

GILLES JAITOUR

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Free Sample Chapter

Henri's Last Gift

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Chapter One — Henri's Last Days

CHAPTER ONE

Henri's Last Days

It isn't enough. It never is. None of my morning routines inspire me to seize the day. Thank God I have a mindless morning routine and time enough alone. I make my way to the kitchen; our cat leads the way. I turn on the radio, make coffee, then open the back door. Our cat sniffs the air and refuses to go out. Unusual. I follow him to the front hall. He takes a left into the living room and settles onto his favourite couch. I continue to the main entrance for the morning paper. A cold, blustery wind hits me when I open the door. Some of the marigold heads in the flowerpot on the front porch are brown, dying. The newspaper is halfway out of its wrap, soggy. Damn that paperboy, and the weather. I shake my head, shiver, slam the door, and go back inside.

It isn't enough but the solitude comforts me. When the family gets up, they will disrupt the silence and my routine. I escape their noise and clatter by leaving before they stir. The coffee tastes bitter this morning. I pour it down the sink. I'll get a decent cup at work. On the radio, the irritating voice of the woman reading the weather report prattles on about clouds moving in fast from the northwest, bringing chilly air and thunderstorms. Even though I'll be inside, the lack of sunshine will bother me. My head begins to pound.

The phone rings. "Yeah?"

"Josh."

I instantly recognize the voice. It's Paul, my youngest brother. Maybe the day won't be so bad after all.

"Oh, hi, Paul. I thought maybe it was some asshole from the plant ... Paul?"

"Josh, Henri's gone. Last night in his sleep."

Another death I don't want to deal with. Emptiness overwhelms me. I swallow and take a deep breath before answering. "The old bugger was over seventy, Paul. He'd been in hospice for two months. We knew it was only a matter of time."

"Still, when they called, I was shocked, Josh. I was there until ten. When I was leaving, Henri said, 'Come back tomorrow, and mon ami, tell that frisky nurse I'm alone now if she wants

to fool around.' He was so nonchalant, joking and being his cheery self. I didn't think it would be so sudden. I should have stayed with him."

I don't answer. I know Paul well enough to know what he's thinking. He wishes he'd been there to say goodbye, to see death firsthand as he envisaged it: peaceful, while asleep, loved ones close by. Perhaps it would have helped erase the memory he had of our father's death, five years earlier. Paul and his wife had taken Dad and our stepmother out for dinner, agreeing in advance they would play a few hands of cards when they came back. While Paul was setting up the card table, Dad went to the washroom. He never came out. Paul found him sprawled on the floor, covered in vomit, his pants around his ankles. When he called to tell me I was relieved. After I delivered the eulogy and witnessed his internment next to Mom Dad, I was relieved. And I wouldn't ever need to see my stepmother again.

Paul's voice brings me back to the present. "No one should die alone."

It's an awkward moment. Paul is no doubt thinking about Dad and Henri. Meanwhile, I'm thinking of a far greater personal loss that happened almost 40 years earlier — Ronnie, a brother who died before Paul was born. As Paul is haunted by Dad's death, Ronnie's death disturbs me. On July 10, 1961, Ronnie drowned at age nine. I was just a year older. The funeral was an open coffin, but Ronnie wasn't in it. It was the body of a stranger — bloated, puffy-cheeked, and pale. I remember crying out, "That's not him! That's not Ronnie!"

Chest pains bring me back to the present, compounded by my headache. I have to get off the phone. "The last few months have been hard for all of us, Paul. Listen, I'd better call the office and tell them I won't be in. I'll call you later."

It's going to be one hell of a lousy day.

Pushing away thoughts of other times and other deaths, I recall my last encounter with Henri, two days earlier. When I arrived, he was sitting in a vinyl-covered chair in his half of the room, with his back to the window. A green blanket was draped over his legs, and he was peering at a framed picture in his lap. I watched as he cradled the picture, holding it as if it were a kitten. I recognised it: a picture of a young blond man, average height, with a happy and handsome face. When I'd first seen the photo — sometime in the mid-seventies I'd asked Henri about it — his answer was curt: "That's Dieter, someone I once knew well." Something in his tone told me to drop the subject.

Behind Henri, the sun was setting, giving the room a warm, saffron glow. He turned the picture face down when I said hello and told me to sit on the edge of the bed. Pulling his bathrobe close around his bony chest, he smiled at me, and then looked over my shoulder with a faraway

look in his eyes. It was so unlike Henri to seem lost in reverie.

I studied his face. His large, hazel eyes, normally alert to all that went on around him, were misted, focused inwardly on a private thought. He tugged at one of his elephantine ears, put his hand under his chin, and then sighed. "I hate this place, Josh. It's a hospice. Only one way out. The guy beside me's on life support and never says a word. I never see any doctors. They don't bother with me. Why should they? And the nurses? They act more like funeral directors. They're pleasant enough, but there's no passion in any of them. I'm just another body, soon to be removed. In the meantime, they feed and clean and inspect me every four hours, to see if I'm still alive."

I didn't like to hear Henri talk this way. Couldn't he see the look on my face? I stood up and went to the window, wishing he would change the subject.

He continued, "I'm cut off from everything I enjoy. There's no one to talk to. Once I've read the paper, there's nothing to do — no one to visit, no place to go. I need to be where there's some action, some excitement."

He stopped, pushed back his shoulders, and shook his head. "I can hardly believe I said that, Josh. It's not like me, but I'm lonely, I'm dying, and for the first time in my life, there isn't a damn thing I can do about it. If it weren't for you and Paul and others coming by, I'd have probably said, 'Kiss my ass!' to this world months ago!"

"Henri, you've always told the world to kiss your ass! I've known you for nearly thirty years, and you've been a crusty old bugger all that time. If you ask me, the problem now is you have no freedom. You can't do what you used to, and I can see it's getting to you. You're turning into a bitter old man!"

Henri laughed. "That will never happen, Josh. The nurses around here call me a dirty old man, but they've never called me bitter. It's just that, since I've been here, I'm by myself too much. Too many hours with nothing to do but think of the past, wait for death, and wonder if I've done all I could to make a difference."

"How could you ever doubt that, Henri? After all you've done for our family and for others? All those children you helped when no one else would? How do you think Paul and the others would have turned out if you hadn't stepped in and given them a father's love? You were also there after my mother was diagnosed with cancer and was in and out of hospital. You looked after Eddie, Willie and Ben off and on for four years."

Henri looked at me, and his eyes squinted. He took a deep breath, rested both hands on his knees, and leaned forward in his chair. "Yes, Josh, shortly after your mother died — what, twenty-four years ago now? I did take in Paul and Matt. Eddie, Willie and Ben were older. They

didn't need much attention. They all turned out to be good men, but they didn't have a mother and your stepmother did everything she could to get rid of them. I don't know why, but this has been bugging me for days. What do you think?"

Henri expected an answer, but when he sat back and folded his hands in his lap, I knew that he wanted me to think about his question before answering. My reply was important to him — would somehow make a difference in his last few days. I went back over everything I knew about him and his relationship with our family. Why was Henri raising doubts about what he'd done? Why was he asking for my opinion at this point? If Matt and Paul had had a mother figure while they lived with Henri, would they have been better off? Mom was an alcoholic, then an invalid. She hadn't been much of a mother as far as I was concerned.

I ducked the question — bought some time to answer it. "We could all be different people, Henri, if things didn't happen as they did. Why is this bothering you now? You personally never had any use for women except in a ballroom or bedroom."

Henri took the picture from his lap and hugged it to his chest. Rocking from side to side in his chair, his eyes to the floor, he said nothing.

In the hallway, the sounds of people walking by, talking in muted voices bothered me. I wished they would laugh or say something more spirited. Did this hospice have to be so funereal? I got up from the bed and sat in the chair next to Henri.

He looked over at me, the picture still in his lap. "I'm trapped in this room and dying. I have too much idle time, Josh, way too much time. I hear strange ghostly voices, and I have strange thoughts. I hear Beethoven music and the number twelve keeps popping up. It's weird but ..." Henri stopped, just for a moment or two, and then he continued. "Look, forget I asked. I'm tired of sitting in this chair. Help me into bed, won't you?"

Henri put out one gaunt, trembling arm. Once he was in his bed, resting against the pillows, I sat in the armchair. The nurse came in with some pills.

Henri suddenly smiled. "I thought we had a deal, nurse. No pills, just vodka or gin."

He took the pills from the nurse and then tossed them in the wastebasket when she left. Typical Henri.

I laughed and shook my head.

"Josh, I need you to deal with one or two loose ends. Piclow, that high-priced lawyer on Main Street, will call you once I'm gone. I've had a good life. I've lived pretty much as I pleased and have few regrets. Except for one thing, which I've left for you to resolve, my house is pretty much in order."

"You've left something for me to resolve? That's not like you, Henri. What do you want me to do?"

The corners of his mouth turned up, just a little, and he opened his eyes a bit wider. "You'll see, Josh, soon. Yes, quite soon, you'll see very clearly." He continued to stare deeply into my eyes.

I didn't like it and looked away; the sun had almost set. Henri tapped his fingers lightly on the picture frame to get my attention, then said, in a business-like manner, "You're executor to my will, Josh. You're one of the few people I trust in this world — so responsible, so serious. I don't have much, but I want you to take care of my mementoes and say good things about me at my funeral. Here, take this." He pushed the picture towards me, his hand trembling.

I couldn't believe how weak he'd become, but Henri didn't want my pity or sympathy. I quickly relieved him of his burden and then looked at the photo. Standing in front of a meadow, a forest of pine trees off in the distance behind him, was an attractive young man smiling self-assuredly — tall, powerfully built, probably in his late teens. Turning it over, I read in Henri's distinct, almost unintelligible handwriting, "Dieter -- 1958. Timmins. Soon to be college boy."

I didn't want any more responsibility. I didn't want to think about Henri's death, or anybody else's for that matter. I'd attended too many funerals starting at too early an age. I just wanted to be left alone.

"Listen, Henri. You're too ornery and stubborn to die anytime soon. Besides, I don't know much about this Dieter guy, so I don't understand what it is you want me to do with his picture. Any time I've asked you about him, you've brushed me off. Same thing when I asked you about your family and roots in Belgium. Why don't you just hang on to it?"

I tried to put it back in his lap, but he waved me away from the bed. He said nothing for a moment, just grinned at me in a knowing way. Finally, he spoke. "We've known each other a long time, Josh. You know as much about me as you need to know for now. Promise me you'll look after my things."

"Dammit, Henri, you know I will. I just can't see the point, and you're not making it any easier. What makes this picture so special? Why won't you tell me?" Henri was silent. Was he reading my body language? Quickly I stuffed my emotions back into the dark abyss where they normally hide.

Henri resumed. "All in good time, Josh. Soon. Relax and don't worry about it. Just make sure you go through my things after I'm gone. Then it will be clear. In the meantime, take this picture

home with you. I won't be needing it anymore." Henri turned his head away from me, looking out the window. It was his way of telling me the discussion was over.

I don't know if I can handle this. Henri got to a tipping point and shut down. Just like me.

The sun was gone by then. The crows had settled down outside, no longer raucously vying for bedtime perches. All was quiet. Henri was not going to say any more that night. I knew it was useless to probe. It never worked. Anytime I'd asked him to tell me about his youth, he ducked the question. Few of his stories went back beyond the time he immigrated to Canada, in 1946. Anything he said about his childhood and adolescence was factual and terse, without elaboration or colour.

Our silence was broken when the nurse came in. She was young and shapely. Her gait reminded me of a model walking down a runway. I started towards the door.

Henri sat bolt upright, growled, and cast a mischievous grin at the nurse. "Yes, Josh, time for you to go. Cette jolie jeune femme wants be alone with me."

As I was leaving, he said once more, "Don't forget what I said about my things!"

I just shook my head and left, promising I'd come back and see him the following week. In the parking lot, I looked up to the window to Henri's room. A smile on her face, the nurse was closing the blinds, her head turned sideways, no doubt listening intently to whatever Henri was saying. He always did have a way with the ladies.

As she closed the blinds my gut closed too. I bent over and did what the psychologists and psychic healers told me to do; take three deep breaths and focus on a pleasant memory. Like always it only worked for a few seconds, then the pain returned; my master. When it did subside, I was a zombie, empty inside for hours, hollow, devoid of emotion. My shrink called it apathy.



The clock in the front hall strikes seven times, waking me from my reverie and bringing me back to the present. Henri is dead, leaving me with the burden of burying him and disposing of his worldly goods.

Once again, I'm Mr. Responsible. The calm, dispassionate guy who keeps cool while everyone else wails, sobs, wrings their hands or completely freezes. But I'm no Walter Mitty wasting my days in grandiose daydreams; I'm busy solving everyone else's problems. I don't have time for wallowing in any emotional snake pit. Besides, none of the counselling sessions, whether one-on-one or in groups did any good. They just resurrected more ghosts and added to my

burden.

"Don't forget what I said about my things!" His parting words now make me queasy, unsettled. The familiar burn in my gut returns. Henri didn't care much for "things." Why did he try, at the last, to tell me otherwise? What was he getting at? And why had he alluded to Beethoven, numbers, and strange, ghostly voices?

What would I be thinking about on my deathbed? It was not a question I wanted to answer then; better to deal with the immediate problems, like calling my office and getting the number for the funeral home.

I do my chores, staring blankly out the window over the stainless-steel sink, and then sit at the kitchen table. Poor Henri. At least he went in his sleep, which is what the nurse told Paul. Had she told Paul that it was a peaceful death? I couldn't remember. I just assumed that anyone who died in their sleep went peacefully. Is it possible to die asleep, in torment? Can a nightmare kill you? Henri said he'd been troubled in his last days, but we'd never finished that conversation. I didn't like to talk about emotions any more than I wished to show them.

I look at the clock on the stove. It's seven-thirty. Soon my wife, Jackie, and the kids will be up. I will have no peace or solitude once they stir.

They have to know about Henri. He'd been such a close family friend. I quietly make my way up the carpeted stairs to the bedroom to tell Jackie. She can tell the kids. She's good at that sort of thing, better than me. When I open the door, the radio alarm clicks off. Jackie is lying in bed with the quilted eiderdown cover pulled high to her neck. She's even less of a morning person than me, but she likes having breakfast with the kids. After she sends them off to school with big hugs and kisses, she goes back to bed until ten or so. I had never been able to sleep during the day. Once I'm up, I'm up.

Jackie peers at me with half-closed eyes. "What are you doing here? It's after seven-thirty."

"Paul called while I was having breakfast."

"What did he want so early?" Jackie kicks off the covers and sits up on the far side of the bed, leaning on her arms. Yawning and stretching, she makes her way to the closet and pulls her bathrobe from the hanger. She then turns and shuffles towards the bathroom.

"He wouldn't have called so early if he didn't have something important to say."

Jackie stops, folds her arms, and gives me a stabbing look. "Don't play games with me, Josh, please! I'm not a mind reader!"

My chest pains and headache intensify. I wrap my arms around my gut and stifle the sobs and sadness trying to surface. I shove them back into the abyss.

"Henri died last night, about two hours after Paul left. Paul was pretty shook up about it."

Jackie turns around and comes close to me but stops when she sees me backing away. For an instant, her eyes cloud; then she picks up on my last words, heading towards the bathroom again. "I imagine he was. Henri was like a father to him, your sister Annie, and most of your brothers. Poor Paul. Are you going to see him?"

"Later. I asked him to let the rest of the family know. I have to look after the funeral arrangements and see Henri's lawyer. Henri insisted, probably because he knew Paul would fall apart. And you know Matt, he doesn't have the wherewithal to do any of it."

Jackie has her green-handled toothbrush in her hand as we talk. She puts it down, turns off the tap, and comes to where I'm standing, just inside the bedroom door. She hugs me, her left hand rubbing my back, her right cradling my head. "I'm sorry, Josh. Henri was a good man who did a lot for your family — for a lot of other families too. It's too bad he got so sick and had to spend his last days in a hospice. He was such an energetic old devil before, despite his age. I can't believe he wouldn't take their painkillers; afraid they would cloud his judgement. Such a stubborn man. He would rather suffer pain than risk a loss of consciousness. That was Henri, feisty and spirited to the end."

"That's what Paul said ... on ... the ... phone, ... too." I'm gasping for air as I finish this sentence. Jackie's embrace is like a straitjacket, stifling me. I need to escape.

Jackie doesn't let go completely. She slides her right hand down to my left hand, gently squeezing it, resting her other hand on my shoulder. "I know you don't want to talk about it, Josh, but I'm here if you change your mind. Henri was right to ask you to look after his affairs. You'll see that his will is honoured, and when you deliver the eulogy, there probably won't be a dry eye in the chapel."

She knows I prefer presentation to conversation, because when I have time to prepare — to choose words and phrases to arouse others — I can do it. Very well, others tell me. Too bad I can't do it spontaneously or naturally.

I can't let go. I never could, even as a child, not in front of others. I can't express emotion. It causes too much pain. It makes me feel like I'm in a giant cement mixer filled with scents that I inhale and swallow. I can't go there. From an early age I'd found a way to escape — put all that behind a steel trap door from which nothing can escape, leaving emptiness and numbness. Now, with the door slammed shut, I can carry on. I back away.

Jackie winces, takes a deep breath, and then looks at me like a child would look at a puppy she can't take home from a pet shop. "Josh, I'll look after getting the kids to school and telling

them about Henri. Why don't you go down to the study? I'll bring you a coffee once the boys are gone."

"Tell the kids I'll see them later. I'd like you to come to the funeral home during visitation hours, but I don't want them there, okay? They can come the last day, after the coffin is closed. I want them to hear what I have to say about Henri, but I don't want them to see his corpse. We'll put his picture on top of the coffin."

"The kids know how much Henri meant to you and your family, Josh. I think they're old enough to decide for themselves whether they want to be there earlier. They know we're all mortal. I think we should leave it up to them."

"Jackie, please! After what I went through when my brother Ronnie died, I just don't want our kids being scarred like I am ... like I was."

"We've had this conversation before, Josh. You can't keep all these things bottled up. It isn't healthy. Look at you. I can see what you're feeling even though you think you're hiding it. You'll have to learn to say goodbye at some point!" Jackie slams the bathroom door behind her.

Good, now I can be alone. I go to the basement, closing the door at the stairwell as I descend. We have both retired to neutral corners, away from the world and each other.

The basement is soundproof, something I insisted on when we finished my office. The contractor had to stomp around on the floor above before I would let him close off the ceiling below. I sit at the cherry desk, then pick up a framed picture I have of Henri with my two youngest brothers, Matt and Paul. They were just boys then. The photo is at least twenty years old. Henri's arms are around them, protective and proud. I have no pictures of Mom and Dad hugging me. I push that thought away. Better to focus on the job at hand.

"You were a good man, Henri Deault, and I'm gonna make sure no one forgets!"

I put the picture down and take a pencil and notepad from the desk drawer. Within an hour, I've filled over six pages. Not hard to do when you have over thirty years of personal experience and family anecdotes to choose from. I read it over. Tears and sobs try to surface. I force them away. No time and too many bad memories to handle. Satisfied I can do no more, I look at the picture Henri had given me of Dieter. What was their relationship, and why was Henri so sure I'd find the answer?

Before I can take the thought any further, Jackie opens the stairwell door, "I've got a cup of coffee for you, Josh. Do you want me to bring it down?"

The tone in her voice tells me she's forgiven me. It's safe to ascend. "No, I'm coming up."

The cat is lying on the carpet at the top of the stairs, looking at me with half-closed eyes, his tail limp. He knows better than to expect anything. I step over him and onto the white ceramic tile in the kitchen. Jackie sets my coffee cup on the table, next to the kids' dirty dishes. I glare at her. She knows I like a tidy kitchen.

She ignores the look, studies my face. "What were you doing down there?"

"I wrote some things about Henri ... for the funeral. My brothers and sister helped. It's on the desk. Why don't you look at it? Tell me what you think."

I sit at the round oak table, drinking my coffee. My stomach is empty, acidic. I hadn't eaten anything yet. I can't stop thinking about Henri's death and our last conversation. Outside, the clouds are moving in, blocking the sun, and robbing the room of warmth. I shiver. Is it in response to the weather or the thought of Henri's death ... or the memory of Ronnie's death in 1961, more than thirty-five years ago?

Jackie puts the dishes in the sink. I hear her making baby talk with the cat just before she goes back upstairs.

I get up to distract myself, to ward off the memories flooding my thoughts. I stand by one of the long, thin windows, seeing nothing, swirling my coffee. It's hot. Steamy. I can feel its vapour rising inside my nose. The phone rings again. Damned phones. Now who's calling?

I pick up the receiver. "Hello, Bencet, here." I suddenly realize what I'd said and how I'd said it. I had used my usual gruff office voice, the one that implies I'm busy and this better be important.

It's Henri's lawyer. He asks me to come over to pick up a copy of the will and the key Henri had left with him. Recalling what Henri had said, "Take care of my things," I get in my car, a five-year-old, dark-red Ford, and go straight to the lawyer's office.

Besides the ache in my stomach, and the burning in my chest, my forehead tenses up, amplifying the pain already there. I tell myself it's the change in weather. The sun is gone, covered by clouds in varying shades of grey. On the horizon, they're pitch-black. The rain will start soon. When it does, I hope my headache will end. In the meantime, I take our compact umbrella out of the glove box, go into a nondescript professional building, and climb the carpeted stairs to the second floor. At the end of a rather short corridor, I see a sign on the door: K.L. Piclow, LLB, Barrister and Solicitor.

His secretary tells me to go right in. Our conversation is banal, stilted. Henri hadn't had much use for lawyers, and in a jesting manner, which thinly disguised his opinion, he probably told Piclow as much. We review Henri's simple will, and then I leave. The rain begins just after I

get into my car. I turn on the wipers and drive to Henri's apartment. It only takes a few minutes; our tiny village only has one stoplight.

I pull up in front of the red-brick building and get out of my car. Why Henri had kept his apartment after going into the hospice was puzzling to people who didn't know him well. Those of us who did were not surprised. Henri always had to have a place of his own, "mon chateau," he said.

Henri's apartment is as I remembered it: a TV in the corner of the living room, an easy chair, an end table, and a pull-out bed sofa. Four inexpensive chairs, a radio, and a yellowed table are in the kitchen. In the bedroom, I see a single cot, a clock, and a dresser. Too austere for me, but Henri said the decor suited him fine. He wasn't much interested in worldly goods.

Henri's mementoes are in his bedroom dresser. From the bottom drawer, under some old undershirts, I retrieve a plain cardboard box, the kind picture frames come in. In it are a medal, a notebook, a letter, and two pictures. There are two people in the first picture: a pretty young blonde girl and Dieter — the young man in the other portrait Henri had given me two days before. I flip the picture over. The first thing I notice is a scrawled, hand-written date: 1961. My heart starts pounding, increasing the pain coursing throughout my body. 1961 had been a bad year for me. Henri knew that. What possible good could come from revisiting it? I had never known Henri to be a cruel man. Yet here he had left a trail that unnerves me. I turn my attention from the picture to the folded letter. With shaking hands, I unfold the yellowed, two-page document and begin to read:

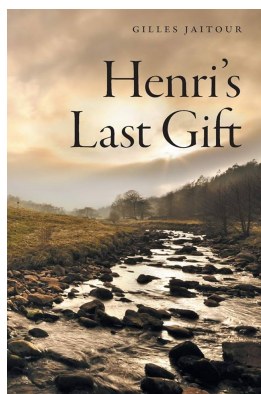
July 10, 1961 — Valiantly in the line of duty, Ranger Dieter Franc died today...

"What? What kind of sick joke is this? It can't be. Henri, why are you doing this to me?"

What happens next changes everything.

Josh goes to Henri's apartment expecting to find a few mementoes.
What he finds instead sends him into a coma — and into a world
he never knew existed.

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