However Frail

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Abstract

SETTLE DOWN, FRIEND. Unpack the suitcase with the airline stickers and names of strange hotels framed in palm trees. Take off those worn shoes, polished in every shoe shine shop between Boston and Bangkok...
Interlude

Who said “living does not need to hurt?”
You did.
Their juke-box-chant is cute, you said,
For where are we sad in this moment
   in the smothered down warmth
   in the soundless soft
   of our loving, on an afternoon.
I know, I know . . .
But something will not stop hurting here.
   Somewhere on the first night or the first afternoon, in
   the deepest dark there ever was, God said — Everything
   must end.
You may sweep this little pain of ours
Under the broad howl of the sea,
Or scatter it amongst the confetti
Of the wishes and hours and chatter
Out there on the street.
You may refuse to hear it as now
By calling your long caresses through me “forever.”
But you must, you must know how my weeping will sound
When I will wind white waters about your deadness
And see the last white foam sucked down through the mud
And the mud folded over in the trench.
The hurt is between us even now.
I cannot bear it, even now, no . . .
But rest.
I cannot leave either, you see.
I am here my love.
I am here, for you, now.


However frail

SETTLE DOWN, FRIEND. Unpack the suitcase with the
airline stickers and names of strange hotels framed in palm
trees. Take off those worn shoes, polished in every shoe shine
shop between Boston and Bangkok. Stretch your stocking
feet toward the fire—we don’t mind the holes or the darned
spot over the right toe—warm them. Warm them through. They must be tired, those feet. To think of all the miles of sunbaked asphalt, all the rods of rich black fresh plowed soil, all the blocks of narrow cobblestoned streets, all the feet gained inch by inch on the many mountains, would stagger the mind of one who did not know or understand. Stretch each toe. They must be very tired. And I suppose they have been cold; in glacial trout streams, when the hip boots sprang a minute leak; or when the sleigh turned end-for-end and left you and that brave girl in a ditch all one starless night, or when the accident was over, and you stared at the mangled vehicles and suddenly felt very much afraid and very much alone, and felt the blood drain from your feet so that they almost froze.

And lean back in the chair, friend. Down town on the streets there are a thousand girls with nice legs. Nice girls who want homes and children. Settle down, and when your feet are warm and you back is rested, go down and take your pick. Take her to that little back road place that hardly anyone has ever heard of, where they serve squab basted in butter, and drinks, if you know the waiter. Take her there and tell her you are tired of moving on. Tell her she is your only love. Tell her that you would like a home, drapes on all the windows, and real lace curtains if she likes. Then take her to a movie—one that Time recommends (and those are rare)—take her to a movie and forget the plot. Buy her popcorn and when her lips are salty, steal a kiss and hold her tight. Hold her very tight as the flickering images grind on into the night.

But not now, friend. Now lean back and fill your pipe with good tobacco. It's Prince Albert, Reynolds Tobacco Company, you know. It always tastes the same. They have quality control unduplicated in other tobaccos. You can count on that! Relax. Your pipe is old and battered. Try this one. Worked this one in with the machine in Harn's Smoke Shop. He'll do it for you—this machine smokes the pipe continuously for forty-eight hours. Burns the flavor in—see how well the bowl sweats?

Settle down, friend. Suscribe to Life and Time and Holiday. Buy Popular Mechanics and Esquire for yourself, Journal and Good Housekeeping for the wife. And when the kids begin to grow up they'd probably get a big bang out of Jack and Jill. Look, there's an Esquire now. Pick it up. See how relaxing it is to read those stories? Get all the thrill of
playing when you read Conty's Baseball Short. And here, in this travel article you can learn things you've never dreamed about Rio. Love's ready made on the pin-up page. Oh, don't get that wrong, friend. You never tire of your woman, really. It's just a change that's sort of fun.

Rest your eyes friend. Those eyes that have seen so many sunsets and so many dawns. They must be very tired after following the phosphorescent wake of schooners in tropical seas for so long. They must have strained terribly to interpret every subtle hue of color in the Persian market places. They must have squinted in the cruel sun of Africa and ached from peering so long through the sights on your elephant gun. Rest your eyes. How much you have relied on them, in the dark outside Rome, in the fog of London. Rest your eyes on the figure of the cat as she bends her back to scratch fitfully at the arm of the chair. Let them flood out of focus, and when they come back of their own accord, we can watch some color movies I took last vacation when we spent two weeks in the Black Hills. Or if you like, there will be news on television—news from Pakistan, and Washington. It's quite a thrill to watch all the picturesque people in the background. And after that there will be a cutting of a Broadway play. It's nice to keep up on the current stage.

Don't bother thinking about deep meaningful things, friend. All your life you have lived by your wit and charming repartee. You needn't even talk if you are so inclined, for now you are among your own kind. Settle down, and play bridge—the games sometimes become very cut-throat just so we can all work out our recessive malice. There's a poker club you'd get a kick out of; it meets once a week. The members have it at a different place each week—that way the beer bill is pretty well distributed. Feel it in your blood that you're doing something big and daring. It's great satisfaction.

You can get a job any place—you wear your clothes well; you keep a fair shine on your heels. That won't be hard. Some job that will take just eight hours a day—one that you can punch in and out of at eight and five and wipe your hands of the responsibility and get a good night's sleep. It will not be hard to find one like you a job.

Listen if you like, friend. That record player is the best high fidelity. It can make you feel like you are in the front row at Carnegie Hall. That will rest your ears. Poor ears
that had to listen so hard to hear the gypsy violins on the banks outside Wien. Ears that were deafened by the surf as the great combers roared ashore at Cape Town. Ears that were anesthetized by the sambas they played on that plantation near Manas. Listen to this record. It was made in the perfect conditions of the Columbia Recording Studio. Not a sound in the background. No crickets, no tinkling waterfall, no soft breath—not a sound.

Wait, friend, don't stand up yet. Surely your feet are not warm through yet. We'll have some good domestic wine to revive your taste buds after all that harsh Mexican tequila, after all that hot Italian pizza, after the coarse minced herring that the Norwegians served.

You aren't going, friend? How long has it been since you've smelled pine cones burning? We'll throw some on the fire and permeate the room. Redwoods burning, Parisian perfume, the sticky sweet of the Everglades—poor tired nose, poor tired sense of smell.

Stay, friend! Settle down. Be our neighbor. Pick a girl; buy a house, a new car; go on two weeks vacations, sip—Don't leave yet. Wait!...

Good-by then, friend. I can't see why you're going on again. I can't see why.....

—Damon Swanson, Engr. Fr.

To Mother Young

As we stumbled through the cavern that is this life
She guided us to glimpses of light
That were to mean love and friends:
She took us by the hand and made us gentlemen.

Now her cold fingers will not reach from under the snow
And twist anguish from our hearts at her leaving.
Rather, the warm imprint she left on our hands
May fade, but not disappear.
Then what regret can we feel,
We the living,
Who talk of what we cannot comprehend?

—James Wickliff, Sci. Sr.