

Golden Boy

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Henry woke to the roar of 98 octane high-performance fuel pumping through a 900 horsepower V8, inches from his head, just the way he liked it. He silenced the alarm and rolled out of bed. He passed through the living room with a microfiber cloth, dusting all 228 tiny hubcaps in his model car collection, cloth pinched delicately between his thumb and forefinger as he worked the tip like a paintbrush. Today was Tuesday. Tomorrow was Wednesday. On Wednesday he did windows.

In a glass display case in the center of the room sat the very first model his father had given him: Jeff Gordon's 1998 entry in the Winston Cup. A shiny Chevy whose nickname, Golden Boy, had become his own. As he did every morning, Henry tapped all five sides of the display ten times each, repeating the process ten times for a total of 500 touches. He wiped the glass and went into the kitchen where a pot of yesterday's coffee was waiting on the stove.

Nine hours later, Henry clocked out and returned to his car. He folded his yellow greeter's vest and placed it neatly on the passenger seat. Nobody could have guessed that the first job Henry excelled at would consist exclusively of speaking to strangers, but he—the boy who, for years, had to be coaxed into saying hello to his own parents—had become a fixture at the store, nearly as ubiquitous as the shelves themselves.

He turned the key and his car rumbled to life. In less than twenty minutes he arrived at Parker Hill Rotary, the only three-lane traffic circle in the county—his Nowhere Motor Speedway. In the years since getting his license, Henry had driven thousands of laps around Parker Hill. The routine was as natural and necessary to him as food or sleep. He fell in behind a passing Jeep and began his circuit.

Lap after lap after lap in the inside lane. Henry let his shoulders fall as his brain was drawn into a state of repose by the simple beauty of a continuous left turn. His beige sedan became a finely-tuned stock car flying beneath the lights in Talladega. Pavement and rubber wrestled for control. The engine fell into gear and Henry watched the needles sweep their smooth arcs across the dash. He rolled down the windows and the rush of air became the low roar of a reverent crowd. Henry felt his mind level out until it was as still and clear as a mountain pond. Most days he drove for hours, sometimes going until the fuel light flicked on, but today his ride was cut short.

A black SUV with plates from out of state flew into the circle. The driver failed to yield, cutting across all three lanes just as Henry was coasting into his 78th lap. Henry downshifted, allowing the engine to slow him down, but the driver didn't see him. He threw it into neutral and stomped on the brakes, but he was a moment too late. His head snapped forward as the cars connected.

Henry's brain began to sputter like popcorn without a lid.

By the time he regained enough composure to fumble around for his insurance card, the other driver, a man dressed in a blue suit, was already out of the SUV, examining the damage.

"You alright?" he asked as Henry stepped out of his car. "Don't see why they can't just make it an intersection like everyone else." The man's brow was drawn and he was frowning.

Henry tried to respond, but he stumbled over his words, uttering nothing but a few strained consonants. He gave up and began to write down his information, but his fingers were shaking and the pen punched through the paper, marking his palm with a blue streak.

"Are you ok?" the man repeated, emphasizing the words so that the question sounded more like an admonishment. But his tone softened once he saw what was happening. "Hey, it's alright. It's ok. Let me do that for you." Gently, he plucked the insurance card from Henry's hand and went to copy it against his windshield. He returned the card along with his own information scrawled on the back of an envelope. "See? Nothing but a cracked taillight." He moved to put a hand on Henry's quivering shoulder, but he hesitated and placed his hand in his pocket instead. "And look, not even a mark on yours."

"I'm ok, thank you for asking," Henry said, his breathing down to a manageable rate.

The man looked at him with an expression somewhere between pity and amusement. "Well if you're alright to get home, then there's no sense in sitting here all night."

Henry watched the man climb back into his car. The driver of a passing pickup truck stared at them before snapping his attention back to the road.

Officer Davis wiped his boots on Henry's Sunoco doormat. He pressed the doorbell—one of those flimsy plastic ones that offered no feedback to indicate whether or not it was connected to anything. A long moment later, a pair of eyes peered out from a window at the top of the door. The eyes vanished and Officer Davis heard the muffled clatter of a deadbolt sliding open.

"Henry," Officer Davis said through the storm door. "How are you?"

He looked down at the Officer's feet.

"I talked to your father the other day. Said things have been going good for you over at work."

Henry said nothing.

"Listen Henry," Officer Davis said, holding up his open palms. "Everything is alright. They just sent me down here to talk with you, that's all. Why don't we open up this door and talk face to face."

For the first time in the conversation, Henry met the man's eyes. With a shaky hand, he opened the storm door and stepped out onto the stoop.

"Now I don't want you to worry too much about what happened yesterday, alright? Nobody got hurt, and that driver, the presidential-lookin' fellow, he doesn't even want to put anything on insurance."

“That’s good.”

“It *is* good. But Chief got talking at the station and decided that it might be best for everyone if you took a break from your driving down at Parker Hill.”

“B-but,” Henry stammered. “You always...”

“I know we did, Henry. And it was fine for a while, but I think with more traffic coming through town, what happened today could’ve been worse.”

Henry felt his heart begin to pound and flutter. His hands started to shake more violently than before. He closed his eyes and breathed deep. In and out with his stomach, the way the doctor showed him. The moment passed and the emotions dissipated. Officer Davis let Henry compose himself before he continued.

“But you know what? There’s that parking lot down by the mall. It’s always empty and I’m sure nobody would say a thing if you wanted to take some spins down there. How’s that sound?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “Too square.”

“Well, Henry,” Officer Davis said. “I guess I can’t help you with that. I’ll tell you what though. I’ll be watching the race at my place this Sunday. Come by if you want. Tell your father he can come too.”

Henry turned and disappeared into the house. Officer Davis stood there for a moment and listened to the deadbolts fall back into place.

Henry fumed as he drove past the endless cornfields, searching for a familiar landmark but coming up dry. An 18-wheeler rumbled by in the opposite direction.

He hadn’t had a week this catastrophic in a long time. Without his daily drive at Parker Hill, he was losing hold of the tether he so meticulously maintained. Four days without a single lap, and he’d begun to shut down at work. After a meltdown at the greeter’s post, his boss had him running documents to other stores around the county.

Now he found himself lost on the way home from such an errand. Not only was he missing the race, but he told Officer Davis he’d be there. His boss knew Sunday was race day. Nobody should have to work on Sunday. Even the radio was static out here.

At the bottom of a dip Henry stopped at a three-way intersection. It looked familiar enough and he made the turn. His error became apparent when the pavement gave way to a narrow dirt lane, deeply rutted by many seasons of rainfall. There was no space to turn around so he kept on, his car jostling over the uneven surface. The lane meandered through grass so tall that Henry could only see what was directly in front of him, like he was looking through a cardboard tube. The sun was going down and Henry wondered how long he had before it got dark.

After what felt like a thousand more turns, the grass began to thin and the horizon opened up. Something loomed off in the middle-distance—some kind of building. Henry cocked his neck forward and squinted against the sun. The building was made of concrete, but

large pieces of the structure had crumbled off. Faded lettering on the near wall suggested some kind of defunct agricultural facility. The whole place put him in mind of a warzone, but it was not until the surrounding area came into view that he was truly stunned. Along the edge of the abandoned complex ran the even curve of a paved roadway, once used for shipping and deliveries.

Henry tightened his grip on the wheel and inched his car forward onto the pavement. He revved the engine. His tires squealed and his mind touched the still surface of a mountain pond as he accelerated beneath the golden sky.