

Highlights of Henry

Henry Baltimore was born in New York (his parents had moved there from Detroit).

At the age of seven, he began taking things apart. It wasn't until fourteen or fifteen that he would successfully put anything back together, but that never guaranteed it would work.

At eight, he declared to whatever adults were in earshot, "I don't think it's a good career choice, just taking things apart."

At age eleven, riding the Fifth Avenue bus to school, he watched the big earth-movers break ground for the Guggenheim Museum. The following year, as Wright's spiral innovation took shape, the city was abuzz with the controversy attendant upon all such architectural statements.

"It's something of a statement," his great aunt said, coming down for breakfast.

"Well, if that's a statement, I think someone should learn to keep his mouth shut," said his father.

"What's wrong with statements?" asked Henry, but the adults were already out the door, and he was late for school.

Years later, visiting his friend in Malibu, he noticed that his friend's dog Chester had no balls.

"I didn't know you had him fixed," Henry said.

His friend replied, "Oh, no. He lost them in an accident."

"What happened?"

"He was chasing a rabbit behind the shed, and jumped over an old bedspring. They caught on something and were torn clean off. I guess he 'fixed' himself."

“That’s horrible.”

“It was dramatic,” his friend said. “He was hemorrhaging pretty badly, so we took him to the vet and got him sewn up. Chester didn’t seem to miss them, though.”

Later, Henry said to his friend, “I hate to ask, but did you have to go get them?”

“I was planning to,” his friend said, “but Chester found them first.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes. One gulp.”



An incoming text message made his phone bleep, a warbling bleep with a subtle liquid quality to it. The timbre reminded Henry of his father’s parrot, which was given to a burbling cry at random intervals, a cry that was almost a kind of yodel. He glanced down at his phone. The text app was already open from the last message, or the one before that, or from the string of messages coming in for the last several days, sporadically, like digital yodels from the demented Alps.

“You have no friends,” it read, “nor even acquaintances.”

That seemed sufficient for the hour. Henry terminated the text app and thrust the phone back into his pants pocket where it nestled, warm, against his leg. The messages weren’t from anyone, that much was clear. The sending party’s phone number wasn’t blocked, though; it was blank. That is, not truly blank—where numbers (or blanks) could have been displayed there were only portions of glyphs, pieces of letters, number fragments, shards of indecipherable alphabet. Some hacker may spoof a telephone number, or perhaps even cleverly substitute letters and punctuation where the digits should go, but only the phone can replace data with true gibberish. No sender could do that, and no phone company; only a deliberate move within the firmware, an intentional perversion of the phone’s intimate internal embedded languages.

“The drugs were your only hope,” intoned the phone, but Henry only heard a muffled mumble from his pocket. He pulled out the phone, stared at the glowing display, and thumbed the volume to max. “Say again?” he said, as if the phone could understand him. “The drugs were your only

hope,” the phone said again. There were no apps running; the screen was just wallpaper and quiescent icons.

Henry thought about his last descent into chemical refuge. It hadn't gone well. That remedy can only be attempted once. He laughed ruefully, pinching the corners of his mouth into a crude simulation of a smile. “Nothing is funny,” he muttered.

“Laughter is a sham,” said the phone.

He examined the slab of technology, a slice of compacted creative intelligence from man-centuries of stepwise refinement. Obviously the phone was on the fritz. He closed his eyes. *Mumbling is a sure sign of dementia*, he thought.

“Editing is futile,” said the phone.

Editing? Nothing was being edited. What good would that do?

The phone vibrated and Henry looked down. A text message was coming in, another telex from the fragmented character generator. “The memory erasing drug is a sham.”

He thought about that, and another text arrived: “But it worked a week ago, didn't it?”

It did? When? I never tried any fucking memory erasing drug, he thought.

“You have forgotten nothing,” said the phone.

If there were such a drug, Henry thought, *how would I know if I had taken it? Or if it had worked?*

“Forgetting is impossible,” said the phone.

Henry slid the phone back into his pocket. No point indulging the thing. He wondered if it was checking in with huge computer arrays at the Googleplex, pulling up disturbing commentary to hold his attention. If your attention is sufficiently held, perhaps you don't notice when vital organs are removed. Henry remembered Chester the dog, shoved his hands into his pockets, and glanced around to see if anyone was looking. Reaching around in his pants, he confirmed that nothing had gone missing.

Across the street, a city bus was rattling its diesel. The airbrakes hissed and the bus roared softly, ponderously, into motion. A dozen heads were aligned in a dozen windows, some staring out, others reading, some asleep. The billboard under the bus windows proclaimed, “Today only! All that

you remember at any moment is all that you have ever known. On sale now!”

Henry rolled his eyes. *So it's not the phone*, he thought. *The whole fucking thing is a delusion*. The bus tooted its round brown horn sound and pulled into the endless traffic.

“All is illusion,” Henry announced, to the city. His phone vibrated, and he pulled it out again and glared into the quad-HD display.

“Delusion is not illusion but illusion is delusion.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Henry snapped. But this was where the phone came into its own. Someone at the Googleplex was on his toes, off the back burner, firing on all cylinders, four sheets to the wind. Either that or discussions about delusion were coming up more often than he would have imagined, illuminating millions of smartphones around the country with inexplicable truthiness.

“*De*-lusion is the result of deficiency or malfunction or mis-use of your faculties,” the text message read. “*Il*-lusion is in the object perceived, so it’s no fault of your own. You can be self-deluded, but not self-illuded. I’m letting you off the hook.”

Henry gripped the phone dangerously. He’d heard that sometimes they could be bent. It was tempting to snap the thing in two, but he needed to respond. “Hardly,” he said, since thumb-typing into the thing was clearly no longer necessary. “That doesn’t let me off the hook. And what you said still doesn’t make any sense.”

“There’s no law says it should.” The phone vibrated erratically, with a half-rhythm that felt almost like laughter. “Nevertheless, the illusion is entirely of your own making,” it said. Or texted. “So you’re right: ‘hardly.’ Which means you are indeed back on the hook.”

The screen went black. Perhaps it had timed out. Henry laughed, this time without pinching the corners of his mouth. He vocalized it a little, too, instead of just puffing out through his nose.

“The laughter was an illusion,” it said. Something said it; the screen remained black.

Henry’s belly shook. Tears streamed from his eyes. He staggered across the sidewalk and leaned against the New York Times building, grinning like an idiot.

You have never laughed, something seemed to say.

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