

Chapter Twelve: Henry Meets the Old Zen Thing and Gives Up
from [Beercans on the Side of the Road: The Story of Henry the Hitchhiker](#)

Abstract: What do Christopher Columbus, President Nixon's mother Hannah, and Henry's new friend Peggy have in common? They all understood the principles of the Old Zen Thing, something poor Richard just couldn't comprehend.

I decided to return to Peggy's to try again to get my bearings. Not knowing where she lived, I anticipated my first problem on the road, but before I had time to define it in terms of seriousness of extremes and possibilities of solution, I heard a female voice calling out a male name. The voice was Peggy's, the name was mine. I turned around and, sure enough, it was Peggy shouting to me through the window of her car, which she had parked on the other side of the street. "Henry, is that you?"

It was. I knew that for a fact because I was sober now, although a lingering doubt coupled with beer breath caused me to reflect on the psychological implications of "Who am I?"

"Hurry up," she shouted. Answerless, I crossed the street.

"What are you doing here?" she asked as her foot hit the accelerator and my neck jolted the headrest behind me. "Tell me later," she answered. "I'm late."

Her blue eyes dazzled beneath her thick black-rimmed glasses as she looked alternately at the road ahead and the booklet on the seat beside her.

"Registration," she said in a monotone, "first time in six years."

She had a funny smile where her left cheek rose higher than her right and so less of her left eye was visible. Her eyes turned inward and so as I followed her eyes, my vision drifted onto her nose.

The coincidence of her being on her way to register on the day that I had chosen to drop out struck me as a storytalish unveiling of mystical importance and so I pulled back from the glare on the page and read the next paragraph of my life. Was she me six years from now, going back to school admitting I was wrong? "Drop your drawers and bend over, Henry. (*potsch*) See, I told you so." WISDOM THROUGH EXPERIENCE—1; IMPETUOUS YOUTH—0.

"It'll be different this time around. I don't feel like a student anymore," she added. "Last time I went for grades, now I'm going to learn. I'm doing it on my terms this time."

Her observation seemed like a logical conclusion, but as she was finishing the sentence, her voice changed so quickly I thought I had changed the station. She glared at me, almost swerving into the curb, and gritted her teeth.

"Do you hear that, Bill Faller? On my terms."

A momentary clash of consciousness made me feel guilty so I missed what she said next, but she was talking about the night before, which apparently fell far short of being the romantic "first time in so long" she had waited for because when I came back she was saying, "Imagine the nerve of him, saying those things to me and then going soft."

A combination of forlorn love and horniness recalled her anguish and her anger at Bill's decision to leave last night. He spoke, she related, about the Me, You, and Us of a relationship and of the danger of sublimating the Me and pushing away the You for the sake of the Us. In order to have a strong Us in any relationship, he said, it was important to first strengthen the Me and the You. Translating the abstract to the concrete, Bill told Peggy he was leaving without

her because he needed “to feel independent again.” Not only that, but he couldn’t even get it up one last time.

I saw my first novel skyrocketing up the charts, bursting the bubble of the bestseller barometer: “Man leaves woman for road. Woman claims lust as the reason. Mad admits: ‘Yes, I lusted for another. My heart belongs to the road.’” Ahhh, the realistic romantic tragedy of the Existentialist Narcissistic Era of the ‘70’s.

“Well, fuck him,” she said, as a dead squirrel on the road reminded her of the futility of pursuing that train-of-thought. “You can’t dwell in the past.”

Her nose shined with a glow that suggested an impatience with wind-burnt skin. Her teeth overlapped with Swiss precision and her chin was merely a hint. Words tumbled out of her mouth faster than she could breathe, yet she spoke clearly and her words were well chosen. Her cheeks swelled with words waiting to be spoken. After all, life is art, and you are what you think you are, so if what you do is boring, you’re a poor artist. What I mean is conceptual art is what it’s all about.” She paused so that I might grasp the essence of conceptual art, which I didn’t. Then she repeated the term for accent and moved on. “Conceptual art—that’s what you call it when you live your art. Like Bill—as long as I’m thinking about him. I’ve got to hand it to him. During the war, he got called by his draft board to come in for his physical. The night before the test, he spent the night in a vat of green jell-o. The next morning, his skin was dyed green. He went to the test and the doctor said to him, ‘How’d you get green skin?’ He said, ‘I spent the night in a vat of green jell-o.’ The doctor said, ‘Next.’” She laughed and shook her head knowingly. “Now that’s conceptual art.”

I thought of the time I signed a batch of form letters “Henry Freedman, Esq.” with a curlicue and two parallel slashes under the signature. The slashes became the bars of an army cell, and I saw myself imprisoned between them and the paper.

She continued. “Me, I never thought I’d go back to school. Not that I ever said I wouldn’t, I just didn’t think I would. But who knows what’ll happen tomorrow? I can only keep track of one day at a time.”

As she reminisced, she threw out such terms as “higher education” and “formal education” and “formal higher education” like they were part of her normal vocabulary and called them all misnomers, with the possible exception of “formal.” “College is to the mind what sugar is to the tooth,” she added. “It’s worse. You can’t brush your mind before bed.”

She admitted to already having a teaching degree—“It was either that or get married, whichever came first, and I didn’t want to get married”—but besides earning her degree, the four years were wasted. “I wanted to learn, not study,” she recalled, with a distant look in her eyes. “I wanted to be taught, not graded. I wanted to take courses because they were interesting, not because they fulfilled requirements. I wanted to enjoy learning in school, and that’s why I stuck it out. But the longer I lasted, the less I liked it.”

After graduation, she used her teaching degree to secure a job as “an underpaid overworked paperworker of a bureaucratic government agency.” “It was a continuation of school,” she said. “I despised it. I couldn’t stand it anymore. And so I quit. Everywhere I went after that, everything I did, I learned something. And I enjoyed it.”

“It’s the old Zen thing again,” she concluded, with a parallel that rivaled the two slashes in my curlicue. “The more I wanted to learn, the harder I tried and the more I ended up not learning. As soon as I gave up, I began to learn. Giving up is a good learning experience. When I give up, I can do anything I want. When I struggle, I can’t do a thing.”

At the next corner, we caught a red light. She stopped talking and flipped through the pages of her schedule book. At the green light, she began again.

“Sometimes I think the more we want something, the less we should try to get it. To get where we want to go, we should travel in the opposite direction.”

“Like Columbus,” I added. “He sailed east to reach the west.”

“Columbus was into Zen,” she agreed to what I hadn’t thought of. “So was Nixon’s mother, Hannah. In his better years, he used to fondly recall a favorite story about her. ‘When I was a young boy,’ he would say, ‘and times were rough, my ma used to put her arm on my shoulder and say to me, ‘Don’t you ever give up, Dick!’ And I listened to her, and to this day, I have never given up.’ Poor Richard, he had it all wrong. What his wise old mother used to plead was, ‘Don’t you ever give up, Dick?’ Hannah Nixon was into Zen.”

“But anyhow,” she said, returning to her decision to re-enroll, “classes are a good thing, just so you don’t get too hung up in them. They can give you ideas for living but they aren’t a substitute for living. You can learn about music, but no one can show you how to play. You just have to play. All the time. There’s the difference between a singer and an artist. An artist is someone who’s obsessed.”

“By the way,” she said, as the four-sided cluster of four-sided buildings blocked her thought pattern, “what are you doing here? I thought you left this morning.”

“I’m dropping out of school,” I said. “I gave up.”

“Congratulations,” she beamed.

A grin of confidence covered a trace of apprehension.