

Those Wonderful Years

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I

LISTENING TO THE great sounds of '63, pouring like fruit from the transistors, the engine on high, pulling me irresistibly toward that simpler and more reasonable time of my life. *All is love/stars above/know the tune/I lost so soon*, Cosmo and the Pearls, got it together in '61, got the sounds right the following year, hit it to the top with MOONSONG in that golden year of the assassination and then it all fell apart as so many lives have fallen apart during the 60's: drugs, divorce, abandonment, flight, hatred and Cosmo himself died in a fountain in Las Vegas or was it a pool in '69, must have been around that time, maybe a year later. Does not matter. Old Cosmo was finished by the mid-sixties, the whole sound that he exemplified, the tender lyric which he probed overtaken by harsher jolts but ramming the Buick at high speed down the expressway it is '63 again and Cosmo is young, all of us are younger and I let the apples and oranges of that music bounce over me, humming only a little at the rhythm parts. On the expressway I whirl past other aspects of the past: cars from the early sixties assault me from oncoming lanes, yield to me on the right and in the chrome, the strange, bent archaic shapes of the 60's I know my history again and again revealed. MOONSONG ends on a diminished seventh or maybe it is merely a hanging chord (I know absolutely nothing about music other than how it affects me) and the radio is still, then there is a commercial for the Wonder Wheel chain of superior foodstuffs in the metropolitan area and without transition from '66 comes the sound of the TROOPERS singing *Darkness of Love*. '66 was a good year too although not as critical in many aspects as '63, still it is a period worth remembering. The TROOPERS help me remember. Locked to the sound, a little pivot wheel of memory I soar through all the spaces of the Expressway and into the impenetrable but to-be-known future. The vaginal canal of the future, parting its thick lips for me gently as I snaffle along in pursuit of my destiny.

II

Outside the building containing Elvira's single-girl's apartment I wedge the car into a space, remove the key (cutting off Tom and the Four Gees in SWEET DELIGHT, a pure pear plucked from the tree of '54, a little before my time but no matter) and sit behind the wheel for a moment,

meditating. I am a little early for our date which happens quite often but then too I am in no hurry to see Elvira, preferring always to cherish the memories gathered through our times together than to go into the difficult business of creating new ones. (The past is fixed, the present incomprehensible, the future without control; I must remember this.) Already Elvira is an artifact to me; her breasts already seem to have the glaze of embalming fluid, her mouth tastes like mucilage, it is not Elvira which I am kissing so much as the Elvira which I will remember. It is difficult to explain this. It is difficult to explain this but I will try: Elvira and our relationship are to be a golden oldie of the early eighties. Thinking this and other muddled thoughts I step briskly from the car, move through stones and into the lobby of the building where I see she has already come down to wait for me, a handbag slung over her shoulder, a tight and aggressive expression across her eyes and cheeks. I know that I will have to suppress memories of Elvira's aggression in order to be truly moved by her years hence. "We must make a decision," she says, grasping my arm between wrist and elbow, in the vicinity of the ulna, and applying modest pressure. "We cannot go on this way. Tonight we must resolve our relationship."

"I am not prepared to make any decisions, Elvira," I say, submitting to her grasp. In ordinary life I am a claims examiner for a large insurance company which has, partly because of me, one of the lowest payout rates in the business, a statistic which they do not advertise. In that capacity I must do a great deal of writing and checking but fortunately this is with the *right* hand and not with the left which feels Elvira's pressure. Resultantly I do not protest at being greeted by her in this way but try to take a lower key. Cosmo and the Pearls, according to the newspaper stories at the time of their success, are supposed to have met on an unemployment line in the Bronx, New York, but I do not believe this. I discard most public biographies as lies and, trusting nothing, believe that the truth can only be found in what Cosmo does to me. A little snatch of MOONSONG buzzes through my head like an indolent fly and I do not slap at it; I listen. *Lost so soon/all I loved/like the stars above*. Above, above. "We will have to take it as it comes, Elvira," I add liking the sound of her name. *El-vi-ra*; it carries within it the characteristic sound of the seventies, posturing and yet somehow childlike, which will surely characterize this decade in the years which lie ahead.

"No," she says, tightening her grasp on the arm, leading me toward the one voluminous couch which in shades of orange and yellow dominates

the lobby of her residence, "it cannot be. You've equivocated too much. I can't waste these important years of my life on someone who doesn't even know his identity!" She raises a fist to her face, dabs at her eyes. "And besides that, I sometimes think that you don't even really want me," she says, "that when you're with me you're already thinking about how you'll remember me. I tell you, this is no way for a relationship to function. I have a great deal to offer you but it must be within the terms of the present. You've got to be here with me now."

"You don't understand, Elvira," I say, guiding her to the couch, gently easing down and at last her terrible grip eases and I run a fervid hand over my joint, relocating the source of circulation and bringing the blood to clear surge yet again. "The past is fixed, the present incomprehensible, the future without control. If we repudiate our past, well then, what are we? And if we do not cherish the past, that only immutable part of us, well, then, Elvira, what will we make of the present and the future?" but even as I am saying this I feel the hopelessness of the argument overwhelm me. Her little face is set tight, her little breasts jut with argumentation; if I touched her body my hands would recoil, I am sure, with a metallic spang. She does not understand. Slowly I disengage myself from her, stand, walk back through the lobby, gesticulating.

"I'm not ready to make a commitment," I say, "how can we know where we're going until we know where we've been? You've got to understand history, otherwise the sheer accumulation of data overwhelms," and so on and so forth, now I am beyond the doors themselves, the cool, dense glaze of air hitting me, ruffling my cheeks and still Elvira sits on the couch, unmoving, her hands closeting her pocketbook, her eyes fixed straight ahead. She seems to be speaking but I cannot hear a word which she is saying. She mouthes polysyllables, I concentrate, but all is beyond me. "I'm sorry," I say, "truly sorry," and walking back to the car feel a fine, true instant of regret; I could come back to her, vault against her on the couch and confess my sin: that dark, unspeakable stain which radiates from the heart through all the tendrils of the body, that stain which begins in loss and ends in acceptance but what good would it do me? Or her? No, our relationship is obviously finished, I restore myself to the seat cushions of my car, hurriedly start the motor and drive away, the radio, caught in the gears, booming.

The Four Knights, '59, THE TEARS OF YOUR HEART. '59 was a year of great transition just as this has been; everything hurt in '59, I let the

music run over me like blood and for an instant it is that year again and I twenty years old trying to come to terms with matters which I do not even remember. In retrospect I glimpse Elvira; she remains on the couch, she is sunk on the couch like stone: already a perfect artifact nestled in mucilage, on display for the *tourista* of recollection which in little fibers I shall send on their way in all of the years to come.

III

A man with all of his limbs torn off by an automobile accident was denied compensation when I was able to establish through delicate interviewing and piecing together of evidence that the accident was self-caused and therefore not covered under the terms of his particular policy. For this I was given praise by my supervisor and a small bonus but I cannot get over an unreasonable feeling of guilt even now as if somehow it would have been better if I had falsified the interviews and documentation and allowed the quadruple amputee to slip a false claim through the company.

IV

A Festival of Revival is held at the large municipal auditorium which I attend. All of the great performers of the '50's excepting only those who have died or have gone on to better things are there: the Chryslers and the Flyers, Lightnin' Joe and the Band, the Little Black Saddle, Tony Annunzio. Seated in the third row orchestra, surrounded by stolid citizenry who have carried forward the menacing expressions of their youth and little else, I am stunned again by the energy of that decade, its fervor and wildness, the way in which it anticipated and sowed the seeds of so much else to come, but I am also humbled because in a critical way I have come such a short distance from that time; my responses to the Little Black Saddle are as they were when I was thirteen, no difference, this is no Festival of Changes. Of course the '60's were even more significant than the '50's, I must remember that, and that is to take nothing away from the '40's which prefigured both of these decades to say nothing of the '70's, fast receding from us and likely to be remembered as the most moving decade of all. Tony Annunzio takes off his jacket and tie to sing his final numbers, just as he did in the old days, and I am shocked at how round he has become although, of course, my memories of him are unreliable. His great hit, **BROKEN CHAIN OF CIRCUMSTANCE**, is the finale of the show and while standing in tribute with the rest of the audience I find myself

thinking of Elvira. If only we had been able to share this moment together! but she declined my invitation, of course, hanging up the phone on me nastily but not before saying that in her opinion my unusual attachment to certain elements of the past only showed a childish inability to face the future.

How could I have explained to her that the past *is* the future? and what difference would it have made, the spotlight on Tony Annunzio winking off, the houselights surging on and all five thousand of us rising as one to cheer the voice of his generation, and Tony, standing on the bare stage to take those cheers with the same grace and offhandedness with which, more than twenty years ago, he bowed to us at the old Orpheus, now the *new* Orpheus and also the site of many great revivals?

V

Coming home I find Elvira lying naked in my bed, the covers below her waist, her eyes bright with malice. Try as she may, it seems that she simply cannot leave me alone. I know the feeling well although I have never had it with Elvira. "I'll tell you about the nostalgia craze and your golden oldies," she says with a mad wink, "I've been thinking this through carefully and now I'll tell you the truth." She is thirty-one years old, attractive but not exceptional and from the beginning of our relationship she might have regarded me as her last chance. This has led to much bitterness in the breakup.

"Let me tell you what I think it is," she says, her voice wavering, her little breasts shaking, the nipples pursed as if for a kiss, "the nostalgia craze, this constant digging up of the past for people like you who can't face the future; it's all a government plot. It comes from the capital. They're manipulating everything by digging up the past so that people aren't able to bridge the distance between the present and the future. They think that they can keep people from seeing what's really been *done* to them if they feed them the past like a drug to keep on reminding them of what they used to be. They're going to keep us all locked in the past so that we won't really ever see what's going on *now* but I won't fall for it and I won't let *you* fall for it." She leaps from the bed, breasts shaking, and seizes me around the neck, gathers me in. "Please," she says, "you must face your life, must face what you've become and where you're going, you can't live in the past," moving her body like a lever against mine, bone to bone, flesh to flesh and for all of my embarrassment and rage it is difficult

to suppress desire—Elvira and I always did have a good sexual relationship, I have saved certain memories of it and bring them out now one by one in privacy to masturbate—but suppress desire I do, hurling her from me.

"Don't you ever say that," I say to her, "the past is immutable, the past is strong and beautiful, the past is the only thing we have ever known," and resist as she may, I convey her shrieking from bed to wall to door, pausing to guide her fallen clothes with little kicks toward the exit. At the door, I pull the knob with enormous speed and strength and then throw her, weeping, into the hall, kicking her clothes after her. "Get out of here, get out of my life, get out of my way," I say to her and not bothering to gauge the effect which these words have had, slam the door closed and lock it, turn my back to it trembling and then stride toward the radio.

Turning it on to the station of the golden forever I hope that I will find some music of the '60's which will galvanize me with energy and help me find emotional equivalent in events of the past but something is wrong with the radio; the dial is somehow set toward the only station in the area which plays current hits and in palpitation and dread I find myself listening to the Number Two maker on the charts, something about *Meanies and Beanies*, the tune confusingly disordered to me.

It is too much. I simply cannot cope with it; not this on top of Elvira. I sit on the bed wracked with sobs for a while, whimpering like a dog against the strange music and then in the hall I hear the softest and strangest of noises, as if Elvira had somehow found a key and was insinuating herself within... and then as the music tumbles cheerfully on I have a vision and the vision is that not only she but the quadruple amputee who I have serviced have somehow managed to get into my room.

They sing along with the radio, I watch them, the vision turns and I shriek like wind out the other side of that tube. From a far distance then I hear *Meanies and Beanies* for what it always was; an artifact of that forgotten decade, as the nineties overtake me in sound and the amputee and Elvira roll against one another on the floor, their defeat accomplished as the smooth, dense wax of the embalmer pours from the tubes of the radio to cover them like lava on volcanic ash.

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