

What of Memories?

Above the man, where the porch roof rested on the corner post, a strand of cobweb twisted in the breeze. From his chair he watched the thread glint then disappear, glint then disappear, playing in the sun like the silver tail of a kite. The breeze brought up the smells of sage from the bushes growing either side of the staircase, and of distant rain he knew came from the mountain.

The air stirred the hairs on his bare arms.

I might die tonight, he thought, and it will be raining.

He hoped he would be awake when he died so he wouldn't miss that last sound, that pleasant, soothing, provocative, ancient drumming. He supposed he wouldn't miss rain after he was dead, but he missed it now in anticipation.

He ran the knuckles of one hand across his mouth and remembered a friend from third grade, Veronica, whose coquettish face and dark ringlets were those of a child star from a silent movie. He had chased her across the playground, and when he caught her, she kicked his shins. "It's because she likes you," his mother said when he came home sobbing. As an eight year old he couldn't understand such a thing, but now he smiled at the thought.

Eight, so that made it how long ... eighty-six years ago?

He lifted a cup from a side table. The coffee, nearly too hot to drink a moment ago, had cooled. He took a swallow and choked. Down the wrong pipe. He choked a lot lately. When he caught his breath he wiped his mouth again and looked into the trees, mostly pines: jefferys and ponderosas, a few lodgepole, some western whites. Now in autumn they smelled like Christmas, but in summer they carried a different scent, that

particular odor of heat, of dry needles and earth, of tramping through the woods. After the adventures of youth he'd become a forester, caring for the land, and had smelled all the seasons. The fecund spring, the parchment fall. His had been a good life; not much money, but happiness and solitude. Solitude at least when he wanted it, and Mutchie when he didn't. They never married but she was always there, not needing him but accepting him for what he was, wanting him as he wanted her. He supposed it was Mutchie he missed most of all, though there was so much to miss. It seemed that was his life now, missing the past.

He thought again of the different pine smells, the cool and the hot. The notion of cool reminded him of milk sliding down his throat, of splashing in the creek behind his parent's house, of sledding in winter. Hot was fresh asphalt, baking bread, the top of a rock outcropping in summer. He could feel each sensation as if he were living the memory.

The breeze stopped and he heard a woodpecker banging against a tree. Now the image of a boat came to mind; not the boat itself so much as the sounds it made, lolling in the swells. People say a boat creaks, but this was more a knocking, wood on wood like the woodpecker against the tree. They'd been anchored off La Digue in the Seychelles. From his bunk he could hear the rest of the crew ashore trading for copra, but he'd been sick and stayed below. His head pounded as if his brain were trying to escape its skull. His stomach rolled. He recalled the slap of waves, the slow rocking, the cloying smell of diesel, the punishing heat. But then in late afternoon he'd been well enough to go on deck and see the gauzy sky, clouds without edges.

He took another drink of cold coffee.

He should probably eat something too. Shadows that had stretched to the west when he came to the porch were gone now. It would be noon or thereabout, but he wasn't hungry. *Should I eat to stay alive?* he wondered. What was the point? If they found him dead in the morning, would someone say, "At least he had some soup. There it is on the stove." He'd be dead whether full belly or empty. And who would find him? Visitors came so infrequently it could be days before someone arrived. He was sorry to put them through the experience, but what was the choice? Die where he didn't want to be, for their convenience?

His mother hadn't done that, been convenient. He'd found her pitched into the rose bed, where he stroked her slack cheek, held her cooling hand until the ambulance arrived. He wondered if, when it was his time, would he see her again? Would he see all those who'd gone before? He doubted it. When you're dead, you're dead. The fire is out, the ashes scattered in the wind.

But if that was true, what of these memories? Where do they go? What of the twisting cobweb and the rain? What of the woodpecker and the boat, his mother, the smells of cooking, of laundry and grass? What of love? Is it all simply gone, or is *that* what remains after death? Not a soul but a lifetime of recollections saved like reels of film. Is that heaven? An archive? A library?

He reached once more for the coffee but found the cup empty. The man realized he'd been sitting for hours, thinking of the past, preparing to let it go. He put his hands on the arms of the wicker chair and pushed himself standing. The chair's broken fibers bit into his palms, another sensation. Another memory.

The first drops of rain splashed in the dirt beyond the porch; little mortars leaving little craters. And then more rain, washing the craters away. And more still until the yard was awash and rivulets poured from the corrugated roof.

Rain pounded the tin so that if there were someone to talk with, they'd both have to shout. But there was no one. The man stretched, shuffled to the screen door, pulled it open, and decided to lie down awhile.