

HENRY HINKLE'S HYACINTH HONEY

A Short Story By

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Inspired by the Story "Royal Jelly" by Roald Dahl

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Harriet was in a state. Her husband was at it again. All the time he spent with those damn bees! And for what? He was convinced he could find a way to mass-produce all-natural honey made only from the nectar of hyacinths. Hyacinths, of all things! Like people even cared about what kind of flowers the bees collected their honey from.

"You'll see, my dear," Henry had once told her. "As soon as I've solved the problem of mass-producing all-natural honey, Henry Hinkle's Hyacinth Honey is going to make us rich beyond our wildest dreams!"

Henry Hinkle's Hyacinth Honey hadn't always been his life's ambition. Raising the bees started out as a hobby, a little something for a retired high school science teacher to keep busy with while waiting for life itself to finally wind down. And, if she was going to be completely fair about it, she had supported him in his early pursuits. She admitted to herself that having fresh honey for her toast in the morning or her SleepyTime Tea at night was a real treat -- at first. But then Henry had just gotten...Well, the best word she could think of was strange about his hobby. He started experimenting with nectars from various flowers, spending a fortune at the florist to make sure his bees had only the finest of flowers from which to make their honey.

"You'll see, my dear," Henry told her. "When I'm finished you and I will be enjoying the most delicious honey ever produced. My bees won't flitter about here or there, gathering just any old nectar for their honey -- oh, no. They will be gathering only the finest nectar from the most suitable flowers -- once I determine which variety of flower that is, of course."

She pointed out to him that -- living on fixed incomes as they were -- buying dozens of fresh flowers every day simply did not fit into their budget, but Henry Hinkle had laid a finger on the side of his nose (an affectation he had picked up goodness only knows where) and with a sly wink intoned, "Don't think of it as money wasted -- think of it as an investment in our future."

This investment so depleted their savings after a while that Harriet started a small housecleaning service to make a little extra on the side. It was when she had returned home from one of these jobs the previous year that she found Henry sitting in his favorite chair holding a small jar of viscous amber fluid. At first she thought he hadn't even noticed her coming in, his gaze was so intensely set upon the jar. She started past him to go into the kitchen and prepare dinner when he spoke a single fateful word.

"Hyacinths."

His voice stopped her. "I beg your pardon?"

"Hyacinths, Harriet. Oh! Isn't it wonderful? I found it! I found the golden nectar to make the finest honey! Hyacinths, Harriet! Hyacinths, I say!"

He grabbed her hands and spun her about the room. Harriet shrieked in terror, believing him to be mad. Her shriek made him finally stop spinning her and he stood there with a bemused look on his face. "Why, my dear Harriet," he asked, "whatever is the matter?"

Harriet had managed -- barely -- to control her anger. "Henry, you are behaving like a fool and spinning me like a dervish. What in God's name are you going on about?"

"Of course, of course. You weren't here, you don't know about the breakthrough. Hyacinths, Harriet, hyacinths!"

Harriet backed away in fear that he would begin spinning her about the room again, but instead he thrust the jar in her face. "Taste it," he said smugly. "Then you'll see."

Harriet tentatively stuck her finger into the amber goo in the jar and placed a dollop on her tongue. It was honey, perhaps just a tad sweeter than she had expected, but nothing more than honey nevertheless.

She shrugged. "It's honey," she admitted, then added as his face fell, "It's very good honey, but it is just honey."

This seemed to anger him. "Just honey? Just honey? My dear Harriet, that is the finest honey ever made, using only nectar from the finest of hyacinths. I've planted rows and rows of them in the back yard. I've also bought enough netting to make our yard into an enclosed apiary so the bees get their nectar only from my specially grown hyacinths." Harriet blanched at the thought of how much money her husband had spent on his hobby, but he didn't slow down for a second. "I see that face you're making. I know it was a lot of money, but it will all pay for itself, don't you see? I can sell the honey to the neighbors and at the farmer's market. Henry Hinkle's Hyacinth Honey! Oh, you just wait and see, my dear, just wait and see. This honey is going to make us rich!"

And so it had gone for the next six months, Henry harvesting his honey and selling it. To Harriet's great surprise, the honey had indeed been popular with the people in the neighborhood. Every Saturday morning Henry loaded up the back of the second-hand cargo van he bought for next to

nothing and chugged out to the farmer's market with a hundred or so small jars of Henry Hinkle's Hyacinth Honey, and every Saturday night he returned home with hundreds of dollars in tax-free cash.

Still, despite the success of his venture, Henry Hinkle had not been satisfied. He began to feel that he was not reaching a large enough market with his honey. "After all," he would muse, "why settle for hundreds of dollars a week when I could be making thousands of dollars? Millions of dollars?"

Harriet blanched again when he told her his plan for mass producing his home-made honey. He intended to mortgage their home (their home, for God's sake -- which they had only just paid off the year before) and use the money to buy the house next door, raze it to the ground, and use the entire lot to expand his enclosed apiary and hyacinth garden. Harriet pleaded with him not to take so foolish a risk, but the house was in Henry's name alone and she could do nothing to stop him. "You'll see, my dear", Henry said. "Soon enough the money will come rolling in faster than you can count it."

"But Henry," she moaned, "you're risking everything we spent our lives paying for to chase after some fool pipe dream of being a honey magnate. Can't you see what this means? Think of how much your insane plan is going to cost us! We'll have two mortgages! We'll have dozens of new bills! Oh, Henry, stop this now before it's too late. Think, my darling! Where is the money going to come from?"

Henry held up a jar of his precious honey. "Why, from this, of course. You know how they sometimes refer to oil as liquid gold? Well, they're wrong. This, my dear Harriet, this truly is liquid gold. Once we are able to mass produce my honey, in a completely natural way, you'll forget you ever had any doubts about my enterprise. And look at the bright side: think how much more it would have cost if I had said 'Let's build a factory'."

Harriet's mouth fell open. "A factory? Oh, Henry -- you wouldn't!"

Henry chuckled at the gaping stare she had given him. "Of course not, my dear. Oh, do close your mouth before you attract flies. I would never dream of owning a factory. Everything must be done meticulously by my own two hands. Otherwise, it wouldn't be completely natural, would it?"

And that had been the end of that. Henry had gotten his way, and now his combination apiary and hyacinth garden

covered well over an acre of ground. He planted thousands of hyacinths, collected millions of bees, and honey seemed to flow like water into the small jars which he labeled and shipped out to customers and stores in the area. He had to incorporate himself (more money!) and start paying income taxes, business taxes, zoning taxes, taxes, taxes, taxes! None of it seemed to faze him in the least, nor did any of it (or Harriet's constant pleading that "enough is enough, already") stop him from pursuing his dream of becoming the wealthiest purveyor of honey in the country.

Unfortunately, like so many dreams, things had begun to unravel in the past month. Demand far exceeded what he had been able to supply, and markets were beginning to cancel their orders with him in favor of more reliable sources of honey. Harriet hoped he would finally slow down before he worked himself into a heart attack or worse, but nothing would deter him from his dream.

"You'll see, my dear," he said. "I'll find a way to lick this problem, never you fear."

Fearing the worst, Harriet moaned, "Not another expansion. We're almost out of money as it is. We can barely afford to feed ourselves, let alone buy another house."

Henry patted her hand in a reassuring manner. "Don't worry, my dear. We'll always have honey to eat. If it can sustain such industrious workers as bees, it can surely sustain us as well. And I will grant that you are right -- expansion is not a viable answer to increased production given our current financial state. I don't think it's a matter of a bigger apiary. What I need to increase production is bigger bees and hyacinths!"

Looking back on it now, Harriet began to think that expanding the apiary might have been more time efficient, for it seemed that Henry now spent every waking moment in his precious apiary or in the small laboratory in the basement. (He had once had a much larger laboratory in the garage, but the garage had gone the way of the house next door; torn down to create more space for the apiary.) She couldn't see how it was costing any less either. Henry was importing larger bees from all over the world, even the deadly killer bees from Africa and South America which he managed to obtain from an unscrupulous importer/smuggler for a hefty fee.

"You'll see, my dear," Henry said when she had confronted him with the bill. "It will all be worth it in the end."

"It isn't just the money, Henry!", she cried. "Those bees

are illegal! They're deadly! If the Department of Agriculture were to find out--"

"But they won't find out, will they, dear?" Henry took her hand in a grip that was perhaps just a trifle too tight. "After all, apart from the man who imported them for me -- whose silence I have more than adequately purchased -- you and I are the only two people who know I have them. I'm certainly not going to tell anyone -- and neither are you, are you?"

Despite the pleasant smile on his face, there had been something in Henry's voice that caused Harriet's conviction to waver. "Why...I mean...Well, no, my darling, of course not."

Henry's grip loosened and he gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. "That's my girl. Now let me get on with my cross-breeding. By the way, would you mind doing me a favor? I've managed to cross-pollinate my hyacinths with a breed of giant orchid that has allowed me to grow them to three times their previous size, but I'm a trifle concerned that the nectar might be affected. Would you be a darling and go upstairs to the kitchen? You'll find a jar of the new batch of honey sitting on the counter. Make yourself some toast and try it and tell me what you think."

Harriet did as he asked. The new honey was thicker, almost gelatinous in nature, but the flavor was unmatched even by Henry's previous efforts. She called down to him, "It's delicious! Oh, my! I think I begin to see how this could be the solution to all of our problems." Henry did not reply as such, but she could hear him chuckling.

Now she lay in bed, replaying in her mind all of the events which had led to this moment. Henry was still in the apiary, playing with his damn bees. She sighed and rolled over. The new honey was delicious, she could not deny that. It had a consistency thick enough to provide a decent sustenance, and Henry even reassured her that he had found a way to increase the vitamin content. She was feeling stronger, she could not deny that fact. What troubled her now was Henry himself. He had grown secretive about his bees. Where once he had bored her with endless lectures about the entomological changes he was experimenting with, now he hardly talked to her at all. She knew that eventually he would walk through their bedroom door, undress and fall into bed in an instant slumber so deep that she would be unable to arouse him until he chose to be roused.

To top things off, the past few evenings when she had tried to bring Henry his dinner, he had been nowhere to be found. True, Harriet never went into the apiary as she was

terrified of the new bees Henry had imported, but usually she could see him from outside the apiary's netting. He was hard to miss in his bulky white beekeeper's outfit. She had also noticed when he came to bed that he had a strange new musky scent about him.

Was he having an affair? It hardly seemed possible after forty-seven years of matrimonial bliss, but stranger things had happened to others she knew. Had her constant concern about his fascination -- no, not fascination, obsession -- with the bees finally driven him into the arms of some other woman who was willing to be more understanding, especially if he convinced her of how rich he would become when he had solved all of his problems? It wasn't like Henry to take an interest in other women, but perhaps the new honey had awakened urges in him that she no longer fulfilled. And there was certainly no denying the strange scent that he wore to bed recently like some exotic perfume. She was determined to get to the bottom of things, even if it meant the end of their marriage, and so she sat up and waited for Henry to come to bed.

She did not have to wait long. Less than a half hour had passed since she made her resolution to get everything out into the open before Henry entered the room and began to undress.

"Henry," she began.

Henry stopped, a strange expression -- guilt, perhaps? -- on his face. "Harriet," he said, "you know I love you but I'm absolutely exhausted. Whatever this is, can't it wait until morning?"

Harriet held up her hand. "You know full well that by morning you'll be out with those damn bees again."

Henry sighed. "Is that what this is about? Those 'damn bees'? Are we going to go through all of this again at this time of night?"

"This time of night is the only time I can talk to you," she replied haughtily. "And no, this isn't about the bees. It's about you."

"What about me?"

"I want to know what you're up to."

Henry sighed again. "Up to? I'm up to my ass in hyacinths, bees and honey. Thank you for asking."

"Are you cheating on me?"

The accusation cut through the air like a knife. Henry stopped tying his pajama bottoms and stood there looking at her in disbelief. "What would make you think--?"

"You smell different, some strange new perfume. And don't tell me you're trying out a new cologne. I know perfectly well you never wear the stuff." The silence was palpable. "Well?"

Suddenly, Henry burst out laughing. "I smell different? That's what this is about? Oh, my dear, that is just too much!" He laughed again.

Harriet could feel her fury growing inside of her. "Don't just stand there laughing like a fool. I've been checking on you. You haven't been in the lab, and I know you haven't been in the apiary. The white suit of yours stands out like a sore thumb. So where have you been? I demand an explanation!"

"And an explanation you shall have, my dear. I am at a critical phase in my work. I am attempting to adjust the bee DNA to create larger bees for my larger hyacinths. Larger bees plus larger flowers equals a dramatic increase in honey production. It is, however, extremely delicate work. I am doing some very precise manipulation of the egg sacs of my queens, and you simply cannot imagine how difficult the process is. It can't be done in the lab as I don't dare to remove them from the hives, lest the other bees attack me mercilessly. It is of such a delicate nature that I cannot do it in the suit, it's much too clumsy of an outfit. But to approach the queens without protection? That would be as sure a death sentence as stepping out in front of a speeding truck.

"I know how upset you were about the African and South American bees. I know you probably thought I was planning to cross-breed them with the honey bees to make some monstrous and ultimately dangerous hybrid, but such was not the case. I assure you, all of those bees are dead. I wanted them not for their DNA, but for their pheromones. You see, in order to do the work I had to do, I had to convince the bees that I myself was a bee in order to enter the apiary and approach the queens without being attacked. Using the pheromones of such strong and deadly bees simply increased my odds that the other bees would leave me alone."

Harriet gave him a skeptical glance. "And your delicate work?"

"Is almost complete. Another day or so, I should think. Good thing, too -- I fear the pheromones are

starting to wear off. See?" He held up his hand to show her a bright red welt. "One of the little suckers stung me."

Harriet's anger subsided at the sight of the welt. Perhaps he was telling the truth after all? "Oh, Henry, you poor thing. Don't go in the apiary again without protection, I beg you. If those pheromones are wearing off, you could get stung to death."

"But I must. One more trip only, I promise you, but I simply must complete this course of action. You'll see, my dear." He winked and laid his finger aside his nose. "It will all be over soon. One more trip and my work in the apiary will be complete. It will be worth a few stings, I assure you. And once I've finished my work, you will be my number one priority. Just wait and see. Oh, Harriet, I know I've been ignoring you and I am sorry about that, really I am. One more day, that's all I'll need, and then I swear I am going to make it all up to you. Just wait and see if I don't."

Henry was as good as his word. The next day he stopped working early, though Harriet suspected from the welts on his arms that the bees might have had a say in that matter. He assured her he was fine though, and offered to let her relax while he made dinner. He served her some scrumptious honey cakes made from scratch, and later on he even surprised her by making her a cup of her SleepyTime Tea. True, he had put a little too much honey in it and Harriet found the tea to be cloyingly sweet, but she decided to show her appreciation by gamely downing the brew.

She slept a deep and dreamless sleep that night, but the next morning awoke to a mild pain in her lower abdomen. Henry clucked around her, expressing his concern and insisting on taking the day off from his precious bees to take care of her. Harriet thought about calling the doctor to see if she could squeeze in an appointment with him, but Henry was convinced it was probably his horrid cooking causing her severe indigestion. He reprimanded her to stay in bed for the day, and assured her that if the pain was not gone by the next morning he would drive her to the emergency room. That night, he brought her tea and left her to rest. It was far too sweet, like the night before, and she put it aside after only a few sips. She felt tired enough to sleep without it.

She was dozing when the feeling of cold metal clamped tightly around her wrist awakened her. She tried to sit up, but discovered she was handcuffed to the bed rail. She looked frantically around and saw Henry standing at the foot of the bed. "Henry!", she cried, "What's going on?"

Henry allowed an odd little titter to escape his lips, then fought it down. "I am so sorry about the handcuffs, my dear, I want you to believe that; but, you see, you didn't drink your tea -- and I couldn't allow you to ruin the most delicate part of my experiment."

"Experiment? What experiment? Henry, what are you talking about?"

"I completed phase one last night while you were asleep. The drugs I put in your tea caused you to slip into an almost comatose state. Tonight is phase two, but you didn't drink your tea so I knew you would wake up and I couldn't let that happen because it would ruin everything just everything would be ruined and I couldn't have that oh no I couldn't have that at all could I?" His jabbering evaporated into another of those odd titters and he fought to control them again.

Harriet felt the icy grip of fear clutch at her throat. "Henry, I don't know what you're talking about, but please, my darling, undo these handcuffs."

"Oh, I'm afraid I couldn't do that, oh dear me, no. You might upset them if you struggle too much."

"Them? Who?"

In answer, Henry held up a plastic case filled with buzzing bees. "The drones, of course."

Harriet began to realize that her husband was definitely tipping over the edge of madness if he thought she was going to lie still for whatever he had in mind. "Henry, I don't know what you're thinking, but if you think I'm going to lie still and let you--"

"LYING STILL IS JUST WHAT YOU'LL DO!", Henry roared. He calmed himself. "It's for the honey, don't you understand? For the last few weeks, all of the honey you've consumed has contained copious amounts of Royal Jelly."

"Royal Jelly?"

"Yes. Royal Jelly is what makes a queen a queen. You see, in order to achieve my goal of creating a species of bee large enough to produce the vast quantities of honey I need to keep up with demand, I realized I had to somehow infuse the eggs and larvae with the DNA of a much larger species -- human DNA, to be exact. I discovered in my researches that our DNA is surprisingly compatible to Apini DNA. Yesterday morning, I went to the hives and painstakingly collected the unlaidd eggs from all of my queens. Last night as you slept,

I implanted those eggs in your womb. Now all that remains is for those eggs to be..." He gave another little titter. "...inseminated."

Harriet's eyes focused on the plastic case in Henry's hand and widened in terror. "You -- You can't mean --", she stammered.

Henry tittered again. "Oh, yes, I'm afraid I do. I thought of doing the job myself, of course -- I've been feeling ever so much more virile since we started consuming the Royal Jelly -- but the eggs are quite delicate and I have been forced to the conclusion that it must be done by the experts."

He opened the plastic case, and the drones began to buzz about the bedroom. Harriet was beside herself. "Henry! No! Please no! You know how terrified I am of those things! They'll sting me!"

"Oh, no," he reassured her, "they won't sting you. You're their queen. You're my queen. You'll see, my dear. It will all be quite painless." He tittered once again, and this time did not try to control it. "I only wish I could say the same about the birth."

Harriet couldn't hear the door as Henry snicked it closed and locked it. She couldn't hear the buzz of the bees as their tickling legs crawled slowly up her thighs. All Harriet could hear was the sound of her own screams.