

Full Circle

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by Hal Bynum (June 2006)

Ever since the man had slumped over the steering wheel and passed out, the little boy had been alone in the world. He was afraid to get out of the car. It might be the wrong thing to do, and if it was, the man would find out about it later and beat on the child's body with his hand.

The west Texas town had red brick streets and the boy could see people moving around in some of the stores. It was mid afternoon on a warm spring day and everybody but Hal knew what to do. He looked back at his father, snoring and snorting and from time to time moaning in his sleep. Hal wished somebody would come out to the car and take care of them.

Finally, he felt so lonely and unsafe he opened the door of the car, and after a slight hesitation he stepped down into the street. He stood with one hand on the outside handle and looked up and down the sidewalk, searching for kindness. A man wearing a once white western hat stood in a doorway, chewing a toothpick and squinting at the day.

Hal came up close and asked the man, "Would you help my daddy and me? Would you help us get home?"

The squinted eyes moved to the car and studied the scene briefly before returning to the boy. He took the toothpick from his mouth. "Where do you live?"

For the first time Hal wanted to cry. "I don't know."

"You don't know where you live?"

Hal thought of the old ranch house and the porch and his dog, Prince. "My grandmother's there."

The man studied Hal for a moment, "How old are you?"

Hal glanced down the street. Maybe he needed to find someone else.

“Four. I’m four years old.” He felt vaguely ashamed that he wasn’t older and bigger. He knew he needed to be.

Further down the street a woman had stepped out of a door to examine the situation and Hal began to move toward her. He had given up on the man. He took a couple of steps and then stopped and turned back to face him again.

“You won’t tell the sheriff will you?” Hal looked at his father, helpless in the car. “The sheriff will take him away. They’ll put him in jail.”

When the man made no response, Hal turned and walked toward the woman. She had begun to move in his direction, a look of concern on her face.

Many years later, Hal sat at a glass topped table on the patio behind his brick, ranch styled home in Green Hills, a rich suburb of Nashville, and tried to remember how he had gotten home that spring afternoon in Spur, Texas. The memory shut off at the place where he began to tell his story to the woman. That was the end of it.

Hal poured himself another drink of whiskey and lit a Pall Mall, gazing at the big back yard. Earlier in the day he had been reading a book that had reminded him of that scene in Spur. It told how it was the father’s role and responsibility to take a son out into the world and introduce him to life, and life to him, and to let the child see the father interact with society. Kind of like the way an animal teaches a pup how to hunt.

He took a long drink from the glass and thought about his collision with life-- his “man against the system” mentality, and how his career could have been a parade, but he had chosen to make it a battle rather than fit in and adjust to the way big business does business.

He took another drink. “Maybe you just loved the drama of the thing.” And then after a moment, “Or, maybe it’s just cause that’s all you’ve ever known.”

He went over and hid the bottle among the plants that grew along the brick wall of the patio. In a few minutes his ex-wife would be bringing his boy over for the weekend and Hal didn't want her to know he was drinking.