



A Haunting View

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Such a pleasant afternoon in late September, Henry thought, as he sat high upon a boulder on the edge of the cliff. It overlooked Willow Falls in the distance nestled in the rising walls of the Alabama mountain park which towered above the canyon river directly below. *It's so peaceful, he thought, I wonder if I could find peace here at this particular spot. And on this boulder.*

Now pushing 40, Henry's life had not turned out the way he had expected during his senior year in high school. That was a wonderful time. His girl Emily was a cheerleader and attracted to Henry, a track star from Woodfield High. He graduated with honors and the world ahead glistened for him. Reminded him of a pearl, abundant and radiant, glowing with promises of the future in the family real-estate business and a life with Emily.

Something had happened that senior year. Henry remembered Emily saying the day of their graduation from high school, “Henry, you’ve changed. You don’t seem to have fun anymore. You’re just never happy. Is it me?”

“Oh no,” he assured her. “You are the best thing that ever happened to me. I love you, and when we’re out of college, we’re going to be married and start a family.”

That had satisfied Emily back then. Their college years at the same Alabama university did not turn out like he planned. He was gloomy much of the time. He became pessimist and looked on the negative side of any issue discussed. He was very good at pointing out all the things that could go wrong. He predicted things turning sour in his life. He was correct.

By their senior year at college, his grades fell to bare passing, he was depressed, and Emily had all she could stand.

“Henry, I’m not going to see you anymore. I’ve found another boy who brings me happiness, and I want to be with him. You’re just dragging me down with your attitude and outlook on life.”

That was a significant blow on the weight he was already silently carrying. However, by now, he was getting used to failures and unhappiness.

“Emily, I still love you. I know I haven’t been so much fun for a while, but I have a lot on my mind. My folks are on me constantly about my grades. My father insinuates he’s not sure he wants me in the family business. I’m in a fog.”

“Well put,” she said. “It’s choking the life out of you. These past four years have been all downhill for you and for me.”

Since he was almost expecting it to come to this with Emily, he hung his head and didn't say much more.

"Goodbye, Henry, I hope something works out to bring you happiness someday. I know I can't."

With graduation, Henry did go into the family business, and it was hard from the beginning. His father was on him all the time it seemed for things he overlooked, didn't do correctly and his negative attitude even when he did as he was told.

He dated through his twenties and thirties with no serious relationships. Guy friends also came and went. They didn't share much in common with *wet-blanket-Henry* as they called him behind his back.

Sitting on that rock on the eve of his fortieth birthday, he continued to contemplate what went so wrong. How could his life be so opposite of what he had expected when the future looked so bright back in high school?

Birds chirped in nearby scrub trees, anchored into the rocks and growing with virtually no soil. Their limbs were sparse and branches spindly. The limbs reminded him of his life.

I remember this one day in April back when everything was just fine. Let's see, Ernie my teammate was here with me. That was a good day. Ernie brought the beer in a cooler, and I drove my new car I got for my birthday. We were taking a break from the rigorous track schedule and skipped that Friday to make this trip.

The beer was kicking in as Ernie, and I sat on this very rock. Ernie always did get mean when he drank alcohol.

“Henry, buddy boy, you’re never gonna equal me in any of the short distance sprints. You’re just not fast enough in the 100-yard dash, and you don’t have the wind for the 220 and 440. I’m gonna keep on kicking your ass right through track season.”

“Ernie, why you got to talk like that,” Henry asked. “Yeah, you beat me a good bit of the time, but we’re both fast, often we take first and second at the track meets.”

“You don’t work hard enough. You got that rich old man and the family business behind you. You’re the golden kid who has everything. You’re spoiled rotten.”

Henry remembered wincing with those remarks. They were the most hurtful his friend had ever said to him. They’d been best friends for four years. Had Ernie been harboring growing hate for such a long time? He remembered more of the conversation.

“You’re the kid with the silver spoon always in his mouth. You got that pretty cheerleader for a girl. She loves your money, your car and all the things you buy for her.”

Henry felt the heat rise up in his cheeks and didn’t notice his own fists clinching up at these comments.

“I can’t believe you mean what you’re saying, Ernie, we’ve been friends, good friends for these past four years.”

Ernie now stood up and looking down at Henry still sitting on the bolder, “Friends my eye. Yeah, I hang around with you cause I don’t have a car. But you always got plenty of money for anything you want, while I have to work a part-time job after school and some weekends. If your dad didn’t grease the coaches palms, instead of coaching you one-on-one, you woulda gotten kicked off the team last year.”

Ernie was really building up a head of steam and spewing hateful, angry spears into his friend. At least that's what Henry felt. Henry looked up like a beaten puppy with eyes watering from the cruel accusations. Perhaps because just a bit of it was valid, but he could not help that his family was better off than Ernie's, who's dad worked on the Railroad.

Then Ernie said, "You're just a rich spoiled kid who never worked for anything, and if Emily didn't feel sorry for you, she'd be gone in a second."

There was a sneer on Ernie's face as he looked down on Henry. Henry could feel his cork about to explode as he looked up at Ernie, shadowed by the afternoon sun on the edge of the boulder.

Henry never knew what got into him when he rared back and kicked Ernie hard on the knee. Ernie went staggering back and toppled off the boulder to his death on the rocks far below.

Everyone knew it was a tragic accident. Two boys drinking beer playing hookey from school and one got too close to the edge and fell over. Henry was so shaken up, he never disputed the story.

It was a well-attended funeral, the family all wept. Henry dressed in a rumpled black suit, never said a word and hung his head throughout the service. Only Henry knew the truth, and the haunting of that memory caused a complete personality change and withdrawal from many activities, and ultimately losing the love of his life.

Things do not go well for the haunted. Henry could not quite figure out what brought him to this same spot again since that day so long ago. He had not eaten anything that day and not much in the days before.

At last, he stood. He stood tall, feeling a bit of breeze that had picked up. Standing abruptly with nothing to eat, the blood seemed to drain from his head. He closed his eyes. Dizziness enveloped him.

Everyone assumed he was still mourning for his long lost friend when he returned to the boulder and overlook that day. It was tragic that an accident had claimed the second of two friends in the same spot. Who knows, it may have been a ghost in the stronger breeze against the weaving body of the man. It might have been Ernie's ghost in the boulder.

Henry may still have that haunting view in the spirit world.