

to lash the ground until the branch splintered in his hand. Then he crumpled to the ground, exhausted.

The sun wavered on the horizon, sending out massive columns of light to gild the clouds. Only the sunset seemed alive, filtering kaleidoscopic hues through the branches of the witch hazel. "God," he thought, and he felt as if he were suddenly being swallowed. Turning cautiously toward the wall, away from the light, he was conscious of a penetrating numbness. He wanted to run, but he couldn't—something seemed to be pressing in on him.

"Paul!" The voice needled his spine. "Paul!" His mother's voice was louder now, re-echoing shrilly, seemingly carried in the air all around him.

He ran to the wall and climbed up the vine. His hands moved surely on the rough bark. When he stood in the yard, he patiently brushed off his clothes. Then, as his mother's worried voice prompted him, he shrugged and walked slowly between the rose-bushes toward the house, kicking the ground absently as he went. The sunset had faded, leaving a quiet charcoal sky spread evenly above him. His hand began to throb where Boots had clawed it, and he clenched his fist, digging his fingernails into the palm until the pressure made him forget the scratches. Then he slumped up the steps and went into the house.

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## Jonnie and the Old Man

Dorit Paul

**T**HIS Mr. Hicklemeyer, my boss, he was an old man, see. I used to work for him after school and sometimes on Saturdays. He would say on Fridays, "Jonnie, you come in to-morrow," and so I had to come in on Saturday, even if I had tickets for a ball game or something.

He was a jobber, they call it. He was supposed to sell buttons and jewelry and things wholesale. That means at half price. Only he had this sort of store in the front, too, where he'd sell the same stuff at full price to the retail clientele. That's what he called it, only if they bought it by the dozen or so he'd sell it cheaper. That is, if I waited on them he gave me a price for which to sell it, but with him they had to haggle.

He was pretty old and kind of stooped over. He had a funny voice, wheezing sort of like a mosquito in your room at night. He wore these real heavy glasses down his nose, bifocals, and really was a four-eyes if I ever saw one. And did he act as if he had four eyes, too. This store was a real hole in the wall, everything gray and dull and dirty-looking, and you should have seen his desk. I mean the part he kept locked up and where I couldn't clean. But if he saw the littlest speck of dust where I'd swept, would he get mad!

"Jonathan," he'd say—he called me that he was mad because he knew I couldn't stand it—"Jonathan, you say you cleaned here? Maybe before an army marched through, eh, Jonathan? This place is filthy!" and then he'd point his scuffed up old boot at some dirt he probably tramped in himself.

I was supposed to clean and help out with the retail business. And everyday I had to re-arrange the stock. We used to take the green buttons from the right side and put them on the left, next to the black buttons, one day, and then he'd change his mind and want them back on the right next to the brown ones. This he called being a smart merchant and displaying the stock to advantage. Then when a new shipment of buttons came in I had to arrange them in shoe boxes in the back room and sew a card of the buttons on the front so you'd know what was inside. Only sometimes, in the morning when I wasn't there, he'd take them all out and look at them, and sort of play with them like toy soldiers, I guess, and put them back all wrong. He did this because he was so old, I think: it's what they call second childhood. So when we went to sell them to a customer he'd find a different button in the box and then I'd get hell to pay. One Friday it happened three times in a row and he refused to pay me for the week.

"Jonathan," he said, "you cost me much business today. I had a man with a big order to go immediately, and he wanted to check if I had enough buttons. But you mixed up my boxes and he got tired of waiting. So I lost the order and can't pay you this week," which was a lot of nonsense because the man only wanted two cards of buttons for his wife.

I was also the shipping clerk. At least that's how he sometimes introduced me when he had a wholesale customer. "My shipping clerk will see that the order goes right out," he'd say. So I had to pack the buttons in big cardboard boxes and paste them up real fancy so nothing would fall out. Then I took them to the Post Office and mailed them. That's where we ran into a lot of trouble because sometimes he wouldn't believe me what the postage was.

I guess I really didn't mind too much working in a dingy store like his instead of in the supermarkets like most of the boys. He was a sort of relative and told my mother if I worked for him one day I'd have a big future. He told us he'd teach me how to run the business, and one day who knew what. . . . That's how I came to get the job.

It was just that he was so awfully old. His face was all wrinkled like a stale head of lettuce, only it was red. He had lots of white hair, though, and he wore it pretty long, to save on haircuts, I think. His fingers were all swollen and shaky, and had a funny smell. Sort of like old apple peels. I used to hate it when he touched me. He'd pay me my salary and count the last penny right out into my hand. The money he paid me with he took out of the cash register. It was usually pretty empty, and sometimes there wasn't enough. Most of



the money from customers he put into his pockets, only my sales were all rung up. I think that's illegal: tax defraud or something.

Sometimes, when he was real pleased with himself, he'd look at me over his glasses and say, "See, Jonnie, that's how you run a good business. You're learning from me. You're learning and getting good experience; that's worth more than wages. So pay attention, and one day you'll run this store."

It wasn't that I wanted his store. It was just as old and dirty as he was. He was just so old. It wasn't right that he should be so old and go on cheating people, and taking their money. Some of the men worked awfully hard and they'd come in and want to buy a pin or something for their girl friends. Then he'd put on a lot of fuss and talk of Fifth Avenue, and make up prices. Hell, the dime stores wouldn't have carried the stuff he sold them. So I figured maybe it wasn't right that a useless old man like him should cheat young ones like that. I used to work pretty hard keeping the place clean at least, and he'd just sit at his desk in the back room in his dirty old clothes, and when he didn't pay me in full he'd say I was earning experience.

Then one day he got a letter asking what happened to a certain shipment. Well, I mailed it all right. I'm sure the clerk at the Post Office would have remembered, because I wrapped it in cut-up paper sacks—we were out of paper—and he laughed at it. But Mr. Hicklemeyer wouldn't hear of going down to check, he just claimed I must have lost it, or kept it. So he was going to make me pay for it. But I felt this wasn't right. It wasn't fair for him to carry on and take advantage of me because I was young and his rheumatism bothered him too much to go to the Post Office. Then I got real mad all of a sudden, and I guess I killed him. I guess I just hit him very hard. He was sort of like a dried up mosquito suckling blood from the young and juicy ones. They do that, you know: we read about it in school. So I swatted him, like a mosquito. They're pest and no good. So that's how I came to kill him. That's all there's to it, I guess.

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## A Sketch

Ruth Paller

**D**AVE swam to the edge of pier where two rowboats tugged at the ends of short ropes which held them prisoners. In the nearest boat an armless negro boy was bailing. Dave tossed the wet sun-bleached hair out of his blue eyes and squinted at the child silhouetted against the glare of sky and water.

"Is the boat ready, Chester?"

"Jes' about, Dave. One mo' pailful'll do it."