

Henry

by Kyler Ericksen

Various coats and arms brushed briskly against each other on the crowded sidewalks of the inner city. Hundreds of busy citizens went about their daily routines, heading to work, or home, or lunch, since it was nearly noon. Henry, very late, barely avoided a lamppost he had almost not noticed as he hurriedly pushed through the crowds. Narrowly squeezing between two disgruntled women in long, fashionable dresses, he shouted a quick, "Sorry!" over his shoulder as he reached the marble steps of The National Financing and Security Advisory Corporation. A faster-than-normal walk took him through large doors, past the security, and up more stairs, where he finally reached his office.

"Good morning, Margie," he said to the plump old woman who worked as the floor secretary.

"Good *afternoon*, Henry" she said, correcting him and pointing with a pen at a clock on the wall which read 12:07, not raising an eye from her work. "You are over an hour late, as per usual."

"Oh, you know me, Marge, never early to the party and always late to leave." Henry replied, feigning a smile and continuing to walk around her desk. She raised an eyebrow, still looking down and scribbling as he entered his office and closed the door behind him. Sitting down in his hard chair at his bleak brown desk, he set his briefcase on the ground and turned to look bleakly at the ominously large pile of paperwork stacked on the edge of his desk. Just as he reached forward to grab the first part of the pile, his phone rang with a sharp, obnoxious noise. Scooting his chair awkwardly towards the corner of the room where his phone sat, he picked it up.

"Hello?" he asked.

"Hey, Henry," came the delicate voice of his older sister.

"Steph! This is a pleasant surprise. Few minutes earlier and you would've had to talk to Margie."

"You were *that* late today?"

"Been a bit overwhelmed" Henry said, running a hand through his hair, "whats up?"

"I've got some bad news. I just got a call from the estate property managers. It's about the old house in the country."

"The summer house? Gosh, it's been a while since we visited there, I hardly remembered it existed. We had quite the time there, didn't we." Henry said, laughing.

"Henry," Steph said, sounding more serious, "there was a fire. Something about a dead tree and dry lightning. The whole place went up, even the orchard. I'm headed there tomorrow

morning to meet with some insurance guys to assess the damages. Just thought I'd let you know."

"Oh..."

"Sorry to break the news to you at work. I know the place was really sentimental to you, especially with mom passing last year. I'd like to--"

"I'm going with you," Henry said, cutting her off.

* * *

"Hold the doors!" Henry shouted the next day. A conductor with a large handlebar mustache and round spectacles pushed a hand out to stop the door from closing as Henry rushed forward. A whistle blew in the background and he jumped up onto the step as the train lurched to a start.

"You're a lucky one," said the conductor, "ticket, please?" Henry held out a light pink sliver of paper and the conductor clamped it with a hole punch. "Find a seat anywhere, it's packed today," he said as he closed the door and began walking away.

"Thank you," said Henry, turning around and walking down the hall. Eventually he found a compartment empty but for an old woman sitting by a window, clutching a light blue handbag with a dress to match. He knocked on the wall, poking his head in. "Mind if I join you? Everywhere else is full."

The old woman smiled and, nodding, said, "have a seat. Some company would be lovely." Henry slipped into the slightly cramped compartment and sat on the opposite side of the space from the woman. She watched intently out the window, hair grayed and half moon glasses shimmering with the reflection of the countryside as it rolled by. Her lip was lifted, ever so slightly, into a contented smile. She seemed peaceful, sitting there, keen eyes contrasting a wrinkled face.

Prompted by the twisting in his gut for worry about what he might find at his childhood home, he sat forward just slightly and asked, "do you ever feel burdened?" The woman looked at him, brow lifting questioningly. "Sorry," he continued quickly, "I don't mean to ask something so personal- gosh I haven't even asked your name," he apologized. The woman laughed, waving a white-gloved hand in the air as if to brush away any discomfort.

"You're quite alright, young man. My name is Winifred." She reached out, and Henry shook her hand, gently.

"I'm Henry, it's nice to meet you," he said, still embarrassed.

"Well, Henry, to answer your question, yes. A long life like mine isn't without its struggles."

Still a bit abashed, Henry asked, "and what do you do when it all seems to be too much?"

Winifred smiled, and asked, "what is weighing on you, dear?" which opened the floodgates. For the remainder of the train ride, Henry explained about his work load. He talked about his mother, and her passing. He told stories about memories he held dear, all of which were

located at the old estate. He expressed his worries about the fire, and life, and hardship to this old woman and her light blue handbag. At times she would smile, or rest a comforting hand on his knee, or frown and look thoughtful. She gave condolences for his mother, and seemed earnestly empathetic towards anything he said. She spoke very little for over an hour of the ride, simply letting him speak.

“You must think I’m a right fool, or insane,” Henry said, chuckling. “Here I am, having just met you, and telling you all about my life.”

She smiled again, and said, “there have been times in my life where I needed someone to speak to, or needed to be spoken to. As a matter of fact, there have been two times where I have spoken to complete strangers just as you are to me. People need people to talk to, and I’ll be happy if I can give half as good an ear to others as has been given to me. I’d be a right fool, or insane, to turn down the opportunity.” She had a profound way of speaking. Very gentle, very thoughtful. Though her age showed in the quiver of her voice, she was firm in what she said. Outside, the passing terrain began to go by slower.

“So...” said Henry, “what do I do?”

Winifred laughed, “there's not near enough time for me to give advice on everything you've just talked about. Besides, I may be old but I’ve not got all the answers, and this is my stop.” A loud whistle from outside signaled the nearing of the station, and the mustached conductor from before walked down the hall calling out the name of the small town.

“I suppose that's all true,” Henry said, naively disappointed. “I’ve got to face my own problems, anyway.”

“There is one thing that just might help you,” Winifred said as she stood, handbag in one hand and glasses, which she had taken off somewhere around the talk about Henry’s mother, in the other. “Have you cried?”

Henry, surprised, said, “n-no, I- not since I was a boy.”

“Then let yourself cry.” Winifred said, putting on her glasses and then grasping his hand. “It was lovely meeting you, Henry.” And she walked out the door.

Henry paused, then said, “Thank you-” but she was already gone. He sat there, quietly, watching out the window and pondering what she had said until the train started moving again. He pondered still for the rest of his ride, and even still as he arrived at his station. He thought even more as he hailed a cab and had a long, quiet drive to his final destination. He paid the cab driver, left the cab, and stopped short.

The place was in ruins. Once beautiful, ivy laced walls were crumbled and charred. A lone cobblestone pillar, the chimney he realized, stood standing. Henry looked out over the orchard, where he and his sister had run and jumped and imagined. Some of the trees still smoldered. He walked, not knowing his destination, not caring for the soot and ash that marked his shoes when he stepped on stray bits of crumbled wood. Eventually he reached the stump of a grand oak that once had grown just yards from the house. It had likely been the dead tree struck by lightning. It had also been where he had learned to climb. In its sturdy branches he had spent

hours playing, reading, singing, and growing. He paused there, and Winifreds advice echoed in his mind.

Let yourself cry.

He kicked away the black remains of a “sturdy” branch, and knelt. *Let yourself cry* came the echo again. And so he did. Emotions welled up, his eyes blurred and burned. Lip quivering, chest tensing, one hot tear slid down his face and dropped into the ashes. Its impact darkened the ground and pushed up a small puff of dust. It was followed by another, the tears like marks of shame slicing down his cheeks. He let out a sob, mind swimming with memories of his youth. He cried for his old home, for his mother, for his stress at work. He cried for his childhood. He cried for needing to cry. He cried for Winifred, and his sister, and Margie. He let it all out onto the ash dusted earth. A grown man, afraid, unsure, and finally able to let it all out.