

September Light

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Switch off the lamp at the top of the stairway, as dusk calls you to the armchair at your window, just fifty yards from a weathered cottage across a grassy hill. Peer through the gap in your lace curtains as your tired eyes reach for the old cabin, and picture not an ordinary man from six hours ago, tall and slender, slightly bent at the shoulders, silver hair reflecting the midday sun burning above Puget Sound, but the man's silhouette through a small window divided by four panes, backlit by a second small window that looks upon the Sound behind him. He is no longer ordinary. Sandwiched between the two windows in this waning light, he becomes a caricature of himself, a monolithic shadow moving in the slowest of gestures, the opening of a cabinet, the reach for what can now be seen as a wine glass, a pour, and then a pause before taking the glass to his lips and arching his neck slowly backward as he drinks.

Cast your eyes left, as though to the previous frame of a child's picture book, and see through a larger window the silhouette of an easel, the canvas cloaked in the growing dark, its image withheld. He prefers his canvas large, his stroke broad. Feel the stem of the goblet rotate slowly between your fingers, as you sit perched in your own darkness and wonder whether he still wears the faded jeans and blue work shirt from earlier in the day, if the sleeves remain rolled up, revealing arms once strong, now flaccid with the years, and spotted with age. Take wine to your own lips, and watch him as he crosses from the one frame into the other, and slowly back again.

Consider whether he will take the brush into his waiting hand.

He nearly saw you today at the market on Water Street, but you slipped like a specter into the next aisle. Perhaps he will bake the halibut he bought there, steam the asparagus. Or maybe he will just finish his bottle of wine and slip out of view as he did the night before, the brief glow through the fogged bathroom window a garish spotlight cast upon another day of failed intentions. Was his lunch of fish and chips and cold beer enough to sustain him? It is hard to know. He sat at the long, cedar bar of Gleason's Ale House until nearly three, picking at his food like a tired hound, the stool creaking like an old wooden boat moored too close to its dock.

"Another cold one for you, Erich?" The barkeeper reached for a rag and wiped down the counter, sticky with salt and bread crumbs and mug rings of lager left by old men who had sat hunched upon those stools, and had since moved back into the wandering streets, up the hills home, or toward the pier to watch the ferries come and go. Men too old to notice a table tucked away in a corner.

Remember his voice as he peeled dollar bills from the tarnished money clip he keeps in his right jeans pocket, and replied, "Thank you, no. I'd best be getting back to it."

His is a voice steeped in time, a voice that traveled across an ocean, and found its home two thousand miles east of the continent's edge from which it now speaks, a voice without place. Hear him again. He seems to speak to his waiting canvas now. His arms loom large above the easel, the left hand clutching the wine glass, the right frozen in an imploring gesture. Strain to see him, as the distance between you recedes into darkness.

Imagine what you cannot see.

The light over the bathroom mirror spreads a pall across his skin, makes him grayer than he is. For a moment he sees himself standing off to the side, just a boy eye level to his father's chest, looking up to the mirror and watching the rhythmic scraping of the razor traverse Karl Huber's coarse face, covered in thick shaving soap from the dark, chipped mug that rolled out of Hamburg's central train station in 1947, packed carefully alongside his mother's enamel kettle and his own leather *völkerball*, across marshlands and dunes shrouded in autumn fog toward the harbor on the Elbe's North Sea outlet, and a steamship waiting to take it to America. The same chipped mug from which three neighbors, secreted away in 1941 in a makeshift compartment below Karl Huber's press, shared cold milk that came daily around the corner from the icebox outside Karl Huber's apartment. Among them a beautiful woman called Clara with whom, during ten nights of firestorms that drove Erich and his mother deep into tunnels below Hamburg's streets, Karl took comfort, only to lose her in the confusion that was the war's end.

Erich Huber blinks, looks back to the mirror, taller now, but still slight of build, his blue eyes nearing gray, sunken and set deep in hollows beneath his creased forehead, straight brown hair gone thin and silver, like wire, his seventy years staring back at him as he splashes cool water upon his face.

A brown leather wallet, worn and discolored, lies open and flat upon the bureau as he fishes through the top drawer for a clean T-shirt. An aging man stares out from the driver's license behind the plastic on the left side of the wallet, opposite this a snapshot of a

young woman. The photograph is tattered from touching, the finish tired, colors fading. Sometimes he stops at this point, considers her face. Sometimes he wonders if she has watched him age in the darkness of this wallet.

Her hair is black, long. It is parted just left of center and pulled behind her ears, only to appear again cascading in pendulous waves over the front of her bare shoulders. It was early September, but very bright that day. Had the photograph been taken just a bit earlier, had the backlight been only slightly different, you would have seen a touch of summer red toward the tips. In stark contrast to the hair is the pale of her face, her arms. She had the whitest skin. Her eyes are dark blue, set deep beneath thick brows. There she is, looking at something just beyond his shoulder, her red lips easing into a shy trace of a smile. Her left hand is balanced lightly on the railing of the old hickory footbridge, Moss Creek washing over stones below. In the field behind her are the first of autumn blooms—the yellow panicle of goldenrod, black-eyed Susan, gentian as blue as her eyes, Queen Anne's lace as white as her skin.

There she is, from a time just hours before he first made love to her. A week later he brought her to meet his parents. The girl's surname meant nothing to Karl. But her mother's story spilled over her lips and crashed onto the kitchen table like the clatter of fine china as it slips out of trembling hands and hits the floor.

"She spent the war hidden inside a trapdoor below a printer's press in Hamburg, along with two of her neighbors. Each day the printer would pass down milk in an old, chipped mug. When he could, he would bring a chunk of bread, sometimes an apple. I never knew my real father. He was lost to the camps."

Clara's story. In search of displaced friends, she and her daughter had made their way across the Atlantic, and then into the Ohio valley just a few miles up Moss Creek, where she married a mill worker from Frankfurt, only to be widowed a year later. Karl Huber's face went ashen as he stared across the table into the eyes of his daughter.

Two days later he stood at Clara's apartment door, her beauty still ringing across the years, his hands still bearing ink stains from a press that was her salvation. They spoke in hushed tones of comforts taken during nights of bombings, of common journeys, and innocent children colliding on improbable paths. They spoke of roadblocks to be set, and passages denied. Karl handed her an envelope filled with cash, and she and her daughter left the next week. Erich Huber knocked on their door for a month, peeked through the gap between pulled curtains, tried to make sense of a room emptied of its people, its possessions, as the miles between them gathered like thunderheads on a hot, August afternoon.

And now what of this distance, these fifty yards? The light from his bedroom meets you halfway. Soon it will expire, be lost to this night. Fifty yards. Down the rickety stairs, a quick pause in front of the mirror, a wrinkled hand smoothing white hair, a touch of red lipstick, then quietly out the door and up a grassy hill. The outside air is warmer than expected, the slope of the hill gentler. A sudden illumination above the easel draws your eye inside, as he takes the brush to his hand.

Fifty yards. You have been this close. Once you stood in the dark outside a screened porch, as the glow from a television cast uneven

shadows across living room walls, and flashes of light upon his sleeping face. The next day you imagined yourself comforting him at the side of an open grave as he buried Karl Huber, instead of watching from a stand of oak trees on a sultry day, mosquitoes swarming just beyond the veil that hid your face. Fifty yards. Just two years ago, told by neighbors he had moved west, you drove across the country and found him in a bar in Taos, then followed him to the east end of the bridge that crosses the Rio Grande Gorge, taking care to keep several car lengths behind. He walked to the center of the bridge and stood for what seemed an hour, looking down upon gooseberry and red-tailed hawks and rushing waters six hundred feet below. You could no longer help yourself. You walked onto the bridge, took his picture, then waited in your car for him to leave.

Fifty yards. The space between you reduced to this. Walk to where the light from the easel touches your feet; consider his subject. The lamp reveals a canvas filled with a still faceless woman with long black hair, her hand at rest upon some old railing, a field of flowers in the background. He has painted you a hundred times, always in September light.

Stand at his door.

Fifty yards, all behind you now. A distance as arbitrary as the two thousand miles and forty years that preceded this night. For what purpose now, why at this late hour? All the children never born have long been saved. The faces of those who would remember lie rotting in graves overgrown with weeds, or in dark forests across an ocean. Moss Creek, diverted through a concrete channel to make way for a shopping mall, runs now only in the hearts of those who ever sat on her banks and let her cool waters rush over their intertwined feet.

Feel the steadiness of your hand as you knock on his door.

Your mother once spoke of optimal distance, that virtuous space between any two hearts—a teacher and his student, friends, a brother and sister. An idea meant for comfort, now grown tired with the years, an idea too small to hold innocent desires born along creeks on warm September days. The distance was never optimal, and for this you were never sorry. It spreads itself before you now, taunting, as it always has, an empty canvas yearning to be covered in bold images, thick paints bleeding to the edges, a cacophony of color. It asks for a bridge, not monumental in stature, not suspended from mighty towers or spanning vast horizons. It asks not at this late hour for some feat of engineering, but rather for simple crossing, not unlike a narrow foot-bridge of aged hickory and worn handrails. It asks to be closed.

Hear his footsteps grow near. Listen for the turning of the knob; see the light as it makes its way across the threshold. □