

Man With a Suitcase

I waited outside the liquor store shaking. The rippling light lent the empty morning an aura of extravagance, there was more vacancy wherever I looked than I could comprehend. Whether or not I'm remembering any of this correctly, the world of disappointments and worries, that world was not going anywhere. Everything else was going backwards, shadows going in the wrong direction. Suddenly a green suitcase came flying out of a window and sprung open on the sidewalk. Most people walked around it, but a few stopped and sorted through its contents and took things that I guess they thought would fit them or someone they knew. Pretty soon a man came out of the house and collected the items of clothing that were scattered about and tried to close the suitcase. The latches were broken so he just gripped it under his arm and walked away into the next part of his life. About then the owner of the liquor store unlocked the door and I walked in, standing there for a moment and performing my foolish but necessary ritual of looking at the rows of bottles as if trying to decide what to buy before asking for what I always asked for, and the owner's wife came out of a back room, greeting me, as the man with the suitcase might eventually be greeted when he figured out someplace to go.

Grace

Grace is not a word I would ordinarily use
to describe the men sitting at one o'clock in the afternoon
in the yellowish gloom of the Magnet Lounge.
Yet one day a man suddenly got up from his bar stool
and lurched into a wobbly pirouette, dancing to the music
in his head with something like grace,
if only the strange grace of a three-legged dog,
and when he sat down, he was able to meet his own gaze
in the mirror behind the bar for a minute or two
without feeling ashamed, which easily beat my time,
me for whom the sound in my head
was nothing I could dance to, not unless
you think a moth inside a glowing lampshade is dancing.

The Address

Jack Waverly asked me what I was drinking and bought me one. I tried to lend my hand a casual unhurried appearance as I drank it while he wrote an address on the inside cover of a match book with a little yellow pencil that made me think of the time my father had taken me to play miniature golf and cheated while keeping score. The address was where I was supposed to go to give his ex-wife some money. I don't know why he didn't want to go himself. There were a hundred possible reasons, and I guess all of them made some kind of sense if you were him. I went to the address and rang the doorbell until I realized it probably didn't work, so I knocked and eventually a woman came to the door. She was small and pretty, although her prettiness had hardened. She had a chipped front tooth and had stopped being a blonde months ago. When I told her why I was there she laughed as if I'd just told her a joke she'd heard before. How much did he send? she asked. I looked inside the envelope and counted the money. Seventy dollars, I said. When she laughed again, it sounded weary. She held the door open and I went inside. It looked like some furniture was missing. A radio was playing in another room. She took the money, then picked up the bills that were sitting on the kitchen table and stared at them the way you might if you were trying to find a favorable hand among some unlikely cards you were dealt. What does he think seventy dollars is going to do? I tried to shrug in a way that might seem sympathetic. No, she said, how would you know? How would you know anything? I smiled idiotically. Did he give you anything to do this favor for him? I told her he'd bought me a drink and paid me ten dollars. Give it to me, she said. I pulled the five and five ones out of my pocket. She studied me for a moment. You look like a nice guy, probably the kind of guy people take advantage of. She handed me the five and said, Have one on me. For some reason I had the idea that it would be pleasant to stay here, sit in the kitchen and drink a beer while she tried to figure out which bills to pay. I started thinking what she might be able to do with a little more money, dye her hair blonde again, maybe get her tooth fixed. I was thinking that I could get some kind of job, and eventually move in with her. I was already imagining myself giving her my paycheck, imagining what it would feel like to be dancing with her, to go to bed with her, when I heard someone turn off the radio in the other room and she looked at me and said, you probably should go. As I left, she stood at the door for a moment and when I looked back, she waved to me, a gesture so unexpected that hardly a day passes when I don't wonder what it meant.

Bar

I'm trying to remember the name of the bar
where I heard a woman laughing
and it sounded like a dog being beaten,
but all I remember is the word
Bar in trembling neon, as if God had written it.
I remember there were two or three people
holding their faces in their hands. I remember
my thoughts were like lighted matches
dropped down a well. The jukebox stood there
like a ghost. After awhile you didn't know
if it was day or night. Everybody looked like
people in a painting from which the angels
had been removed, leaving them
standing there looking hopeful and a little
terrified, like someone having a heart attack
and waiting for the ambulance to arrive.

Hobbies of the Damned

You don't sense much of an interest in the future here. Once in a while somebody tells you what he's going to do when he wins the lottery. Most of the time it's past mistakes, some resentment or regret that won't let go. Gradually an ugly sort of boredom sets in. A man sitting at a table had passed out and the woman with him was lighting matches, trying in a half-hearted way to set fire to his hair. Call it a hobby. Call it a hobby of the damned. Like cutting a face out of photographs, or reading love letters and crossing out all the phrases that were lies. I watched her place a cigarette between her lips and light a match, holding it near the end of the cigarette then blowing it out, only to discover the cigarette wasn't lit. It looked like something she'd done a hundred times before, which gave it the appeal of a favorite moment in a movie when somebody performs a gesture that defines them. The man sitting next to me at the bar told me he just hoped the aliens would come and put us out of our misery. Another man was singing "Happy Birthday" to no one in particular. When he stood, he seemed to be trying to adjust to the gravity of a different planet. Outside the bar people walked past with a mysterious sense of purpose.

Night Riffs

I love the strange
machinery
of the night,
its levers and veils,
its winches and
invisible mirrors
reflecting
the awful splendor
of solitude.
Sometimes I hear
the sound of pulleys,
like the beds
of restless sleepers.
Sometimes
I hear the vibration
of ancient wires,
weird shimmering
notes, haunted
by the pain of love.

.....

I love the angels
when they are not
wearing wings
and are mistaken
for sleepwalkers.
I love listening
to the stars
telling me to forget
everything I know
about them
and just let the light
go through me.
I love the way the trees
stand around
as if waiting for
somebody
to ask them to dance.
I love the possibility
of a star falling
where
I happen to be looking,
the ecstasy

of seeing accidentally.
I love my ignorance
of constellations,
my inability
to see the imaginary lines
between the stars,
only distances,
immense and lonely.