

Arthur Grover: A Portrait of Melancholy

I moved to Manhattan six years ago for college, and I stayed after graduation to take a job in advertising. Every day, I rode the packed subway downtown, wearing a monochromatic wool suit, feeling perpetually tired and annoyed. In these moments, hours, days, I missed my family, who still lived off of Lake Huron, in the relative tranquility at the heart of the Midwest. I don't know why it took me so long to ask my father, during one of our weekly phone calls, when the next family get-together was.

“Fourth of July, I suppose. Why?”

“I think I'll fly in.”

He and my mother made the trek to Manhattan once a year, and on each trip they complained of sore feet, or about not being able to sleep because of the constant hustle and bustle of the restless city. “You ought to come see us sometime,” my mother would say with long drawn out vowels. I always said I would.

I caught an evening flight on the Friday before the holiday into Detroit-Metro. My parents picked me up in their old Chevy Impala, white with tan interior. It hadn't aged a day since they'd used it to drop me off at the airport six years earlier. My father prided himself on his ability to care for things. He was stoic, almost impersonal, as if I hadn't been gone that long. My mother looked up at me with tear-encased eyes.

“You look so handsome, Adam,” she said. She always told me so, like she was noticing a profound change in my appearance, despite the fact that I was very much the same young man she'd sent off to school and seen once a year since. I sat in the backseat of the car, looking over their shoulders at the empty plains surrounding the airport. The

flat lands gave way to row after row of identical tan houses and their sun-faded roofs. On the highway, we passed a dust ensconced black sedan. Someone had stenciled “wash me” into the dust with a finger. The roads were mostly empty, in sharp contrast with the pandemonium of borough traffic in New York, that moved without cease from the Jersey turnpike all the way through to the east end of Brooklyn.

“Where are we doing fireworks this year?” I felt weird saying the word we, as if my distance and period of isolation from these people (my family though they may have been) had invalidated my membership in their ranks. There was a silence in the car, suggesting this same thought was passing through each of my parents’ minds.

“It’s at your Aunt Heidi’s house,” my mother said cheerily, over-compensating for her delayed response. It seemed like she wasn’t talking about someone who was, in fact, her sister. While my father drove he held my mother’s hand, rubbing her knuckles with his thumb, letting go only to turn the wheel.

At my parents’ house I took my old bedroom. It was unchanged from how I’d left it. This familiarity didn’t provide me comfort, but a solemn sense that I’d lost something from the more innocent days of my youth, when I spent countless hours over my studies at the cheap plywood desk which was still flush with the molding pieces around the window pane; on the dresser by the wall opposite the door was a row of baseball trophies, spelling bee championships, commemorative medals from elementary science fairs, and a framed picture taken on a third grade field trip. All of these things seemed like they belonged to someone else. The whole room had the same dust heavy air common to rooms where someone has died and their possessions have been left untouched in a superstitious attempt to preserve some semblance of their memory. In a way, sitting on

my childhood bed, on top of the old blue comforter that had covered the mattress since I was about twelve, I felt like I was intruding upon the memory of a person who had been lost many years before. The thought unnerved me, and I spent a restless evening under my blanket, which was no longer my blanket, listening to the now alien bedlam of crickets outside.

That year, Independence Day fell on a Monday, giving everyone a three-day weekend. My aunt lived six houses down from my parents, in the same three-bedroom ranch they'd been raised in as kids. The family got together on the second, the Saturday before the holiday, to preserve the remainder of the weekend for cleaning up debris from fallen fireworks, and gathering all the empty cans, paper plates, and off-brand disposable cups littered around the yard.

Aunt Heidi's house is positioned oddly in its lot. The front yard is a tiny sliver dominated by rhododendron, chrysanthemums, and a smallish wisteria that lets off a purple glow when the sun prisms through it. The backyard is a mixture of Bermuda grass and sandy washout, like those found behind beach houses in the northeast. The pool dominates the yard and is flanked by Adirondack chairs, patio tables, and horseshoe pits. A mostly unused wooden and plastic play place and swing-set sits at the far back of the yard, where woods separate my aunt and uncle's land from that of the neighbors behind them, who I haven't seen since early childhood. The property is large enough to accommodate our expansive family, which is comprised of my grandmother's six children, all of whom, except my mother, have two children each, several of which now have their own kids.

The family's youngest children ran about shouting at a near animal pitch, jumping into and out of my aunt's Olympic pool with an admirable sense of abandon. Half drunk adults loitered around bocce balls arguing about earned run averages, or sat hidden in the shade of the awning-covered porch. I sat on the steps of my aunt's pool with my feet in the water, thinking about the evening, tired and a bit sore from trying to sleep in the unfamiliar bed of my childhood. A few of the children, my second cousins, none older than eight or nine, were in the pool smacking a beach ball over the top of some floating rings.

"Adam, get on our team," one of the kids, whose name I'd forgotten said.

"Didn't bring my trunks with me. I'll just watch."

After a few minutes I stopped watching, dried off my legs and feet and put my shoes back on, and headed inside my aunt's house to find something to eat. There were plastic trays filled with all manner of comfort food, from barbeque and fried chicken, potato salad, homemade macaroni and cheese, baked beans with chunks of spicy pork, steamed corncobs, and bowl after bowl of fruit salad, which people seem to bring when they can't be bothered to make anything. While I bit into a chicken leg, my grandmother pinched my cheeks, rubbed my head, and began asking me questions about my life in New York with the same voice she would use to entertain her great-grandchildren out in the pool. After a few minutes, she seemed to reach a natural terminus in her questioning, and settled back down onto the couch next to me in silence over her plate of potato salad and strawberries.

I looked out my aunt's large bay window across the room. It was then that I saw Grover's house across the street up for sale. Me and the other kids on the block would

make up stories about Grover, everything from being a top-secret spy with something like the Batcave under his house, to a murderer with hundreds of victims buried in the backyard. All we knew for sure about him was that he lived with his mother, caring for her into her old age, and when she died, when I was about twelve or thirteen, he continued to live in the house alone. From time to time my Aunt Heidi's husband Gary would cross the street and invite him over to one of our family functions. And sometimes, though it was seldom, he would join us. Grover was a little old retiree in his late sixties or early seventies—I was never sure. He would stand awkwardly by the men at the horseshoe pits or by the bocce balls with his skinny fingers wrapped around a beer bottle that he didn't drink from, or he would sit with a plate of barely eaten food under the awning listening to the small talk. I found him a curious study. He had spotted hands he placed flat upon the table or on his knees when he sat down. His skin tone was pale, the kind of ghost whiteness that can only come from hermitage. He still had a full head of hair, but it was silver and looked as brittle as gossamer. There was a smallness about his body, not just from his excessive hunching, but in his general demeanor—he had an inward quality, like he was trying to constrict himself into the smallest possible space, so that he might pass through this world with the least disturbance to the things around him. He wore clothes that suggested both a sense of personal upkeep and of forfeiture: muted, beige trousers, white and gray checkered shirts, Velcro orthopedic shoes. His whole face was made smaller by giant spectacles.

Grover's quietness gave off the impression that he was not friendly, but his denture filled smile was warm and welcoming. After a few hours of mingling with the family, he'd politely say bye to everyone, and he'd shuffle back across the street carrying

a wrapped paper plate of leftovers. And once his door shut we wouldn't see him again until another invitation to another family event brought him out.

“Grover is selling his house?” I asked no one in particular.

“Grover?” Uncle Gary piped up. “Hell, Art Grover died two...maybe three years ago.” He said it and went back to his plate of beans and chicken; a simply stated fact that, to him, contained no weighty connotations and considerations. It shouldn't have meant anything to me either, since I'd never had as much as a single conversation with the man, and had only seen him outside the frame of his darkened windows a handful of times in my whole life, but I felt profoundly touched, like much more than an obscure stranger's coming and going from the world were being discussed.

“How'd he die?” I asked over the clatter of forks and knives.

“What?” My grandmother said.

“Mr. Grover. How did he die Uncle Gary?”

“What do you mean?” Uncle Gary asked. He looked at me like I'd just asked something he didn't comprehend and he was trying to work out the meaning in his mind. “He just died. He was an old man.” Again, he returned to his plate. I stared out the window at Grover's yard, at the yellow “For Sale” sign.

“Did you ever go inside, Uncle Gary?” But my uncle wasn't in the room anymore. The chair he'd been sitting in was empty. I asked my grandmother.

“Maybe. I don't remember frankly.”

“What was it like?” I didn't really know what I was asking nor why I was asking it. She looked at me like she hadn't heard me, so I let the question pass. I got up after a few minutes to head back to the backyard, but changed my mind after throwing my paper

plate away and made for the front porch. There were two Adirondack chairs there, angled slightly toward one another. My aunt and uncle would sit there on cool evenings, surveying their holdings with silent pride, watching the street with the detached ambivalence natural to longtime members of a generally peaceful and unchanging community. So I sat down to do the same, only I was not detached or ambivalent, I was acutely fixated on the house across the street. As I thought about it, the house and its former occupant seemed to reassert itself in my memories, changing from an ignored thing in the background to a vital piece of my recollections.

Of course, that house had always been there. The backyard was hidden from view by an old, decaying privacy fence. The only thing visible over its edge was a Weeping Willow, which drooped down forlornly, with some of its leafy mass gently resting on the roof shingles. The house's gutters dipped and bowed in certain spots, heavy with decades of dead leaves, but somehow still standing, in defiance of gravity and the practical realities that forced all of Grover's neighbors to yearly climb shaky ladders and empty theirs out. The brickwork and the vinyl siding had a jaundiced look, but overall the home endured. It was a decently large house, far bigger than Grover and his aging mother would have required: counting the windows, it seemed like the place was capable of accommodating a family of four or five, with enough room left over for the sort of familial comforts, such as pet ownership, that actually bind people of blood together. The grass had been cut, presumably by the city, with a surgical precision that it had never seen in my lifetime—Grover had always paid whatever youth was dragging a lawn mower up and down the street, who would leave raggedy looking weeds to frame his porch and driveway until season changes did away with them.

My father came out to the front porch. He walked slower than I remembered. He was getting old. This realization must have visibly disturbed me, because he said, “oh, I’m alright,” before sitting down with a sigh, as if he could no longer effectively carry his own heft with his own legs. He tilted the chair so that our gazes both angled toward Grover’s house.

“When they found him, they said they had no idea how long he’d been gone.”

“It’s hard to imagine.” I said.

“You’re young yet, Adam. You’re not supposed to be able to imagine what it’s like to die.”

“Not just that. But dying that alone, with no one to find you, or notice you’re not around anymore. It’s a terrible, terrible thought.”

“There’s not much you can do about how you go. Or when you go. Art Grover died as he lived—quietly. Alone. I think that’s a bit sad myself, and as bad as it is to say, I am glad it wasn’t me that had to go that way. I think about that sometimes—it makes me feel grateful for your mother, grateful for you.”

“But I’m not around at all. I don’t feel like I even belong here anymore.”

“Son, this is your home. You’ll always belong here.” Out of the corner of my eye I could see him looking across the yard at Grover’s house. I wondered what he was thinking about, just like I did as a kid in the backseat of whatever old car we were in, driving to somewhere, anywhere, on a road trip to see one of the millions of things there is to see, not because we wanted to see them (what is there really to gain from seeing anything in life that one could easily see in a picture), but because the seeing of those things somehow made us more than individuals occupying a shared space, it made us a

family. Maybe that's what my father was thinking about too, in his way, when the miles and miles of empty highway between us and our destinations bled away, and the car kept going into the night, its high-beams smashing through the nebulous dark that marked the vast stretches of America's empty parts; I remembered, for some reason, as we sat on Aunt Heidi's porch, a mostly silent trip to Texas, and my father interrupting the quiet to point out the visible curvature of the earth along the plains, which were vacant save for out-of-use oil wells silhouetted against the orange-blue horizon like iron stick-figures; I remembered a trip up north when he actually let me drive, and how he gripped the frame of the door with panic as I rounded a bend with a bit too much speed, and I wondered then, as I did when it happened, if he was saying a prayer to himself, urging whatever higher power he had faith in to watch over him and his loved ones. Then it occurred to me that Arthur Grover never got to take my father's place in the cyclical order of human life, that he had never pointed anything out to a son of his own, or taken him to a ball game, or taught him to shave, or how to grind the gears of a standard transmission until everything became second nature; and thinking about all of these things, I began to wonder about Grover's long ago childhood, and what he and his family may have done, and what seemingly useless (but in the end absolutely vital) knowledge he was given that he, in turn, would be expected to pass on, but would never get to. And all of this thinking, which concerned the happenings of something like a hundred years, between two people who'd never said a word to one another though they'd occupied the same space in the same minute flicker of history, took place in the span of the thirty seconds between when my father told me that this was home, and that this would always be home, and what he said next, so that in an instant, a fleeting and trivial instant in a lifetime of instants, I was

nearly led to tears, not only at my father's passionate insistence, but at the portrait of melancholy that was the life of Arthur Grover.

"Mom and me are proud of you son. We're happy you got out of this little town and made something of yourself."

"I should call more often. Visit more often."

"You're busy. We know that."

"I should call more."

I thought about the slow way he had walked up the porch, and the care he took in lowering himself into the chair, and how a time would come, sooner than I care to admit, when I would not be able to sit with him anymore, and I wouldn't just have the memory of the conversations we did have, but of the ones we did not, and even the smallest, most insignificant of conversations would, on that inevitable day when he was gone and I still remained, take on a new significance, like the ancient heirlooms of the those lost to time.

"I should call more," I said again. He didn't respond, and frankly, I can't conceive of anything he might have said. "How long had he been alone?"

"I'm not sure. I didn't know him well. I can only remember talking to him a time or two at most. He kept to himself, as you know. He didn't always live with his mom though. The house was his first. She wasn't there one day, and then she was. I'd say she stayed with him for about twenty years before she died."

I can imagine a sickly woman outliving whatever ailments she'd been afflicted with for two decades. I can imagine the son, himself an old man, bringing trays of microwaved soup into his mother's sickroom on a plastic tray, and lining up the pills she was required to take: Duloxetine for her fibromyalgia, Oxybutynin for a failing bladder,

Lorazepam for her sleep apnea. What indignity she must have faced, lying helpless, feeling like a burden on her son; and maybe, lying there, she thought about how alone he was, how her son was a hermit in his large house, which her presence had transformed into a sepulcher. Maybe, at the end, when her voice was gone, and the long battle of her illnesses finally reached its terminus, and she was free of her pills and pain, she wanted to look up at him through the haze of her atrophied eyes and admonish him for not living his life to the fullest, for wasting irrecoverable decades caring for her when he could have found happiness.

“Did he ever do anything?” I asked.

“Not that I’m aware of. Gary would know better.”

I remembered my uncle walking over there from time to time. I could never recall him entering the home, but I could see him talking through the screen door, and I imagined it was like giving confession to the imagined specter of a priest, gauging their attitude based on responses. I had spent my life imagining Art Grover as an oddity unique to my neighborhood, but he was in fact an archetype that I felt myself gradually becoming: the lonely man with the lights all off and only the old times long gone to live for, until even those memories become laborious and burdensome, and I could imagine Grover haunted by the memories of his dead mother, with her silver hair and her sickly skin barely covered by a jaundiced nightgown that once fit but, in her final days, touched the floor as she shrank into her self, the decay claiming what she’d spent a lifetime living in; and perhaps Grover saw this every night when he closed his eyes, or perhaps he saw instead the other potentialities that had become missed opportunities, people who he’d

once known who had died or moved on, while he himself languished there in a house without life and without a future.

“It just seems so sad... I’ll call more.”

If my father connected these two elements together, if he was aware of the juxtaposition between my life and Grover’s, he didn’t say, he just sat silently in his chair, looking at the house of the dead man, and it became clear to me, perhaps from his rather blank glare, that my father wasn’t thinking about Grover’s loneliness or his sad, melancholic life, but about something else entirely, something completely unrelated to that singular misery; perhaps my father was chasing through his own past looking for shreds of memories he could toss out in our conversation in an admirable attempt to connect with me over my strange interest in a man he had probably never spent more than twenty minutes thinking about.

The next day was Sunday, and I was due to head back the next morning, on the holiday itself, a misguided attempt at beating the thrush of commuters also heading back to wherever they were going. I took a walk around the block. It was the dusty, late evening hour in the Midwest right before the sun finally dies for the night, when it is still spreading out a brilliant amber glow behind the trees. It was hot, but not the kind of unbearable, sick hot common to the early evenings in Manhattan. I was hollow with hunger, since I hadn’t been able to eat much of the leftover chicken that mother had wrapped up the night before, after the firework display casually let everyone down with a climax more like a whimper, a sputtering of reds and blues and purples that wasn’t bright enough to reflect on the blackened water of the swimming pool in the yard below, nor

was it enough of a spectacle to illuminate the dim night sky, which was more grayish than blue or black.

I liked walking by myself. I felt relief being out with only the mosquitos. I liked how here, away from the calamitous noise of New York City, birds sang in their trees while crickets chirped in the mulch by the random gardens that people faithfully tended every off chance they got. Walking in the city always made me feel lonely, even though there's always an unspeakably large crowd moving a thousand feet per minute. As this thought passed through my head I wound up in front of Arthur Grover's unsold house. In the darkness, it had a haunting shapelessness to it, like it were built out of a network of shadows; the Weeping Willow in the backyard looked like the blackened plume of a mushroom cloud. I was compelled to explore everything further. My legs carried me without thought over the privacy fence into the unknowns of the backyard. The driveway was ruptured from years of weeds growing up through the cracks. There was a small tool shed with a rusted door, collared by overgrown grass. A wicker gazebo leaned perilously against the far side of the fence, as if it, like the old tower in Piza, might collapse into the dust at anytime.

At the back of the house there was a sunroom, the siding of which had been hastily painted brown. The windows were opened up, showing an empty area that, in the night, was adorned in impenetrable darkness, like the vacuous blackness of deep caves. My hands, of their own accord, reached out for the handle of the door. A light popped on.

My first thought was that my intrusion had been discovered. But the light, which came from above the door of the sunroom, was an automated light, probably installed by the same entity that was not trying very hard (given the upkeep of the backyard and the

overall dreariness of the whole house) to move the property. I turned the doorknob, and much to my surprise, it was unlocked, and after a deep breath, I stepped into the hollow darkness of Grover's patio, reaching my hands out for any sort of object to guide my stumbling body through the unknown. After a few steps I reached a wall, which I walked along side until I came to another doorway, this one to the house proper, which amazingly, was also unlocked.

This doorway led to a landing just off the side of the kitchen. There was a row of light switches just to the left inside the door, and with a snap of the wrist the room was fully illuminated by an amber incandescent glow. The kitchen was made up in the manner of decades long gone: yellow, plastic floor tiles, fiberglass cabinetry, a round-edged refrigerator. There was no dining table, but against the far wall, under a calendar from 1995, was a single foldout tray, its top covered in dust, undoubtedly used to prop up cheap TV dinners that were taken in as simple sustenance, and not as something meant to be enjoyed. The tile flexed and bowed under my footsteps, like it hadn't been fully fettered to the boards and foundation below it. All fear I had of being caught was diminished when I ran my hand across the imitation marble countertops, which were covered in dust years old, the kind of dust that smells of sawdust and ancient books—a thick layer of sandy film that not even termites or cockroaches had dared disturb in the time since the home's quiet apocalypse.

I entered the living room and flicked on another set of lights and began to wonder why the sellers of this place even bothered to keep the current flowing. The red carpet was as thin as brittle toast, and here and there rodent droppings were scattered about. The furniture was covered, but I could somehow tell it was the same stuff Grover had

probably died on, stuff bought back in a time before he'd been taken over by apathy or melancholy, at a time when he still had desires beyond waiting out the bitterness of the years. The whole house was filled with random objects familiar to living, breathing people, but the home felt terrifyingly empty of any evidence that human beings had ever spent any time there. It felt more devoid of life, in the two or three years since its now permanent vacancy, than the crumbling ruins of long vanished peoples built and died in during the times before recorded histories. I looked around at the place, sealed in by the dust which gave visible shape to my footsteps, and had to fight a strange and uncontrollable urge to cry, because I was witnessing, there in the sepulchral silence of Arthur Grover's vacated property, a human being's long and drawn out personal apocalypse, a man's intentional surrender to the infuriating harshness of melancholy and decay, and this felt all too close to my own wayward ramblings through life, out there in the rambunctious Big Apple, alone in a crowd of lonely people, all of us lost on the avenues and numbered streets that make-up the vast, unrelenting grid of the metropolis. I realized that my greatest fear, even then as a young man, was dying alone, following along Arthur Grover's pathway of unfathomable solitude.

I visited again the next year, and the house was still unsold. Someone had kept cutting the grass in the front yard and watering the plants, but everything was just as lifeless, as if there, on that little sliver of earth near Lake Huron, across from my aunt's house, time itself hadn't moved. The year after that, I came home again, this time for Memorial Day, and the "For Sale" sign had been vandalized and never replaced. The grass was long enough to let off a noxious odor.

The following year, I got married. Another year after that, I brought my wife home with me, to meet my extended family. The house was gone now, and all that remained was the Weeping Willow and an empty field, and no one seemed to notice; it was as if there had never been a structure at all, only a single tree on a plot of land, the kind of place where children would mess around as they came of age, playing pick-up games of tackle football, or hitting baseballs through the windows of the nearby houses. But for me, as a grown man, thankfully spared from such a destiny of solitude, it was a haunting reminder of Arthur Grover and his implacable hermitage. I sat for a long while on my aunt and uncle's porch, in those same Adirondack chairs my father and I had sat in years before, and thought about Arthur Grover, who'd passed through the world with complete anonymity.