A Summer Walk

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I WENT for a walk last Saturday night. It was an unspoiled June evening, the air laced with the scent of new flowers, the heavy mosquito season not yet begun. Fresh breezes prevented stickiness, giving me the feeling of slipping from a cool shower into an envelope of soft, clean sheets.

The unfaded green grass cushioned my sandaled steps, then unfolded, straight as it had been before my being there had bent it. The grass would not betray where I had gone.

I had nowhere to go, so I wandered up the street. Highpitched children noise filtered from the playground to my ears and painted for me a picture of myself some twenty years ago.

Down by the river
Where the green grass grows
There sat Sarah
As pretty as a rose
Along came Jimmy and
Kissed her on the nose

"No! I don't like Jimmy!"
"Yes you do! You do! Sarah loves Jimmy! Sarah loves Jimmy!"

A huge, dark row of oaks blocked the children from my sight, but I could still see them. Miniature bib overalls, gingham shirts, and tennis shoes had probably replaced my brown plaid white collared dress and saddle shoes, but they still sang the same rhymes and crushed their lips to an ancient, rusted orange pump that pretended to be a water fountain.
Heart attack, Sarah. But he’s only thirty-two. Heart attack, Sarah. Heart attack, Sarah.

The tennis courts were hard cement, unyielding. The warm metal fence was touching my toes before I stopped walking. My fingers curled tight around the dull gray diagonals. Love-fifteen. The dirty white ball bounced high, but always came down to be hit again. Love-thirty. It didn’t care who won. Love-forty-five. If it accidentally bounced into a pile of cornered dead leaves, one of the white clothed figures would bounce after it and give it reprieve. Game.

Will he live. Don’t know. He’s young and strong. Don’t know.

A John Philips Sousa march strained pale and out of tune from a band shell four blocks away. I had once been a part of so many of those concerts, constantly asking Mr. Corbin why the French horns always had to play the off beats and were never given a chance to carry a melody. He would explain that marches were written that way and ask if I’d like to switch to the cornet. Cornets played melodies, but I always declined. I loved the mellow music my French horn gave me when it was just the two of us and I could play what I wanted.

A porch swing creaked contentedly. I looked up and saw two kindly smiles set into folded, worn faces. An embroidered apron over an old housedress covered the woman, the man had on a pair of gray cotton workpants and a matching gray shirt. Both pairs of feet wore heavy, comfortable shoes. Their lives had probably been hard, but a carefully nursed garden in their backyard and dirt under their nails told me that they had grown to love this work, expect it as part of living. They would make it, they always had. Through all these years of marriage they had made it. And now they could sit together on their front porch on summer evenings with stained hands held together.

Goddam it! He’s only thirty-two years old!

I pulled my eyes away from the kindly smiles and ran down the sidewalk. My face was wet, but I was making no sound.
The wheat fields at the edge of town were beginning to swallow the enormous red sun. I wanted to catch it, to stop it, but the orange and red and pink striped clouds guarding it kept me away. I ran towards it, my flat sandals making loud splatting noises, my legs reaching farther than their length. I knew I couldn’t have it, but I ran. I could see the tennis ball losing and the old man and woman rocking their tomatoes to sleep. I could hear the French horn discording. I ran until I knew he was going to die.

Someone found me that night in a wheat field and now I’m home. It’s Monday and they tell me Joe’s going to be all right in a few months. But I don’t believe them. I know he’s dead.