The Naked Chain

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Abstract

It is not often that I think of this. Only when I am alone, as out on the southwester plains, standing beside the gray pavement stretching deep into the horizon which is my life...
IT IS not often that I think of this. Only when I am alone, as out on the southwestern plains, standing beside the gray pavement stretching deep into the horizon which is my life; or in the late evening loneliness when the night is slow to fall. Then in the rising threads of blue smoke, I trace my past and future—and sometimes Linda's face.

Linda, bright girl smiling with long hair laughing in the breeze.

Linda, pearl teeth framed with rich lips and sweet breath.

Linda, flawless, faultless, blameless.

Somewhere, smiling in the silent night.

Yes, in the night rooms filled with shadows sprawling from a smokeless flame, I see again that day, the breaking of the day, or perhaps the day of breaking with the morning air chill, not the shivering chill, but the brisk nip that makes a thick woolen shirt more of a friend than a protection.

In the six o'clock stillness the town was frozen in a living frame, the quiet broken only by the rasping of a
wrinkled leaf whipped by the wind across the rough cement sidewalk.

Right in the middle of an intersection I stood, so impressed with that immobility of the scene that for a moment I felt as though I could not move and that perhaps I was only a bit of pigment lifeless on a canvas and had spent my existence in that one spot.

Then a horn blared behind me and a “Whatsa matta, ya def a sumpin?” told me that if I had spent my previous days in that one spot, I’d better move if I were going to spend any more days anywhere. I laughed and waved to the garbage truck as it belched away and disappeared around a corner.

The truck was a herald of the town’s waking. Now the clean sweep of the empty streets was being filled with sporadic bursts of cars and people rushing to open stores and businesses, to work and sweat a day to go home and rest to go to work, to rest, to work, rest, work. People rushing blindly everywhere, not knowing why, just rushing. People building their pre-fab, fashion-show churches. Everywhere people working for the show, not the reason.

Everyone except wandering me, renouncing the way of life before I, too, became indoctrinated into the mass of the glassy-eyed, all-night television starers.

Being saved by the symbol of truth somewhere in that very town. The symbol I had seen only for a few days on a park bench in Chicago two years ago and had kept a precious correspondence with her (the symbol: Linda) and by those letters had kept one light before me to love only as being a light.

But also by the letters to know the town. I knew the corner up ahead (“Where those kind of girls stand and don’t you get mixed up with any of THEIR SORT.”), the bar I was passing (“Where those nasty men drink their nasty booze.”), and the large gray house on the hill where the sleeping Linda dreamed. I knew the town from Linda’s letters, but all of her letters were not of the town. One of them swung with a silver cross, the symbol of my Faith, in a small packet on a chain around my throat.
So I walked through the town, pairing Linda's descriptions with the actual things, finding that the “horrid, horrid statue” in front of the library was some Greek god dressed in a fig leaf.

After my third trip around Sevun Falls, looking for the sights to see, I decided to chance Linda's early rising and call her.

The phone rang with a clanging echo until a click and a hard “Hello” stopped it.

“Linda?”

“This is her.”

“This is Rip.” (Casually, savoring the surprise of it.)

“Rip who? (A pause.) Rip?!”

“Yes, Linda, all the way from Iowa.” (Almost laughing now.)

“Oh Rip, what in the world . . . ? It's such a . . . a surprise, I . . .”

“Yes, Linda. That's the way I wanted it to be. When may I see you?”

“Rip, you've startled me so, I . . . I need a while. I've been . . . not very well, nothing serious, just a little 'flu, and, Rip, I want to see you so much, too, I have to . . . explain something to you. It’s . . . I can tell you tomorrow. Stay in town and call me. Please, Rip?”

“Yes, Linda. I want to see you very much. It's been a long way.” (Somewhat discouraged, blunted.)

“I know, Rip. Oh Rip! I wish you would have let me know. I . . . could have made things ready for you. I . . . stay in town at the hotel, please, Rip? You wrote me about some of the places you stay. Please stay at the hotel and call me.”

“Could I come up to see you? If you're sick, I want to . . .”

“No! I mean, no, Rip, the house is all scrambled. Please, just call me tomorrow and we'll work it out. Promise me, Rip?”

“I promise. I'll call you tomorrow. Stay in bed as much as possible and get well.” (Covering up, again casual.)

“I will. Goodbye, Rip.”

“Goodbye, Linda.”

Click.
Now it was as if we had never been apart, as if she had always been near me. Linda, my tawny goddess in the distance, now only a day away. But her voice . . . but that was Linda. Not wanting me to worry, wanting to be her best tomorrow. That was Linda.

I walked through the cluttered, wide-awake town, stopping to feed the pigeons in the park some crunchy bread crumbs I had in my pockets, waiting for the movie house to open. The morning vanished and soon I was seated almost alone watching Elmer Fudd chase Bugs Bunny, Bugs putting on various disguises to befuddle Fudd, but always Elmer finding out in time it is really Bugs ("You wascal!"), and chasing him with a shotgun. Soon I fell asleep

awaking about ten and deciding I had had enough sleep to last for another night or so, and feeling light and slightly numb from my rest, I walked out into the settled night to find the place where "nasty men drink their nasty booze."

It was a small bar, with a white-shirted bartender flitting ghostlike in the dim, shadowless light, always with something to do—polishing the bar, glasses, signs, always in motion. The only other customer was an old (to young me) man sitting at one of the tables. His age-tanned face had glassed eyes floating in thick rings sunk deep in the wrinkled skin. He spoke loudly, cursing the glass in front of him, the "damn bassard 'publicans," and (fair in his criticism) the "damn bassard democrats."

I walked to the bar and ordered a beer.

The bartender looked at me and sighed, "You got any identification, boy?"

"You got change for a five?"
"You got the five?"
"I got the five."
"Bottle or tap?"

I sipped the tingling beer slowly, listening to the drunk, who had now passed from politics to religion to liquor to his own sexless state.

"Gettin so a man don' know what it's like no more. Money they want! When I uz a young buck, no money
then. No sir. 'Twas 'Billy, come over t'house t'night.'
Yasman. Never had no money worry then. Now! Jeez, take half a man's paycheck gettin a little company nights. Wo­men just ain't th' same no more. But some o' them young 'uns up on the hill . . .'
— Hill? There were many hills in Sevun Falls.
"... he HE he heeeeee! Make a fella's belly get all tight and his guts run warm. Them bodies! Specially that new un. That . . . Linda. Gawd! What a tail!"
— Linda? There were many girls named Linda.
"Hey, Pete! (to the bartender) Do ya think could I go up and get one on credit? Ha he he heeeeee . . .!"
— Many hills. Many Linda-girls.
"... he he, credit. I never did hear a such a . . ."
The old drunk stopped when my hands pulled him by his soiled lapels out of his chair. He started to say "... leggo me, legg . . ." but he saw my face and the whiskey ran out of him in that instant. "What you want with me, mister? I never . . ."

(Very softly, almost whispered.) "A gray house on the south side? A tall girl with long hair reaching to her waist? Linda?"

The drunk's hands circled my wrists and the muddy yellow of his eyes framed his terror. "That's right, mister. Whadda you . . .?"

I slammed the drunk against the wall, my thumbs crushing his neck, feeling his windpipe crackle beneath the pressure while his eyes bulged upward and his breath whistled in thin gasps.

The bartender ripped me away from the drunk and spun me across the floor. He bent to help the gasping drunk.

"What's wrong with you, boy? This fella never did you no harm. If you can't hold yer liquor, you shouldn't a come in here to start."

— He never did me any harm.

"Christ, ya like to killed him. You shouldn't a come in here."

— I shouldn't have come.
“You better get out a here. Don’t come in no more. Shouldn’t a come in here to start. He never hurt you.”
— Shouldn’t have come. Better leave. Didn’t hurt me.
Yes.
I left the bartender bending over the drunk and walked out. Somewhere outside my skin something was drawing my guts out slowly, leaving nothing but a conscious nothingness. The night air was clean and brisk and there was the welcoming darkness

which now, as then, comforts me.
And even when the sun is gleaming, I shutter my eyes to melt into that soft stillness of the welcoming darkness. But I try not to think of this. Yet in my lightless room at night, pale smoke phantoms of the past float in the air and I touch the naked chain about my throat and remember. But this is not often.

And sometimes not at all.

The Oldest Irishman

by Tom Harkin

I took two bottles of cold beer from the refrigerator, opened them carefully so they wouldn’t foam, and stepped outside. The screen door slammed shut behind me and I started on the path that led through the orchard to the garden. The gentle summer breeze did little to cool the noon sun, which scorched the earth through a cloudless sky.

Beyond the peach trees I could see Uncle Joe pushing the plow down a row of potatoes, his back to me. It was a big garden; and, since Mom died, we didn’t bother planting anything in it. Uncle Joe, however, who lived just a stone’s throw up the road, saw to it that the garden was never empty come harvest time. Every year he planted three crops: Irish potatoes (they were really Idahoes but