

Taste the Rainbow

Henri hears Jimmy Cliff's version of "I Can See Clearly Now" every morning. Today it fills him with so much anticipation that he starts skipping down the sidewalk. How annoying this must be, he thinks, as he weaves in and around the consumers of downtown Los Angeles. This halidom of fast fashion with its urine baked runways and shrines of litter. How dare he not align with the daily trudge. A matter of perspective, Henri says to himself as he double axles around the corner of 6th Street like an elated Roberto Benigni. Henri drums on a parking meter with his hand and the music stops. Odd, he thinks and continues humming the tune.

Henri bounces through the fabric district. Flamboyant monoliths of colored silks, polyesters, cottons and chiffons guard the sidewalks. How, deep down, they yearn for a wandering eye, a fondling finger-tip. Sometimes the store owners stand out front fishing for eye contact, biding for an invitation of commerce but mostly they sit towards the back scribbling accounting in old Moleskin ledgers, their fingertips died metallic gray from their measurement chinks. They always look so tired behind their thick spectacles, numb to the platter of texture and color around them.

Growing up, Henri had dreams that he owned his very own fabric store. Greet customers warmly but never be pushy, his father would teach him. Let the patterns speak for themselves. Take pride in the accuracy of your measurements, the cleanliness of your cuts, he would drone. Be rigid but fair in your negotiations, Henri. He'd listen to his father bargain... Mulberry Silk can go for 45 dollars a yard, young lady, but for a repeat customer like yourself, I do 35 and we all sleep well tonight.

In some of these dreams, Henri would be an old man, longing for the end of each day. He would stare at the clock, begging it not be as precious with the passing of its minutes. And finally, when it was time to close up shop, his dream would unravel in the silliest manners...

He'd lock the doors and pull the security shutters. Then he'd clear everything to the sides of the room and marvel at the open floor. Henri would select a fabric at random, each night a different roll. He would lay it onto the ground and push it across the room so that the cloth would flap and sigh until it covered the ground. Then he would strip to his undergarments and roll around in it. He'd crawl to each end, pulling the fabric over himself, spinning webs of color around his body. These indulgences left him in a mess of slippery knots and smily slumber.

How embarrassing dreams are, Henri thinks and turns the corner to the electronic section. Since he was a child, Henri has hated this street. Each storefront an assault on the senses. Everything barking and blipping. An electronic Pit Bull jumps in front of him and then recoils back to its position at the door to sit guard. Its eyes flashing red and its steel teeth gnashing. Oh, hush, puppy, Henri simpers.

The next store is worse. The same weatherman is on every Flatscreen TV. His plastic tan and shiny teeth make Henri queasy and his stomach flips when he feels like the man's eyes are following him. He gets the feeling the entire store is watching him and he quickens his pace. Then all of the cell phones start ringing at once, each ringtone blaring his song "I Can See Clearly Now". This is all too much for Henri and he starts to run, looking back at the gaggle of weathermen pointing at him.

SMACK!

Henri's departure is halted by another parking meter. He gasps for the wind that was knocked from him and tries to ignore the store owner giggling over her tablet.

Finally out of the Electronics district, Henri finds himself amidst the Mexican party supplies. He slinks by a rack of hanging piñatas. They've given him the creeps since his 7th birthday, when he got lost in a wholesale warehouse after being chased by the block's resident curmudgeon, Mr. Ambriz. This prompting years of reoccurring nightmares.

"Chiclets! Chiclet!" Henry welcomes the distraction of a child selling candy. He tips her an extra quarter for the Skittles and puts on a party sombrero. Finally, some relief from the ubiquitous sun. Henri starts skipping again, humming his tune. He almost skips past a rack of floating gold balloons before reading, "HAPPY BIRTHDAY HENRI". What are the odds, he thinks, today is my birthday. Henri is twenty one years old today. This year he plans to break free from his father's business and leave downtown Los Angeles for good. He grabs the gold H and skips along but the store manager sees and starts shouting after him.

"Hey! Hey! You pay for that! Get back here, boy!"

Henri lets go of the balloon in a panic and makes a break for it. He dips into another party supply store and hides behind a row of Piñatas. The manager passes shouting, "Wait till I tell your parents, Henri!" His threats dissolve into the percussion of bargain chatter. Henri snarls his independence to himself and tries to catch his breath. He feels the soft tissue paper of the piñata rubbing against elbow. Of course this is where I had to hide, Henri moans and nudges the piñata away from him. It sways right back into him with contempt. He peaks his head out

from behind the rack, checking for safety but the street is no longer visible. Blinded by panic, he hadn't realized the store was the size of an airplane hanger. Even worse, it was filled floor to ceiling with piñatas.

He wipes the fog from his spectacles and steals another peak. He nearly swallows his tongue when he sees that all the piñatas look like versions of himself. There are versions of Henri as a child, a teenager, a young adult, and even the older version of himself... glasses thicker, posture collapsed. Henri starts to feel nauseous again, his stomach full of sugar. He tries to jump from the rack but is stiff and only sways a touch from side to side. He looks down and the skin on his arms is ruffled and cut into thin strips of color. He feels a thousand Skittles rolling over themselves in his bloated stomach.

Then a voice. That of a child approaching with excitement. He sees a family walking towards him. As they approach, they touch each Henri Piñata along the way and deem it unworthy. When they stop at him, Henri recognizes the boy as himself and the parents as his own. He tries to scream but there is nothing but a waft of red paper around his lips.

The angry manager comes running into the store and shouts, "I knew I'd find you! Where is my balloon?" The child hides behind the legs of his parents as they tell the manager they will pay for the missing balloon if he can get their chosen Piñata down for them. The manager scoffs and reaches up to unhook Henri. Grinning at him, eyes as red as the Pit Bull bot, he carries him to the entrance of the store and hoists Henri up a couple feet above the blotchy sidewalk. All the shoppers passing by step out of their way to avoid the Piñata as it sways and twists, paying no mind to its muted cries. Henri scours the block for help and sees a golden 'H' rising high into the putrid breath of the tall buildings. How he longed to join it... to float away into the smoggy firmament. Henri could do nothing but watch, feeling his freedom escape him.

Then the store manager gives young Henri a big bat and points right at the piñata's stomach. The skittles squeal with excitement as the child winds up with all the might in his little body. I'm going to be here forever, Henri thinks. The child swings the bat and...

SMACK!

The store owner awoke to find himself tangled in a heap of charmeuse. Flat on his back, woven in fabric and posed like an Egyptian scribing. "I Can See Clearly Now" was playing through the clock radio, just out of his reach. He kicked and punched himself free. Safe for now, Henri said, and exhaled the metallic remnants of his rest. He patted the floor beneath him for his spectacles and rubbed the sleep out

of his eyes, staining his wrinkled face with chalk.

-Cookie