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A Tree · A Rock · A Cloud

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*Discover this story as others have,
with mull & delight . . .*

It was raining that morning, and still very dark. When the boy reached the streetcar café he had almost finished his route and he went in for a cup of coffee. The place was an all-night café owned by a bitter and stingy man called Leo. After the raw, empty street the café seemed friendly and bright: along the counter there were a couple of soldiers, three spinners from the cotton mill, and in a corner a man who sat hunched over with his nose and half his face down in a beer mug. The boy wore a helmet such as aviators wear. When he went into the café he unbuckled the chin strap and raised the right flap up over his pink little ear; often as he drank his coffee someone would speak to him in a friendly way. But this morning Leo did not look into his face and none of the men were talking. He paid and was leaving the café when a voice called out to him:

“Son! Hey Son!”

He turned back and the man in the corner was crooking his finger and nodding to him. He had brought his face out of the beer mug and he seemed suddenly very happy. The man was long and pale, with a big nose and faded orange hair.

“Hey Son!”

The boy went toward him. He was an undersized boy of about twelve, with one shoulder drawn higher than the other because of the weight of the paper sack. His face was shallow, freckled, and his eyes were round child eyes.

“Yeah Mister?”

The man laid one hand on the paper boy’s shoulders, then grasped the boy’s chin and turned his face slowly from one side to the other. The boy shrank back uneasily.

“Say! What’s the big idea?”

The boy’s voice was shrill; inside the café it was suddenly very quiet.

The man said slowly: “I love you.”

All along the counter the men laughed. The boy, who had scowled and sidled away, did not know what to do. He looked over the counter at Leo, and Leo watched him with a weary, brittle jeer. The boy tried to laugh also. But the man was serious and sad.



“I did not mean to tease you, Son,” he said. “Sit down and have a beer with me. There is something I have to explain.”

Cautiously, out of the corner of his eye, the paper boy questioned the men along the counter to see what he should do. But they had gone back to their beer or their breakfast and did not notice him. Leo put a cup of coffee on the counter and a little jug of cream.

“He is a minor,” Leo said.

The paper boy sidled himself up onto the stool. His ear beneath the upturned flap of the helmet was very small and red. The man was nodding at him soberly. “It is important,” he said. Then he reached in his hip pocket and brought out something which he held up in the palm of his hand for the boy to see.

“Look very carefully,” he said.

The boy stared, but there was nothing to look at very carefully. The man held in his big, grimy palm a photograph. It was the face of a woman, but blurred, so that only the hat and the dress she was wearing stood out clearly.

“See?” the man asked.

The boy nodded and the man placed another picture in his palm. The woman was standing on a beach in a bathing suit. The suit made her stomach very big, and that was the main thing you noticed.

“Got a good look?” He leaned over closer and finally asked: “You ever seen her before?”

The boy sat motionless, staring slantwise at the man. “Not so I know of.”

“Very well.” The man blew on the photographs and put them back into his pocket. “That was my wife.”

“Dead?” the boy asked.

Slowly the man shook his head. He pursed his lips as though about to whistle and answered in a long-drawn way: “Nuuu—” he said. “I will explain.”

The beer on the counter before the man was in a large brown mug. He did not pick it up to drink. Instead he bent down and, putting his face over the rim, he rested there for a moment. Then with both hands he tilted the mug and sipped.

“Some night you’ll go to sleep with your big nose in a mug and drown,” said Leo. “Prominent transient drowns in beer. That would be a cute death.”

The paper boy tried to signal to Leo. While the man was not looking he screwed up his face and worked his mouth to question soundlessly: “Drunk?” But Leo only raised his eyebrows and turned away to put some pink strips of bacon on the grill. The man pushed the mug away from him, straightened himself, and folded his loose crooked hands on the counter. His face was sad as he looked at the paper boy. He did not blink, but from time to time the lids closed down with delicate gravity over his pale green eyes. It was nearing dawn and the boy shifted the weight of the paper sack.

“I am talking about love,” the man said. “With me it is a science.”

The boy half slid down from the stool. But the man raised his forefinger, and there was something about him that held the boy and would not let him go away.

“Twelve years ago I married the woman in the photograph. She was my wife for one year, nine months, three days, and two nights. I loved her. Yes . . .” He tightened his blurred, rambling voice and said again: “I loved her. I thought also that she loved me. I was a railroad engineer. She had all the home comforts and luxuries. It never crept into my brain that she was not satisfied. But do you know what happened?”

“Mgneew!” said Leo.

The man did not take his eyes from the boy’s face. “She left me. I came in one night and the house was empty and she was gone. She left me.”

“With a fellow?” the boy asked.

Gently, the man placed his palm down on the counter. “Why naturally, Son. A woman does not run off like that alone.”

The café was quiet, the soft rain black and endless in the street outside. Leo pressed down the frying bacon with the prongs of his long fork. “So you have been chasing the floozie for eleven years. You frazzled old rascal!”

For the first time the man glanced at Leo. "Please don't be vulgar. Besides, I was not speaking to you." He turned back to the boy and said in a trusting and secretive undertone: "Let's not pay any attention to him, O.K.?"

The paper boy nodded doubtfully.

"It was like this," the man continued. "I am a person who feels many things. All my life one thing after another has impressed me. Moonlight. The leg of a pretty girl. One thing after another. But the point is that when I had enjoyed anything there was a peculiar sensation as though it was laying around loose in me. Nothing seemed to finish itself up or fit in with the other things. Women? I had my portion of them. The same. Afterwards laying around loose in me. I was a man who had never loved."

Very slowly he closed his eyelids, and the gesture was like a curtain drawn at the end of a scene in a play. When he spoke again his voice was excited and the words came fast—the lobes of his large, loose ears seemed to tremble.

"Then I met this woman. I was fifty-one years old and she always said she was thirty. I met her at a filling station and we were married within three days. And do you know what it was like? I just can't tell you. All I had ever felt was gathered together around this woman. Nothing lay around loose in me any more but was finished up by her."

The man stopped suddenly and stroked his long nose. His voice sank down to a steady and reproachful undertone: "I'm not explaining this right. What happened was this. There were these beautiful feelings and loose little pleasures inside me. And this woman was something like an assembly line for my soul. I run these little pieces of myself through her and I come out complete. Now do you follow me?"

"What was her name?" the boy asked.

"Oh," he said. "I called her Dodo. But that is immaterial."

"Did you try to make her come back?"

The man did not seem to hear. "Under the circumstances you can imagine how I felt when she left me."

Leo took the bacon from the grill and folded two strips of it between a bun. He had a gray face, with slitted eyes, and a pinched nose saddled by faint blue shadows. One of the mill workers signaled for more coffee and Leo poured it. He did not give refills on coffee free. The spinner ate breakfast there every morning, but the better Leo knew his customers the stingier he treated them. He nibbled his own bun as though he grudged it to himself.

"And you never got hold of her again?"

The boy did not know what to think of the man, and his child's face was uncertain with mingled curiosity and doubt. He was new on the paper route; it was still strange to him to be out in the town in the black, queer early morning.

"Yes," the man said. "I took a number of steps to get her back. I went around trying to locate her. I went to Tulsa where she had folks. And to Mobile. I went to every town she had formerly been connected with. Tulsa, Atlanta, Chicago, Cheeshaw, Memphis . . . For the better part of two years I chased around the country trying to lay hold of her."

"But the pair of them had vanished from the face of the earth!" said Leo.

"Don't listen to him," the man said confidentially. "And also just forget those two years. They are not important. What matters is that around the third year a curious thing began to happen to me."

"What?" the boy asked.

The man leaned over and tilted his mug to take a sip of beer. But as he hovered over the mug his nostrils fluttered slightly; he sniffed the staleness of the beer and did not drink. "Love is a curious thing to begin with. At first I thought only of getting her back. It was a kind of mania. But then as time went on I tried to remember her. But do you know what happened?"

"No," the boy said.

"When I laid myself down on a bed and tried to think about her my mind became a blank. I couldn't see her. I would take out her pictures and look. No good. Nothing doing. A blank. Can you imagine it?"

“Say Mac!” Leo called down the counter. “Can you imagine this bozo’s mind a blank!”

Slowly, as though fanning away flies, the man waved his hand. His green eyes were concentrated and fixed on the shallow little face of the paper boy.

“But a sudden piece of glass on the sidewalk. Or a nickel tune in the music box. A shadow on a wall at night. And I would remember. It might happen in a street and I would cry or bang my head against a lamppost. You follow me?”

“A piece of glass . . .” the boy said.

“Anything. I would walk around and I had no power of how and when to remember her. You think you can put up a kind of shield. But remembering don’t come to a man face forward—it corners around sideways. I was at the mercy of everything I saw and heard. Suddenly instead of me combing the countryside to find her she had begun to chase me around in my very soul. *She* chasing *me*, mind you! And in my soul.”

The boy asked finally: “What part of the country were you in then?”

“Ooh,” the man groaned. “I was a sick mortal. It was like smallpox. I confess, Son, that I boozed. I fornicated. I committed any sin that suddenly appealed to me. I am loath to confess it but I will do so. When I recall that period it is all curdled in my mind, it was so terrible.”

The man leaned his head down and tapped his forehead on the counter. For a few seconds he stayed bowed over in this position, the back of his stringy neck covered with orange furze, his hands with their long warped fingers held palm to palm in an attitude of prayer. Then the man straightened himself; he was smiling and suddenly his face was bright and tremulous and old.

“It was in the fifth year that it happened,” he said. “And with it I started my science.”

Leo’s mouth jerked with a pale, quick grin. “Well none of we boys are getting any younger,” he said. Then with sudden anger he balled up a dishcloth he was holding and threw it down hard on the floor. “You draggle-tailed old Romeo!”

“What happened?” the boy asked.

The old man’s voice was high and clear: “Peace,” he answered. “Huh?”

“It is hard to explain scientifically, Son,” he said. “I guess the logical explanation is that she and I had fled around from each other for so long that finally we just got tangled up together and lay down and quit. Peace. A queer and beautiful blankness. It was spring in Portland and the rain came every afternoon. All evening I just stayed there on my bed in the dark. And that is how the science come to me.”

The windows in the streetcar were pale blue with light. The two soldiers paid for their beers and opened the door—one of the soldiers combed his hair and wiped off his muddy puttees before they went outside. The three mill workers bent silently over their breakfasts. Leo’s clock was ticking on the wall.

“It is this. And listen carefully. I meditated on love and reasoned it out. I realized what is wrong with us. Men fall in love for the first time. And what do they fall in love with?”

The boy’s soft mouth was partly open and he did not answer.

“A woman,” the old man said. “Without science, with nothing to go by, they undertake the most dangerous and sacred experiment in God’s green earth. They fall in love with a woman. Is that correct, Son?”

“Yeah,” the boy said faintly.

The old man reached over and grasped the boy by the collar of his leather jacket. He gave him a gentle little shake and his green eyes glazed down unblinking and grave.

“Son, do you know how love should be begun?”

The boy sat small and listening and still. Slowly he shook his head. The old man leaned closer and whispered:

“A tree. A rock. A cloud.”

It was still raining outside in the street: a mild, gray, endless rain. The mill whistle blew for the six o’clock shift and the three spinners paid and went away. There was no one in the café but Leo, the old man, and the little paper boy.

“The weather was like this in Portland,” he said. “At the time my science was begun. I meditated and I started very cautious. I would pick up something from the street and take it home with me. I bought a goldfish and I concentrated on the goldfish and I loved it. I graduated from one thing to another. Day by day I was getting this technique. On the road from Portland to San Diego—”

“Aw shut up!” screamed Leo suddenly. “Shut up! Shut up!”

The old man still held the collar of the boy’s jacket; he was trembling and his face was earnest and bright and wild. “For six years now I have gone around by myself and built up my science. And now I am a master, Son. I can love anything. No longer do I have to think about it even. I see a street full of people and a beautiful light comes in me. I watch a bird in the sky. Or I meet a traveler on the road. Everything, Son. And anybody. All stranger and all loved! Do you realize what a science like mine can mean?”

The boy held himself stiffly, his hands curled tight around the counter edge. Finally he asked: “Did you ever really find that lady?”

“What? What say, Son?”

“I mean,” the boy asked timidly. “Have you fallen in love with a woman again?”

The old man loosened his grasp on the boy’s collar. He turned away and for the first time his green eyes had a vague and scattered look. He lifted the mug from the counter, drank down the yellow beer. His head was shaking slowly from side to side. Then finally he answered: “No, Son. You see that is the last step in my science. I go cautious. And I am not quite ready yet.”

“Well!” said Leo. “Well well well!”

The old man stood in the open doorway. “Remember,” he said. Framed there in the gray damp light of the early morning he looked shrunken and seedy and frail. But his smile was bright. “Remember I love you,” he said with a last nod. And the door closed quietly behind him.

The boy did not speak for a long time. He pulled down the bangs on his forehead and slid his grimy little forefinger around the rim of his empty cup. Then without looking at Leo he finally asked:

“Was he drunk?”

“No,” said Leo shortly.

The boy raised his clear voice higher. “Then was he a dope fiend?”

“No.”

The boy looked up at Leo, and his flat little face was desperate, his voice urgent and shrill. “Was he crazy? Do you think he was a lunatic?” The paper boy’s voice dropped suddenly with doubt. “Leo? Or not?”

But Leo would not answer him. Leo had run a night café for fourteen years, and he held himself to be a critic of craziness. There were town characters and also the transients who roamed in from the night. He knew the manias of all of them. But he did not want to satisfy the questions of the waiting child. He tightened his pale face and was silent.

So the boy pulled down the right flap of his helmet and as he turned to leave he made the only comment that seemed safe to him, the only remark that could not be laughed down and despised:

“He sure has done a lot of traveling.”