother's attention. "Mother, did you know that boy's name? You knew his name was Thomas?"

"Sure Ricky, I know his name is Thomas."

"Is his brother named Cleo? Henry said..."

Mother cuts me off, "That's right, son, his name is Cleo. This is such a shame, those two

boys are good neighbors, very respectful."

Now how can that be? First, how is it that Mother knows their names and how is it that those "busy lips" knew Thomas would be dead before Henry's sermon this morning? I have to go somewhere so I can put some importance into these developments and cuss out loud. I'll do that later, but right now Mother has breakfast on the table.

She always cooks me two eggs, two biscuit, and two pieces of salted meat on Sunday morning and gives me a glass of warm sweet milk. I've heard her tell Mrs. Hawkins, the other widow lady in our church, that a breakfast like that keeps me subdued during the preacher's sermon: it stops me from getting fidgety. I don't think that's true. It is true, I fall asleep every Sunday, but I lay that at the feet of Reverend Horton, not because of something Mother fed me. I just don't think she would do that on purpose. I'm sure not subdued right now. I need to get moving. Me and Henry got some commiserating to do. That's Henry's word, I think it means thinking, leastwise I think that's the way he uses it. Monday, when I ask the librarian about the Southern Racial Etiquette Rules book, I am also going to ask her exactly what that word means.

Thomas Rawlings, dead before Henry's Sunday sermon. I feel like my brain is going to explode if I don't go see Henry right now, before he and Aunt Bertha head off to church. "Mother, I ate it all. Can I go see Henry and Aunt Bertha for a minute? I promise I will be right back."

She smiles approval. I think it is reassuring to her that I like Henry and Aunt Bertha. I can see it in her face every time I mention "Henry this" or "Aunt Bertha" that.

I hit the front door running at the speed of sound – must have been at least that fast because I swear I did not hear Mother telling me to be back in time to get ready for church. I ride my bike down to Henry's and Aunt Bertha's and arrive just as they are coming out the back door. "Henry, Henry." I drop my bike next to

Aunt Bertha's strawberry patch and using the last bit of energy and breath I have, I run up to them as they're heading toward their car. Holy cow, Henry is dressed up in a black suit with a white shirt and a tie and shiny black shoes. I hardly recognize him in his preacher clothes. I have to reassess this Henry versus Coldwater Store Henry. This man in front of me is a man with intent; my Henry wears overalls almost all the time and is a man made for commiserating. Not saying nothing bad about this Henry, but I think I prefer the Henry who wears overalls. Mother even bought me two pair of overalls so I could wear them whenever I commiserate the world with him.

Henry greets me with, "And a good morning to you too, Mr. Ricky."

Aunt Bertha is smiling. Did I mention I love Aunt Bertha? Henry is talking odd this morning. I ain't said a word about it being a good morning or any other kind of morning. He stands there looking at me like he is expecting me to say something specific. After a moment, it sinks in. "Good morning Henry, good morning Aunt Bertha."

"Good morning Ricky. How's your mother?" Aunt Bertha has not stopped smiling this whole time. She's like that. I think the world is at peace when she tells it to be; and just to make it clear, the *Southern Racial Etiquette Rules* do not apply to Aunt Bertha. She's allowed to call me Ricky.

"She's fine. Thanks for asking. I'll tell her you asked about her." Not to be short with Aunt Bertha, but enough of these pleasantries. I know the rule book dictates we go through them (I think it does), but I have some serious commiserating to do with Henry. That's what I'm here for.

"Henry, did you hear about Thomas? They found him dead sometime this morning. He was in the river, caught up in some brush along the bank. It's like the gossip you heard. He died before your sermon this morning." I hear my voice rattling on. I can't stop jabbering. Now

would be a good time for my breakfast to do a little subduing, if it can, in fact, do that. I try to slow down. "You think he drowned, Henry?" I feel like I might be screaming my words.

"Mister Ricky, if that poor boy drowned it would be because somebody put a bullet hole in his back so as to let the water seep into his lungs."

"What? Why would someone do that?" Henry loses me with that comment. He does that now and then when he gets a little confused.

"Someone shot that poor boy, Mr. Ricky. He didn't drown – he was shot in the back."

Aunt Bertha takes Henry by the arm and begins leading him away. "Ricky we have to go. Henry has a sermon to give and Mr. and Mrs. Rawlings will be at the church this morning, so sugar, we have to leave now. Why don't you come back sometime this afternoon?"

"Oh heck, I gotta' go too." I watch as Henry opens the passenger door for Aunt Bertha to get in. As soon as they were out on the highway, I ride my bike back home and run into the house to get ready for church. Mother comes to my bedroom door. "Ricky, what did I tell you about being back here in time for you to get ready for Sunday School?"

"I'm sorry Mother. Feels like I was only gone five minutes. Henry said Thomas didn't drown, but was shot in the back. Mother why would someone shoot that Rawlings boy in the back?"

"His name is Thomas. Try to remember that. We have to have respect for the dead and Thomas was such a good boy. To answer your question, son, I simply don't have the first clue."

Clues, that what I need to do: I need to go look for clues. Can't wait for Sunday School to end—I've got some detecting to do. Maybe I can get Henry to help me. Maybe tomorrow I can find out more about who killed Thomas. My excitement begins to lift only to crash back to the ground when I remember that tomorrow I have to start back to school. *Damn*, (I won't

get a spanking as long as I curse in my mind) why does the school year always end later than I want it to and always start before I'm ready?

Sunday school is boring; church is boring; Reverend Horton is so-o-o-o boring. Man of God or not, he can make anybody fall asleep, and today is no different. Grown men are dozing off, and Mr. Kimball (a man I don't like, a fat, yellow-haired man with pink skin) snores out loud and sounds like a pig. Just the same, I try my best to stay awake in case Reverend Horton mentions something about the Rawlings boy. I make it to the very end of whatever it is he is talking about, and not once does he mention the murder of Thomas Rawlings. What is wrong with that man?

We all stream out of the church; and as usual, Mother talks for what must have been an hour in the church parking lot. We're Baptist, and I am convinced there is something about this religion that dictates the adults spend no less than thirty minutes after church gossiping about any and every little thing. There must be a rule book for this, as well. No one has ever made mention of it, but I am convinced there is such a book, outside of the Bible, that tells us Baptist what we are supposed to do when we are around other Baptist. I want to go home.

I learned long ago Mother is immune to moaning. In fact, it often has the reverse effect on her. If I start to moan, say at a time like this, it generally results in her staying even longer and me getting a good lecture on being disrespectful in the company of other adults. Sometimes it even comes with extra work like doing the dishes, or hanging out the clothes after Mother has washed them. Those are girl's jobs, and if anyone ever sees me doing girl's work, I will be forever embarrassed. That being the case, I wait patiently without even a hint of a moan.

Finally, after Mother and the other ladies exhaust all the gossip, they say their goodbyes, and we head home. Mother can drive; most women where we live can't, but Mother had to learn how to drive after Daddy died. Mother

has a picture of him in his Navy uniform and he's holding me. You can't tell it's me because I wasn't even two years old when he died. There was some kind of accident, and his plane crashed into the ocean. Sometimes, when I talk about it, I cry so I want to stop talking about him now. Mother drives pretty good now, but I can remember when she used to scare the dickens out of me.

Anyway, after we return home, I immediately change into my play clothes and ask Mother if I can go down on the river to look around. I have practiced my argument throughout Reverend Horton's sermon, and I am well prepared to explain to Mother why I will be safe. All she says is "Go ahead, but stay out of the mud." Sometimes I don't know what kind of answer I'm going to get from her.

We live next to the St. Francis River, not far from where the old pontoon bridge joined Coldwater to Twist. The pontoon was taken out long ago, but people still use the gravel path to go from the highway down to the river. It's where everybody comes to put a boat in the water because it's the only place where you can get a truck and trailer down to the St. Francis. This, I reckon, is where they had to have found the Rawlings boy.

I hurry down to the river, past the outer bank and over to the main bank to see if I can find any clues. There is nothing, no tire tracks and no foot prints. Except for the fact that Mr. Austin's fishing boat is gone, it's like no one has even been here. I am nothing, if not perplexed. How could there be no clues here?

I walk up the river bank and head back home much more slowly, very disappointed that I have nothing to tell Henry. I start to wonder if this is even the place where the Rawlings boy was found. Almost as soon as I walk in the door, Mother checks my shoes to make sure I've stayed out of the mud. "What did you find, Ricky?" Mother knows what I've been up to. She is just uncanny and it's starting to bother me that she knows what I am going to do before

I do it.

“Nothing, Mother, there was nothing to see. No sign of that Rawlings boy ever having been there.”

She smiles, rubs my head, and says, “Ricky, his name is Thomas. Please be so kind as to offer him the courtesy of remembering his name. And no, there wouldn’t be any signs of him down there because they found his body on the Twist side of the river.” Finally, I have something to tell Henry.

I ask Mother if I can go see Henry. She makes me promise to come home if Henry and Aunt Bertha have company, pointing out that if the Rawlings are there, I am specifically “not to ask them one question about poor Thomas.” What is she thinking I will ask? I’ve got manners. On the other hand, I wonder what they’ve been told. I wonder what they’ve told Henry. Maybe Mother is right not to trust me on this one. I decide it might good if I can avoid the Rawlings family, altogether.

Just as I am getting to Henry’s and Aunt Bertha’s house, Henry pulls into the driveway. Turns out he has just taken the Rawlings family home. They have been making funeral arrangements for the Rawlings boy, for Thomas, that is. It doesn’t seem right to ask Henry if they know anything about Thomas being killed so I just offer, “Henry, they found Thomas on the Twist side of the river. I can’t imagine how he got there.”

Henry doesn’t say a word about that: he just asks me to come in because Aunt Bertha has saved both of us a piece of the chocolate cake she baked for the Rawlings. I ask Henry how the Rawlings are doing. He says they are like any mother and father who’s lost a child, completely broken. We will not be talking about Thomas today.

At this moment, standing here in Aunt Bertha’s house, it just doesn’t make sense, but I’m not supposed to call them Mr. and Mrs. Rawlings. I learned some time back I ain’t allowed to call black folks mister and mis’ess, no

matter how old they are. The rules must be somewhere in the *Southern Racial Etiquette Rules* book because I did that one day at the Coldwater Store to some black woman (I don’t even remember doing it) and some men (one of them from our church, a man who looks like a big pig and sometimes sounds like a pig when he snores) came to visit my mother to tell her that I need to be better instructed on such matters.

After the men left, Mother was shaking with anger. She might be a Christian lady, but I learned that day that my mother can curse a lot better than me. She told me to go outside. At first, I thought she was mad at me, but it turns out she was mad at the men who came to our house and mad at herself for letting me hear her say words like that.

It is a bad year for things of this nature. A lot of people are getting angry with President Eisenhower because of racial issues. According to the men who came to see my mother that day, he’s a yankee and a nigger lover. Apparently, one cannot possess more undesirable traits among white folks here in Coldwater than the combination of those two things. Around here, they say he’s imposing himself on Arkansas’s state rights when he ought to be more worried about the communists in Washington D.C. No one mentions a word about what the *Southern Racial Etiquette Rule* book says on this issue or even bothers to mention it.

Henry and I spend a Sunday afternoon commiserating on the going-ons in Little Rock, about President Eisenhower (how he used to be a war hero before this happened), about something called the Southern Manifest (Henry reassures me it has nothing to do with the *Southern Racial Etiquette Rule* book) and we often speculate on what Governor Faubus will do if President Eisenhower sends troops into Little Rock. After wearing out that subject, I tell Henry about the men coming to our house that day, and what they said to Mother. We continue to commiserate on that subject for some time. As we are getting ready to leave the Coldwater

Store, Henry tells me it would be best for my mother and me if I do as the men had told her – that I should continue to call him Henry and he will continue to call me Mister Ricky. It's never been quite clear to me, this particular rule, but if Henry thinks we should go along with it, I will.

While Henry and I are eating our chocolate cake (I sense Henry was enjoying my silence as much as he is enjoying the cake) I notice a picture of Aunt Bertha and a small white baby in a gold frame on their front room wall. They never had any children, let alone a little white baby so I am curious. "Aunt Bertha, is that you?" I point toward the picture.

"Yes, Ricky, that's me."

"Who's the baby you're holding?"

"Why, goodness Ricky, don't you recognize yourself?"

"That's me?"

Henry smiles and looks at Aunt Bertha as if to silently say, "See I told you he can ask some stupid questions."

I get up and take a closer look at the picture. It is me. It is the same baby as the one in the picture where my father is holding me. I look the same in both – same silly looking hair and same fat face. I sit back down and finish most of my cake with the exception of the top layer of icing. I like to save the best for last. Henry has already eaten his cake, leaving nothing but a very clean plate. I notice he is looking at the icing on my plate: an unasked question hangs in the air. I stand up from the table, and leave the icing for Henry. Everyone who knows Henry knows he has a sweet tooth.

It is clear as a bell that this is not the day for discussing Thomas nor is it a day for just run-of-the-mill commiserating. I give Aunt Bertha a hug and thank her for the cake. I say goodbye to both of them; and as I walk toward the back door, Henry stops me and gives me a hug. He ain't ever done that before. I ride my bike home in a state of 'solo' commiserating. I immediately ask Mother if she knows Aunt Bertha has a

picture of her holding me when I was a baby. Mother knows; but then again, what doesn't she know?

Mother tells me that after Daddy died in that plane crash, she couldn't take care of me the way a baby that age needs taken care of. She wasn't able to cook, couldn't buy groceries, and sometimes couldn't get out of bed. Aunt Bertha would come to our house and do all the things Mother should have done, would have done if she had been able. Henry took care of whatever needed fixing around the house and kept the yard mowed. Mother tells me there was a short time when she got sick and had to spend some time in a special type of hospital. That is when the picture was taken—when I lived with Henry and Aunt Bertha. I understand why I love her now—not just my Mother, but Aunt Bertha (and Henry). Tomorrow I start back to school. I will be in the seventh grade and I need to think about that for now. I'm a little worried.

Monday morning arrives and I have taken the bus to the high school. Everyone in the hallway is so much bigger than me. I'm 12 and some of them are 18. I'll turn 13 this year, but still some of them are 18 and shave and some of the girls have breasts, and wear makeup. I'm not even five feet tall and the only hair I have on my body is on the top of my head. PE is coming up and we have to take showers with the older boys after gym. I really want to go home.

By the end of the day, I begin to worry less and less about the older students. They pretty much ignore me. In home room, we all have to tell what we did over the summer. I tell the class about Henry. I never mention he was black—I'm not sure why—and I tell them about Thomas Rawlings, the black boy who lived next to me being shot in the back and about them finding his body in the river. No one even cares. I could have been talking about a dead possum on the road and their expressions wouldn't have been any different. I begin to think their mothers have not taught them to be respectful of the dead. During Study Hall, I ask the librarian

to help me find a copy of the *Southern Racial Etiquette Rule* book. (I am not sure why I did that—just checking, I think.) The Librarian has never heard of it but offers to look for it in the card catalogue file. After spending a few minutes going from drawer to drawer, she tells me it is not listed.

The first day of school goes by so fast I completely forget to ask about the definition of the word commiserate. As a matter of fact, the whole week goes by as fast as a cat's wink. But even then, it seems as if the weekend and my time for sitting on the Coldwater Store porch and commiserating with Henry is a hundred years away. I miss talking to him.

It's Sunday afternoon, and Henry tells me there is no news about how Thomas died or why he was killed so we talk about school. I tell Henry how I've been afraid of the older students. He laughs. I tell him not to laugh because he's smaller than most of these same students. Henry says he ain't worried because he has Aunt Bertha to protect him. We both laugh at the thought of Aunt Bertha straightening those boys out.

The weeks go on this way—school days going fast, and me looking forward to commiserating with Henry on the weekends. Three weeks have passed and on a Sunday when I have pretty much forgotten about Thomas, Henry tells me Thomas wasn't the only one who got killed that day. There were three other black boys from around here who had been shot in the back. Henry knows them, I don't. According to Henry, the county sheriff's office claims they were caught robbing someone's house in Twist and were shot in the process. During our commiserating, Henry asks me how I reckon four young men all got shot in the back while they were robbing a house. I try to come up with a possible answer but can't, and then Henry laughs and says it was a rhetorical question. He has to explain that word. Sometimes I think I learn as much from Henry as I do my teachers, and more than I do from Reverend Horton.

That night, I tell Mother what Henry said about Thomas. She shakes her head sideways to indicate she doesn't believe it either. Mother says she has known the Rawlings family for 10 years and she knows Thomas Rawlings was a respectable boy.

We don't learn much about current events in school, at least not local current events. We never talk about anything having to do with the death of the four boys—one being Thomas—and we never talk about what is happening in Little Rock. My history teacher pushes the subject of state's rights and how we are a nation of states and how each state has its own laws and all. But we don't talk about integration or equal rights, or the signs at water fountains, or the balcony at the picture show. We don't talk about those things, but Henry and I have been commiserating on these subjects for more than two years. Nothing's changed, but I think we need to consider revising the *Southern Racial Etiquette Rule* book because some of these things don't seem right—not when you see them from Henry's point of view.

Sunday afternoon finally came around and I head down to the store to spend time with Henry. He tells me some folks found out what really happened to Thomas and the other three boys. They had been shot for stirring up trouble in some of the communities, as Henry puts it. They had taken Mr. Austin's boat over to Twist with the idea of recruiting some of the black people to go to a place called Montgomery for some kind of protest and a boycott. Henry tells me these boys had just been talking to other black folks in Twist to get support when they were rounded up by a group of white men, and that's all anyone knows about them up until their bodies were found.

I ask Henry why he thought anyone would kill another person for talking to other folks about the same things he and I have been talking about for two years or more. Henry's face is sadder than I had ever seen him—sadder than



I ever want to see him be again. He holds my hand in his for a minute. It seems as if the world had disappeared into a fog for some immeasurable time. I can feel his love for me, and I know he and I have come to a crossroad, a place where he has to teach me my final lesson and it might be the end of our relationship, an end to our Sunday commiserating. He has tears in his eyes when he asks, “Do you know that big white barn in Twist, the one you can see from our side of the river?”

I nod.

He says, “Do you know what used to be on the front side of that barn, Ricky?”

I tell him no. I have never been to Twist—can just see parts of the town from the top of the river bank in the fall when the leaves are gone. He tells me they used to have some words painted on that barn that said, “Kill a mule, buy another. Kill a nigger, hire another.” Knives can’t cut that sharp nor can they cut that deep. I’m only 12, but I know Henry heart is hurting. What can I say to let him know I am still Ricky and he is still Henry and Aunt Bertha is still my

Aunt Bertha. I look at his face—he looks older than ever before, his face drawn and pulled down by anguish, the rims of his eyelids are red from holding back the tears.

“Henry, there’s no such book called the *Southern Racial Etiquette Rules*. I may have made that up so I could win arguments with you.”

“I know.” He lets go of my hand.

I don’t much like 1956—can’t wait for the year to end. To top it off, over the summer, two airplanes flew into each other in Arizona and killed over a hundred people. To modify something Henry said about Thomas earlier this year, “when the devil gets hold of a year, it just won’t let go.”

After a few moments, I decide to break the silence. “I’m just wondering, Henry, should we commiserate on whether the St. Louis Cardinals will be in the playoffs next year? I’m thinking they need a better bench. What’s your opinion, another miserable year like this one or are they going to make it to the series?”

I love it when Henry smiles. ▲▼▲