

Incident In The Afternoon

After a midday nap, an old man with an enormous beard stepped out of a squalid apartment building in the eastern district and tested the weather with his nostrils. He seemed to approve of it by whatever criteria he used, and nodded his head twice to no one in particular. And why not approve of such weather? The sun shone above a slight band of clouds and the wind stirred only gently.

Encouraged, the old man stepped from the single stair at the door of the building and onto the sidewalk, licking his lips. Soon he whistled an aimless tune, such as old men whistle not only when they are alone, but also whenever their thoughts stir in such a way as to jeopardize but not quite destroy their mental equilibrium, to which they cling with pursed lips, as it were.

As for the content of this particular old man's thoughts and the validity of their threat against his well being, such issues are difficult to untangle. For one thing, the old man himself resisted their exasperation, attempting instead to drown them beneath the labored cacophony of his music. And in all fairness, he was not much aided by his difficulty in walking, which activity taxed both his respiration and imagination, as if merely to place his feet correctly with the required frequency was something of a continual masterpiece for the old man, and so sufficient in its own right and unlikely to permit more.

The second obstacle before the old man's state of mind was the speeding sedan in the distance that hit the old man as he meandered into the street and stopped there unexpectedly to shake an angry fist at the sedan, of all things. At that time, the sedan was noteworthy more for its noise than its physical presence, and the old man, who was less deaf than blind, was distracted from making any forward progress. Instead, he stopped in his eternal tracks and craned his neck, squinting into the distance. There, despite his myopia, he found enough cause apparently in the obnoxious and escalating groan of pistons and cylinders to mutter a, from the point of view of history of words, rich string of expletives, only the first of which he himself heard, the rest being lost beneath the approach of the monster.

As that development only heightened the old man's anger on an otherwise peaceful afternoon, he raised his fist into the air and shook it with impressive self-righteousness. The sedan swerved to avoid him, but he was charging it, he who did not walk well nor move at all quickly! That exact one first assaulted and then at higher speed rebounded from the radiator grill of the sedan, the whole time waving his fist and squinting from blindness, yes, but also from an obvious rage that haunted its witnesses.

These included, first of all, the sedan's young driver, who did not emerge from the car very promptly, but rather clutched the steering wheel with one gloved hand, while using the other, as if confounded by time, to lean on the horn, when at this point the action seemed least useful to

anyone. In response, the second witness, a middle-aged woman in an apron, dropped her small bag of groceries and trotted not to the old man's side, but directly to the sedan, where she motioned with her hands to stop honking. However, her choice of gestures for this purpose, a lone index finger dragged slowly across an exposed throat, impacted the agent of the honking very poorly, and he threw up on his own hands.

So success arrives by serendipity and the driver honked no more. Instead, he leapt from the car and, without much thinking, wiped his hands on the woman's clean apron. As the young man's hands were filthy in an unusual and thorough and, it turns out, also figurative manner, he spent abundant time at his present hygiene until finally the middle-aged woman raised her eyes in combined consternation and furtive pleasure, and her mouth drifted open. For a moment, she was entirely undone. Then, regaining her will, she scooped the apron from underneath and assisted the young man in his further efforts to do whatever it was exactly he was doing. Their cooperation was of one mind, linked at the eyeballs.

The third witness did not see this exchange, and may perhaps have unintentionally encouraged it by himself so swiftly attending to the old man, who was badly broken. He lay on his side with one arm extended forward and the other bent strangely behind him like a defunct umbilical cord. The third witness immediately, but gently, shifted the old man's weight from this injury and brought him onto his back, where he lay without consciousness. Despite that state, the

third witness poured cool water first on the old man's scraped forehead, rinsing away gravel, then also down his delicate throat, so that the old man, miraculously, could be seen slightly to swallow and accept the assistance.

Suddenly, he opened his eyes. He was alone in the gutter, while together two strangers seemed to be folding a small tablecloth or bed sheet. The old man closed his eyes and groaned at his fate, which defied comprehension. He almost laughed. But was it really so senseless that he, as the clearest victim in the affair, found himself entirely estranged by the experience? Had the old man considered it, he might probably have concluded that element to be standard, perhaps entirely without surprise for him. After all, he was already an old man, well advanced into years whose timber, through simple and inexorable human disapidation, no longer hinged upon the sense faculties, were not able to now. The old man could take nothing for granted anymore.

Yet his mind reeled at the recognition that suddenly, upon waking up in the street in formidable disrepair, he felt younger in both his body and spirit than ever before in his life. How could anyone explain that turn of events, least of all the old man, if only to himself? No one could. Nor could they clarify for him why riding in the ambulance, among all the choreographed attentions and ministrations of the paramedics, his mind offered a fleeting clarity as great in magnitude as any confusion in his life, and that during that clear patch he experienced a peace so convincing as to pull him willingly from his body.

When he returned to it fully, he did not wonder at these oddities. They did not bear a nostalgia conducive to that attitude or really have any nostalgia about them at all. On the contrary, they simply were. Meanwhile, the old man's confusions were not. That is, they could not be said either to exist or not to exist, as if instead they did not apply, and had in fact somehow applied lately beyond their rightful term, and so overstayed their welcome in a very sinister way. In truth, the old man did not know what to think, and for the first time was comfortable with that predicament, seeing it as something besides a predicament for a change, anyway. He lay in his hospital bed three months with a fractured arm and hip that never completely healed, as often happens in such cases. Yet the old man was frequently comfortable, and never once whistled, except perhaps at a nurse or two.