Stock Options

Characters:
Henry: a homeless man, balding, with a scraggly ponytail, in his mid-50's
Gerald: an accountant, dressed as such, 40

Setting:
Henry is sitting on a bus bench in downtown Chicago. He is engrossed in his book and scratches his head absent-mindedly. His knapsack sits at the edge of the bench.

Gerald sits down on the same bench, carefully placing his briefcase between them like a wall. He sits without comment and without eye contact, motionless, with a defeated air.

After a moment of silence, some page turning on Henry's part and more near-catatonic rigidity on Gerald's part, Henry looks up and sees his bench partner. He is startled:

Henry: "Oh, hey. Listen to this: A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. Well, whadda'ya think?"

Gerald: [beat] "Do I know you?"

Henry: "Sure, man, I'm your brother."

Gerald: "No you're not."

Henry: "Okay, I'm not. But if somebody asked you if you were in favor of the brotherhood of man, I'll bet you'd say yes you were, wouldn't you? So am I not your brother? Your brother, your friend, your son, your..."

Gerald: "I have no children."

Henry: [beat] "Well, how about opinions? They're kind of like children. You got, I mean have you got...have you any opinions, sir?"

Gerald: "It is not my habit to in engage idle, speculative conversation."

Henry: "Indeed. Ouch." [beat] "Make friends easy, do you?"

Gerald: "Why should I want to make friends with you? You're a bum, a drain upon society, and if I engage in conversation with you, it is most likely that you will solicit me for money."

Henry: "Well said, sir. Very perspicacious of you."

Gerald finally turns his head and looks at Henry. [Beat]

Gerald: "What does that mean?"

Henry: "What, perspicacious? An enquiring mind, I see. That's the third thing we have in common, after said brotherhood, and the fact that neither of us have sired any progeny - at least as far as we know, eh?"

Gerald: (disapprovingly) "No, I am quite sure I have not 'sired any progeny', as you say."

Henry: "How do you know? [beat] You're a virgin? Damn! You don't make friends easy, do you?"

Gerald: "Very funny."

Henry: "Hey, we don't have to talk about your sex life. I'm sure... limited topic of conversation, anyhoo. Let's talk about mine. I never kicked a-one out of bed for eating crackers.

But fuck me if I can figure out how to live with 'em, you know?"

Gerald: "No, actually, I don't. I live with my mother."

Henry: "Never had a girl-friend?"

Gerald: "Once, almost, but...[beat as they both think about that] women frighten me. They are so unpredictable. Even if I found a level-headed woman, I couldn't imaging fathering children."

Henry: "You ain't queer, are you?"

Gerald: "No! I'm an accountant. And I think your friend Emerson was wrong. We need consistency. We have a very complicated society, and some of us have to 'count the beans,' if you'll pardon that odious expression."

Henry: "Sounds like you're caught in the web of getting and spending - and you like it."

Gerald: "No, I don't like it. It's my duty. I am willing to do things I don't like for the good of the whole, a credo you obviously don't live by."

Henry: "No I don't. Not any more."

Gerald: "Why not?"

Herald: [he pauses, considering] "I was in the Army when I was young. I killed people for my country - some of them were women and children. Having barely survived that, I am forever leery of a society that demanded such barbarity of me."

Gerald: (compassionately) "The Korean War, or Vietnam? Sorry, buddy, I can't tell how old you are."

Henry: "I look that bad, huh? [beat] No, I'm one of Calley's boys. I joined up in '66. Before I got out, I helped kill a couple hundred women and children at a place called My Lai. You never heard of any of that?

Gerald: "No. In 1968, I was five. Go on."

Henry: "Well, 'Nam was the kind of war where it was hard to tell friend from foe, you know? Apart from the Ugly American thing about all Charlies looking alike, the 'Cong would actually strap bombs on kids and send them over to say howdy, so to speak. So when Calley told us to shoot the whole village, we did it. Three years later, he was on trial for war crimes. [beat] Thirty years later, and there are days I still feel like they ought to take me out back and shoot me. [beat] I will never again let myself be used by the powers that be. They don't know shit about being human."

Gerald: "Is that why you don't work?"

Henry: "Who says I don't work?"

Gerald: "Sir, your appearance shouts it from the rooftops."

Henry: "Hmmm . .very perspicacious of you."

Gerald: "There's that word again. You have an amazing vocabulary for a...."

Henry: "For an unemployed transient?"

Gerald: "Well, yes. Are you going to tell me what it means?"

Henry: "It means 'acutely perceptive,' as in able to see beneath the surface. And I was being sarcastic. Sorry."

Gerald: "A little bit show-offish, too?"

Henry: [non-committal grunt] "I suppose. I tend to pick up the lingo of whatever book I'm reading. [he points to the book he is still holding] Those Transcendentalists did have some kick-ass vocabularies."

Gerald: "Transcendentalists? The Maharishi?"

Henry: "No, I mean Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, those guys."

Gerald: "Melville ugh! I had to read Moby Dick in high school." [he shudders.]

Henry: [laughs] "I must have skipped that in high school. But I've read it since, more than once. I go out to New Bed every winter for the annual Moby Dick marathon. Melville's my man."

Gerald: "And what marathon would that be? Finding the longest, most incomprehensible sentence in the book? [He stops, aghast] Don't tell me they read the whole thing?"

Henry: [He nods sagely,] "Yes, people from all over the world gather in New Bedford, Mass, where Melville launched his book about whaling. They read the whole thing out loud, cover to cover."

Gerald: "No!"

Henry: "Yes."

Gerald: "Whatever for?"

Henry: "Well, it's great for the tourist trade." [Gerald nods.] "No, it's because of the wisdom it contains, and the language, and the humor. Remember how Ishmael and Quequeeg met? They found themselves sharing a bed in a tavern while waiting for their ship to sail."

Gerald: "The only part I remember is that scene at the beginning of the book about the two colors of chowder. That was funny."

Henry: [he puts his hand on his book, as if he were taking an oath, and he quotes from memory]
"Men may seem detestable as joint stock-companies and nations; knaves, fools and murderers there may be; men may have mean and meagre faces; but man, in the ideal, is so noble and so sparkling, such a grand and glowing creature, that over any ignominious blemish in him...all his fellows should run to throw their costliest robes."

Gerald: "Hmm! Very impressive. You recite admirably well. But whatever does it mean?"

Henry: "It means that the things men - I suppose I should say people nowadays - do in groups are often bad, sometimes real bad. Like war. Like capitalist exploitation. And some individuals - like Calley - are idiotic, or downright evil, but - and it's a big but - we human beings are such amazing, marvelous creatures that all of us should do everything we can to help each other."

Gerald: [his turn to quote. He remembering something he forgot long ago]
What a piece of work is man. How noble in reason. How infinite in faculty. In form and moving how express and admirable. The beauty of the world. The paragon of animals. [beat]...lost all my mirth,...
"Oh, dear."

Henry: "My friend, I am impressed. Studied *Hamlet* in business college, did you?"

Gerald: (dispiritedly) "What? No, we did that musical *Hair* in high school. I sang that song"

Henry: "Were you that bad?"

Gerald: "No! It was all camp, anyway. I wore big hair and spandex, if you can imagine."

Henry: "Then why so sad? Something bothering you?"

Gerald: "No. Nothing. No, not nothing, but I can't talk about it." [beat]

Henry: "You sure? We'll probably never see each other again. That makes me almost as good as a priest." [He snickers at the idea.]

Gerald: "No, I can't. People would get hurt." [He turns to face Henry fully] "Swear on the Bible you won't tell anybody what I'm about to reveal."

Henry: "On the Bible? I don't know about you, buddy, but that would be a pretty hollow oath on this end. Tell you what, I'll take my oath on *Moby Dick* that I won't do anything to drag you down. You need to talk, you can talk."

Gerald: [after a pause]..."You know, you get so tired of being a defender of the status quo..."

Henry: "You mean, an employee of the defenders of the status quo, don't you? Cause it's the rich people who really give a shit about status quo. The rest of you guys are hired guns."

Gerald: (humbly) "Yes. How did you know? [beat] A peon, who measures his life in cubicles instead of hectares, or whatever peons measured with those days... What did they measure with, uhm..."

Henry: "Name's Henry, and I don't know, either. 'Let's see...peon,' that's Spanish, I think, and 'hectare', that's Egyptian, innit? Oh, well, it don't matter. Every culture has words for the disenfranchised, and for land measurement, as well - except for Native Americans and Australian abo's. What's your name?"

Gerald: "I'm Gerald, Gerald Hag...aah, Gerald"

Henry: "Gerald will do."

Gerald: "Henry, did you ever see the movie Trainspotting?"

Henry: "No , I don't watch movies much."

Gerald: "Well, it's about these young punks in Edinborough, in Scotland. They're heroin addicts, who go out to the country for a day trip. They get completely disoriented by the wide-open spaces of the heath, and they open up, start really talking. They're all talking about the 'whys' of their lives, and one of them says, 'The English may be wankers, but that makes us a nation that's been colonized by wankers.' "That's how I feel! Colonized by `wankers."

Henry: "Yep, you can count on the disenfranchised to tell it like it is. But you're not one of them. How does this apply to you?"

Gerald: "Okay (deep breath). It's my boss. He's been my mentor since I came to work at Arth . . .at my firm. Oh, this is difficult . . .he taught me to prize my integrity - and the reputation that came with it - above all else. Now, I don't know. There's new management, new directives from above. Now he's telling me to... to..."

Henry: [he leans closer] "Cook the books?"

Gerald: "Yes! Cook the books!" (he, leans toward Henry and lowers his voice) "You know, free-markets require ethical behavior at their core. What's going on in my office is not ethical behavior. If this ever gets out, heads are going to roll. And it's not only that. It's people's life savings, their retirement, it's all wrapped up together."

Henry: "Hmmm. And have you..."

Gerald: "He says it's just the new style of accounting. He says we have to change with he times or render ourselves obsolete."

Henry: "So, you find yourself working for a detestable joint-stock company, huh?"

Gerald: "Yes."

Henry: "And a man you loved and admired has gone over to the dark side."

Gerald: "Yes."

Henry: "And you don't know whether you should throw your costliest robes over his error in judgment, or blow the whistle on the whole shebang."

Gerald: "Precisely. How perspicacious of you."

Henry: [beat]"Oh, buddy. The names change, the story stays the same."

Gerald: "What should I do?"

Henry: "You're asking me? A bum?"

Gerald: (humbly) "Yes."

Henry: "Well, in that case...don't be consistent, I can see that much. A little mind can't help you do the right thing in a situation you've never encountered before."

Gerald: "No, that's true. But who do I listen to? My boss? Melville? My mother? Hamlet?"

Henry: "Lord, no, not Hamlet. How about your mother? What would she say?"

Gerald: [bitterly] "She would advise me to think about what the neighbors would think. She would be horrified if I went against the 'status quo'. But she's never been in business. She's never been is a situation remotely like this. And you know, as poor as she is, she still believes in..."

Henry: "She believes in tradition and hierarchy, it sounds like. Well, it's probably more than an either/or choice. Why don't you put your infinite faculties to work on it."

Gerald: [he laughs, bitterly] "What they're asking of me is wrong, any way I look at it." He checks his watch and stands up as the bus pulls to the curb". . and here's my bus."{At his words, the background lights resolve themselves from out of focus to a clear image of a city bus.} "You won't tell anyone, will you?"

Henry: "Who would I tell? Mike Royko's dead."

Gerald: "Oh, for Chrissake."

Henry: "Just kidding. Listen, I just thought of something. You'll be here tomorrow, right? [Gerald nods.] "Same time?"

Gerald: "You have to ask?"

Henry: "I do know somebody, another reporter buddy, to tell [he holds up his hand as Gerald starts to protest] but only if you decide to blow the whistle. What say I show up tomorrow morning, same time, same place, and if you want we'll just take a little trip downtown?"

Gerald: "I don't know, Henry. I have to go, I'll be late, I . . . I'll think about it. I'll go home tonight and see if I can locate my 'infinite faculties'."

Henry: [He stands up as Gerald does, hugs him fiercely.] "My brother."

Gerald stands paralyzed, then hugs him back, awkwardly because of his briefcase. He disappears onto the bus by walking through the back stage curtain. Henry sits contemplating for a moment. Then he picks up his book, puts it back in the satchel, and walks down the street, offstage. Lights out.

The End

by Mary B. Moon