**The Treasure of Lemon Brown**

by Walter Dean Myers

The dark sky, filled with angry, swirling clouds, reflected my mood as I sat on the stoop of my building. My father’s voice came to me again, first reading the letter the principal had sent to the house, then lecturing endlessly about my poor efforts in math.

“I had to leave school when I was thirteen,” my father had said, “that’s a year younger than you are now. If I’d had half the chances you have, I’d…”

I sat in the small, pale green kitchen listening, knowing the lecture would end with my father saying I couldn’t play ball with the Scorpions. I had asked my father the week before, and my father had said it depended on my next report card. It wasn’t often the Scorpions took on new players, especially fourteen-year-olds, and this was a chance of a lifetime for me. I hadn’t been allowed to play high school ball, which I had really wanted to do, but playing for the Community Center team was the next best thing. Report cards were due in a week, and I had been hoping for the best. But the principal had ended the suspense early when she sent the letter saying I would probably fail math if I didn’t spend more time studying.

“And you want to play basketball?” My father’s brows knitted over deep brown eyes. “That must be some kind of a joke. Now you just get into your room and hit those books.”

That had been two nights before. My father’s words, like the distant thunder that now echoed through the streets of Harlem, still rumbled softly in my ears.

It was beginning to cool. Gusts of wind made bits of paper dance between the parked cars. There was a flash of nearby lightning, and soon large drops of rain splashed onto my jeans. I stood to go upstairs, thought of the lecture that probably awaited me if I did anything except shut myself in my room with my math book, and started walking down the street instead. Down the block there was an old tenement that had been abandoned for some months. Some of the guys had held an impromptu checker tournament there the week before, and I had noticed that the door, once boarded over, had been slightly ajar.

Pulling my collar up as high as I could, I checked for traffic and made a dash across the street. I reached the house just as another flash of lightning changed the night to day for an instant, then returned the graffiti-scarred building to the grim shadows. I vaulted over the outer stairs and pushed tentatively on the door. It was open, and I let myself in.

The inside of the building was dark except for the dim light that filtered through the dirty windows from the streetlamps. There was a room a few feet from the door, and from where I stood in the entrance, I could see a squarish patch of light on the floor. I entered the room, frowning at the musty smell. It was a large room that might have been someone’s parlor at one time. Squinting, I could see an old table on its side against one wall, what looked like a pile of rags or a torn mattress in the corner, and a couch, with one side broken, in front of the window.

I went to the couch. The side that wasn’t broken was comfortable enough, though a little creaky. From the spot I could see the blinking neon sign over the bodega on the corner. I sat awhile, watching the sign blink first green then red, allowing my mind to drift to the Scorpions, then to my father. My father had been a postal worker for all his life, and was proud of it, often telling me how hard he had worked to pass the test. I had heard the story too many times to be interested now.

For a moment I thought I heard something that sounded like a scraping against the wall. I listened carefully, but it was gone.

Outside the wind had picked up, sending the rain against the window with a force that shook the glass in its frame. A car passed, its tires hissing over the wet street and its red taillights glowing in the darkness. I thought I heard the noise again. My stomach tightened as I held myself still and listened intently. There weren’t any more scraping noises, but I was sure I had heard something in the darkness— something breathing!

I tried to figure out just where the breathing was coming from; I knew it was in the room with me. Slowly I stood, tensing. As I turned, a flash of lightning lit up the room, frightening me with its sudden brilliance. I saw nothing, just the overturned table, the pile of rags and an old newspaper on the floor. Could I have been imagining the sounds? I continued listening, but heard nothing and thought that it might have just been rats. Still, I thought, as soon as the rain let up I would leave. I went to the window and was about to look when I heard a voice behind me.

“Don’t try nothin’ ‘cause I got a razor sharp enough to cut a week into nine days!”

I, except for an involuntary tremor in my knees, stood stock still. The voice was high and brittle, like dry twigs being broken, surely not one I had ever heard before. There was a shuffling sound as the person who had been speaking moved a step closer. I turned, holding my breath, my eyes straining to see in the dark room.

The upper part of the figure before me was still in darkness. The lower half was in the dim rectangle of light that fell unevenly from the window. There were two feet, in cracked, dirty shoes from which rose legs that were wrapped in rags.

“Who are you?” I hardly recognized my own voice.

“I’m Lemon Brown,” came the answer. “Who’re you?”

“Greg Ridley.”

“What you doing here?” The figure shuffled forward again, and I took a small step backward.

“It’s raining,” I said.

“I can see that,” the figure said.

The person who called himself Lemon Brown peered forward, and I could see him clearly. He was an old man. His black, heavily wrinkled face was surrounded by a halo of crinkly white hair and whiskers that seemed to separate his head from the layers of dirty coats piled on his smallish frame. His pants were bagged to the knee, where they were met with rags that went down to the old shoes. The rags were held on with strings, and there was a rope around his middle. I relaxed. I had seen the man before, picking through the trash on the corner and pulling clothes out of a Salvation Army box. There was no sign of a razor that could “cut a week into nine days.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“This is where I’m staying,” Lemon Brown said. “What you here for?”

“Told you it was raining out,” I said, leaning against the back of the couch until I felt it give slightly.

“Ain’t you got no home?”

“I got a home,” I answered.

“You ain’t one of them bad boys looking for my treasure, is you?” Lemon Brown cocked his head to one side and squinted one eye. “Because I told you I got me a razor.”

“I’m not looking for your treasure,” I answered, smiling. “*If* you have one.”

“What you mean, *if* I have one.” Lemon Brown said. “Every man got a treasure. You don’t know that, you must be a fool!”

“Sure,” I said as I sat on the sofa and put one leg over the back. “What do you have, gold coins?”

“Don’t worry none about what I got,” Lemon Brown said.

“You know who I am?”

“You told me your name was orange or lemon or something like that.”

“Lemon Brown,” the old man said, pulling back his shoulders as he did so, “they used to call me Sweet Lemon Brown.”

“Sweet Lemon?” I asked.

“Yessir. Sweet Lemon Brown. They used to say I sung the blues so sweet that if I sang at a funeral, the dead would commence to rocking with the beat. Used to travel all over Mississippi and as far as Monroe, Louisiana, and east on over to Macon, Georgia. You mean you ain’t never heard of Sweet Lemon Brown?”

“Afraid not,” I said. “What…happened to you?”

“Hard times, boy. Hard times always after a poor man. One day I got tired, sat down to rest a spell and felt a tap on my shoulder. Hard times caught up with me.”

“Sorry about that.”

“What you doing here? How come you don’t go in home when the rain come? Rain don’t bother you young folks none.”

“Just didn’t.” I looked away.

“I used to have a knotty-headed boy just like you.” Lemon Brown had half walked, half shuffled back to the corner and sat down against the wall. “Had them big eyes like you got. I used to call them moon eyes. Look into them moon eyes and see anything you want.”

“How come you gave up singing the blues?” I asked.

“Didn’t give it up,” Lemon Brown said. “You don’t give up the blues; they give you up. After a while you do good for yourself, and it ain’t nothing but foolishness singing about how hard you got it. Ain’t that right?”

“I guess so.”

“What’s that noise?” Lemon Brown asked, suddenly sitting upright.

I listened, and I heard a noise outside. I looked at Lemon Brown and saw the old man pointing toward the window.

I went to the window and saw three men, neighborhood thugs, on the stoop. One was carrying a length of pipe. I looked back toward Lemon Brown, who moved quietly across the room to the window. The old man looked out, then beckoned frantically for me to follow him. For a moment I couldn’t move. Then I found myself following Lemon Brown into the hallway and up the darkened stairs. I followed as closely as I could. We reached the top of the stairs, and I felt Lemon Brown’s hand first lying on my shoulder, then probing down my arm until he took my hand into his own as we crouched in the darkness.

“They’s bad men,” Lemon Brown whispered. His breath was warm against my skin.

“Hey! Rag man!” A voice called. “We know you in here. What you got up under them rags? You got any money?”

Silence.

“We don’t want to have to come in and hurt you, old man, but we don’t mind if we have to.”

Lemon Brown squeezed my hand in his own hard, gnarled fist.

There was a banging downstairs and a light as the men entered. They banged around noisily, calling for the rag man.

“We heard you talking about your treasure.” The voice was slurred. “We just want to see it, that’s all.”

“You sure he’s here?” One voice seemed to come from the room with the sofa.

“Yeah, he stays here every night.”

“There’s another room over there; I’m going to take a look. You got that flashlight?”

 “Yeah, here, take the pipe too.”

I opened my mouth to quiet the sound of my breath as I sucked it in uneasily. A beam of light hit the wall a few feet opposite me, then went out.

“Ain’t nobody in that room,” a voice said. “You think he gone or something?”

“I don’t know,” came the answer. “All I know is that I heard him talking about some kind of treasure. You know they found that shopping bag lady with that load of money in her bags.”

“Yeah. You think he’s upstairs?”

“HEY, OLD MAN, ARE YOU UP THERE?”

Silence.

“Watch my back. I’m going up.”

There was a footstep on the stairs, and the beam from the flashlight danced crazily along the peeling wallpaper. I held my breath. There was another step and a loud crashing noise as the man banged the pipe against the wooden banister. I could feel my temples throb as the man slowly neared us. I thought about the pipe, wondering what I would do when the man reached us—what I *could* do.

Then Lemon Brown released my hand and moved toward the top of the stairs. I looked around and saw stairs going up to the next floor. I tried waving to Lemon Brown, hoping the old man would see me in the dim light and follow me to the next floor. Maybe, I thought, the man wouldn’t follow us up there. Suddenly, though, Lemon Brown stood at the top of the stairs, both arms raised high above his head.

“There he is!” A voice cried from below.

“Throw down your money, old man, so I won’t have to bash your head in!”

Lemon Brown didn’t move.

I felt myself near panic. The steps came closer, and still Lemon Brown didn’t move. He was an eerie sight, a bundle of rags standing at the top of the stairs, his shadow on the wall looming over him. I wet my lips, put my hands to my mouth and tried to make a sound. Nothing came out. I swallowed hard, wet my lips once more and howled as evenly as I could.

“What’s that?”

As I howled, the light moved away from Lemon Brown, but not before I saw him hurl his body down the stairs at the men who had come to take his treasure. There was a crashing noise, and then footsteps. A rush of warm air came in as the downstairs door opened, then there was only an ominous silence.

I stood on the landing. I listened, and after a while there was another sound on the staircase.

“Mr. Brown?” I called.

“Yeah, it’s me,” came the answer. “I got their flashlight.”

I exhaled in relief as Lemon Brown made his way slowly back up the stairs.

“You okay?”

“Few bumps and bruises,” Lemon Brown said.

“I think I’d better be going,” I said, my breath returning to normal. “You’d better leave, too, before they come back.”

“They may hang around for a while,” Lemon Brown said, “but they ain’t getting their nerve up to come in here again. Not with crazy rag men and howling spooks. Best you stay a while till the coast is clear. I’m heading out west tomorrow, out to East St. Louis.”

“They were talking about treasures,” I said. “You really have a treasure?”

“What I tell you? Didn’t I tell you every man got a treasure?” Lemon Brown said. “You want to see mine?”

“If you want to show it to me,” I shrugged.

“Let’s look out the window first, see what them scoundrels be doing,” Lemon Brown said.

They followed the oval beam of the flashlight into one of the rooms and looked out the window. They saw the men who had tried to take the treasure sitting on the curb near the corner. One of them had his pants leg up, looking at his knee.

“You sure you’re not hurt?” I asked Lemon Brown.

“Nothing that ain’t been hurt before,” Lemon Brown said. “When you get as old as me all you say when something hurts is, ‘Howdy, Mr. Pain, sees you back again.’ Then when Mr. Pain see he can’t worry you none, he go on mess with somebody else.”

I smiled.

“Here, you hold this.” Lemon Brown gave me the flashlight. He sat on the floor near me and carefully untied the strings that held the rags on his right leg. When he took the rags away, I saw a piece of plastic. The old man carefully took off the plastic and unfolded it. He revealed some yellowed newspaper clippings and a battered harmonica. “There it be,” he said, nodding his head.

“There it be.” I looked at the old man, saw the distant look in his eye, then turned to the clippings. They told of Sweet Lemon Brown, a blues singer and harmonica player who was appearing at different theaters in the South. One of the clippings said he had been the hit of the show, although not the headliner. All of the clippings were reviews of shows Lemon Brown had been in more than fifty years ago. I looked at the harmonica. It was dented badly on one side, with the reed holes on one end nearly closed.

“I used to travel around and make money to feed my wife and Jesse—that’s my boy’s name. Used to feed them good, too. Then his mama died, and he stayed with his mama’s sister. He growed up to be a man, and when the war come he saw fit to go off and fight in it. I didn’t have nothing to give him except these things that told him who I was, and what he come from. If you know your pappy did something, you know you can do something too.

“Anyway, he went off to war, and I went off still playing and singing. ‘Course by then I wasn’t as much as I used to be, not without somebody to make it worth the while. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah.” I nodded, not quite really knowing.

“I traveled around, and one time I come home, and there was this letter saying Jesse got killed in the war. Broke my heart, it truly did.

“They sent back what he had with him over there, and what it was is this old mouth fiddle and these clippings. Him carrying it around with him like that told me it meant something to him. That was my treasure, and when I give it to him he treated it just like that, a treasure. Ain’t that something?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” I said.

“You guess so?” Lemon Brown’s voice rose an octave as he started to put his treasure back into the plastic. “Well, you got to guess ‘cause you sure don’t know nothing. Don’t know enough to get home when it’s raining.”

“I guess…I mean, you’re right.”

“You okay for a youngster,” the old man said as he tied the strings around his leg, “better than those scalawags what come here looking for my treasure. That’s for sure.”

“You really think that treasure of yours was worth fighting for?” I asked. “Against a pipe?”

“What else a man got ‘cepting what he can pass on to his son, or his daughter, if she be his oldest?” Lemon Brown said. “For a big-headed boy you sure do ask the foolishest questions.”

Lemon Brown got up after patting his rags in place and looked out the window again.

“Looks like they’re gone. You get on out of here and get yourself home. I’ll be watching from the window so you’ll be all right.”

Lemon Brown went down the stairs behind me. When we reached the front door the old man looked out first, saw the street was clear, and told me to scoot on home.

“You sure you’ll be okay?” I asked.

“Now didn’t I tell you I was going to East St. Louis in the morning?” Lemon Brown asked. “Don’t that sound okay to you?”

“Sure it does,” I said. “Sure it does. And you take care of that treasure of yours.”

“That I’ll do,” Lemon said, the wrinkles around his eyes suggesting a smile.

“That I’ll do.”

The night had warmed and the rain had stopped, leaving puddles at the curbs. I didn’t even want to think how late it was. I thought ahead of what my father would say and wondered if I should tell him about Lemon Brown. I thought about it until I reached my stoop, and decided against it. Lemon Brown would be okay, I thought, with his memories and his treasure.

I pushed the button over the bell marked Ridley, thought of the lecture I knew my father would give him, and smiled.