

The Living Tale Series

Henley & The Book of Heroes

Illustrated

By Jane H. Smith, M.D.



Cadia
Book House

The Living Tale Series™: Henley and the Book of Heroes Illustrated Edition

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PROLOGUE

“Zrum ziddle zigh, ziddle zrum ziddle zee, and a zrum zrum zigh, ziddle zum ziddle zree.” Ah yes, welcome, children, welcome. Come. Come. I was singing the song of the champions to pass the time until you arrived. Welcome to the story. I am glad you came; you’re just in time. Please, take a seat on the grass. Pull up a cushion to rest your head. It is a perfect day for a story here in the Refreshing. The sun is shining, and a breeze is blowing through the trees. In this place, you need not worry about ants biting or flies buzzing. There are no such creatures in this library. Are you all comfortable? Good.

Now, as I was saying, you’re just in time to hear how Henley Banks, an everyday boy from Shernod, enters the story of his life. You see, his story has been going on for some time, nine years to be exact, but very soon a new tale will explode into his life that will change it forever. What kind of tale? Well, it is a tale that has the power to awaken a hero’s heart, a tale that overcomes death with life, and a tale that bestows victory to the conqueror. It is the Living Tale. Something this big takes time to unfold, for within this story are many books. Today, we are starting The Book

of Heroes, for what better way to awaken your heart but among champions? The other books are for another day.

I'll be your guide through these chapters; my name is Drake. I'll tell you more about me later, but now let's look at Henley. There he is sitting at the dinner table. If he were standing, you'd see he is the same height as a tall dwarf. In human measurements, that is four foot, five inches. His doctor tells him he is average on all accounts for height and weight. Average is a good word for Henley on the outside. He is average at baseball and football; he makes average grades in school and has an average amount of friends. He has average skills with video games but secretly wishes he were as good as his best friend, Jeffery. In many ways, he fades into the pavement of life like gray going to black. Henley, however, is excellent on the inside, and few know it. On the inside, he is the brave knight who fears nothing and no one. Inside, he is the genius who finds solutions to tangled troubles and saves the day with two seconds left ticking on the time bomb. Sadly, though, his heart can only ache to be great until the Garden's power germinates his hero's seed.

While his mother, Julia, does dishes, let me acquaint you with the Bankses' home. You'll need to know your way around before we get going, or Henley will leave you in the dust, for this unremarkable boy does everything exceptionally fast. So why don't we jump into the book? Here in the Garden, all our books are alive, so we may tour them. It takes a moment to get your footing, but you will soon adjust.

Over there, playing on the floor, is little David, Henley's nearly four-year-old brother. Nowadays the dining room

has become his fortress against the evil Gorse's robot army because Mama doesn't have time for big dinners; but when Dad is home, the Bankses play the "guess what I am thinking game" after clearing the dinner dishes.

Down the hall are his other brothers, Jake and Morgan, studying in the den. Jake is fourteen, and Morgan is sixteen. You'll see more of them soon.

On to the family room. Do you see that picture of the soldier on the mantle? That is Robert, Henley's dad. His deployment in Iraq is now over a year. The picture next to him of an elderly gentleman is my dear friend Reginald Banks, affectionately known around here as Grandpa. He lives by himself in an apartment on the other side of town, which in Shernod means a five-minute drive. I don't have time to tell you about everyone else on the mantle, but you will meet them as we go. I apologize for the chill, children. Robert usually keeps a large fire roaring in that fireplace, but the boys forget to start it. We won't go upstairs right now to see their small but cozy bedrooms; just know that Henley's is the messy one off to the right.

Let's return to the kitchen table where Henley sits slumped over his plate, a grumpy boy who misses his daddy something fierce. You see, his father was teaching him about the Living Tale when duty called him away. The Living Tale is known by many names, but to this family it is known as the Book. It is this book that keeps the Banks family going in good times and bad, but especially the bad. Why? Because this family has real adventures—not just hopeful visions—inside it. The problem, though, is that Henley was too young to remember when his parents leaned upon it when Julia's parents died in an accident,

and he was too young to experience its comforting power when Grandma Rose passed in (you call it death; we call it passing in).

Since then, life has been relatively quiet for the Bankses, so unlike the rest of the family, Henley does not believe the Book is alive and mocks his family's trust in it. Deep inside, Henley wants it to be real because his seed of greatness is stirring. This is why Dad's deployment has been so rocky for him. It's been hard enough to have his dad at work for over a year, but now Henley's heart battles between hope and suspicion. He needs his hero to show him the way inside the Living Tale for answers. Without Dad to lead him, Henley walks around with a gnawing pain inside that he dumps on everyone outside.

This is where the story gets really exciting! No, not because he is hurting, but because of how his heart gets fixed. Yes, fixed, for from my perspective, it is already finished. You, however, have some exciting chapters ahead of you. But I am getting ahead of myself again. Forgive me. I am no storyteller but a creature of action. Good thing Henley's story is written down, or I'd blurt out the end before we get going.



SOONER THAN LATER

“I won’t eat them; they’re nasty.” Henley chased his Brussels sprouts around his plate with his fork, making it look like a hare-and-hound type of race. While he rested his face on his arm inches away from the plate so as not to miss the close finish, he added, “I hate green things.”

“You’re not leaving the table until you do,” Mama said with a face that Henley knew meant business. He had tried the “Daddy doesn’t have to eat vegetables in the desert,” argument too many times, so tonight he tried a different approach.

He sat up in his chair with such force that his brown tousled bangs sprang out and settled back even more awry. He pushed them aside with his hand, trying to make contact with the eyes in the back of Mama’s head, believing his new position would save him from Brussels sprouts. “I bet you Getchu doesn’t have to eat sprouts. He can eat whatever he wants. He’s my hero!” As he spoke, his last three sprouts nearly raced off his plate.

Mama stopped rinsing the dish in her hand and turned to look at her son. “I thought Dad was your hero,” she said, sounding a bit surprised.

“He was...he is...I mean...Getchu can do whatever he wants.

Mama seized the moment to talk about heroes. “Getchu can’t be a hero, honey. He doesn’t have a heart. He’s a robot.” She hoped her shift in the conversation would not be too obvious. Henley may look average to everyone else, but Mrs. Banks knew her son’s quick mind.

“What do you mean, Mama?” asked Henley a bit puzzled. He looked at his plate cockeyed, wondering what heroes, Getchu, and sprouts had to do with one another.

Mama breathed a sigh of relief that her hero hint was not immediately rejected. “Robots can only do as their inventor instructs them. They cannot choose to be courageous or brave; they just do what they’re programmed to do. A hero needs a heart so he can do extraordinary things. Remember, dear, every good story needs a hero.”

He didn’t like Mama sneaking in the *Book of Heroes* into their conversation and wanted even more to be done with his sprouts, so he resumed his plea.

“Theorr nosty,” he said as he half chewed, half swallowed, two sprouts at once. He closed both eyes tightly, pursed his lips together, and swallowed hard. In a last-ditch effort to be rid of them, he smashed the last one into his plate with his fork. He walked to the sink with his best “I’m the son you love” look on his face. His smile revealed remnants of his last bite.

“Nice try, Henley.” But this time she was smiling into his big blue eyes, letting him know the last sprout was the disposal’s dinner.

Success! He charged out of the kitchen, his red-hooded sweatshirt flapping. His plate clanked on the edge of the counter as Mama caught it with her right hand. Relief spread over her muscles as he left because this dinner ended without a major fight.

“Evey stowee needs a good hewo, Henley; evey stowee...” taunted his younger brother in the hallway.

Henley dug his faded blue sneakers into the carpet so as not to trample his little brother. “Leave me alone, David—you little troll!” His triumphant smile quickly gave way to an angry glare, and he gave his brother a firm shove to let him know he meant business. David continued to giggle in a heap on the floor. He loved to taunt his older brothers.

Henley was on his way to the den; he couldn’t be bothered by a little brother. Just then he remembered Mama’s words. What did she mean, “Every good story needs a hero, and a hero needs a heart?” He just wanted his dad back. Daddy really was his hero—his fort-building, go-fishing, build-something-in-the-garage hero. As he stopped in the hall, he wondered when Dad would come home. Panic suddenly stormed his mind as something locked deep inside rolled to the surface—the fear that Dad may not come home. At that moment, Henley felt something cold spool around his body; something had him!

Unseen by any of the Bankses, a villain from the Living Tale named Doubt had eked under the front door while they ate dinner. If Henley could have seen him, he would have seen a grey vapor stretching here and there, its sole purpose to devour its prey’s beliefs, so that Henley would

never enter the *Book of Heroes*. Henley did not understand the struggle in his heart, but Doubt did. When Henley took a step toward the door, Doubt moved into action by releasing a sneering thought into Henley's mind, *So much for good stories, Mama. Who needs stories when you have robots like Getchu?* It was such a different idea. Doubt coiled tighter to make sure the thought did not evaporate.



I see some of you look puzzled. Are you wondering why Doubt would want to draw Henley away from good stories? Well, the answer lies in what his boss knows. He knows that planted within Henley's chest lies a dormant hero's heart. He also knows that once this heart is awakened, Henley becomes a great threat, for something new is hidden in him. His boss isn't sure what it is, but he knows it has the power to wreck his dark plans. "At all costs, dis boy must believe dat he is a no-good kid from Shernod. Attack him until his heart is dead! Yous got dat?" his boss yelled just hours ago. So Doubt waited for Henley outside the den, knowing how much he liked spending time in the den with all the books. Books full of heroes; books that would lead him to the Book and the awakening of his seed. But again, I get ahead of the story. We will return to the topic of villains. Forgive the interruption. Let's resume our reading.





When Henley entered the den, Jake and Morgan were working on their homework. “Shhhh!” they said without even looking up. Henley scowled back.

He used to enjoy being with his brothers, but lately he was annoyed by their stories of adventures in the Book. *How could a book be that interesting?* he thought. *They*

make it sound like it's a real place. He spared no chance to mock their so-called bravery, and his scoffing made it all the easier for his brothers to shut him out.

He pulled out his math book with an annoying thud on the coffee table. Two sets of threatening eyes looked up at Henley. He yanked his red hood over his head and slumped toward his homework in silent protest. If he finished his math quickly, he could read a story like the ones Grandpa used to read before bed. He mouthed his times table as he searched for an answer to his first problem. "Twelve times twelve equals...144. Twelve times ten equals..."

Only a few minutes passed before he lifted his work to proudly check it. His brothers could see from across the room that it was a jumbled mess of numbers written down in Henley's hasty style. Jake rolled his eyes and turned back to his work. Morgan shook his head slowly.

Brothers! He slammed his book shut and headed for the rows of shelves, wondering which story he would jump into tonight. His fingers ran across the bindings as he walked along *thump, thump, thump, thump*.

"Shhhh!" And another pair of scowls.

Henley snapped around to mock his brothers, furrowing his unruly brows and wrinkling up his nose. Thankfully, his brothers were already hard at work again, so he felt safe that paybacks were not coming. His fingers stopped at a green leather book called *Tales of Old: Book Three*. He paused while remembering Grandpa's nightly adventures. The words Grandpa read became pictures, and the pictures became movies that came to life in Henley's imagination. Here he saw heroes on quests, warriors with swords, and dragons losing their heads.

Many times his brothers and he would act them out, taking turns being the knight or the dragon. How he missed those times. Now Grandpa did not come over but once every couple of weeks. *So much for good stories*, flashed across his mind, and his heart felt cold.

It's not the same without Grandpa. I won't read tonight. He passed up the books and headed for the family room to play video games.

"Dude, why don't you try reading the Book?" asked Jake as Henley's hand stretched for the door handle.

Henley turned back with glaring eyes. "You mean The Book of Losers? No thanks. If I want to fall asleep, I'll just go to bed."

"Why do you hate it so much?" asked Morgan.

"Why do you like it so much? It didn't keep Dad from leaving. It's a fairytale. Who needs it?" Henley resumed his reach for the door.

"It's not the Book we like. It is what's in the Book. Haven't you heard what Grandpa says about it?" At the mention of Grandpa's name, Henley stopped but kept his back to Morgan. Morgan put on his best British accent to imitate Grandpa and continued, "It's full of hours of adventures, my boy. Take one step on this journey, and you'll be tested beyond measure, challenged by villains you've only met in nightmares, and discover power—"

"I don't care, Morgan; it's not real!" Henley hurled a pillow into Morgan's face. "I don't want your stupid Book!"

Henley's brothers had started their quests and did not understand Henley's anger. "Dude," Jake began, "it's not our Book. It's his Book, the Gardener's. You know, the guy in the green cloak who—"

“Leave me alone!” This time Henley made it out the door and ran for the family room. Doubt, the villainous vapor, smiled as he uncoiled in the hallway; his initial mission with Henley was a success, so he started hazing his way back to the Living Tale, ready to report to his boss.

Henley switched on the TV, unaware of this villain or Mama’s presence.

“Is your homework done?”

He spun around, wide-eyed and surprised to see her. “Huh?”

“I said, is your homework done?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He felt uneasy but wasn’t sure why. The villain’s eerie presence still affected him.

“You may play half an hour then time for bed.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Henley moaned as he slumped his shoulders forward. *Thirty minutes! I can’t get to level ten in thirty minutes!*

Mama saw the tension rising in Henley’s face and anticipated a debate. Thankfully, the phone rang in the kitchen. “Thirty minutes, young man, and no more.” Her voice trailed as she walked out of the room.

“Yes, Mama.”

Mama picked up the phone.

“Hello, Julia; it’s Reggie. How was today with our boy?”

“Oh, Reginald, every day I see my son’s heart crack and sink deeper into darkness. If he’s not staring out the window, he’s trying to play Getchu for hours. You should have seen his face just now when I told him he could only play for thirty minutes. It’s all he wants to do,” she complained.

“Did his visit to church help?” asked Grandpa.

“No. It actually made things worse. He kept going on about how lame ‘the man’ hanging on the front of the altar was in not bringing Robert home. And now he’s slamming his fists into things even more.”

“Quite right. Fury has become his pain’s new face. I saw that during my last visit with him.”

“Oh, but you know, Reggie, lately you are his only bastion of help. I’ve noticed his darkness lifts when you’re around, especially when you read him those tales of old. He keeps asking when you’ll be back.”

“Yes, armored knights, swords flashing, and villains scheming are the things that rouse Henley...” Grandpa paused in thought then continued. “What an idea!”

“What? What idea?”

“I don’t know why I didn’t think of it sooner...”

“Reggie, what?”

“Well, thanks to the Gardener, I have a grand idea. If a fairytale awakens his heart for a few hours, then the Living Tale will heal it. I will give him the Book at Christmas instead of that Getchu game I bought.”

“You’re going to break with your family tradition of giving him the Book when he’s ten? I know that means so much to you and Robert.”

“Yes, it is important, but we don’t have time to wait until Robert comes home to take Henley inside the *Book of Heroes*. He must have his seed awakened and receive his new heart stone sooner; I sense a darkness creeping closer every day. The tradition of generations must be put aside this time. If he accepts the Book, I will lead him in just after Christmas.”

“Oh, this works out perfectly. I was just talking to him about heroes at dinner and thought of giving him a writing assignment on the meaning of ‘Every good story needs a hero.’ I thought of assigning it after the holidays to help him get ready for his summer birthday, but after talking to you, I think it’s better to give it to him tomorrow. Maybe that will ease his surprise.”

“Christmas may still be bumpy considering Henley’s expectations for the new Getchu 2000, but I’d rather have a bump than a crash,” concluded Grandpa.

After that, their conversation moved on to Dad’s latest letters from Iraq and how school was going for Jake and Morgan.

Meanwhile in the family room, Henley’s thirty minutes were full of laser blasts, exploding space ships, and deadly enemy robots. Henley could not believe how well he played.

“Yes, level seven! Hear that, Jake? Level seven! I am the Getchu master. Who says robots can’t be heroes? The evil Gorse will soon be destroyed; there is no escape.” Henley threw his head back and his arms up like the mad scientists he had seen in the movies. “Ha, ha, ha.”

Suddenly, in a sneak attack by Morgan and Jake, the family room became a pile of arms and legs.

“Level seven, Henley; I hear you, level seven,” added Jake as he rolled to the top of the heap for air.

Even little David jumped on the stack of brothers. “I am the Getchu mastoh.”

“There is no escape,” boomed Morgan’s deep voice. It was a tickle fest to end all.

After several minutes of the commotion, Mama finished her conversation with Grandpa and walked in for a closer look. “Okay, Getchu boys. Sneak attack is over. Let Henley breathe.” His snorting laugh changed to panting. Henley was laughing louder than Mama had heard in a long time. In fact, the last time he laughed like that was the night before Robert reported to duty.

Slowly, the tangled body parts sorted themselves out into her four sons.

“School day tomorrow, you know the drill.” She pointed to the stairs, giving a silent order.

I won't go, thought Henley, and he closed his eyes in protest. Morgan was the first to get up, even though he wanted to continue razzing Henley. Being the oldest, he promised Dad to help his mother with his brothers, so up he went. Morgan was taking after Grandpa in height and character. He stood nearly six feet tall with broad, muscular shoulders. When Morgan moved, his brothers followed.

Jake dusted himself off and helped up little David. Next, he offered his hand inches from Henley's face. For a moment, Henley just stared blankly at the hand then grabbed a hold for a hoist. Underneath all the tension, this family still loved one another, and it showed.

“Thanks,” Mama's tired smile seemed to say.

Morgan knew that look meant her day with Henley had been a long one, so he took command of his brothers. “Okay, Getchu boys, prepare for take off! Five...four...three...two...one!” The four of them shot up the stairs to the bathroom in record time, Henley leading the way.



How suddenly life can change. Henley is completely unaware of his encounter with a villain from the Living Tale, and of Grandpa's plans to give him the Book early. The battle for his hero's heart has begun: Doubt is officially deployed to destroy it, and Grandpa is determined not to let it die. Let's read on...

GOOD STORIES

Henley went to bed troubled by the evening's events. Getchu had filled the hole in his heart left by Dad, and now it felt like Mama was trying to take him away. *What's the big deal about a heart, anyway?* he wondered as sleep took him.

That night Henley had a strange dream. He was in Getchu's game, working side by side with him, blasting enemy robots into spare parts. He sped through the levels. Five...six...seven...eight. Hours and hours they fought. At level ten, instead of seeing Gorse, the creator of all evil robots, he saw a large antique mirror hanging on his bedroom wall, from ceiling to floor, illuminated by a single spotlight. The mirror's wooden frame was gnarled and knotted, and the glass was darkened silver. It looked similar to one he had seen hanging in Grandpa's apartment, only larger.

Getchu and Henley walked up to see their reflections, blasters still in hand. Henley was sure he would see a row of medals plastered across his chest for bravery in battle. He tilted his head to one side, trying to look like a western gunslinger and even imagined he had spurs clanging on his sneakers. A tip of his sweatshirt hood let a grateful

imaginary citizen know he was, “Just doing my duty, ma’am.” But the mirror held an unexpected revelation.

When they swaggered up, only one reflection looked back at him. Henley *was* Getchu! In place of medals gaped a hole where his heart should be—a deep, dark hole in which light itself vanished. He instantly dropped his blaster and covered his chest with both hands as he stepped back in shock.

“What?” His hands began disintegrating into the hole! This abyss would destroy him if he did not do something fast. It took all of his strength to pull his hands out. Once they were free, he noticed his fingertips were still missing. Not wanting to go through that again, he shoved his hands out to his sides like an awkward bird ready for flight; he needed to keep them as far away from the black hole as possible. “What’s going on?” he said out loud, hoping someone would answer; but no one did.

Frantically, he turned around wide-eyed to ask Getchu for advice. *He’ll know what to do; he’ll help me.* A quick survey of his surroundings, however, revealed he was alone. He stood abandoned in inky blackness—his hero left him. Desperate thoughts flooded his mind. *How do I get out of here? How do I get home?*

The only visible light came from the mirror. Henley slowly backed toward it, still searching for his hero. “Getchu, where are you?” Hot tears burned his cheeks; the heaviness of the darkness and the silence pressed him. His thin shoulders drooped.

“Remember who you are!” shouted an elderly woman’s voice in a perfect English accent.

Who's that? He thought it sounded like Grandma Banks from their old home movies, but he wasn't sure. They had not watched home movies since Dad went to Iraq. Whoever it was, her urgent declaration startled him, causing him to jump toward the mirror. He looked over his shoulder as he stumbled. The mirror was closer than he thought, so he only had time to see his reflection as he plummeted through the glass.

Henley braced for the worst with eyes closed and muscles clenched, but the fall did not bring the sounds of breaking glass or the sensation of cutting shards. Instead, it brought the warmth of a blanket wrapping securely around him to break his fall. So surprising was this sensation that he popped open his eyes. He awoke sprawled on his bedroom floor, face-to-face with the tiger-striped family cat, tears still running down his face. "Huh? George!" The cat responded with clawed paws, lowered ears, and fluffed fur at Henley's sudden invasion of his sunny spot.

Henley, now fully conscious, found himself snugly enclosed in his comforter. "My heart!" A quick glance at his chest assured him that everything was all right. He rolled onto his back and scratched George's ears, who had repositioned himself on Henley's chest. That dream left him unsettled; he wasn't ready to get up just yet. Something inside that mirror caught him; he wondered what it was. He had not felt such warmth before and wanted more.

While he basked in this new feeling, he looked around his room. Henley liked his room. He had a small desk with bookshelves mounted above it right inside the door. Next to this stood a small dresser covered with his treasures out of little brother's reach. Immediately opposite the door

was a large picture window where he loved to lie watching the stars from his bed, secretly wishing he could meet the maker of the stars. He especially liked his room because its heater vent looked down into the kitchen. Here, he enjoyed spying on his brothers and smelling breakfast. From the smell of things, he could tell it was already cooked and waiting.

The sun streamed warmly through his curtains and seemed brighter than usual, so Henley got up to see. It had snowed! His narrow street lay covered in a thick white blanket. Henley loved snow. He especially loved to shovel it with Dad to make a fort. His thoughts drifted off like the snow...

“Dad, do you think we can build it this big?”

“No, I think we can build it this big.” Henley remembered his dad saying, as he held his hands above his head. It was the biggest fort in the Bankses’ hideaway history. That’s what they called their snow forts. Why, why did Dad have to go to war? Why didn’t the Book that his family trusted keep his dad home? Why didn’t the guy in the Book bring him home? *Yeah, that’s right, so much for good stories.* His thoughts blew back while his hope sank lower...

“Henley, want Bwussels spwouts?” mocked a little voice behind him.

“Get out of my room, you little troll!” He spun around, crashing into little David with all the hurt he felt inside. *Thud!* David’s head hit Henley’s desk on the way down. Blood and tears dripped on the hardwood floor.

Mama arrived on the scene. “What is going on here?”

The appearance of David’s blood and Mama’s face quieted Henley’s mounting rage. “I’m, I’m...I’m sorry,

Mama,” he managed to get out. Mrs. Banks knelt down to assess the damage.

“Come here, baby; let’s take a look at that.” Quickly she took the towel hanging on the back of Henley’s chair and wiped away the blood then swept David into her arms.

“H-he-h-he hit m-m-me on the d-d-desk,” wailed David through his tears.

“I did not. You were bugging me,” defended Henley. His mother’s eyes said everything, and Henley knew better than to argue. He lowered his eyes to the floor, trying to avoid her fiery gaze and nervously ran his fingers through his messy brown hair.

“Clean up this mess and come eat breakfast.” Mama carried David off to the bathroom with a sigh. Whatever peace Henley felt a few minutes ago was now buried deep with his disturbing dream. He slammed a pile of clothes and toys under his bed, threw on his favorite red sweatshirt over his yellow flannel pj’s, and disappeared down the steps. He didn’t care that his bed head stuck out in every direction.

Downstairs wasn’t much better. His brothers heard all the commotion and were ready to let him have it. They had agreed not talk to Henley and leave him the burnt piece of bacon and cold eggs. Henley noticed their alliance immediately. His eyes blazed at his brothers while he circled the table like a vulture. The small 1950s kitchen did not leave him much room for escape. If only he could borrow Getchu’s laser vision, then the bacon would not be the only thing charred.

Morgan looked more like Grandpa with his button-down shirt and perfect posture as he stared down

Henley. Jake, on the other hand, slumped coolly to one side and played with his puka shell necklace. Jake loved the ocean—surf, sand, and smells. Thousands of miles did not dampen his enthusiasm for surfing, and his clothing showed it. This morning, however, Henley found no friendly suntanned look from him. He circled the table again, finally sitting down at the round table with a plop.

Morgan broke the silence. “Eat your breakfast, Henley.” Jake couldn’t restrain himself any longer. “What are you doing, dude? Mom is already tired from taking care of us. You gotta go whack David?”

Henley’s fist burrowed deep into his sweatshirt pocket and found a small rubber ball. His hand tightened its grip while he spied the best place to nail Jake from beneath his shaggy bangs.

Just then Mama walked in the door with a bandaged David. “Time for school, boys. Jake, Morgan, your ride will be here shortly; go finish getting ready. Henley, finish your breakfast.” Reluctantly, he loosened his grip on the ball and took a bite of eggs.

Jake and Morgan rode to school with the Hopper boys. Mrs. Banks used to home school all of her boys, but with Mr. Banks in Iraq, she needed a break somewhere. That left her Henley to school and David to watch during the day.

When the older boys were off to school, Henley, David, and Mama all sat at the kitchen table to start the day. David sat next to Mama, frowning at Henley between his teddy bear’s ears. Henley sat on the other side of Mama with books, papers, and pencils spread defensively around

him. Mama looked at Henley. “Henley, don’t you have something to say to David?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He dropped all expression from his face and turned abruptly toward his little brother. “Sorry, David. Do you forgive me?” His quick monotone voice and eyelids held at half-mast let his brother know he truly was not sorry.

“No!” David cried then he ran off to his dining room fortress. Mama didn’t pursue, knowing some cooling off time was needed.

Henley didn’t like not being forgiven, so he buried that with all the rest of the pain of the day. His shoulders slumped forward, and his gaze fixed on his pencil, which he rapped quickly on the tabletop—tick, tick, tick, tick.

“Hey, Budgie, what’s up?” He received the nickname “Budgie” during family wrestling matches where he would not budge, no way, no how. He hadn’t heard it in months; Dad and little David used it the most.

Comforted to hear his nickname, he sat up straighter in his chair but continued to stare at his pencil. “Nothing.”

“You miss your dad?”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Mama.” He pulled his hood over his bed head to retreat from her probing eyes.

“Okay, but when you’re ready, remember, I’m here.” She craned her neck around to make eye contact. “All right?”

“All right,” Henley whined as he fidgeted in his chair and looked intently at his pencil. Try as he may, he could not shake the image of a black hole for a heart.

“Let’s begin.” Mama smiled at him, trying to put a cheery face on a tough morning. “We only have a week until Christmas, and I want you to start work on a report.”

Oh, what now? Another report on some dead dude I don't care about. He rolled his eyes.

"I want you to research and tell me why every good story needs a hero," she continued. "Our discussion yesterday about Getchu made me realize you need to understand what a hero is."

"Awesome! I can write pages about Getchu," said Henley excitedly. He sat up in his chair and finally looked into Mama's eyes. "Talk about good stories...there was this time, we were battling Brain Droids on the Northern Shores, and Getchu did this—"

"Henley, hang on; go get the dictionary. Let's start by defining what a hero is."

Henley's hands were still held in mid-air as he stopped animating the story of Getchu. At the word "dictionary," they fell lifelessly to the table. "Ah, Mama, I hate looking up words in the in the dictionary." That book was heavy and full of words, not adventures like the books in the den. This morning had not gone well, so he slowly got out of his chair to retrieve it from a small bookcase by the back door. He thudded it onto the table to let his mother know his dislike for it.

"All right, Henley Banks, I have had quite enough of your attitude this morning. Please look up the word hero," snapped Mama, who was losing her usual calm.

Henley jumped to the *h*'s to let her know this word was too easy for him. *Good, I'll just read a stupid definition and start writing on Getchu*, he thought as his fingers scanned the pages.

"Heritage...hermit...hero. Here it is, Mama. It says, 'noble, grand, a champion, lord, master...a man of

dis...tin...guished valor in danger...a great or extraordinary person."

What? A man? Person? This isn't right. A robot's not a man; can't Getchu be my hero?

Mama noticed the confused look on his face and began to explain, "Yes, Henley, a hero is a person—a person of character and courage. This definition describes people who have greatness inside. What we see on the outside, their bravery, is a reflection of what lives on the inside, in their heart." While she spoke she pointed to his chest. "And since he has a hero's heart, he can go into dark places, take on dangerous adventures, and complete them with honor."

"Someone like Dad?"

"Yes, someone like Dad. That is why I said yesterday that a hero must be someone with a heart, because the heart is where courage lives—no heart, no courage. No courage, no hero."

Oh, Henley desperately wanted this to be true, but how? Everything within him dreamed of being a hero, ached to be courageous, but all he knew was how to doubt and be angry. He wanted a hero's heart like Dad's, and he was going to find out how to get it.

"Mama?"

"Yes?"

"How do you get a hero's heart? I mean, can you buy it somewhere?" His mind started racing in characteristic Henley style, and he continued before Mama had a chance to answer. "Maybe I can say a magic spell, like in Anthorn of the Forest. He said a spell and got brave enough to kill the giant." Henley's face perked up with excitement as he took in his new idea.

“Hang on, Budgie. Go get my Book off of the cooking shelf; I want to read you something.” Mama pointed in the right direction. Among her recipes was a big, black, dog-eared book.

“Not that one. It’s full of words and Garden-stuff, not quests—boring.” He rolled his eyes as he got up to lug it back to the table.

“Someday you will see it differently.” Mama smiled while she opened it to a favorite place. “I want to read you just a couple lines. It’s from a story about a young man. He thinks he is a nobody from Nowheresville, but one meeting with a man named Sam changes his life forever. Will you listen?”

“Yeah,” Henley halfheartedly replied with his head leaning on the palm of his hand. He was already tracing the word “lame” on the tabletop in anticipation of being bored out of his mind.

Mama read, “So when he had turned his back to leave Sam, the Gardener gave him another heart; and all the Gardener’s words happened that day.’ Here a little later it tells us, ‘and there they made him king.’”

Henley stopped writing on the tabletop. “King? Not bad for Mr. Lame-o.”

“See, a young man gets a new heart from the Gardener and becomes a king, but that isn’t the best part. His new heart makes him extraordinary so he can defeat his enemies. In the next chapter, he leads thousands of men to take on a whole army and wins. He becomes a hero and a king, all from getting a new heart.” Mama noticed a blank look on Henley’s face. “Remember, you have to answer the question: Why does every good story need a hero? I’ll give

you two months to work on your report,” she added while pointing up at the calendar.

Henley heard every word she said and was very interested in this young man, but when he looked at the calendar, Christmas caught his attention. He knew that meant Grandpa Banks would be over soon with adventures, stories, and presents. He was sure to get the new Getchu 2000.

Doubt took advantage of Henley’s distraction to interject an attack. As he lurked in the shadows of the kitchen, he grew more concerned that last night’s victory so quickly vaporized because of a dream and a good story. He could see the Living Tale was calling Henley’s heart through his dreams, and now Mama was reading it to him. He had to work quickly to get Henley confused or risk losing his special-ops position in the Bankses’ house. He knew success in this mission meant a permanent placement, as Fear had achieved. To add to his concern, Despair waited just outside the door, hoping to have its chance at Henley if Doubt failed. Doubt moved into action. He swirled around Henley, whispering, “Wouldn’t you rather be playing Getchu instead of listening to this stupid story?”

The villain’s thoughts did not stick this time; the get-a-new-heart-become-a-hero story captivated Henley’s attention. Henley wondered what he would do if he had a new heart. His mind raced away in a flurry of heroic daydreams, while his heart soared. Mama’s voice jerked him back to attention.

“We’re going to do your math lesson, then you can have some time to think about your report.” She closed the other

books and opened up his math text. For the first time ever, Henley wanted a closer look at the Book. Nothing else could hold his attention after that. The morning dragged for Henley, while Doubt looked for a new opportunity.

Later, Henley sat in the den, thinking about all this hero talk and his conversation with his brothers the night before. Doubt was quick to interject a new thought, "Aren't you already a hero in the Getchu game? Who says you need a new heart to be a hero."

This time Henley took the bait and entertained the thought. *Right. I have risked my life lots of times on the front lines. I've been a hero in the game.*

In the heat of his reflections about these victories, something unusual happened. Another question as refreshing as this morning's warmth rose in his heart like mist on a summer afternoon. "What if you were a hero outside the game?"

He sat there for a moment. What would that look like? Would he rush into burning houses to rescue old ladies? Would he climb tall trees to save George the cat? Remove trapped babies from car wrecks? He would definitely need a new heart to do that, but how?

Could I be like the young man in the Book...get a new heart and become a hero? A king? Maybe there was something to the Book after all. At that moment, though, Doubt let fly an image of Dad that flashed into his mind like a land mine and exploded his hope.

That's right, thought Henley, *It's just a fairytale. So much for good stories. If the Living Tale didn't keep Dad here, then I don't want it.*



If Henley could see the invisible but very real Living Tale, he would witness a whirling column of life plowing toward his home with only him in mind. Good thing he can't see it, for it is of terrifying size. Nevertheless, Henley was made to live inside this tempest in complete comfort. But as it is, his suspicion will blind him to its entrance, even when it sits right at his feet.