

A Most Remarkable Day

Henry Johnson woke up with a comforting feeling that there was something remarkable about this day. It was nothing he could put his finger on. He had no special plans for the day, and as far as he knew there was no reason this day should be any different than the day before or the day before that. He just felt good about the day, and he imagined that something special was going to happen.

This was odd, because in general Henry was not what you would call an imaginative man. He was very much a creature of habit. Each day was like the day before it, and he went to great pains to keep it that way. This morning he exchanged the usual pleasantries with his wife as he poured a bowl of bran flakes and toasted a slice of wheat bread for his breakfast. He noticed the box of bran flakes had dropped below the half-full point so he dutifully wrote “bran flakes” on the shopping list pinned to the refrigerator door by a magnetic daisy. After breakfast he brushed his teeth, shaved, and dressed for work. As he reached for his razor he momentarily thought that maybe what was special about this day was that it was time to put in a new blade, but then he remembered this day was the 17th. He always changed blades on the 1st. Today was Wednesday so he’d wear his green shirt today. He didn’t think there was anything special about his green shirt, so whatever was unusual about today must still lie ahead.

As Henry drove to work he puzzled about why he felt today was going to be different from any other day. He couldn’t imagine that his boss was going to give him a raise today. For one thing, it seemed to Henry that his boss didn’t really understand what it was that Henry did, let alone appreciated it. If he really appreciated Henry, he probably would make more of an effort to remember his name. His boss called him Herbert almost as often as he called him Henry. Or Hendrick. “Hendrick” at least was understandable, since the man Henry replaced had been named Hendrick. There really wasn’t a slot for an accountant in this department, so accountants were just “on loan” from the business office. Normally an individual would spend six months in this job and then rotate back into Accounting. Except Henry had been in the job for two and a half years. Had they forgotten about him back in Accounting?

Suddenly Henry realized he was at the Jackass Light. There were two lanes leading into this intersection, but just past the light the right lane ended. During the morning rush hour everyone on this road drove the same route every morning. They knew the right lane was going to end, and almost everyone dutifully merged into the left lane and took their place in line before the light. Everyone, that is, but one or two jackasses who tried to use this as an opportunity to pass everyone on the right and then cut in front of them as they drove through the intersection. Why the right lane wasn’t “Right Turn Only” at the intersection was something Henry never understood. It would make perfect sense if it was, and it would stop the jackasses from passing on the right. Ahhh. There was this morning’s jackass. A black Nissan coupe sailed past Henry in the right hand lane, passed the half dozen cars in front of Henry, and stopped at the light, next to the Dodge minivan in the “correct” lane. “Why is it always a minivan?” Henry thought to himself. “Why not a BMW, an Aston Martin, or a Mercedes? Something that could give the jackasses a

run for their money?” Henry dreamed of the day when all the drivers in the left lane would unite. Drive through the intersection in a solid block, forcing the jackasses to stop dead when the right lane ended and wait for traffic to clear so they could fall back in at the end of the line, where they belonged. Maybe today would be that day. After all, today was a special day. . .

But when the light turned green the minivan slowly trundled through the intersection. The Nissan coupe easily shot by on the right and then cut into the left hand lane. It always happened that way. And in fact, Henry knew that on the rare occasions when he was first in line at the stoplight, he always let the jackass pass him, too. He might accelerate quickly for a second or two, just to let the jackass know he wasn't a pushover, but in the end he would back off and let the jackass in. After all, anyone who was enough of a jackass to pass on the right probably wouldn't hesitate to force his way in. He'd probably scratch the paint on Henry's beige Chevy too, and then speed away without stopping. That kind of driver did things like that.

When he got to the office, the good parking places in the shade were already taken so he had to settle for a “second tier” spot. Henry worked for a large department store. The main business office was located several blocks away. That's where the other accountants worked. Henry's temporary assignment was in the retail store itself, where he kept track of the daily cash receipts. Every morning he issued a verified cash register drawer to each sales associate. Then he counted the cash in the drawers they had turned in at the end of the previous business day, balanced it against their sales receipts, and restocked the drawer for the next day. It wasn't much of a challenge for a Certified Public Accountant. Henry had recently suggested the company could save money by hiring a clerk to do this, freeing him up to return to the Accounting department. He was proud of this suggestion, as it made him feel like part of the management team. Finding ways to do things more efficiently. Giving his company an edge over the competition. Working smarter, not harder. He hoped his boss might recognize this initiative and realize he had what it took to step into a management role, although in truth this was the first suggestion he'd made in his fourteen years with the company. That night his wife had pointed out that the only way his suggestion would actually save money was if the company hired a clerk as a replacement for one of the existing accountants, not as an addition. And since he was the one currently doing that job, he was the one most likely to be replaced. He therefore had mixed feelings when his boss called him into his office that afternoon. Was he going to congratulate him on his suggestion, or . . .

“Sit down, Hendrick” his boss said as he motioned to a chair in front of the desk. “I'm afraid I have some bad news for you.”

“Oh God!” thought Henry as he numbly took his seat. He stared anxiously at his boss. He had the feeling his boss expected him to say something, but he didn't know what to say. Besides, his mouth was so dry he wasn't certain he could say anything.

His boss paused for a moment, and when Henry didn't reply he continued. “You requested vacation on the day after Thanksgiving. I'm sure you're aware that's our

busiest day of the year, but you've worked that day for the past, uh, several years so it's not an unreasonable request. I thought I could get one of the other accountants to fill in for you, but it turns out the business office will be closed on that day and the other accountants have all been given the day off. So, I'm afraid I can't approve your request."

Henry's mind was reeling. It slowly dawned on him that he wasn't being fired. "That, . . . that's all right, sir." He finally replied. "We were just going to drive down south to spend the weekend with my wife's family. It wasn't a big deal. We can spend Thanksgiving at home."

"Glad to hear it's not too much of an imposition" his boss replied heartily. "I knew I could count on you to understand. I wish I could give you the day off, but your work is just too important to us." He stood up and ushered Henry to the door as he said this.

Henry was so relieved at the fact that he wasn't being fired that it took him a while to realize that all the other accountants were being given the day off, but he couldn't even take one of his vacation days. Why couldn't the company have told one of them they couldn't take the day off? Henry began to wonder if they'd been given the day off on any of the past years, while he had been working in the retail office.

Henry brooded about the unfairness of this as he drove home. He also worried about what he was going to tell his wife. She already thought that the company took advantage of him. She didn't seem to realize how important he was, and she didn't appreciate the fact that when you rise to a position of importance you sometimes have to make sacrifices in your personal life for the good of the company. Hadn't his boss just told him that his work was too important to take the day off?

Mechanically, he turned left onto a side road at the Fill-Rite gas station. There was a long line of stopped traffic in the oncoming lane, backed up behind the stoplight. As Henry began to pick up speed a white pickup truck suddenly shot out of the gas station, between two stopped cars in the oncoming lane, and directly in front of Henry. Henry slammed on his brakes and swerved to the right, banging over the curb, to avoid a collision. The pickup truck driver also slammed on his brakes, made an obscene gesture, and then squealed his tires as he sped off.

Henry drove back onto the street and immediately realized his right front tire was flat. He'd obviously damaged it when he ran over the curb. Possibly he'd bent the wheel as well. Disgusted, he pulled into a nearby auto parts store parking lot and put on the spare. "Some special day this turned out to be" he thought.

Later that night, as he brushed his teeth before bed, he wondered what had made him feel that this day would be special. He'd begun the day with high hopes, but it turned out to be a day when he'd been denied vacation at work by a boss who couldn't even remember his name, ruined a wheel and tire, and gotten into an argument with his wife over not visiting her family on Thanksgiving. And yet somehow, he still felt good about the day. It was almost a feeling of accomplishment, of a job well done.

What Henry didn't know was that the white pickup truck had been driven by the owner of a small general contracting company. He had been talking on his cell phone when he pulled out in front of Henry, arguing with a supplier about an overdue delivery of insulation to a restaurant he was remodeling. From his viewpoint, Henry's beige Chevy had suddenly appeared out of nowhere, obviously speeding. When he slammed on his brakes and jerked his steering wheel to the left, his cell phone flew out of his hand and smashed against the gearshift lever. Pieces of shattered glass fell off the now useless instrument as he picked it up and hurled it onto the passenger seat in disgust. He was still swearing at the beige Chevy as he turned into a residential neighborhood a few blocks away. However, because he wasn't talking on his cell phone he noticed two kids racing their bicycles down a hill on a cross street just ahead. He just barely caught a glimpse of them out of the corner of his eye, but it was enough to make him slam on his brakes once again. The two kids were so busy looking at each other, trying to tell who was gaining on whom, that they didn't see the stop sign until it was too late. They shot through the intersection directly in front of the truck, one of them flipping his bicycle as he frantically tried to stop. He jumped back onto his bike, bruised but otherwise intact, and they both sped off before the truck driver could yell at them. They didn't have a clue that they owed their lives to a henpecked accountant in a dead end job.