This, Too, Shall Pass Away

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Abstract

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THE QUIET of the July night is broken by the gentle reverberating echo of the midnight bell. Glancing off dirty brick buildings, striking ash cans, squeezing through knotholes in boards nailed over windows of abandoned structures, it reaches Poplar Street. A young mother looks up from her sleeping baby as the sound vibrates the broken glass in the third story window. One . . . Two . . . Three . . . With each peal of the bell, the glass quakes, and silences. Eleven . . . Twelve. Midnight. One hour left, and she can sleep. But she must keep alert in the meantime. The rats may come.

The baby sleeps quietly; Wilma looks at him, so different are his features than when he is awake. His eyelids, calmly shut, hide the contrast of whites surrounded by black. His pug nose is barely visible in the faint light of the two-room apartment. Her eyes travel from the baby to her husband, snoring rhythmically in the bed beside her. His muscles, although relaxed, create curves in his arms and legs. The night is warm; sweat covers his black body, making a halo of silver.

She nods, but snaps awake again; to stay awake, she plays a game, listening to the desultory sounds of the night, naming them and guessing their origin. A siren wails, feet tram-
ple in the alley below. Then for a moment, all is quiet save the normal creak of the building.

Then other sounds pervade her awareness. Upstairs, a couple arguing, the stamping of feet, and some plaster sifts from her ceiling, landing on her husband’s back. He snorts, rolls over, and sleeps, quietly this time.

Her eyes focus on the darkened bulb above the mirror, and then move from one wall to another, stopping momentarily to gaze through the opening into the kitchen, then moving on and resting again above the mirror.

Afraid of falling asleep, she rises from the chair and enters the kitchen. She takes an apple from the counter, lifting it to her mouth, and stops; the apple is for her lunch tomorrow, not for now. Replacing the apple hesitantly, she moves back into the bedroom, thinking of morning, and work.

“Work” is a sweater factory up on Glenwood. Wilma is an Examiner, and her piece-work wages usually end up to be about fifty dollars a week. There really isn’t much to being an Examiner, but the first few days on the job were confusing. She received a cart of sweaters from the Trimmer, and she methodically pulled at every seam, making sure none of them were ripped open. Then a quick but thorough look over the body of the sweater, checking for flaws in the weave; if the sweater passed, it was put in one pile; if not, it was sent back to the Operator to be re-done. The hard part was the tallying of each variety: Menders, Cleaners, Operators, Seconds, Passes. If she made a mistake, she was charged for it. And in the beginning she made a lot of mistakes. But after a few months she got the hang of it, and after the five years she had worked there, she was an expert.

After work she would take the C-Bus home, but her husband would not come for about an hour. He always stopped off for a beer with his buddies, which she did not mind. At one time she had objected, but he had retorted that it was none of her business, that he deserved a little time to himself. When he did get home, he would eat and go right to bed, since he had to get up and watch the baby at one o’clock.

Twelve-thirty comes and goes. She must keep her mind occupied for half an hour; her thoughts, eager for a subject,
rest upon her childhood.

Born just two blocks from this building, she grew up as any city child would. Her father had died of tuberculosis when she was six. The apartment had felt strangely empty after that, even with her mother, her two brothers, and four sisters packed into the three rooms. Times were bad, the depression’s full force had hit, and jobs were non-existent. Her mother fed and clothed all seven of them on welfare payments and donations from charities. Then there were the Saturdays, when Mother made her go downtown in her most ragged dress to sell Kleenex-flowers. Mother had taught her to blink her eyes and look hungry, so that people would feel sorry for her and buy the flowers. She felt embarrassed, and was not as good a salesman as her older sister. She was glad she lived the way she did now; her child, lying in the crib, would never have to know what it was like to beg. He would have the best.

And what about her? God would take care of her. How many times had the minister said, “The meek shall inherit the earth”? Thinking of church made her feel better. She thought of the Sundays she had spent at church, the morning services, afternoon meetings, and evening sermons, with the music pounding in her ears and people standing with palms in the air shouting, “Yes, Lawd.” Brother Thea Jones, the pastor, had been given the power to heal by God, and frequently held Healing Services. He preferred the fast spirituals on the big electric organ instead of the slow, mournful type of church music. He said that religion was happy, and that people should be joyful when they sang praise to God. At every service, Brother Jones would shake the hand of every person who would give five dollars to the church, and if you shook his hand, it meant that God would watch over you for the next week. He also taught them to love their fellowmen. After all, he was white, so white people weren’t all sinners. Thinking of church made Wilma quite happy.

The sound of the bell again peals through the window, this time announcing that one o’clock has arrived at last. Wilma shakes her husband gently, and he awakens. They look at each other silently for a moment, and he reaches out, pulling her down upon the bed toward him. They make love quickly, mechanically, and then it is her turn to sleep.
She sleeps fitfully, dreaming of a golden cup which can barely be seen through a dense fog. As she reaches for it, the cup moves away. Now she is running, grasping for the cup, but she is held back by a strange, strong force. Running, groping, grasping, reaching . . . .

She wakes up, tears gleaming on her face. The baby is crying, and she sees her husband warming some milk over the stove. Pulling herself up from the bed, she goes to the dresser, takes a slip from the top drawer and grabs the orange-flowered washdress from the closet.

"Mornin'," her husband mumbles.

Shadows In the Sun

by Dell Nett

Education, Grad.

THE WHITE autumn sunlight turned Bernard's study into patches of light and shadow. On the wall, opposite the volumes of theology, hung a portrait of Christ, his head crowned with thorns. Bernard, who sat in the shadows by the bookshelf, felt the suffering Christ appeared blinded by the white light. The observation, however, seemed only faintly amusing, and he swiveled his chair around and got to his feet. Standing before the second story window, Bernard's attention wavered from the lifeless view to a recent letter he had written his sister. Behind him, on the desk, lay a nearly memorized copy of it.

Bernard skipped the tortured opening to remember: I am sorry to break our long silence, Elaine, just to analyze myself again. It is a habit I cannot even keep from in letters. What I wish to tell you—confused as this may seem—is I have come to a decision. Marilyn has decided we should marry and I should leave the ministry.

Leaning forward, Bernard put his fist between the glass and his middle-aged face. He stared wearily at the roof below until the shimmering light forced him to close his eyes;