

Smiley
by
Janet Hise

It seemed as though he had always been there. A part of the community. The kids cruising up and down the street would say, “Wave at Smiley.” Everyone waved at him, and he waved back, again and again.

Of course, he had not always been there. He came after Korea because this was Howard’s home town. Howard was his buddy in the war, but the family didn’t seem interested in talking about their dead son. Yet he was here, and here was as good a place as any. He was a friendly guy. Howard called him Smiley because of the way he could turn his whole face into a giant grin. He learned many years ago to smile big so people wouldn’t be afraid of his immense shoulders and his overbearing height. People warmed to that smile.

He walked leisurely through the little town, taking in the smell of lilacs in bloom and waving to the people driving by. Some waved back. A small brick house with an uncut lawn caught his attention. He could mow that grass. A “For Rent” sign peeked from the corner of a front window. He removed the hat from his large, bald head and rang the bell. A white man with a massive brown mustache and a dirty yellow shirt yelled at him from the steps of the house next door.

“Ain’t nobody livin’ there,” the man said. “Who ya lookin’ fer?” The man looked angry. Smiley realized he’d forgotten to show his friendly side to this man.

“I ain’t looking for nobody special. Just saw that sign in the window. Thought I might be able to rent a place for a while.”

“I don’t think they’d rent to you.”

Smiley put on his large smile and thanked the man. Hooking his thumbs around the buckles of his bibbed overalls, he continued slowly down the street. He came across two little girls playing with trucks and blocks of wood in the grass in front of a large white house with a wrap-around porch. He bowed for them and smiled. The girls giggled.

A sharp noise caused him to look up. A woman in a blue dress and yellow apron had come outside, banging the screen door behind her. "Come inside," she said to the girls. Smiley gave her a smile and a wave, but she did not wave back.

An elderly lady lounged on a front-porch swing across the street from him, and he waved big. She waved back and motioned for him to come over. The lady wore a flowered dress with a large straw hat. He did not walk up the steps to greet her, but stayed on the worn sidewalk.

"You must be lost," the woman said.

"No, ma'am, just looking around your nice town."

"I reckon you know folks here think you're about as different a person as they ever seen."

"I reckon."

"Why you come here?"

"Well," he began, hat in hand, "I come here to see Howard's family. You know Howard Belt? We was in the war together. We was buddies, him and me."

"Come up here," the old lady invited, a bony hand motioned him to move closer. She tilted her head back, peering into his dark face. "Plan on staying long?"

He hooked a thumb into the buckle of his overalls. "Maybe. What you think about that?"

"I think it'd be fine," she said. Leaning forward as though letting him in on a secret, she added, "Most folks don't know it, but I'm a black woman."

His face forgot to smile at this. “I see,” he said.

“No, I never tried to hide it. They just assumed.”

The smile returned to his own black face.

“I got a basement room I’d rent to you, if you need a place to stay.”

“I’d be mighty obliged. And I can work for you. Cut your grass, trim trees, garden.”

That’s how it started. How Smiley found a home. Soon other people allowed him to mow their lawns, rake their leaves, or scoop their snow.

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