

HENDERSON

by

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It is almost as if there is no air here. Sizzling rays radiating from the southern sun, few breezes and high humidity create a sticky, muggy environment called summer. The heat slows time.

Sitting on the front porch, Sara slowly rocks back and forth in the swing, halfheartedly trying to swat flies. People she doesn't know repeatedly say, "How ya' do?" as they pass by. They trudge along with a deliberate slowness and control. Every word seems to be mulled over before it is spoken and their speech has a whining tone.

Summer after summer Sara visits her parents' relatives. As Sara and her mother walk past the hedge-trimmed sidewalk in front of her grandmother's house, Sara wonders why she must visit her mother's old friends.

Stanley, barefoot, and dressed in a white t-shirt and diapers, is standing on his front porch as usual, babbling and slobbering as he watches Sara and her mother pass by. Stanley is ten years old now, and the neighborhood kids still tease "that ole' retarded boy," although Sara and her sisters don't.

Heading toward Mrs. Knott's house, Sara and her mother are greeted by barefoot and ragged children playing in an open field, overrun with weeds. Chasing one another in their frenzied play, the children don't notice their skinny arms, gangling legs with knobby, ashy knees, or their baggy or skintight hand-me-downs. Even with their uncombed, unwashed, kinky black hair, they continue to scurry and dart throughout the neighborhood, their shrill and raucous laughter echoing from one drab, dilapidated shanty to the next.

A heavysset buxom black woman seems to sit placidly in a kitchen chair on the broken porch of every other shack in the community. It is bewildering to Sara that just around the corner from her grandmother's house, people live in whitewashed shacks.

Up the street, an elderly woman is sitting on her front porch. Gingerly tiptoeing up the wobbly brick steps, Sara and her mother carefully position themselves in front of her.

She is staring straight ahead, her gnarled hands clasped in her lap. Her dry, ashy legs are spread as if she is preparing to raise herself from her chair at any moment. Her feet are shod in dingy grey bedroom slippers, riddled with holes. Although it is a hot day, she is wearing a tattered sweater. Surprisingly, Mrs. Knott responds when Sara's mother calls her name, hesitating initially, then gradually a smile cracks across her creased brown face. Shiny rivulets trickle down Mrs. Knott's face as she remembers one of the few who come to visit her.

Walking back, Sara notices an old woman crouching behind a manicured shrub to relieve herself. Across the street, two threadbare neighborhood boys move aside to allow a grimy white man in greasy overalls to pass.

Sara's mother says, "Things have really changed for blacks in the South, they're even building their own red-brick-homes-with-white-trim-surrounded-by-shrubs-and-ever-greens."

It's so hot and muggy all Sara wants to do is go swimming, but they don't have swimming pools for blacks in the little town of Henderson.