

The Man at Mandeville

We had not quite reached the ^{corner street light} street corner lamplight when Bob decided to go back.

"You can freeze your tail off if you want to. I came out here to study psychology, not to take walks at one o'clock in the morning."

I don't remember what I said to him if I said anything at all; I just stood there and watched him walk back to the cabin, ^{which was the only} ~~the~~ only house on the lake shore with the lights still on. As Bob opened the door I could hear for an instant the sound of Dave's record player coming loud and distorted, even over the wind. Then Bob closed the door behind him and I was left there standing in the street with a strange feeling of isolation within me. It was strange because though I felt isolated, I did not feel alone. Perhaps it was the wind. It was very windy tonight. The Norther swept off the lake shaking thousands of pieces of ice from the branches of the trees that stood along the shore line, shattering ^{it} ~~them~~ like fine glass as the pieces fell into the street. As soon as the ice was broken off more ice was quickly formed from the steam rising from the lake. It was almost unreal as if I were looking at a forest of swaying, bending glass.

The shoreline road turned up ahead. Just beyond the bend lay a dock and a small sheltered wharf often used for picnics on Spring and Summer weekends. Dave told me that it was seldom used by anybody.

else but yachters who on weekends raced across the lake from the Southern Yacht Club located on the New Orleans side. It was empty now and out in the water beyond the narrow cement jetty two mastless, canvas wrapped sailboats bobbed forlornly against the wind. After the bend the road ran straight for a mile or so then turned past the asylum and ran for two miles or more until it reached the old town of Mandeville. I felt suddenly superior as I stood there on the corner, alone, under the swinging lamplight. I guess I was also a kind of a masochist for the cold must have reached the predicted sixteen degrees by now. I gave a condescending snort when I thought about my two buddies, Bob Lightfoot and Dave Moore, sheltered away in the warmth of Dave's cabin. I was amused ^{too} ~~though~~ because I could just imagine Lightfoot trying to study with Dave's record player going as loud as it was and Dave jumping up and down making an ass out of himself. Dave was drunk. I guess I had known that he would be drunk the minute he came into my room back at school. It was just before dinner time and I was taking my usual nap. I felt his hand shaking me.

"Hey, Stu, get up."

I opened my eyes and looked up at him. He was standing there with his airline traveling bag in his hand.

"What do you want?" I said, annoyed.

"Come on, let's go out to the lake and study and spend the night. We can't study around this noisy pit. We'll get some of that chicken to go and some beer and we'll go out to my place where it's quiet so nobody will bother us. We'll get this stuff down pat in no time."

"Don't feed me that, Dave. You know what happened the last time we went out there to study."

"Awe that stuff's all over with. This is a final we got to face, not just one of those little weekly jobs. Come on, let's go. We'll be back Sunday night."

I was about to say no when Bob Lightfoot, my roommate, came in from his chemistry lab. All three of us were in the same psychology class and were holding about the same low average. When Bob promptly

Dave -
Fiction, just
HA, HA -

accepted Dave's invitation, I all too quickly followed suit. I threw some of my things into Lightfoot's duffle bag (I had to in order to get all of our stuff into Dave's Corvette) and thirty minutes later the lights of Mandeville blinked through the darkness as we neared the end of the cause way. *skipped again*

There was a bird under the tamplight. It was a little yellow bird about five inches long squatted, shivering in the shadow of a log which lay in the gutter by the edge of the road. It must have been there all ~~of~~ the time and I had just noticed it. It seemed funny that he was not looking at me though I stood only a few inches away from him. The bird must have come out of the darkness to the light *in hopes* ~~that~~ where there was light there would also be warmth. I bent over to pick the bird up and startled it. Its flight was little more than feeble effort and more blown by the fierce winds than flying on its own effort it rose, circled in the light and was gone into the darkness. I waited for it to come back but it never did show again.

" Now let me see," I said to myself, speaking loudly into the wind, " the intelligence quotient tests are not valid past the age of thirteen; *they are* ~~that~~ is computed by taking the chronological age and dividing that into the mental age, then multiplying that by a hundred; IQ's ranging from 0 to 25 are classified as idiots, twentyfive to fifty are classified as " I really didn't know why I was saying all this to myself. The stuff that I could spout off out loud I *already know*. *Besides all this* ~~to be continued~~ was the simple stuff anyway, the stuff that I should have known on the earlier tests . . . and didn't. It kind of gave me courage to say it, I guess. I was standing about halfway out on the cement jetty and was getting kind of nervous because there was more ice out here where the mist from the waves had frozen the surface slick and smooth. It was only about three feet from the top of the jetty to the waves below and even then the water was only about waist deep — but that was cold water, water that would shock the breath out of you if you were to fall into it. I had stopped because I knew that it was stupid to continue. Now I had even wondered why I had come out here in the first place. I guess that that feeling of superiority had gone to my head and my self-recognized independence had become rather frightening. I wanted to turn back, but turning back would be rather difficult on the slippery, only one foot wide ~~jetty~~ jetty. In negotiating the maneuver of turning around, I got one of those little thoughts that always prick your mind, for the

worst I suppose. I wondered, if I were to fall into the water if I would freeze to death before I could get ~~back~~ to the shore which now lay about fifty yards ahead of me. I started to think of the Titanic.

Inspite of the wind and the ice and those little thoughts that seemed determined to land me in the lake, I made it back to the shore quite safely. As my shadow passed ~~under~~ under the dock light I saw hundreds of little crabs ~~dodge~~ off from the shore and scuttle back into darker, ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ warmer waters. I was glad that I had come off the jetty because I had a new reason, the wind was picking up. ~~xxxx~~ I could see the white tops of the waves reflecting in the dock light as they swept over the far end of the jetty. I could hear the metal street light across the street ~~banging into~~ the telephone pole. The cable had broken and as the light swung around so did the shadows of trees, and telephone poles and the columns of the wharf shelter under which I now stood. The shadows swung and swayed, shortened then elongated themselves like a surrealist landscape or a drunken nightmare. The waves licked up over the edge of the wharf, splashing ice upon the cement whose greyness became one with the mist, merging into one translucent curtain. I was beginning to doubt the truth about those zip in lined raincoats. I pulled mine closer about me. Out in the lake the red jetty light and the red buoy lights were red halos in the fog. It was bitterly cold.

At first I thought it was the wind blowing through the rafters of the wharf shelter. There was something different about it though and I turned around to see what it was. I saw nothing but the empty platform and the pile of picnic tables that had been stored in a corner. ^{to return} until the Spring yachting season. A minute or so later, after I had stopped thinking about it, I heard the noise again. This time it was louder. It was a man's voice, singing. The sound came slow and sad, more like sobbing then singing, the sound muted by the wind. Then I ~~xxxx~~ could make out the words, then the melody of the song. It was a hymn that I had heard many times.

A mighty fortress is our God

Over and over again, the same words, the same tune, the same sad slow voice. I had turned again and I could still see nothing. I didn't say anything; I just stood there looking. Then I saw him. The streetlight made a hundred and eighty degree swing about the telephone pole and for an instant the swinging light flashed upon his white hair. Then in

the darkness I could see his silhouette hunched over on one of the picnic benches. He was not looking at me. He just sat there with his head turned out toward the water and his mouth moving slowly to the words of his hymn. The light flashed upon him again and he jerked his head around into the light. He had a long beard. There was fear in his eyes. Then he stood up. I watched him but said nothing and made no move. I wasn't even sure if he knew that I was standing there. It was hard to hear him because of the wind which kept picking up, then dwindling, then picking up again. He had stopped singing and was talking now. I could not hear what he was saying. Then he looked at me. There was no surprise on his face so he must have known that I was there. He stopped talking and started to walk to me. I must of been afraid because I stepped back a step or two. This stopped him, though he was still looking at me. He was a bigger man then he had at first looked, infact he might have been six and a half feet tall. I could see him well now; he had crossed the distance between us in just a few strides. There was no fear in his look, nor malace nor even scrutiny. He seemed to be looking through me out toward the jetty light. Then he turned his head and looked down into the mist below, and started singing his hymn again.

A mighty fortress is our God

It was then that I noticed that he had no coat on nor any warm wrap of any kind. He was standing there in this cold, wearing nothing more than a wrinkled pair of grey cotton pants and a grey cotton shirt with the shirt tail cut hort and sqaure so that it hung out. He stopped singing and started talking again. This time his words were louder as if he were addressing them to me. I didn't know what he was talking about.

" There were five of them. God blessed us with five and I thanked him for them, oh Lord how I thanked you. I kept to my promise, laord. When you sent the fifth baby I knowed I had your ire up, I knowed it lord and I kept my promise and I prayed that you would take your curse of that baby. "

He looked at me. There was pain in his eyes.

" Five of the prettiest little girls that you ever done seen in your life. "

He did let go, but it wasn't because I asked him. I heard the sound too and we both looked down the road toward town where the noise was coming from. It was a sound like a factory whistle or a prison siren. Some of the house lights along the lake shore lit up.

"What's that I said."

"It's the asylum siren. Ain't you ever heard that before; It goes off all the time."

Suddenly the far off gleam of car lights struck us as the automobile turn from a side road and came racing toward us. It was still far off but I could see the red light flashing on top of the car. I forgot about the man who did not try to stop me this time. I hurried out into the street and stood under the streetlight. Then I heard the door to Dave's cabin slam and I could see Bob running towards me down the street yelling something.

"Stu! Somebody's escaped from that nut house. It's just over the radio!"

"The car was less than a block away. I could see the brake lights flash on. I yelled to Bob.

"He's over there under that wharf shelter."

Bob stopped and ~~but~~ we both turned and looked toward the shelter. Gravel flew as the car behind us ~~stopped~~ came skidding to a stop. There was ~~nobody~~ nobody under the shelter, nothing but the cold mists. The police jumped out of the car and came hurrying toward us saying something. Bob was talking too. Everybody was making noise. It was then, though, that I could have sworn that I heard a splash.

THE END