

MISTER HENRY'S TROUSERS/ *William McCauley*

HEARING THE HONDA in the valley, he pushed himself to his feet, paused to let his belly receive the pain, then moved stiffly across the dirt yard to the wrought-iron gate. From there he watched the young white man drive the Honda through the stand of tamarind trees on the brow of the hill and bounce along the dusty trail toward him.

The white man stopped the motorcycle in front of the garage. Giving Sheku a smile, he removed his goggles and stripped off his gloves.

"How de day, sah?" Sheku asked.

"I de manage," Mister Henry said over the bubbling putt-putt and pop of the engine. He tossed a ring of keys to Sheku.

Sheku caught the keys and unlocked the gate and pulled it open.

Mister Henry gunned the Honda up the incline into the garage, where he stopped it between a drum of petrol and stacks of shovels and head pans. Sheku waited at the gate while the young man dismounted and removed his helmet. When he came out of the garage, Sheku entered and loosened the rubber that held the shovels on the back of the Honda.

Mister Henry went across the bare earth and up the stairs to the long covered porch and unlocked the double doors. "Sheku, come upsai," he called over his shoulder as he entered the house.

Sheku finished stacking the implements against the wall, secured the gate and climbed the stairs. He approached the threshold of the open doorway and stopped and waited. He heard Mister Henry opening windows in his bedroom.

"Sheku!"

Sheku stepped out of his halfbacks and went barefoot across the cool tile floor toward the hall. The shadowy room contained bamboo chairs, a dining table, a writing table. On both of the tables were coal-oil lamps.

Mister Henry came out of the hall carrying his laundry bag. He handed the bag to Sheku. Bobbing his head, Sheku took the bag and returned to the porch.

Under the gauzy, tented shelter of his mosquito net Sheku sat cross-legged on his sleeping mat. From his vantage point on the porch at the

top of the stairs he could observe much of the hillside, which was bathed in silvery moonlight. The moon's position in the western sky told him that the night was almost finished. He leaned back against the wall and put his hand inside his baggy trousers, taking in his hand the substantial weight of his scrotum. The pain subsided a bit. For a while the underwear that Mister Henry had given him had supported his scrotum and thereby provided some relief from the pain. But no longer. Now his scrotum was too big for the underwear, and the pain was with him more often, and more intensely.

Sheku tried not to think about the pain. He preferred—as on this night—to pass the time by reflecting not on his affliction but on how good life had been for his family in the year they had been in the care of Mister Henry. The young man had provided many good things: the underwear, the trousers that were roomy enough in front to contain his scrotum, the school fees for his children, halfbacks for his entire family, the mosquito nets, the coal oil and the lamp, the rice. Above all, the rice: even now, in the hungry season, Sheku's family ate rice. Only three days ago, the young white man had returned from Pujehun with a fifty-kilogram sack of upland rice tied on his Honda. Of course Sheku knew this good luck would end someday. Mister Henry would leave, and the project masters in Freetown would send another white man to replace him, as Mister Henry had replaced the white man who was before him. The new white man would no doubt choose another, more able, villager to be his watchman. But that was in the future, and he did not worry about the future, which would come no matter what he thought about it.

He reflected once again on his recent ride on the back of Mister Henry's Honda, when the young man had transported him all the way to Lunsar. Sheku had never been so far from his village. At Lunsar a white doctor had told him that some bad things had gotten inside him and lodged in his scrotum. He told Mister Henry and Sheku that he could remove the bad things and fix the pain by cutting Sheku's scrotum away. To Sheku that did not seem like fixing it, so he said no, it was a thing he would bear. The doctor and Mister Henry had tried to persuade Sheku, but Sheku—though he had never before contradicted a white man—had stubbornly told them no, he would not do it. The white doctor had given Sheku some pills, which he had eaten. But nothing good had happened. His scrotum kept growing and the pain kept increasing.

A metallic crash startled him. He listened to the rattle and bump of a mango rolling down the metal roof and then the thump as it hit the ground. He noted that Mister Henry's snoring stopped, then started

again. He lifted the edge of the mosquito net, pushed himself to his feet and went down the stairs to look for the mango. He found it on a moonlit patch of dirt at the back of the house, between the banana trees and Mister Henry's latrine and bathing baffle. He picked it up and returned to the porch. He would eat it in the morning.

The sun was below the horizon and the hot air was still and smoky. Across the road, beyond the garden of greens and okra and potato leaf and peppers, Kadiatu squatted beside her cooking fire, stirring a pot. Nearby was the hut he had built for her from bush poles and palm fronds. Seeing her preparing his food reminded him again that she had no palm oil for the rice. For days there had been no palm oil in the village nor was any to be found in the district markets. While he pondered the problem of obtaining palm oil, the pink of the air yielded to rose, then rapidly darkened, until the paddies and reeds of the valley merged into spreading gloom. Mosquitoes began to fill the air, their wings brushing his cheeks, their drone coming and going in his ears.

"Sheku!"

He pushed himself to his feet and stood motionless for a few seconds, allowing his belly to prepare itself for the weight of his scrotum. Then he turned and climbed the stairs. He stopped at the open door and peered into the room. A thin spire of smoke rose from a mosquito coil smoldering under Mister Henry's writing table, its sandalwood sweetness blending with the oily scent of burning kerosene. The light from a lantern illuminated a scatter of papers on the desktop. The rest of the room was dark.

"Yessah?"

Mister Henry's voice came from the hall. "Come upsai."

Sheku kicked his halfbacks off and entered, crossing to the hall that led to Mister Henry's bedroom, where another lantern glowed on the nightstand. Mister Henry was inspecting small piles of folded clothing on his bed, clothing that Sheku's daughter had washed that morning and that he had ironed in the afternoon. Mister Henry was a quiet-spoken young man who went about with a stoop-shouldered, absent-minded air, but now his expression was alert and suspicious.

"Usai de khaki trouser dey?" he asked.

Sheku looked blankly at him.

"Sheku, my khaki trouser no dey."

Sheku thought about the rope he had tied between one of the iron bars of the kitchen window and the mango tree for drying Mister Henry's laundry. His daughter had washed Mister Henry's clothing

and draped it on the line that morning. He'd told her to watch it while he walked the two miles to the village to buy charcoal for the iron. Though he was thinking about the clothing he had ironed in the afternoon, he could not remember seeing the khaki trousers.

"You been tief am?"

Sheku sucked his breath. "Oh, no sah, I no been tief am. Nar God!"

"I been tell you say, if you de tief me, I go sack you. Notoso?"

"Yessah, but mastah, I no been tief am. Nar God."

"Well, wetin de happen? Usai de trousers dey?"

Sheku licked his lips, wanting to say something, wanting to tell Mister Henry about going off to the village to buy the charcoal, wanting to tell him about how diligently his daughter had guarded the line. But he could not organize his thoughts into words. His stomach fluttered, and his heart pounded.

"They do it every time," Mister Henry muttered to himself.

"Sah?"

"Nothing, Sheku." Silence, then a sigh. "Lef me. I get for think pan this tief business."

Mister Henry did not speak Krio well, and Sheku understood little English, so any sentence from Mister Henry that was more complicated than a simple command or greeting was usually unintelligible to Sheku. Now Sheku understood that he was dismissed, but he also feared that he had been sacked. He opened his mouth again to protest his innocence, but decided he had better leave it alone. "Yessah," he murmured, and backed out of the bedroom, bobbing his head. He left the house and resumed his customary seat on the bottom step, where he listened to his pounding heart while he tried to understand the dimensions of this disaster and how he could contain it—if it was not too late.

A few minutes later his wife came across the road with his bowl of rice. He whispered to her about the trousers. She sucked her breath and moaned. She sat beside him on the step, her head down. He looked at her from time to time as he spooned the rice into his mouth, waiting for her to finish thinking. In a few minutes she looked up and told him that he must go to Pa Kanu and tell him that a thief had taken Mister Henry's trousers. Pa Kanu was the village headman and Mister Henry's friend. Perhaps he would tell Sheku how to find Mister Henry's trousers. Sheku saw the wisdom in her words. He nodded and said yes, he would do it in the morning.

Pa Kanu was Sheku's age, but in every other way he was unlike Sheku. Pa Kanu was as clever as Sheku was stupid, as full of energy

and good health as Sheku was of laziness and pain. He had once been as poor as Sheku, but through years of hard work and clever manipulation of project masters such as Mister Henry, he now had more land under cultivation than any other farmer in the chiefdom. He had even built metal-roofed mud-and-wattle houses for both of his wives, and every one of his numerous sons and daughters had gone to school for at least a few years.

Sheku came to Pa Kanu's house in the morning, as he and his sons prepared to go out to the swamp to work in his rice paddies and fish ponds. Pa Kanu did not invite Sheku inside, nor did he invite him to sit on one of the several chairs displayed ostentatiously on the porch. As a matter of fact, he was insultingly brief: as Sheku entered his dusty yard, Pa Kanu came out on the porch and asked him what he wanted.

The story poured out of Sheku's mouth.

Pa Kanu's three oldest sons, who worked with their father in the rice paddies and fish ponds, came out to the porch while Sheku talked. Sheku finished by begging Pa Kanu to tell him what to do. The headman told Sheku crossly that he had no time for such nonsense. He went down the stairs and pushed past Sheku. His sons, taking their cue from their father, sneered their contempt for the foolish Sheku and hustled down the stairs after their father. The four of them strode off with their cutlasses and hoes down the road that passed through the village to the swamp.

Sheku was shocked. He'd expected contempt—that was natural—but not rejection of his plea. He had not come begging for himself; he had come on behalf of Mister Henry. Pa Kanu was the friend of Mister Henry. To whom else, if not to Mister Henry's friend, could Sheku go for help in recovering his master's trousers? Puzzled, disconsolate, he turned toward the road.

"Eh, Bo, wetin you de want?" The voice was young and scornful.

Sheku looked back over his shoulder and saw another of Pa Kanu's sons, young Mansaray, on the porch. A skinny child a head less than man-high, he stood with his arms akimbo, in imitation of his father.

Sheku's mouth fell open. He stared at the boy.

"Wetin you de want?" the boy asked again.

"Notting, I no de want notting," Sheku muttered. He turned and went across the bare earth of the yard to the road, his brain seething with the implications of his discovery, wishing Kadiatu were there to think it out for him. He found himself wandering down the road in the hot sun toward the middle of the village and the court bari. He entered the open-walled, thatch-roofed structure. The air was cool beneath the thatch. He sat on the bamboo bench along one of the waist-high walls.

Absently, he put his hand into his trousers and lifted his scrotum to ease the pain.

A girl carrying a headload of wood passed by on the road. Her breasts were high and full and glistened with sweat in the bright sun. She greeted him, but he did not notice. Others passed by on the road, farmers on their way out to the swamps to work their plots of rice, woodcutters heading for the upland bush, women with headloads of brush or basins of greens or cassava roots. But he did not even see them, so absorbed was he by the enormity of his discovery: young Mansaray wore khaki trousers, trousers so long in the leg that the boy had rolled them up around his ankles, so full in the waist that folds and gathers showed all around his skinny torso. Sheku was certain that he had ironed those trousers many times.

Sheku sat in the shade of the court bari for a long time. Around the thatch and bamboo structure, village life went on. From several directions came the hollow chunk-chunk-chunk of women pounding rice, and the screams and laughter of children. After a while he thought about Kadiatu. He needed her to think about this complication. He pushed himself to his feet and went out into the sunlight.

As he emerged he saw young Mansaray Kanu ambling along the road toward him, still wearing the khaki trousers but carrying a cutlass now. He was walking north on the road, away from his father's rice paddies, probably to cut wood in the fallow land between the road junction and the Sewa River. Without thinking of what he was doing, Sheku turned away from the direction he had intended to go—back to Mister Henry's house—and started up the dusty road toward the junction.

Though the pain was eating into his scrotum and his belly, Sheku forced himself to walk with a long, steady stride. He did not look back, but he sensed the youngster was there. After a while he glanced over his shoulder and saw that he had maintained his lead. The dusty road curved over the gentle swells and dips of the first upland hills, moving through chieftom land that had lain fallow for several years. The bush had taken it back, though not permanently. It would be shared out again to the farmers of Sheku's village in two or three years. Now brush and elephant grass leaned out over the road. Ahead of him a cutting grass scurried across the two dusty tracks. The long, rat-like creature was fat. Sheku's mouth watered, and he thought of making some traps.

He came to the palm-log bridge that crossed a creek just above the place where the stream flowed into the wide, slow-flowing Sewa River. Ignoring the intense pain in his belly, he knelt on the creek bank and

scooped water to his mouth. It was cool and clear, and it tasted of the earth. He splashed the water over his face and arms to cool himself, then pushed to his feet and stood at the bridge and waited for the boy.

Young Mansaray looked curiously at Sheku, the cockiness out of him now that he was away from his father's house. The two-foot blade of his cutlass rested on his shoulder.

"Na fine trouser," Sheku said, gesturing toward the boy's legs.

Taken aback, Mansaray stopped.

"Na fine trouser. You done tief am, notoso?"

The boy looked indignant. "No, I no been tief am. My papa done buy am."

"I tink say you done tief am. Na Mister Henry trouser, notoso?"

"No, my papa—"

Sheku was on the child as quick as a bush cat, wrestling him to the ground and holding him with one hand, while with the other he fumbled with the knotted rope that ran through the belt loops. But the boy wiggled and jerked about so frantically that Sheku could not untie the knot. He gave up trying to get the trousers off the boy and put his effort into subduing him. Locked together, they tumbled from one side of the road to the other, kicking up a cloud of dust. For one minute, two minutes, they grappled and grunted and snorted and rolled over one another in the dust. Sheku was far stronger than the boy, but the knives in his bowels had sapped his stamina. He felt the youngster besting him, and the struggle took on a single focus: if he did not subdue this biting, gouging, twisting, slippery monkey he would never recover Mister Henry's trousers, and if he did not recover the trousers Mister Henry would sack him. Sheku felt the boy's cutlass under him. Rolling the boy to the side, he managed to get his hand on the wood-and-tape handle. Mansaray, taking advantage of Sheku's loss of one hand, pushed clear and scrambled to his feet. But Sheku was already swinging the blade. It flashed through the boy's neck below his ear and Sheku saw stunned surprise shining through the dust on his face, and then the child fell away, landing on his back, the blood spraying brightly. Sheku pushed himself to his knees and lunged for the boy, who flapped in the dust, gurgling and gasping. The cutlass rose above Sheku, as if of its own volition, and came down with such ferocity that it severed the child's head. Sheku staggered back, staring at the head resting face up in a pool of blood. One eyelid flickered for a moment against a smear of sand and blood.

Sheku stood panting and swaying, his chest splattered with the boy's hot blood. Bent over by the pain, he made himself approach the headless body and take it up into his arms and struggle down the stream to

the river, where he laid it on the bank and removed the trousers before rolling it into the river. He came back up to the road and picked up the boy's head and the cutlass. After throwing both into the river, he squatted in the stream and washed Mister Henry's trousers; then he removed his own trousers and T-shirt and washed himself and his own clothing until the blood was gone. He put his wet clothing back on and went up the stream to the road.

The pool of blood had congealed into dark lumps of mud. The sweet briny smell of it hung in the still air. He squatted and scooped the mud up and pitched one handful after another into the stream, where it exploded in vivid redness.

It was nearly dark when the light of Mister Henry's Honda bounced through the tamarind trees. Sheku was already on his feet and waiting at the iron gate. The Honda stopped before the garage, and Mister Henry removed his gloves and goggles. He dug into his pocket, got the key ring and tossed it to Sheku, who unlocked the gate, swung it open and stood aside as Mister Henry drove the Honda into the garage and dismounted.

"How de go de go, Sheku?"

"No bad, sah."

Mister Henry gestured at the shovels and head pans tied to the carrier on the Honda. "Make you clean am fine."

"Yessah," Sheku murmured.

Mister Henry went out of the garage and climbed the stairs to his house. As Sheku untied the shovels and the head pans, he heard Mister Henry come out of the house and walk around to the bathing baffle. Sheku cleaned and stacked the shovels and head pans, then locked the garage and went to the bottom step to sit and wait.

The horrific violence of the afternoon seemed as distant in time as his childhood. He remembered it not as a single scene, with one action leading to another, but as disconnected images—of the palm-log bridge; of the headless, naked body of the boy at the river bank; of the earth-curdled blood; of the slippery tape-and-wood handle of the homemade cutlass; of the meandering route of the bush trails he had walked on his return to Mister Henry's house. He had murmured to Kadiatu that he had the trousers, and she stared at him in surprise and started to question him, but he turned away from her and went to his customary place on the bottom step of the porch. There he'd rested for a long time, letting his mind go blank. He remained on the step, as still as a stone, for so long that Kadiatu, observing him from her garden, came to him and

asked worriedly if the pain was very bad. Her voice had been strange, her words far away and hard to understand, as if he was listening to her through a malaria fog, and he wondered why, if malaria was again singing in his head, his body did not shake and his head was not bursting with pain. Kadiatu, kneeling beside him, anxiously whispered things to him that he did not understand. After a while he became annoyed with her and sent her away, and then rose and went to their hut and got the bucket and his bar of laundry soap and filled the bucket with water. He washed Mister Henry's trousers again, scrubbing so hard and so long that he thought he would wear them out cleaning them, but he managed to remove the last traces of the child's blood. Kadiatu had watched him apprehensively for the rest of the afternoon as he sat on the steps and stared off into the valley. When the sun was low, he had roused himself and put charcoal into the iron, splashed some coal oil over it and gave it fire. After it was hot, he took the damp trousers from the line and ironed them dry.

By then, though exhausted by the pain in his belly and the long walk and the terrible fight at the palm-log bridge, he'd distilled the complicated events of the day to a simple tale of good and bad. The child had stolen Mister Henry's trousers and would not give them back. Sheku had tried to recover the trousers. He'd not intended to kill the child—for what could be more terrible than to kill a child—but the child had died anyway, as if by his own hand, in an accident caused by his own stubbornness. The boy would still be alive if he had given up Mister Henry's trousers.

Mister Henry came around the corner of the house, a towel fastened round his middle. He handed the empty water bucket to Sheku and began to climb the stairs.

"Mastah, duya," Sheku said, rising.

Mister Henry spoke over his shoulder as he mounted the stairs. "In a minute, Sheku. The mosquitoes—I've got to get dressed." He went inside.

Sheku climbed the stairs and stood at the railing. The sky to the west was blue above a glowing band of yellow that vividly etched a palm-studded horizon, and a cloud of stars had infested the black sky above the mango tree, just as the first mosquitoes of the evening had infested the still air and now were singing about his head, smelling him, wanting his blood. Behind him, Mister Henry moved almost silently across the living room to the kitchen. Then came a rattle of glass and the pophiss of a bottle of beer being opened, followed by the scratch of the short-wave radio as Mister Henry searched for the music he often listened to in the evening. The music came, barely audible on the porch,

and Mister Henry's shadowy form appeared in the double-door opening. He carried a warm bottle of Star beer. Sheku moved away from the place at the railing where Mister Henry often stood in the evenings to watch the sunset, and lowered himself onto his sleeping mat. The young white man stepped out on the porch. And then Sheku's breath caught in his throat, and he went light-headed. There, two paces away and at the level of his eyes, were the khaki trousers that he had washed and ironed so many times. He put his hand on the plastic sack that contained the child's neatly folded trousers and felt the cloth radiate its warmth, like a living thing, through the thin plastic into the palm of his hand.

Mister Henry put the beer on the railing and buttoned his shirt cuffs. He looked out over the valley into the growing darkness. "Lovely night," he murmured. But he stayed for only a minute, slapping at mosquitoes, before turning and going back into the house.

Sheku gazed blankly through the railing at the interface of sky and earth, now almost indivisible. The pain in his scrotum and in his bowels was very great. He put his hand into his trousers and lifted the weighty, melon-sized organ and sat thus, scrotum in hand, as the sky gradually became one with the black earth. As he became one with the pain that liberated him now of memory.



William McCauley's stories have appeared in *Confrontation* and the anthology *From the Center of the Earth*. His novel, *Turning Over*, was published by The Permanent Press in 1998.