

2022 Short Story & Essay Contest: Honorable Mention, High School Short Story Contest

The Family Man

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Inspired by the play "The Piano Lesson" by August Wilson

Pittsburgh, 1936

"All I'm saying is to take it into consideration is all," I stress.

"Lay off it, old man...you'll be a dead fool tryna get that piano outta Sutter's house." My brother sneers, taking another sip out of his glass of whiskey.

Releasing a sigh, I sit back in my cold plastic chair and look around the dim neighborhood, the sound of Ola's voice scolding our son gnawing at my ear. It's quiet around these parts, nothing much to do except skirt by on bills and look to the stars, hoping to shake loose the depressing mood life puts you in nowadays.

"Doaker, you just don't understand. How can a man like me have his head held up high while a piece of his family is sitting in that damned white man's house?" I sigh.

The wooden door opens and I feel a cold beer pressed against the side of my face.

"Them veins gon pop out of your skull with how hard that head of air is working, Charlie," my other brother, Wining Boy, jokes as he leans against the now-closed door, nursing another can after the family dinner.

"He's at it again, Wining Boy," Doaker complains at my right, rolling his eyes before leaning back against the creaky wooden railing of the porch.

"Oh lord have mercy on our souls. It's just a piano," Wining Boy shrugs. "Ain't gon bring nobody back to life. It's part of the past just like them plantation days were."

Their dismissal tugs on a nerve and I stand up to face these two fools that our green earth tells me to call my brothers.

Having had enough of it, I snapped, "Listen youngins. Now I know I'm older for a reason cus I ain't ignorant to my past like y'all. As long as that man still has that piano in his hand, holding onto something that my granddaddy done poured his heart into for his family, we're still in slavery! He still has his hold on us. At least my old man Willie Boy carved something for his family. The most we could do is take it back!"

“That’s all fine and dandy but is your life worth stealing something ‘for the family’? Look at you. You got a wife, kids, and a house at that. Most Black men can’t get all of them things at once these days. The best you can do as a man is to be there for your family and not get shot. That’s how I see it. Ain’t no good reason to go poking the bear like he ain’t own us decades ago.” Doaker reasoned a calm ice to my fiery mood.

“I’ll drink to them words,” Wining Boy remarks, almost stumbling while tryna clink his silver can with Doaker, drunkenness clearly growing legs on the poor man.

I ready myself to argue, fighting words at the tip of my tongue, when the mahogany door opens once again and the curvy silhouette of my wife leans against the doorway. Ola carries Boy Willie on her hip and stares me dead in the eye.

Well, it looks like I ain’t getting off easy tonight

Finally taking them dark eyes off of me, she glances toward my brothers with a tight smile.

“Welp, it was great having y’all stay for dinner but it’s gon get dark soon and I wouldn’t want y’all leaving too late,” she suggests softly, her smile slowly slipping off her face.

Feeling the tension in the air, my brothers look at each other before getting up and collecting their coats from inside.

Once the porch is just the two of us, rehearsed apologies make their way out of my mouth, “Hey Ola, I know you aren’t the biggest fan—”

“Save your excuses for later. We’ll deal with it once your accomplices leave,” she interrupts, hissing as to keep our baby boy from stirring.

Coats in tow, my brothers step out on the porch, kissing Ola on the cheek goodnight before giving me a look of prayer as they walk out of sight.

Still watching their backs, I hear the door slam loudly behind me. I sigh, ready to deal with all the attacks this woman’s gonna throw at me. I open the door to a now quiet home, the fireplace cooling down and the sounds of little feet running to bed heard from upstairs. Looking toward my pack of cigs at first, I decide against it.

Don’t need her to get mad for another reason.

I walk into the warm bedroom, steps getting slower as I near the love of my life. Her back faces me but the aggressiveness of her dressing for bed tells me that my presence is known.

“Ola, I just—”

“Don’t start with me tonight. I’ve had enough of this talk and I’m sure your brothers have too.” She cuts me off once again, marching to the hallway and yelling for my daughter Berniece to get in bed.

“It’s because none of y’all get it. Ola, I have to do right by my family,” I insist, desperate at this point, trying to grab hold of my wife’s soft hands.

She whisks her hands out of my grip and points toward me.

“Do right by this family and don’t selfishly put yourself in harm! How about that? Do you want to make me a single mother, Charles? A widow?” She questions me harshly, her voice slowly getting louder.

I stiffen at her words before irritation pushes me to rant, “Now don’t go head and say stuff like that, Ola. I ain’t leaving this family. I’m a man. A free man at that. So if I’m free, what is a piece of my family’s history doing in that man’s house? He prolly looks at it every day and remembers the people he had under his shoe for decades. Am I a free man to allow that? My granddaddy poured family into that piano. Family that that white man don’t need to hold onto anymore.”

“You a real fool, you know that, right? You free cus you ain’t a slave no more and that’s more than anyone in your family could have wished for you. So damn free at this point that the only thing your ungrateful self has to worry about is some stupid piano. Not about if you gon get beat up from going in the place a white man just came out of. Not about getting your food and allowance from ‘massa.’ For you to even live and lead a family that even has a fourth of what a white man has shows what you’ve done for this family. But no, instead of you being a good example for our kids, you wanna die.” My wife spits harshly, tears brimming the edge of her eyes.

But my temper won’t let me settle so I turn and yell, “Damn it, I ain’t dying over nothing! And if I do, it’s for this family!”

“You know what happens when a Black man steals from a white man?! You’re gonna die for being a fool and leave me the widow of a fool,” she yells back, tears fully streaming down her face now.

I cup her face into my hands as she sobs into my chest, the weight of her words slowly sinking on me but I say nothing. Looking up at me, Ola stares at me and begs, “Now, promise me this is the last time I hear about this piano. About you doing something so stupid ever again. You can’t leave me, OK?”

Her face of sadness crashes into me, and I nod my head in agreement, too scared to form the words she requests. I hold her through the night and don’t let go until late morning rolls around. It’s the Fourth of July today, a day of “independence” or whatever them white folks say it is.

I slip out of bed and get dressed to meet up with the boys at the saloon today, grabbing a pack of cigs on the way out the door. The sun almost blinds me as I step into the busy bar, crowds of men already enjoying glasses of beer. Sitting down at an empty barstool, a glass of barley gets slid my way, a clap on my back alerting me of Wining Boy's presence.

"Well, look it here. The man made it through the night. Thought I wouldn't see you again, Charles," he teases before sitting down next to me.

"Life gotta do better than that to keep me from breathing."

"Well look it here, Sutter done stepped in. Over there in the cozy white section with some folks. Didn't know he liked being around us."

"Son of a gun proddy smirking over there, expecting some entertainment from us Black folks." I sneer, side-eyeing the group from my stool. Sensing it, the fool looks my way and laughs before turning to a person wearing a watch that probably costs more than my salary.

Normally, I would've ignored this. But today and after last night, I was hot. First, he boldly walks around with that white skin and that white power. Now, my presence ain't nothing but a joke to him. I gave one of his people the bird before turning back to the bar table.

"Now, you've done it," I hear Wining Boy mutter before I feel a hand being placed on my shoulder. I barely register the tall presence behind me before a fist slams into my jaw and I see stars. Blood fills my mouth and I set my eyes on the brass rings adorning the white hand of Sutter.

The whole saloon is silent and watches the festivities of a Black man. I lift my head up to Satan on earth himself to see a smug smile playing on his lips.

"Now, I ignored that disrespect earlier but you're not gonna be rude to my company. Now apologize, n----r," he demands, pointing toward the watch guy who was waiting expectantly.

Like hell, I will.

"Burn in hell—" The words barely leave my lips before I'm knocked to the ground with a right hook. A metallic taste floods my senses faster than the need to breathe. Voices are getting louder and I'm being dragged out of the saloon by my clothes. It was Wining Boy doing the heavy work.

"You a real fool, you know that, right?" He breathes out in anger once I'm sitting on the sidewalk outside.

“Now, where have I heard that before?” I chuckle, laughter turning to groans due to my black eye forming. “I’d be a bigger fool to let him keep my piano after that bull.”

I’m grabbed by my collar and dragged to my feet to meet my brother’s fuming face.

You could’ve been a dead bastard right now and this is what you’re worried about?!” he yelled.

“It’s an even bigger of an issue now,” I spit back before slipping out of his grip and walking away. I set toward an empty parking lot and sit on a curb as the sun rolls across the sky and sets, smoking my pack away in record time. It’s quiet, a dangerous type—where silence floods your head, giving you a moment of peace before you’re brought back to reflecting on the s--thole that is a Black man’s life.

Where I need to be grinning from ear to ear because the white man simply gave me a job or let me enter his stores. Where I need to turn the other cheek when I get spit on. A life where I’ll see a white man with no better worth than me living in a house twice as big as mine, with a job with twice the prestige as mine, taking his white kids to a school twice as good as the ones my kids could ever step in. To look at all the things as a man I can’t ever reach and reason that “It’s a luxury for a free Black man” to have these crumbs. Can’t even try to honor the pain of my granddaddy and his work by taking the piano back. A true family man, as Ola would call me.

I’m sorry, Ola. But that man doesn’t deserve none of me no more.

I get up and run to Doaker’s house, a sense of urgency and motivation speeding up my steps. I bang on the door and it swings open to a confused Doaker and a still pissed-off Wining Boy.

“Help me get that piano tonight or I’m getting it myself. There’s a picnic that they have every year for them white folks. Please let me do this...please,” I beg shamelessly.

There’s silence for years before I hear a sigh and Doaker mutters an OK, pulling a wagon outta his shed. Relief washes over my soul as my brothers and I race to Sutter’s mansion. As expected, no one was home so the crowbar I grabbed before leaving caused no issues breaking open the door. Walking inside without a care, there it is. The piano. I run my finger over the dusty keys and mahogany panels, carvings so deep and raw, it seemed only yesterday when my granddaddy poured his life into decorating it.

I’m taking you home now, Granddad.

Wining Boy and I lift up the beautiful piece of wood and keys outta that forsaken house, success lighting a fire under our feet. Setting the piano down on the wagon, excitement sets my soul ablaze.

“We did it! We really did it, y’all,” I exclaim proudly, fireworks going off into the sky like the colorful sparks were cheering with me.

“Yeah, yeah. Instead of jumping for joy, how about you decide where you’re gon hide the damned thing?” Doaker questioned grouchily.

I snap back to reality and my smile drops.

Once Sutter finds that piano gone, it’s all gonna point toward me. I gotta get outta here and make sure they don’t find that piano.

“Take it back to your house, Doaker, and keep it there for now,” I shout as I start running off onto the street.

“Where you think you going, N-gro?” Wining Boy shrieks.

“Don’t worry about it anymore,” I yell back confidently. “Thank you for the help. I love y’all and tell that to my wife and kids. I’ll be back!” Their response gets lost under the sound of my heavy pants as I race toward the train station.

Using whatever money is left on my body, I buy a ticket for the last yellow dog train going south. I board the boxcar and take my seat on the wooden ground next to a couple of hobos, apparently the only space reserved for my people.

One of the bums turns toward me and questions, “Now what are you panting like a dog for?”

“I just brought power back to my family,” I brag proudly, a smile settling on my face.

He gives me a strange look and mutters, “What good you doing here and not with them?”

“I had to make a run for it if I wanted to stay alive.”

“And how is that putting a smile on your wife’s face?” He questions again.

“She knows I fought for our family and what was right.”

“Well, did she ask for all that?”

I pause for a second and reply, “What does it matter, old man?”

“I ain’t fighting with you. It just sounds like you did it to make yourself proud. Ain’t no family in what I’m hearing,” he mutters before turning around and resting his head on a nearby wooden crate.

I roll my eyes and lean my head against the wall.

Ola gon be mad but she'll understand. They'll understand. I'll just leave for a bit and come back once this all calmed down. I'll teach the kids how to play some notes and we sing at Christmas with Grandad looking over us. *I ain't gon die...I ain't gon die.*

The ride is quiet and my heartbeat calms down. My doubts were starting to slip away when the boxcar jerks and stops out of nowhere. I snap awake to the sound of yelling outside.

"I think he's in here," a voice yells from outside.

Fear grips my throat as the door to the boxcar is ripped open and in steps a red-faced Sutter and lackeys. Laying his eyes on me, Sutter grabs me by the collar and screeches, "Where's the piano?"

Calm down, Boy Charles. The piano's safe.

I fix a smile on my face, stare him straight in the eye, and blurt, "It's not here."

I'm dropped to the ground and kicked at my side as the lackeys start searching the car, tossing the hobos aside. The pain in my side stings like hell but is meaningless compared to the victory achieved by witnessing the frustration on Sutter's face.

He turns to me suddenly and spits on my face. The last time I'll ever let him do that.

"You're a dead man now," Sutter promises angrily before he leaves out the door.

So, this is what it looks like when the white man loses.

Setting myself back up against the wall, I force my heart to calm. The bums groan from being pushed around by the lackeys but we're OK and that's all that matters.

The car almost gets silent again before a lit match gets thrown into the boxcar. Then another. And another. In a matter of minutes, flames engulf the whole room. My throat closes up to all the smoke and my hands struggle to fan it out of my face. I barrel toward the entrance but a wall of fire blocks the now shut-tight door.

It can't be like this. Ola, Berniece and Boy Willie need me.

I try again to push the door open but flames blaze through my hand instead. Moans of pain fill the room, fear and despair mirrored in the blurry faces of the other men. After a few more tries at the door, I finally slide back against the wall, tears leaking as I cough painfully and smoke floods my eyes.

I'm sorry, Ola. But I think I'm about to break my promise.