The Sparrow

David J. Kennison*
The Sparrow

David J. Kennison

Abstract

Mr. Bender left the tavern at ten minutes of twelve on a Saturday evening, and lurched uncertainly in the direction of home. Home, a ten by ten cubicle containing one cot, one chest of drawers, and one chair...
MR. BENDER left the tavern at ten minutes of twelve on a Saturday evening, and lurched uncertainly in the direction of home. Home, a ten by ten cubicle containing one cot, one chest of drawers, and one chair. There were two thoughts in his mind: that he wanted another beer, and that it was raining. He leaned against a nearby street lamp for a moment. A passerby shivered, pulled his coat closer about his ears, and hurried on.

"Damned bartender," Mr. Bender muttered, "damned, lousy, stinking bartender. No money, no drink. Lousy, stinking son-of-a..." Mr. Bender lost the train of thought, and staggered on, the tattered end of his coat slapping Salvation Army shoes with that peculiar, heavy thud of rain-soaked cloth.

It is peculiar that the still, small cry reached Mr. Bender — more peculiar still that he took any notice. It came in one of those still moments just before the lightning flash and the roll of thunder. The blue of the flash caught Mr. Bender in an attitude of drunken attention, his feet temporarily planted, his head just a little too cocked to one side, and his eyes — his eyes wide and staring. The thunder rocked him slightly, and then the cry came again, the cry of a young thing caught in the storm. Mr. Bender did not move; only
his feet moved, toward a narrow alley between two buildings. There in a heap of rubbish lay the source of the cry, a young sparrow, a bit of fluff fallen from its nest, crying a note of distress into the black strangeness. Mr. Bender's knees bent, his hands reached forth of themselves, and the baby nestled in the cup of his roughened palm. His eyes peered at the thing, and his mind swam.

"His eye is on the sparrow. . . . son, listen to me . . . you drink too much . . . even the lowest of men . . . Pater noster, qui es in coelis . . . this is the last time . . ." 

The sparrow stirred and cried again, opening its maw to the rain and the night.

"Wherever you walk. . . . the Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. . . . a drink. But Max, I promise—just one more. . . . goddam son-of-a-bitch. . . . and don't come back or I'll call the cops. . . ." 

The lightning flashed abruptly; Mr. Bender started and dropped the thing from his hand. It did not matter. There were two thoughts in his mind. The cold and rain. The bottle carefully secreted in the top dresser drawer. He had forgotten that. What had he been thinking of? Mr. Bender swore to himself, lurched to his feet, and moved off into the night, pausing once as if hearing some far-off sound, some sound from the past or the future. But there was only the gentle sound of the rain. The body was already growing cold in the puddle where it had fallen.