

THE YEARS

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THE old man paused when he came to the campus. The season was fall. A raw wind was blowing out of the west. It rattled the dead leaves that hung in tatters from the branches of academic elms and maples. It wrinkled the dead grass and blew through the naked shrubbery. Soon snow would come and the year would die and the new year would bow in.

The old man was trembling, but not because he was cold. The university buildings in the background frightened him. He was terrified of the students strolling along the walk—the long-haired, sloppily attired young men, the long-haired girls in overalls and denims. But he forced himself to go on and he made his old eyes focus upon the faces of the girls. It had cost him his life's savings to make the trip and he was determined not to go back empty-handed.

None of the students seemed to notice him. It was as though he did not exist (in a way he didn't, he supposed). Repeatedly he had to step off the walk to avoid colliding with them. But he was used to such indifference. The young of each generation were invariably arrogant and self-centered. It was only natural that they should be. The world was their apple and they knew it.

The old man began to lose some of his fear. The university buildings were far less formidable in appearance than memory had painted them. Memory was a poor painter at best. It overdrew, exaggerated. It added details that had never existed, left out others that had. And there was yet another consideration. You could never see something the second time in quite the same way you saw it the first, because the part of you that interpreted the initial impression was forever dead.

The old man peered eagerly at the faces of the strolling girls, searching for Elizabeth's. It was her face alone that he wanted to see. He wanted to take its youthful radiance back with him so that the final years of his life might be less bleak—so that some of the loneliness that had descended upon him after the death of his wife might be driven away. Just for a little while. A little while would be enough.

When he finally found her face he was touched to his marrow. So young, he thought. So sweetly beautiful. It surprised him that he could recognize it so readily. Perhaps memory was not as poor a painter as he had thought. His heart pounded and his throat grew tight. The classic reactions, only in his case multiplied by one thousand. His vision dimmed. He found it hard to see. Elizabeth.

She was walking beside a tall young man, talking to him and swinging her books. But the old man did not look at her companion. The moment was too precious to waste. Besides, he was afraid to look. The years ...

The couple grew closer, laughing and talking, warm and secure in the oasis of their youth. Elizabeth wore no hat, no kerchief. Her red-gold hair danced in the wind, broke in evanescent waves along the soft shores of her childlike cheeks.

Her lips were an autumn leaf lying lightly upon the lovely landscape of her face. Her eyes were shards of summer sky. She wore a shapeless gray sweater and paint-daubed dungarees. Her long and lissome legs were hidden from the sun. But memory served him well.

He was crying now. Unabashedly, the way a drunk cries. Elizabeth. Elizabeth, my darling, my dear.

She did not even notice him till she and her companion were almost abreast of him. Then she seemed to feel his gaze and looked into his eyes. She stopped and her face went white. Her companion halted beside her. The old man halted, too.

Color came into Elizabeth's cheeks. Revulsion darkened the azure of her eyes. Her full lips thinned.

"How dare you stare at me like that, you dirty old man!"

Her companion was indignant. Angrily he confronted the old man. "I ought to punch you in the nose!"

The old man was horrified. Why, they hate me, he thought. They look upon me as a leper. I didn't expect them to recognize me—I didn't want them to. But this—dear God, no!

He tried to speak, but there was nothing he could say. He stood there dumbly, staring at the young man's strange and familiar face.

"Dirty old man," Elizabeth said again. She took her companion's arm and the two of them walked away. Helplessly the old man stared after them, knowing that although he would go on living, from that moment on he would be dead.

Why didn't I remember? he wondered. *How could I have forgotten that poor old man?*

He returned on dead legs to the bosquet on the outskirts of the university town where the time-field burned, stepped into its shimmering embrace and sped back through the years that had transmuted him from a tall young man into something unclean. After paying the guard the second half of the agreed-upon bribe and leaving the time station by the rear entrance, he drove out to the cemetery where Elizabeth lay buried. He stood by the grave, in the bitter wind, for a long time. Again and again he read the inscription on the granite marker: B. 2025. IN MEMORY OF MY BELOVED WIFE ...

But Time the Thief had not yet finished. It trephined his skull and cut keep into his memories and extracted the soft summer nights and the sleeping flowers and the misty afternoons. It left only naked fields and tree-denuded hills.

He read the inscription a final time.

"Dirty old woman," he said.