

Henry's Birthday

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TODAY HENRY NOTLITTLE was thirty-one. As soon as he opened his pale eyes that was the thought that washed over him. No longer was he a roaring twenty nor had life yet begun, but there was something special about this birthday.

"Happy Birthday, Henry," growled a deep voice from near the window.

"What, what—where, who . . .?" stuttered poor Henry as he bolted out of bed in his baby blue, broadcloth pajamas.

"I said happy birthday, Henry," boomed the voice.

"But who are you? What are . . .? Where are . . .? How . . .?"

"Just a minute, my boy. Give me time to explain. I'm your great-great-great-great-grandfather. You can call me G.G. for short."

"But how . . .?"

"Take it easy, son. When I was thirty-one I made a rash deal with a certain famous but disreputable gentleman. For some small deliberate oversights I was granted one wish—mine was to return in the twentieth century and each century after to view a male Notliddle of that time on his thirty-first birthday. This century it's you."

"But how . . .?"

"Tarnation, Henry. I can't reveal my professional secrets even to a relative. So forget the whys or I'll be forced to leave with a very bad opinion of this century's male Notliddle."

"But I don't see . . ."

"That's not important. I can see you and I can carry out my investigation better when you're the only one who can hear me. But now to more important matters."

"I don't quite understand, sir," began Henry.

"You aren't supposed to. But I've been watching you, son. And I'm sorry to see the fire and brimstone has gone out of the male Notlittles. I'm here to help put some of it back. Now get up and let's start movin'."

"Yes, sir," murmured Henry as he meekly arose and began to remove his pajamas.

"What'n the land ya doing? Folding up your night clothes?"

"Yes, sir, I always . . ."

"I don't care about that. There's a gal to clean up the apartment, isn't there?"

"Yes sir, but . . ."

"But nothing. Sling those clothes on the floor and let her earn her wages."

"Yes, sir," said Henry and sling he did as best he knew how.

"Well, that's not too good," growled G.G. "But I guess it'll have to do."

By now, Henry was putting on his dark suit, customary white shirt, and black tie.

"Lorda mighty, where ya goin'? To a funeral?"

"No," said Henry sharply. (That is, it was sharply for Henry.) "I'm going to the office."

"Muddy boots and rusty rifles," bellowed G.G. "Put on some gear with some fire in it."

Suddenly the clothes in Henry's closet began to sway crazily. At last a blue shirt jumped out and hung suspended in the air.

"Wal, this is a little better. Where'd ya get it?"

Henry sank limply down on his bed and mumbled, "The girls at the office—my birthday present last year."

Finally, Henry was dressed and shaved to meet G.G.'s approval. This included using some of the shaving lotion the office had given him year before last. Henry had never dared to use it before.

As they were leaving the apartment building, Mrs. Lotsup, the landlady, called a hearty good morning from the first floor window. Henry looked up, stumbled, and muttered something which left her looking puzzled. Immediately Henry's ear began to twitch.

"Ouch, oh," he cried, "let go."

"Not until I teach you how to greet the public. Why didn't you wave back and speak up from your stonick? We Notlittles never been known as sissy britches and you aren't going to spoil the record."

The elevator boy at the office greeted Henry cheerily. And after one severe ear tweak, Henry responded with such unusual energy that the boy kept sniffing to see if he'd been drinking. But Henry thought he was admiring his shaving lotion and resolved to wear it more often. As he stepped into the long ante-room, choruses of "Hi Henry," "Morning Henry," and a giggled "Lover" rushed out to meet him. Henry smiled anemically and stumbled into his private cubicle as if he'd been booted from behind. And he had been. The door slammed and G.G. let fire.

"Why didn't ya joke and talk to those gals? They'll treat ya like a ninkapoop if you act like one. You're the office manager. Demand a little respect. 'Mr. Notlittle' and 'sir,' not 'Henry.'"

"Yes, sir," began Henry.

"There ya go again. Isn't there any man in that frame of yours?"

At ten o'clock Miss Lofing came in for dictation.

"Hi, Henry, I brought some flowers for your desk." She put them down by the calendar.

"Oh you ah really . . ." Tweak went the ear, and a heavy book fell out of the shelf on his finger. "Ouch, I mean. Would you call . . .?" Tweak, slam. "From now on address me as Mr. Notlittle," Henry ordered in a surprised voice. Miss Lofing dropped her dictation book so astonished was she at her employer's behavior.

"Oh dear, I mean . . ." Tweak, slam. "I mean I don't want you sitting out there talking when I buzz either. Come immediately

or I'll . . ." His voice trailed off weakly. As Miss Lofing saw the book falling for the fourth time, she dropped her pencil and rushed out.

G.G. roared and slapped his knees, or so it sounded, as Henry sat there rubbing his ear and hand alternately.

"Hi ho, Henry. I knew you'd do it. And say, that little gal's kinda cute and I think she's sort of sweet on you. She did bring you some flowers."

"Well, she is rather nice," admitted Henry. "But I know she'd never look at me."

"She will if you'd show some interest. Now let me see. Don't buzz her. Just sit here and yell for her."

"But . . . oh, no don't, I'll do it. Miss Lofing."

"Louder, Henry."

"*Miss Lofing.*"

"Louder."

"MISS LOFING."

The door banged open and in ran the little blonde.

"Oh, what's wrong, Henry? I mean Mr. Notlittle. Is something hurting you?"

"Oh, no . . . I ah just wanted to make sure you'd come quickly. You may go."

Looking puzzled and very surprised, she backed out of the office.

"Jumpin' grasshoppers. Why'd you send her away?" snapped G.G.

"I didn't know what to do. . . . You said call her and that was all."

"Tumblin' tumbleweeds son—can't you carry a little bit of brain in that skull of yours? Ask her out for lunch and then take the rest of the afternoon off. Live, son, live. That's one thing we Notlittle's always practiced."

"Well, I'll try."

"Okay, now, call her again."

"Miss Lofing."

"Louder, Henry."

"*Miss Lofing.*"

"Louder."

"MISS LOFING."

"OH, yes, Mr. Notlittle. Right here," she puffed.

"Well, I ah have to have you eat with me this noon. Business discussion . . ."

"Sts." A hiss came from near the desk.

"Ouch," yelled Henry grabbing his ear. "I mean I want you to have lunch with me today."

"Oh, Henry, . . . I mean Mr. Notlittle, I'd love to."

"Well, I'll ah stop at your desk at noon."

"The afternoon, afternoon," a piercing whisper prompted.

"Will that be all?" asked Miss Lofing as she paused with her hand on the door knob.

"Oh, yes, I mean no, ah. I say I think we ah should take the afternoon off, too. Don't you? You know we could talk about ah the office. . . ."

"Oh, that would be nice. Thank you," said Miss Lofing and then she closed the door behind her.

"Well, son, I think there might be some hope for you." This time the voice came from up near the ceiling. But immediately after, Henry was soundly thumped on the back.

At five minutes of twelve, Henry began to get cold feet.

"G.G. I can't go."

"Oh, yes you can and you are, too. Especially since I have taken all this trouble to get you goin' in the right direction. I didn't make this trip back here for nothin', you know."

"But G.G. I . . ."

"Put on your coat."

"But G.G. . . . oh, no, not my ear again. I'll go but . . ."

"Now, get out there and give that little gal a thrill."

"I can't."

"Oh, yes you can."

"But G.G. . . ."

Suddenly, the door to Henry's office opened and Henry somersaulted out as if he'd been kicked from behind. Everyone in the office looked very surprised, but Henry. And as he flew through the air in the general confusion, he heard a familiar voice.

"Carry on, Henry, and happy birthday."