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YOU AIM SO HIGH

Frank Brookhouser

I got a right to sing the blues

THE TWO BOYS lived close together, in the same city block, in houses gray as dawn and sad as dusk. And they worked even closer together, side by side, sometimes on Market Street but mostly on Broad Street because there was a big automobile agency there and they could look at the bright new cars in the show windows and discuss their varying preferences when they weren't working.

"Man, I sure like to own that baby when I get to be big and going around. . . ."

"Ah man, that ain't nothing compare to that cream color one. Just look at that number. . . ."

They carried their executive offices and their advertising offices and their production departments under their arms, in shoe shine boxes, and they worked all day on Saturdays, which was their rush day, the day of huge profits, and after school on other days except Sunday, which was their day of rest.

They did not look alike at all. George was tall for his twelve years, with sloping shoulders and long, thin legs and a light skin. Teddy was short and stocky, with stout legs, and his was a black skin. But these differences were unimportant.

The important difference was in their ages. Teddy was only nine. George was old enough to know about things, about how things were.

On this Saturday, Teddy made an investment and was very proud about it. He bought a new piece of cloth for shining shoes, a clean white piece of cloth which cost him twenty-five cents.

"You crazy, buying that," George told him.

"What you mean, crazy?"

"I mean what I say, man. You didn't need no new rag yet. You ain't that dumb."

"I almost need it. The old one ain't gonna last me, you know that."

"Why don't you wait till you need it? You crazy, man."

"I like that new rag. Look at how clean and white it is. Man, that's a spiffy thing, that's class. And it's good for business. How you expect business with old dirty rags all the time?"

"What they care if the rag white or if it black, long as they get a shine? . . ."

"Shine, Mister. Give you a good shine."

"Shine, Mister."

"Not today. . . ."

For a long time on this Saturday, though, Teddy wasn't so certain about the rag, even though he had defended its purchase so intensely.

It was a bad day for business. There was a steady drizzle of rain and heavy clouds threatened a downpour any minute. The people apparently didn't want to take a chance of waiting for a shine and hurried past the two boys.

George had one customer shortly after nine o'clock, a brown pair of shoes with no tip. But queries to scores of other pedestrians were not productive and the boys spent most of the morning looking at the cars in the window, huddling close to the building for protection against the rain, and watching the people eat in the chain restaurant next door.

"I wish we going to have a steak for dinner," Teddy said, after watching a while. "I ain't done no work but I getting mighty hungry just standing around."

"What for you need a steak? You fat now," George told him.

"I ain't fat, I just healthy."

"You fat."

"I just building up to be a football man in high school."

"You never be a football player. You too little."

"I just ain't start to grow fast yet, that's all."

"Now I'll be a football man. I gonna be big and tall."

"But you thin."

"I'll fill out. Shine, Mister?"

"You legs is too thin for football. Shine, Mister? Give you a good shine."

"Them legs is fast, man. They chase you into a hole any day in the week."

"Ah, who you making fun with? You need an old airplane to catch me."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

In a flash, Teddy started running, dodging pedestrians hurrying down the street, cutting behind cars, darting around them, George close at his heels, the both of them laughing and shouting with excitement.

Finally, Teddy led George around a car and headed back toward their abandoned shoe boxes in front of the agency. As they reached them and came to a rest, breathing heavily, grinning, laughing with each other, Teddy said, "See what I tell you."

"You pretty fast all right for such a little squirt. Maybe you be Jesse Owens some day."

"Maybe, huh George?"

"You can't never tell."

They were both feeling pretty good when the two men stopped and asked for shines.

Teddy grinned widely, flashing white teeth, his round eyes crinkling in his beaming face.

"Yes sir," he said, "you bet you get a shine. Best shine there is."

"Make it quick."

"Yes sir. Like a flash."

"Now you got a chance to show off that new rag you boast about all day," George told him.

"I got a new rag to work over them shoes of yours, Mister," Teddy announced proudly, taking the neatly folded rag from his box and dropping it carefully across his leg so it wouldn't pick up dirt from the street. "Brand new rag just bought."

"Good," the man said, smiling.

"That's all he talking about all morning," George interposed. "He sure anxious to see how it works."

With all of their equipment spread out beside the boxes, they went to work eagerly. When they were finished, Teddy turned to George and said, "How much you get?"

"Man, I got me a nickel tip."

"Well, man, look at this."

Teddy opened the palm of his hand and displayed a new quarter, which meant he had received a tip of ten cents.

"Now you see what I tell you about the new rag. I got ten cents because I got stuff that looks classy."

George didn't seem to have any answer.

"You got to invest, man, before you get anywhere," Teddy continued. "You never get nowhere less you put something in your business."

"Now who you expect you gonna be, big shot—John D. Rockefeller?"

"Maybe. I got lots of time."

"Man, you never gonna be no Rockefeller nohow."

"That's only what you saying."

"Not if you live to be a hundred years old. You just dreaming, man. And ain't no use to dream. You make a big fool of yourself, that's all."

"You crazy, man."

"You the crazy one. You just don't know nothing at all, squirt."

"No? Well, maybe I be like Duke Ellington some day, how you like that? He a big enough man, ain't he?"

"Yeah, he pretty big all right."

"I sure glad I buy that new rag all right. I sure glad about that."

"Maybe I get one myself, long about next week. I think it over to myself. But don't you go getting no crazy ideas about Rockefeller. You just make a fool of yourself dreaming like that, man."

"Ah, the Duke, he good enough for me."

"Now you getting the right idea, man. You getting smart. . . ."

. . . *Got a right to feel lowdown. . . .*