

Chapter Nine: Henry Goes to Heaven in a Vega

from [Beercans on the Side of the Road: The Story of Henry the Hitchhiker](#)

Abstract: Henry dies after dropping out of school and smoking dope, and reaches his Promised Land, with coffee refills and real cream.

I slept soundly until I was awakened by footsteps.

“Hey, Freedman, the electrician is here.” I cringed. The joke belonged to Almamata, my guard on the morning shift, and so did the footsteps. Almamata wasn’t sadistic; he was just unoriginal.

“He wants t’ know if you’re gonna pay cash or charge. Ha ha, get it? Cash or CHARGE.”

Well, maybe a little sadistic.

“Moving on does have its advantages,” I thought resignedly. “At least after today I won’t have to put up with Almamata’s jokes.”

I looked at the freckle on my right wrist. “9:45 already?” My appointment was at eleven. “Where does the time go?” I raised my left hand above my head and, with a small piece of cement I had chipped off the wall to use for chalk, I etched another chicken scratch on the wall that faced the window. The wall now showed sixty-one chicken scratches, one for each day Almamata had greeted me with that same line. As he spoke, Almamata was probably wiping his right coat sleeve with the coffee that had dribbled down his chin. He always dribbled coffee down his chin.

I flicked a spider from my cheek, then mechanically pressed the fingertips and palms of my hands against the temples and cheekbones of my head. I didn’t know what it was about my fingertips and palms that helped me remember my dreams, but it worked, unless I was awakened suddenly. Even then it worked sometimes, so what the hell. Or heaven, I didn’t want to take any chances. I was especially anxious this morning to see what awaited me on the other side of the gate.

Lying limp on the cot that extended eighteen inches from the grey wall adjacent to the window, I furrowed my eyebrows to more efficiently squeeze every possible thought from my memory. Eyebrow furrowing caused my shoulders to tense up, while allowing my entire body below my shoulders to remain limp. Thanks to these morning isometrics, which I had performed for as long as I could recall, my shoulders were muscularly out of proportion to my otherwise medium frame. Standing barechested before a mirror, I thought I looked pretty handsome, but in a sport coat, I looked like hell. For that reason, I had asked to be buried wearing only a blue flannel shirt and jeans. My last request was to be honored.

My eyes re-opened and I surveyed my bare 8 x 6 cell. How ironic, I thought, in all my years of college, I always had at least one roommate. Now I had my first single and it was also to be my last. I looked at the hole in the cement floor in the far corner. A half-eaten plate of beans beside the hole was a cold reminder of my last supper. I farted nostalgically and was encapsulated by a cloud of smoke that carried me out of the cell and deposited me on a dirt path that led to an ivy-covered gate.

I walked up to the gate and noted immediately that it appeared more metallic than pearly underneath the vines. I wondered if I’d come to the right place. The picket fences that provided its support extended forever to either side and several of the wooden slats were broken. Both

fences needed a paint job. I contemplated crawling through an improvised entrance but decided instead to go through the proper channels. The doorkeeper would let me in when the time came.

I waited for what seemed like ages. It might have been, I thought, though I was unsure. I had read about worlds being built in a week up here. That could only mean one of two things, I thought. Either they have small worlds or long weeks. My eyes lit up and I added another: Or else maybe they get paid by the piece.

Oh well, I had waited one lifetime already for this moment. What was one lifetime more? Or was it a deathtime, now that I had passed on? I wasn't sure what terminology was correct to describe this phase of my life. Or was it death? I jotted a note in my notebook to ask the doorkeeper.

As I waited, the clouds drifted complacently past my ankles. I felt as if I was in a room with a thousand waterbeds. Water leaking to the earth chased the birds below me to shelters. A '71 Vega pulled up to the gate, stalled, and honked, and only the sun's glare on the window prevented me from seeing the driver. I opened the door and climbed inside. There was no sun in the car, so there was no glare. Much to my astonishment, there was still no driver.

"God Almighty," I cried as I gritted my teeth and glared through the driver's window."

"Henry," he answered. "It's so nice of you to come."

My calm gave way to an hysteria that would allow for no excuses of any kind. "Where have you been? And why did you call for me? I was in the prime of my life."

"Hold on, Henry," he said. "Before I go anywhere, slow down and take a deep breath."

I did, but I talked right through it. "What's goin' on, God? I don't know if I'm coming or going."

"You're not, Henry," he said.

"I'm not what?"

"Coming or going. You're just being. How are you feeling?"

"Freaked," I said. But God was undeterred.

"Freaked isn't a feeling, Henry. What are you feeling?"

"Nutty," I said. "I feel like I'm going nuts."

"Nutty isn't a feeling either. What are you feeling?"

"Gone. Bananas. Tense. Uptight. What in hell do you want me to say?" I felt like I was playing twenty questions in a foreign language.

"I just want you to stay simple and tell me how you're feeling. Do you feel good or bad, happy or sad. Are you angry? Maybe a little scared? There aren't that many simple feelings to feel."

"I'm scared. Scared shitless. I fear reality and all related concepts. I'm hooked on my past, I'm scared of my future, and I can't seem to get the hang of living in the present. I want to drop out of school but what would my parents think? I want to quit my job but how will I find another one without a degree? Now that I smoked dope, I've got a record so I'll never find another job anyhow."

The pedal rose from the floor and the car stalled again.

"Henry," God said, as he shut off the ignition, "aren't you forgetting something?"

I determinedly furrowed my eyebrows but I couldn't squeeze out any forgotten items.

"You're dead, Henry, look."

He pointed to the wings that not only flew me here, they held up my pants. They were just like the ones that carried dear old Dad. Of course, Papa was a good two shoulder sizes

bigger and he was a Large; I was a Medium. Also, I had opted for a blue flannel while Papa had settled for the conventional grey.

“Oh, yeah. I thought I was tripping on acid.” I said it slowly as I looked from one wing to the other, as if saying it slowly would give them time to disappear. They didn’t, so I unbuckled them and tossed them in the back seat. Then I carefully began to spit out fragments of a larger thought.

“I’m dead—So that means I already dropped out of school—So that means there’s nothing to be afraid of anymore—But they killed me—Yeah, they gave me the chair, and I’m dead, and I’m just sick about it. God, can you tell me why dropping out of school was so bad they had to kill me?”

“The dope, Henry, what about the dope?” he replied.

“Okay, so what about the dope?” Is that so bad? I even played with myself once, but so what? Am I a criminal?”

“You aren’t a criminal, Henry. There are no criminals; there are just those who made it and those who didn’t. Earth was my first experiment and I made a few mistakes, but so what, no one’s perfect.”

He pointed to a blanket of clouds that floated past the tired. Thunder ripped it apart, exposing a TV screen. “What do you see?” he asked. “You needn’t be afraid.”

Despite his assurances, my first reaction was to jump back. My notebook fell out of my rear pocket and I quickly replaced it, never taking my eyes off the screen. I saw a breakfast table and I smelled onion bialys and lox. A woman was scurrying like a mouse from corner to corner, setting the table, feeding the dog, heating last night’s coffee, and putting on her make-up. It was Mama. Her hair was up in curlers and her slip was showing. She was still a receptionist for Mount Sinai Hospital.

“She never made it, Henry,” God said, interrupting memories of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for breakfast and salami and cheese for lunch. “Even when you graduated and moved away, she couldn’t transcend motherhood. I tried to help her live her own life but she settled for the security of a familiar role and I couldn’t save her. She lived for you and she died thinking you needed her to take care of you.”

I felt guilty—I couldn’t shake it. I said she looked dead already.

“It’s all relative,” he said, as the cloud formation reappeared. “Take some of those people you work with. Do you call that living?”

“We call it ‘death’ here, Henry. You knew it was death down there but you had no alternative because it was a death culture. That was my mistake. Almamata never made it either. You, however, were one of my successes. You believed in yourself and you knew the world was a stage. You lived your life as a story, knowing all the while that fantasies were to experience, not to dream. ‘If it wasn’t worth writing about, it wasn’t worth doing’—that was your philosophy, and you died on the road still trying to live it. But, *oy*, the pain you felt trying to be sane in an insane world. I couldn’t let you suffer anymore, so I killed you that I might bring you life. Henry, for your fearless effort at creating a more poetic world, I’d like to reward you with a lead part in my second play.”

“Ah ha,” I cried, and my shoulders firmed to attention. “Just what I thought, it’s a trick. I know, you want to make me an unwitting subject in another one of your perverted experiments. My God wouldn’t do that. Who are you and what do you want and if you’re God how come you’re driving a Vega?”

The voice of eternity remained calm as the winds of change and said, “Look closely, Henry, this isn’t just any Vega.”

I looked. Then I squinted. I gaped.

“God, I’m so embarrassed. I can’t believe I forgot.”

It was my Vega. That bomb, I hated it from the moment it was given to me as a high school graduation present. The engine blew after the first 10,000 miles because the exhaust manifold sprung a leak and the oil dripped out—it cost me \$400 to fix it, which I did because having a new car that ran for only \$400 still seemed like a bargain.

But then the brakes gave way going round a turn—\$300 more for brakes, a rear bumper, and a new right rear axle.

Then it was the carburetor—\$25.

And the alternator—\$60.

When the old lady crashed the stop sign and ended up in my lap, I had to get a new back door, front door, and left front fender.

The asshole who threw his transmission into reverse on a side street cost me another \$800 for a radiator and grille.

Altogether, the damn car must have cost me over \$2,000 over a three-year period. And the radio never worked the whole time. But it got me to Maine, Florida, California, Washington, and points in between, not to mention parts of southern Mexico and all of Canada west of Toronto.

“This baby drove you to every corner of the continent and all it ever asked was one thing—to make it to heaven someday. And here it is—here you are if you want, Henry—Fantasy Heaven, where you can do whatever you want as much as you want and never have to worry about going hungry.”

I pinched myself to see if I was dreaming. Nothing changed, except that I drew blood. Either this was for real or it was a painful dream. I was astonished, tending to disbelieving. “You mean I can write in my diary all day long and I don’t have to get a job?” I asked.

“Is that what you want?”

I hesitated. “Well, I’d really like to write a novel, but I’ve never had the time to get that together.”

“You still don’t, Henry,” were the words I heard, “but you do. We live on the other side of the time barrier where our pasts, presents, and futures blend together to their fullest potential. There is no time here, and therefore there is all the time in the world. We eat when we’re hungry and we sleep when we’re tired, and you can write whenever you want without being bothered.”

“Even in restaurants at 4 a.m.?”

“Free coffee refills and all.”

“And they serve real cream?”

“No *ersatz*”

My relief was otherworldly, but I had one more question. “God, if I stay, will I have to type any form letters?”

“No more form letters, Henry.”

“And I’ve got all the time in the world?”

“But not a moment to waste before you start living.”

“This must be Heaven.”

“It is, Henry, I just told you. So shoot for the stars—you’ve never been closer.”

A rainbow brilliance replaced the radiance of the Vega. I turned to see a man with one ear applying a final coat of paint to the picket fences. A bearded beer peddler wearing a long robe and looking through glazed eyes strolled by to admire the effort and to advertise his wares. The painter exchanged his appreciation for a six-pack.

“You don’t recognize him, do you?” God asked, as he pointed to the peddler. “No one recognizes him at first and when they finally do they don’t care. He spent his whole life being a leader and trying to be perfect. Now he’s just an ordinary guy, and that’s the way he wants it.”

“I know him,” I said, but I couldn’t place him. “He looks so familiar. But how can he afford to live as a beer peddler?”

“Oh, he gets by. He isn’t a millionaire, but he’s living now on his terms. He always wanted to be just a regular guy but he felt insecure talking in public because he lisped. He touched a hot coal to his tongue when he was a baby. The beer’s his own invention. He adds cayenne and hot pepper to the basic formula and calls it Burning Bush Beer.”

It hit me like a miracle. “I know—it’s Moses! Who cares?”

“You’re getting the hang of it, Henry. You’ll do okay here.”

He drove off along the road that bordered the fence. There were gates every mile, so several times I asked God if we could enter now. Each time, his response was the same: “Not yet, Henry. Your time is coming. It’s right around the bend.”

I was anxious to get in but I had so many questions I didn’t worry. The old beer peddler intrigued me. As a child, I didn’t believe there really ever was a Moses because the concept of four thousand years was so awesome I couldn’t grasp it as being reality. Still, I spent years studying his life. The story of Moses taught me about a man whose life was driven by a maniacal desire to reach a land that he had never seen but that was promised to him by a shrub that talked. He spent the last forty years of his life living in the desert with a tribe of heathens who didn’t respect him, trying to make it to this promised land and then being refused entrance by the same shrub, which now lived in a tent and that his heathen followers prayed to as a father figure, because he hit a rock. I envisioned the last vestiges of a mammoth of a man, footsteps away from realizing his lifelong dream, moments before his death, voluntarily choosing to forfeit that dream in order to please his father.

“He was that close,” I said aloud, as I touched the tips of my thumb and first finger together to form a narrow circle, “and then you made him fail because he wasn’t perfect.”

“Henry, Henry, Moses didn’t fail.” He sounded condescending. “He reached his promised land.”

“But what about the rock? And the guard?” I was confused. “The way I learned it, you judged him guilty and placed him on probation for killing the Egyptian guard. The terms were he had to be perfect or he couldn’t enter Israel. Then he hit a rock forty years later and—wham—goodbye passport.”

“Is that what you learned?” He sounded surprised. “For Heaven’s sake, Henry, I’ve been misquoted. I said I didn’t want him to enter Canaan, but I didn’t say he couldn’t enter. That was his decision.”

“But you aren’t just anybody. You’re God.”

“And he’s Moses. And you’re Henry. *Nu?*”

“It’s not the same thing.”

I was unconvinced at the comfort he apparently assumed we would feel when confronted with omnipotence and I argued that to be told “I don’t want you to” by God is the same thing as being told “You can’t.”

God attacked my logic. “Blaming your failures on my omnipotence is just a way of not dealing with your own impotence. Moses didn’t fail. He didn’t even want to live in Canaan.”

“But the Bible...?”

“No, the biographers. The only reason Moses hit the rock in the first place was because he was careless, and the only reason he got careless was because he was starting to feel settled where he was. There’s no one as footloose and carefree as a Roadie on the road, but there’s no one as settled as a tired Roadie. Moses was in no rush to reach Canaan. He just wanted to settle down.”

“In the desert?”

“It was home. The Hebrews had defeated every army along the way and they occupied territory that began in Egypt and extended to the borders of Canaan, so wherever he went he was home.

“By the time the tribes reached the morn of what they knew would be their greatest battle, when they would need all their forces to be unified, they were embroiled in a divisive power struggle between two factions. The one led by Joshua was claiming credit for the victories because of his superior military leadership. Moses’ faction claimed credit because he and I got high together. Moses’ side lost, but partly because Moses didn’t have his heart in it in the first place. He had been at it for a long time and he was getting tired. He wanted to pull back for awhile, sit in the lotus, and go inside himself, search for his roots.

“Joshua knew that. He knew Moses could be bought, so he offered Moses a deal he couldn’t refuse. In exchange for complete control over all of Moses’ forces, with the support and blessings of Moses, Joshua promised land to Moses just this side of Canaan. Moses was a good kid and Joshua was glad he surrendered peacefully, so he told Moses that he was welcome to visit him in Canaan anytime he wanted. Moses gladly accepted Joshua’s offer.”

“But your promise?”

“I never went back on my promise. Moses settled in the land Joshua had promised him and died contentedly believing fully that one day he would reach the land I had promised.

“But what’s the difference who promised him land? Moses reached his own promised land. Our promised land is inside ourselves and we reach it as soon as we believe we can reach it. I promised to lead Moses to the border, but he had to cross it on his own. It’s the same promise I make to all my children. Moses’ goal was to try his best and to keep growing, but it’s okay to rest. You can’t get neurotic about it.”

Talk about objective journalism, I never thought of myself as neurotic, just well informed. “Yet he is written about as someone who died one step short. From studying his life, I learned that it’s useless to try our best because no matter how hard we try we will ultimately fail.”

“And you learned that from studying the life of someone who succeeded. When biographers are afraid to pursue their own dreams, then they write biographies about their own heroes in such a way as to reveal them as tragic characters. The message reinforces our fears of even trying because it forces us to feel the overwhelming hurt that was suffered by those we worshipped as larger than life. Pain hurts and no one wants to hurt.

“When people shoot for the stars, they may never reach the stars but they’ll accomplish more than they ever thought possible. But when people pursue goals expecting to fall short, they inevitably fall shorter than they expected.”

A cloud drifted by us on the other side of the fence. A man was sitting on his backpack, waiting for a car to pass. God honked, the man waved.

“Now there’s a nice boy,” said God, glad to change the subject. “Another writer. His books are selling like the blazes, if you’ll excuse the expression. He just finished one called *On The Cloud*.”

The man wore a blissful grin on a face that bore no wrinkles. I couldn’t believe my eyes. “You mean...?”

“I mean.”

“But I thought he was a drunk.”

“He was.”

“He looks so happy.”

“He is.”

It was an amazing sight. I was unable to pull my eyes away from the happy hitchhiker until long after he had disappeared. Even then, I couldn’t think of any other subject. Long ago, my image of Kerouac as a young fantasy seeker had been shattered and terrorized when I learned that before he died he was a drunk old lonely man who had never had a successful loving relationship with a woman. “How could he feel complete without a wife and kids?” I had wondered.

“The way I learned it,” I said, “he was still living with his mother, voluntarily choosing to not make the break with her because his father’s dying words to him were, ‘Take care of Mom.’”

“*Oy vay.*”

I couldn’t help but think that if I stayed here, my ulcer might heal. Maybe my allergies would go away, too. The possibilities were endless if I let myself fantasize, and this was undoubtedly the place to do it. I saw a gateway ahead.

“Fantasy Heaven’s the place for me. I accept your offer,” I said, with a feeling of homesickness assuaged. “Can we go in now?”

“Not yet, Henry,” he said, as usual.

But I was impatient now. “I know, my time is coming. Well, so is Chanukah, but I’m tired of waiting. Let me in.”

“I can’t do that.”

“But your promise.”

“What about my promise?”

“To lead me into—oh yeah.”

I was embarrassed. Then determined. Then eager. “God,” I said, “I believe I’m ready to enter my promised land.”

“You’ve made it, Henry. Congratulations.”

The gate opened as we approached.