

BIG BOY RETURNS HOME

by

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Walking longingly in a pair of old shoes, a man comes out of the woods. Looking around in wet eyes, as if he was crying, the black middle-aged man leaves a deep sigh. In his mended clothes he looks tired from life and older than he is. The wrinkles on his dark forehead and around his expressive eyes suggest a man who has been through a lot of difficulties and has gained knowledge and wisdom throughout his thorny life. He stays still, closes his brown eyes and visualizes the last time he was here, in these woods. It was many years ago... He was a young, carefree adolescent, singing, laughing and having a good time with his male friends on a beautiful sunny day. He remembers how his friends fell on him, trying to pin his arms and legs down on the ground as they were playing, but in vain; he was stronger. Looking at his tired, overworked arms, he smiles for the physical strength and vitality he once had. He recalls the song that they were singing that day and starts whispering:

Dis train bound to Glory

Dis train, Oh Hallelujah

Dis train...

He stops singing abruptly as the terrible images that followed those harmonious moments flashed through his mind. The water, the sign that says NO TRESSPASSIN, the scared white woman, the angry white man with the rifle, the sound of the shootings, his two friends falling dead... He starts walking again, in quick steps this time, as if he is trying to escape from his painful memories. The black man seems to be in tension and his weary and callused hands are trembling. When he sees a bench a few steps ahead, he immediately heads towards it and sits down to rest. He looks for a handkerchief in the right pocket of his jacket and slowly wipes the drops of sweat from his face. He takes a bottle of water from his bag, drinks some and pours the rest on his face. He feels much better now. He starts examining the place around him. Far beyond, he can see the town, its buildings, and a handful of people. Some things are familiar, some have changed. He wonders if his old house is still there. The silence is disturbed by the loud voices and laughs of a group of young boys passing by. They carry books so he figures out that they must be students. He looks at them nostalgically, recalling the days he was a young boy going to school. He smiles gloomily as he remembers the times that he and his friends skipped school to play around in the same place. It is ironic how, a few years later when he ended up in the North, he struggled to finish his studies but he wasn't able to do so. Big Boy sighs, shuts his eyes and brings to his mind the way he got to the North. It's not difficult since he has recalled these moments many times in the past.

The day Big Boy arrived in Chicago he was frightened and scared because he had survived through a terrible experience. He saw his friends being murdered and now he was alone in an unknown and probably hostile environment. Fortunately, he had some relatives in this—as it seemed to him back then—huge urban city of the North. His mother had given him a piece of paper with his aunt's address before he ran away from home to save himself from the angry mob. When he finally arrived at her house he was relieved. He wasn't at home but at least he was safe with his people.

Big Boy, standing up from the bench, starts marching toward town. He glances at the few houses in front of him. They are some charming constructions, well-built, with

beautiful gardens. He looks at two young girls—probably siblings—who are playing in their garden. Both of them are very pale, with blue eyes and long blond hair. The tallest one wears a white silk dress and white shoes, while the other one wears a light blue dress, white shoes and has a pink ribbon around her hair. There is something sparkling in their hands, most likely a silver bracelet.

Instantly, his first impression of his new family and their house in Chicago comes to his mind. The place they lived was located in a poor neighborhood inhabited mostly by black people. He remembers that when he arrived he was repulsed from the stink and the sight of garbage scattered all around the place, the deep darkness since there were no lights in the streets and the rats and insects that were roaming around the whole district. He recalls his first impression of his aunt. She was a dark-skinned woman, with deep brown eyes, and long, braided hair. Her clothes were old, washed out, worn out and second-hand. “She is beautiful,” Big Boy thought when he first saw her. She seemed kind and sweet too and Big Boy longed to get to know her better. Unfortunately, they never had a lot of time together because she had to work all day long. Every day, she was waking up early in the morning to go to work. She was in service of several white people, cleaning their houses, cooking their meals and taking care of their children. She usually returned home late at night, overworked and too tired to take care of her own children and Big Boy. “It’s very ironic,” Big Boy used to think, “that Aunt Betty is praised for how good she is in cleaning, in taking care of children and in doing housework for other people, yet her own house is dirty, insects have become part of the household, and when she returns home exhausted from work, she can’t do anything but sleep.”

Big Boy remembers that Aunt Betty’s high priority when he arrived was to enroll him into school. She was always stressing the importance of education and how vital it was to finish school. And so Big Boy registered for school. It wasn’t easy to attend and study though. Aunt Betty was working from dawn till midnight but she never earned enough money to feed five hungry mouths. She couldn’t pay the electricity and water bill, so for long periods of time they had no other choice but to live without them. The lack of electricity was a huge problem, particularly during winter, when it was freezing and snowing outside. Big Boy still remembers those terrible nights when they were trying to sleep wearing not their pajamas, but as many clothes as possible, covered with all the sheets and blankets they had, lying one next to the other, as close as possible, to try and keep warm. Beds cost a lot more than they could afford, so the family members had to share few beds among them, which was a good thing during the cold winter. But since it was terrible during summer, Big Boy decided to find a job and help Betty out financially.

“No! You gotta finish school! I can handle the household by ma’self!” Betty insisted when Big Boy announced that he was going to quit school. “School’s important. Education’s important. You can have a betta’ life than me if you learn to read and write!” In the end, both of them compromised on him working only in the afternoons for a few days a week.

As Big Boy wanders around the Southern town of his childhood, the place he was born and grew up, the place he loved so much but he had no other choice but to abandon, he brings to mind all the comments that his family and close friends made about the Northern cities of the United States. He recalls how each one of them

wished for a chance to move to a Northern city, where they would have more opportunities to advance and fulfil their dreams.

“There, we’ll be real American citizens.”

“We’ll get a good job, make money, and buy a big house and many goods.”

“In the North, we black people ain’t lynched. We’re treated with respect. We’re not called niggers there.”

“Pray to our Lord that we move to the North.”

These statements from the distant past of his youth echo in his mind. He used to believe in them too, but soon, after his fierce and sudden migration to Chicago, he disappointedly realized that they were only an idealization; they were just a dream. Reality was far beyond this image. He completely understood this when he started working and mingling with lots of different people in his daily life.

He was lucky enough to find a job as a waiter in a small restaurant for a few days a week. The money wasn’t much but he called himself lucky, because the restaurant was a fine place with new furniture, beautiful colors on the walls, and above all a warm place. He was not shivering in there and he didn’t have to pretend that he was all right, like he did in his house in order not to upset his Aunt Betty. He was even given nice, brand-new clothes to wear. When he first got them, he was overwhelmed with joy, as they were the finest clothes he ever had in his life. For the first time, he would wear clothes that weren’t second-hand. Big Boy smiles as he recalls how he used to stare at his reflection in the cracked and dirty mirror in their house. He thought he looked magnificent. His young cousins were excited.

“Big Boy looks so fine.”

“You look like a white gent.”

“You’re so lucky cuz.”

Soon though, Big Boy realized that he wasn’t really lucky. The place was nice indeed, but his time there was not. He recollects the countless derogatory statements made by clients who attacked his skin color. One time, he was serving a big company of men and women. One of the women was wearing around her neck a big and long golden necklace, which ended on her cleavage. He stared at its sparkling beauty for a few seconds. The man who was sitting next to her—probably her husband—noticed him and fiercely jumped off the chair. “Get your nigger eyes off the white lady, you black bastard!” He punched Big Boy right in the nose, which started bleeding. A guy from the closest table grabbed the man’s fist before he could punch Big Boy a second time.

“Jesus, man! He’s just a boy! Calm down.”

“Go to hell, man! A nigger is a nigger.”

Until he reached his early adult years, Big Boy did lots of different jobs. Waiter, janitor, cook, machine operator, porter and common laborer were some of them. He worked very hard, from dawn to dusk. Still, the money was not enough to cover his essential needs. As many years had passed from the time he was 25, Big Boy nostalgically brings to mind the day he met Sally, the woman who would become his wife and mother of his children. He had just found a new job as a porter at a house at that time and Sally was working as a domestic servant for the same people. She was a very pretty girl, with a beautiful smile, a bit shy but very gentle and kind. Those days, Big Boy was disappointed from life and had started drinking in order to overcome his problems. He felt dissatisfied as he was 25 years old and couldn’t see any possibility in fulfilling his dreams. When he was younger, he was dreaming of accomplishing

Aunt Betty's hopes and aspirations for him: to finish school and attend college in order to have a better future than she did. Seeing how much she struggled for a living, he shared her dreams for his future. However, poverty changed his plans because he couldn't cope with either school or job. He had to choose one of the two. And he had to choose the second.

His love for Sally and later the birth of their children gave him new hopes in his life. He decided to work harder and take advantage of any opportunity he could find in order to offer them the best he could. He wished for his children to have a better childhood than his. He wanted them to enjoy their life, attend school and not have to work to support the family, like he did. However, hope was not enough as reality proved to be very different and harsh. The first few years were not that difficult as both Sally and he were employed. Plus, they had an extra help from Sally's savings. However, soon after that period, Big Boy lost his job. He was sick and not able to go to work for a week, so his employer immediately looked for somebody else to replace him until he got well. There were people begging to be employed—even to replace somebody else for just a few days—so he found one on the spot. Apparently, this man was stronger and better at this job because Big Boy was informed that they won't need him anymore. It was a big blow for Big Boy, since he knew that finding a new occupation wouldn't be easy. He felt crushed and hopeless but he didn't lose a minute and started looking for a new job right away. Unfortunately, as he had predicted, he had no luck. He was unemployed for a couple of months and the family didn't have a sufficient amount of money. They could hardly manage their every day needs.

"I got another work." Sally announced to him one evening. "I'll go cleanin' an office as well. They're paying good money. We'll get along until you find something."

"But you're working too much already. You'll exhaust yourself!" Big Boy muttered looking at Sally's beautiful dark eyes.

"Well, we ain't have no another choice." Sally sighed, touched her husband's rough palms and turned her eyes on their two children who were sleeping. "The money's barely enough to eat. We can make it, but what about them?"

Big Boy looked at his young offsprings as well but didn't say anything. He knew Sally was right.

"It'll be for a few mo' hours a week. And I'm sure you'll find something soon", Sally comforted him.

Unfortunately, Sally was wrong. Big Boy found some part-time jobs now and then but nothing permanent. Soon, he started feeling hopeless; he couldn't see any chance for advancement. They lived in utter poverty, the kids were complaining and Sally was working harder every day. Soon, they didn't have time to see each other as Sally was away for the greatest part of the day and, when she came home late at night, she was worn out. Big Boy started feeling that his family was his personal failure because he couldn't provide any financial help. Once again, alcohol became his only way to escape his misery.

Big Boy walks around the town he was born, heading towards the neighborhood he spent his early years. His mind is overflowing with all of these thoughts about his harsh life. For many years he lived in uncertainty and offensive remarks and curses were part of his daily life. He remembers how he once came to believe that there will be no change, not for him, not for his children, not for any black person in America. They would forever be doomed to such appalling living conditions. But a few years

ago he met Peter, a man who gave him back his lost hope by introducing him to a new way of living.

A few days before the Christmas of 1957, Big Boy was drinking beer, as he usually did, at a local bar. He was leaning on the bar, chatting with James, the bartender, when Peter came in greeting the barman:

“Hey James!”

“Peter! What’s up man? It’s been ages!” The bartender shook the man’s hand and gave him a friendly stroke on the back. Soon, Big Boy was introduced to Peter and they spent the rest of the evening talking. Peter was a man in his late forties. He was tall, dark-skinned and had curly black hair. He was born in a town near Big Boy’s birthplace, but his family moved to Chicago when he was very young. He was a smart student and was given the opportunity to attend college and become a teacher. He was speaking in a nice manner and was interested in Big Boy’s story. He was very kind and compassionate when Big Boy let him know of his difficulties.

“Listen, it’s getting late and I gotta go.” Peter told him while looking at the clock on the wall. “But I’d like to see you again and speak with you about something. I think I can help you.” And so, they arranged to meet up the next day. Big Boy was curious to find out what Peter wanted to tell him and how he could help him.

The next morning they met again. Peter got straight to the point. He was a member of a team which consisted of some African Americans and some white Americans, who were politically involved and were fighting against racial discrimination of black people. As Peter explained, their aim was to establish racial equality, restore the voting rights of black people, overcome segregation laws and launch equal opportunities for advancement in all public sectors, through the use of nonviolent protest and civil disobedience. Peter’s eyes were sparkling with passion, hope and excitement. He sounded enthusiastic about it and confident that sooner or later they would achieve their goal; that sooner or later white and black people would be considered equal members of this society. When he asked Big Boy to join them, Big Boy was skeptical. He had heard before about people who were fighting for black people’s civil liberties but he was doubtful they would be able to achieve anything. So far, his life had proven him that there was no future for them. Still, Peter sounded very confident that change will come and this made Big Boy think carefully of what he has listened. Peter did not press him at all. He was very understanding when Big Boy asked for some time to think.

As he was returning home, thinking of all he has just heard, a photo lying on the pavement caught his sight. He picked it up to have a better look at it. It was a postcard picturing the burned and disfigured body of a black male hanging from a tree. In the background, his lynchers were smiling with satisfaction. Big Boy could not hold his tears and continued walking in a quicker pace. Every time he came across a photograph or a postcard of a lynching victim he had the same reaction because they reminded him of the lynching he had once witnessed; the lynching of his good friend Bobo. The remembrance of that incident was enough to empower Big Boy’s confidence and convince him to fight with Peter and his fellow citizens for their civil rights. He decided that he would no longer remain passive, scared and submissive but he would struggle for the black people to be accepted and acknowledged as equal citizens in this country.

Later that day, he talked about his plans to Sally and his Aunt Betty who had come for a visit. Sally was a bit doubtful to join in the beginning, but she really needed to believe in a better future, as she has been tired of living in a society for which she was almost invisible. Aunt Betty on the other hand, was overjoyed about it from the very first moment. “Good! That’s ma’ nephew! That’s ma’ Big Boy! I wish I were young and full of energy to join you in your efforts! But I’m too old now so make me proud!” She gave him a big hug and her eyes were full of tears.

It is now July 1965. After his long walk to his birthplace, Big Boy arrives in front of the house he grew up in. It’s abandoned. Throughout his lifetime he kept in touch with his family by sending them secret letters – he didn’t want the men who lynched his friend come after him in the North. He knew that his parents passed away many years ago and that his siblings moved away from this town. He feels happy, though, because now he can see that the opportunities and the potentials he once dreamt of started taking flesh. He is proud of himself and of his fellow activists because their protests and struggles have been successful so far. Desegregation has started taking place in the Southern states little by little. More education opportunities are opening up and citizenship rights are being establishing. The Mississippi Universities are being integrated. Just a year ago, the enactment of the Civil Rights Act gave a new sense of optimism and anticipation to every American citizen who has experienced discrimination. What makes Big Boy truly glad is that the African Americans are not alone in their effort for equality, freedom and racial justice. A lot of white Americans are standing side by side with them as they have realized the importance of their struggle and that their lives are inextricably connected with the lives of their fellow black Americans. Big Boy walks away from his old house to meet his fellow civil rights workers in order to make the preparations for their upcoming speech. While walking, the inspiring words of Martin Luther King, Jr, which he heard in Washington two years ago, echo in his mind. “Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.”

Note

The main inspiration for this story has been Richard Wright’s “Big Boy Leaves Home” (1936), which I very much enjoyed studying in the African American Fiction course. When I heard about the writing project I immediately knew I wanted to write its sequel. “Big Boy Returns Home” is also slightly based on Dick Gregory’s autobiography *Nigger* (1964). Other sources consulted are Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” (1963) and Aldon D. Morris’ *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (1984).