

“Out Past the Bridge”

He clutched her tightly and ushered her on into the cool night towards the beat up minivan that awaited them, its steering wheel ice cold to the touch. She tried to look at him with interest, but that didn't matter. His stare was off in some distant scenic land, where they both played according to their said roles. She shuffled on without a care. Her feet organisms of their own. Eyes moist, body clutched in pain, feet moving. Propelled by an impetus unknown.

Unknown aside from the overbearing arm that sat slumped lazily over her shoulder. It almost looked loving, from a distance, until his shoulders tensed and bristled to match the iron wrinkles of his stare. He acted as usher, she the distressed, as they took their calm turn about the park, towards the car that stood infinite at three blocks away. A child passed by and smiled and they both smiled back, he unashamedly happy and she the depressive with the cool stare and empty teeth. They strode by mounds of people, some moving faster than others, but all assuredly lost in their communal sense of self. The pathetic falls dripped in the background and each found their own sense of beauty there among the brown leaves now dead and scattered on the bleak white sidewalks. Feet rumbled on to that soulless trickle and crunch, the sounds of bones ground ever finer into the soil. Bones unheard and unseen through the chaotic roar of the carnival that played on around them.

Larry appeared there in front of the couple, his eyes briefly acknowledging theirs while he humped steadily up the brick steps to the street. You might say his eyes never really saw anything, the way they sat in the sockets, always turned to that unknown corner of the world that soldiered him on. Larry was long and thin, his head jutting abnormally high above his shoulders, his steps whimsical and wispy as he slipped along through the crowd.

Today was Larry's only day off. Sunday. The longer he lived, the less that day seemed to matter. It wouldn't be too much longer until he'd retire and have all day long to sit on his ass. At least that's the way he saw it. What else was he going to do if he wasn't working? Larry wasn't the kind of guy to just sit on his ass. More than one day off a week was too much. Just enough time to fix any kinks in his house or put a wrench to the Oldsmobile if it needed it. Once his body gave out, he'd throw in the towel. But until then, there wasn't any use in trying to make extra free time.

That particular Sunday, Larry had decided to take a quick pass through the old town. It had been a long time since he'd actually walked Main St., and he figured he might take a stroll down the old streets for old time's sake. It was a shame Larry had forgotten how to stroll. He spent so much time at one speed at work that he couldn't shake it out of his body. He moved briskly and cockeyed, his stare not really caught in any particulars of the city. It was all so different he couldn't find it in him to focus on anything.

The only thing that seemed familiar to Larry were the brick steps that led up from the river to the street. The rest of it was totally different. So much of the old reworked and painted over. He struggled to pass through the piles of smiling, young faces that shone about the city in brightly colored athletic clothes, strolling at a pace incomprehensible to Larry. He felt directionless there amongst the crowd. Quickly, he thought of Mark's Hardware at the corner of Main and North and decided to see what fate it had succumbed to.

The walk was exhausting for him. Larry couldn't get accustomed to the stream of faces that surged and swept past him in the intervals set by the stoplights. The truth was he didn't know what to do with his face. At the first couple of sets of people, he paused and tried to smile and mutter a "How we doin'?" But they responded half-heartedly, a true fear in their eyes, their

“Hi’s” as empty as the gleaming white of their teeth. After a series of about four or five exchanges like this, Larry resolved just to put his head down and study the cracks in the sidewalk.

There was something unnatural about people’s teeth these days, Larry thought. Every damned commercial egging you on to that one bleached state of human existence. The more he walked, the more he thought about that. Bleach. A couple of slabs in the concrete stained white from bleach that must have run off from one of the buildings. Bleach. Blonde brighter than the sun, teeth white, faces caked in seamless shades of mud. Bleach. Cars shined and waxed, shirts pressed, houses with floors clean enough to eat off of. Bleach.

Thoughts such as these never used to cross his mind. Larry had made peace with his work long ago. A necessary means to be able to have everything he needed in life. He had his house paid, his children out of the house, James off in college. All was fine, until Joanne died on a Sunday the year before.

It was cool, nature freshly dying as the motor screamed and he blew the leaves into a big pile in the corner of the yard where two sides of the chain-link fence met. He slid the door open and walked in from his concrete porch to Joanne slumped over on the carpet by the couch. Heart attack. It was sudden and unforeseen for Joanne, a pinnacle of life that had always rallied the family together around the holidays. Stray aunts, lone uncles, rebellious children and all, couldn’t deny Joanne’s uniquely inviting air. Everyone came to their house for Christmas.

They still had Christmas at his house that year. And the laughter was so forced and psychotic, but still everyone came and they tried. This year, he wondered. It was doubtful anyone would come. Or if he’d even invite anyone.

Larry found an excuse to not think of Joanne as he passed the corner of Main and North. He looked to his left, and stood in awe at the towering theater. Le Belle Époque. It was a true spectacle, the antique brick of Mark's built upon with fresh frames of steel and glass. The hardware store still could have been there, in that bottom half, still contained within the walls of always, with even more chips in the surrounding brick than he'd remembered. How strange that they'd kept those old dilapidated walls in place. They must have been sounder than they looked, a testament to the quality of buildings before the chaos of mankind's late paper mâché expansion.

Larry approached the building to glance inside. Of course, the interior was totally redone, as far as he could tell. To the left stood the box office, elegantly garnished with thick panes of cherry-stained wood. Maybe mahogany, but Larry was never much of a carpenter. To the right of that sat a few welcoming black leather chairs and a couple of tables. He thought he made out stairs in the back of the building that led to the theater.

He stood there for a few minutes peering into the theater, imagining how it must have been on Friday and Saturday nights, bodies crowding through these spaces in a closeted, sophisticated cheer that he never fully understood. Cheer for him now came in anticipation of the restful hours of night, when his body had moved enough to deserve relaxation. Larry tried to make out the faint details in the woodwork that stood in stark contrast to chrome colored pillars and a sculpture made of aluminum bars that resembled something like a horse, though with a very human face and body.

“Oh, hey, Larry, what's up, Chuck?”

Larry looked cautiously towards this person who'd approached him, his face white and his eyes wandering in every direction, part of a tense neuronal shuffling that sought to make her disappear from sight or possibly even memory.

Then he realized this was someone he knew. "Susan? Oh, hey."

"So what are you up to today, Mr. Larry? Cruising about the town?"

"Yeah. Living everyday like it's my last."

"Like it's your last. That's right partner."

"How you doin' today, Susan?"

"Oh just fine. I'm just up here grabbing a cup of coffee. It's my usual Sunday tradition. Watch all the athletes walk by. Lotta athletes around these parts."

"Oh, that sounds nice. I just come by to see what's come of Mark's Hardware Store."

"Yeah, brother. Mark's. That's been awhile that that's been gone. Five years at least. Where you been, Larry?"

"Oh, you know, around. Don't come downtown too much I reckon."

"Hey, Larry, you wanna come grab a cup of coffee? It'll be good for you."

"Yeah, sure." Larry's neck crooned at about a forty-five degree angle as he answered. It felt natural to be doing this, but then it wasn't.

Susan led the way down Main St., back from where Larry had come. They passed by the rows of restaurants and gift shops at a lethargic pace compared to that Larry normally kept. This lent him much more time than he wanted to look at the changing face of the city. He wondered whether the entire street had been demolished and rebuilt. So many new restaurants and shops stood in freshly painted neutral shades, while others held the same chromatic gleam as the theater. As he looked more closely though, he could still see the patches of chipped, uncovered

brick in the few spaces that had yet to be sanded over and donned with shining masks of modernity.

Susan touched his arm as they passed the Symphony Center and crossed the bridge. “Come down this way, Larry.”

Larry didn't seem to notice her at first as his feet continued their cycle, one moving directly in front of the other. He stopped once he felt a forceful tug on his arm. “Come on.”

They passed down a set of stairs that led to the level of the Reedy. The water poured down slowly and steadily, as brown as it had ever been, the ducks and the geese still pacific in that brown muck that engulfed them. A child stood with her feet in the water up in front of them, to the squawking appeals of her mother.

“April. April! I'm taking your phone away! April! Get out of that water right now!” April's ears perked up at the sound of the phone, but she continued on regardless, wading to waist level. Larry studied the mother's eyes with profound curiosity, though he turned his head slightly so no casual observer would suspect his watching.

Susan kept walking in front of him, so Larry followed. They walked down a wide, bleach white sidewalk past the rows of new brick condominiums that overlooked the river. At the bottom level of the condos were more shops, a couple of restaurants, and a few art galleries. The coffee shop stood past these, tucked snugly into the last corner before the condos trailed off into the oblivion one block past Main St. Those walking turned around after reaching the corner of River St. On the other side of the street stood the peeling underside of the highway bridge, green mixed with the streaked gray of the concrete walls and the fall colors of the trees that stood underneath. Right then, Larry felt the urge to run off into those trees, back into that side of the city that still stood on its own foundation. He the crazed owl that the children shriveled up next

to in fear. The lone owl that wanted nothing more than to be alone and free in the world, flying steadily at its own pace. He willed it to be, but still stay retained within his body. That pale and rusting life form that surrounded him and creaked and pained towards the following day of slow, tepid decay. He followed Susan into the coffee shop.

The coffee shop was extremely plain, the tables handcrafted with two by four's and sheets of plywood, while the chairs looked like antiques dug out from a previous century. Susan took a seat by the window and Larry dutifully followed.

“So whataya think of the old place, Larry? Lot's changed, huh?”

“Yeah...”

“It's a real mess out there Larry. That's why I come here. This is the only place I can come and get a drink of coffee and not feel like a complete imposter. You know what I mean?”

The coffee shop felt equally as foreign as the rest of the city, but at least it had the view of Academy St. up above. The peeling path towards some semblance of sincerity. Main St. was surreal to him now, the way it looked, young foreign faces filing down the streets.

“So, you got any big plans for Turkey day, Larry?”

“Umm, we might go over to my sister's house. I'll have to see.”

“Yeah, I'm not too sure either. I'm thinking about driving up to Virginia to see my brother and his kids and do all of that, but I don't know. It's been a long time since I've seen him, you know, but I don't know if I wanna do all the driving.”

Larry looked blankly out into the city, his eyes fixated on the shadow beneath the bridge and the slight pattering of the cars as they went by.

“Yeah, 's a lot of driving.”

“Yeah, man, I might just stay home and cozy up with a nice turkey sandwich by myself.”

“A turkey sandwich?”

“Yeah, who wants to go through the trouble of baking a whole turkey? Besides, rotisserie turkey is better anyways.”

“Yeah, I’m not much of a fan of turkey myself.”

“I’m pretty excited just to have all the work done on my house now. Or almost. This kid from Durmann came by the neighborhood offering to weatherize my house for almost nothing. I figured I’d give it a shot. It’s just, man, they’ve been taking forever getting the job done. Supposedly, this weekend, they say. It’ll be done. Apparently it’s gonna cut way down on the electric bill though. Keep the heat and the cool in. Before I was payin’ a fortune for electric every month just to keep the place halfway liveable.”

“Yeah, my electric bill usually runs me at least \$150 a month.”

“Yeah, brother, well they told me it should at least cut my bills in half. Yeah Larry, you should look into that for your little house. They’re doing it out of the University so they can cut down on the energy costs for the whole city. Won’t cost you much of anything.”

“Alright, I’ll have to look into that. You got a number I could call about that?”

“Yeah, I’ll have to look it up when I get back to the house. But I’ll let you know on Monday.”

Neither of them seemed to realize the waiter hadn’t come by.

“Hey, y’all, sorry about the wait.” A young kid with short black hair looked about as apathetic as they come. “What do you want to drink?”

“I’ll just take a small cup of coffee. Light roast if you’ve got it.” Susan started.

“I’ll do the same, but a dark roast. If you’ve got it.”

“All we’ve got is a medium roast right now. Uhh, does that work?”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Susan said, as they both nodded their heads solemnly.

“Alright.” The waiter walked back to the counter sluggishly, his light-stained jeans sagging enough to show a nice chunk of his forest green boxers.

Larry shook his head. “Kids these days. Come to work dressed like that?”

“Yeah.”

“Young people these days just aren’t raised the same as they used to be. If you came to work you’d come cleaned up and professional looking. Not like that.”

“Yeah. The times are a-changin’ Larry.”

“I wonder if it’s for the worst, sometimes.”

“Ahh, it’s just change, Larry. I don’t see too much harm in it. You know, it’s just the way kids always are. Rebels at heart.”

“We didn’t take it *that* far. My father would have sent me packing if I showed up to the shop looking like that.”

Right as he said that, the waiter came back with the two cups of coffee, both in white mugs with the I love NY logo.

“Big city now. Big city.” Larry began to remove himself in repetitions, staring even more fondly at the shadow of the bridge outside. He could feel something significant there, out past the bridge, but he could place his finger on it.

“Yeah.”

“I can’t believe it the way it is. I don’t even know where I’m from no more.”

“Did I tell you why I like to come here Larry?”

“...”

“It’s the best place to watch all the folks walk by. You can see them, dandy as ever, whistling along, right until they reach the street here. Then they all turn back around in a heartbeat and sing right along the other way. It’s weird the way people are. Nobody can stand going too far off of the main drag.”

“That main drag is something.”

“Yeah it is Larry. It’s the star of the show. Greenville, the new Southern paradise.”

Larry slurped at his coffee pretty heavily, in sips that were more like gulps. It wasn’t too terribly hot, but it wasn’t bad. He never cared much for those steaming hot cups of coffee. Susan drank hers at a much more relaxed pace, and Larry’s leg started to shake once he’d finished his cup.

“Hey, partner, you drank that quick.”

“Yeah. I always do that.”

“Hey, brother, well, if you’ve gotta go, you’re free to go any time. I’ve got this coffee. I might be sittin’ here a while watching the people roll by. Everybody’s a sight to see.”

As he glanced out the window, Larry saw the girl who’d been standing in the river before, walking next to her mother, hair wet, towel wrapped around her waist. Where her mother found a towel, he couldn’t have guessed, but the thought brought a smile to his face.

“You know, Susan, I might get going. I hate to leave you so soon, but I’ve got some things to be doing.”

“Alright, Larry, well thanks for hanging with me for a bit here. We’ll see ya.”

“Alright, we’ll see ya tomorrow. Another day to live like it’s my last.” Larry stood up and made his way to the door.

“That’s right, Larry. See ya.”

The rush of fall air was cold across his face, and Larry felt refreshed to be in control of his world again. Normally he would've offered to pick up the coffee, but he'd been so uncomfortable the thought didn't even come to him. He'd spoken with Susan lots of times at work, but never outside of work. The concept seemed strange to him in retrospect. He wasn't one to carry a conversation. He never knew how Joanne could put up with him. They'd spent so much time together in pure silence. That was one of the things he missed most dearly about her. The warming comfort of the shared silence as they sat on that red canvas couch and stared into the fireplace.

Susan gone, Larry had returned to his own whimsically brisk pace, storming back towards his car. He briefly looked back down at the river from up on the bridge and breathed in a sort of goodbye. It'd most likely be a long time until he'd return to this place. Possibly never, given where he was in life. Right then, a white-haired figure bumped into him, some ghost from a distant realm of his mind.

"Oh excuse me," she said absentmindedly.

"Oh, you're fine."

"Wait. Larry. Larry Freeman. Is that you?"

"Yeah, that's me. How you doin' Joanne?" He looked at her with calm eyes. Eyes removed from even the slightest sense of shock. There was something dead in his glance, some part of him that seemed as if it had just been shut down.

"Oh, just fine. Meeting the grandkids here while their mother has a cup of coffee."

"Oh, that sounds nice," he said, looking not at Joanne, but through her. She wasn't supposed to be here. Why was she here?

"What are you up to these days?"

“Just workin’. You know how it is.... Somehow I keep moving along.”

“Oh, I know what you mean Larry. I can’t believe how much this place has changed, can you? It’s a real mess these days. There’s no identity anymore.”

“I know it,” he said, a peculiar smile crossing his face.

“God, I miss the old times.” She looked up wide-eyed at Larry, an unspoken yearning caught somewhere within the swirls of her hazel eyes.

“Yeah. Me too, Joanne. Me too.” As he said it he looked back down at the sidewalk, so white it was reflective, free from cracks aside from the spaces separating the slabs.

“Well, it was good running into you Larry,” Joanne said hurriedly as she broke away and turned her face towards the street, the brightness in her eyes quickly fading.

“You too, Joanne,” he said, looking slowly back up at her.

“Goodbye now,” she said, turning, rushing hurriedly down the sidewalk past the barrage of chic shop windows.

“Bye,” Larry said to himself. She never even attempted to look back, her image shrinking in the distance.

Sparing one last glance in her direction, Larry breathed a sigh from somewhere deep inside his soul and turned to peer out over the river. For a second he saw the thin winding sidewalks they had walked years ago. Those sidewalks that skirted the banks of the river, surrounded by a few scattered bushes and a couple of old maple and oak trees, all that had long since been uprooted. Or almost, he thought, as he stared blankly at the image of the former park in his head, alongside his vision of the gentle contours of Joanne’s face. He turned back to the street where Joanne had been, but she was already gone from view, lost in the shifting mass of

multicolored bodies. “I can’t keep doing this,” he said to himself. “I can’t keep doing this.” A refrain that slipped out from a repressed past.

He looked down into the water for a second as if he was about to jump and then he suddenly slapped himself in the head. Firmly. Audibly. A couple of teenagers snickered as they walked by. Then Larry straightened his back and opened his mouth and spoke. “It’s shame she won’t be able to make Thanksgiving dinner this year. What a shame. What a shame.”

“What a shame.” He stared down the river, hoping desperately for any glimpse of land beyond the Academy Bridge, that ethereal terrain just beyond the sounds of the shifting cars and foot traffic. He’d never walked over there.

Suddenly Larry broke from his pose, his body exerting its mandate over the frail circulations of his mind. He walked back down Main Street towards the parking garage. Passing three more blocks, Larry joined the crowd of others that slowly shuffled their way up the steps of the garage.

The garage was one of the most unique aspects of the city. Fifteen stories high, it held most of the commuters to the city in its depths. It was quite easy to get lost inside. Many children were said to have been lost for days within the labyrinth-like combination of up and down ramps. On weekends, parking was free, which led to moments such as these, where Larry was forced to slump slowly up the stairs to the eighth floor, arm in arm with violent soccer moms and deviant teens and the occasional lone skeptic.

It took Larry about ten minutes to make it from the entrance to the parking garage up to his car, a brown ’93 Oldsmobile. It shook and sputtered as it started, but it still did, and he breathed another sigh as he sat and let the car warm up. Less than a minute later, he pulled the car out and made his descent, which went quite smoothly until he reached the fourth floor. From

there down he sat in a line of cars that filed sporadically into the road when traffic allowed. Ten minutes later, he was finally on the road.

He went straight down Augusta St. and turned right on Vardry. Vardry changed to Pendleton, and he took a right onto Academy. He drove not absentmindedly, but in complete absence of mind, his body mechanically pressing the pedal and turning the wheel in timed sequence. He climbed the overpass and looked to his left, but he made nothing out aside from an empty field and some trees and a small building or two in the distance. He made a left onto Buncombe St. and continued on over the rotted remains of railroad cars that hoboed in plain view under the Pete Hollis Bridge, on accessory tracks that had long since been put out of use. The series of street lights on the path to his house were all green, and he turned down a side street and passed lines of small multicolored houses and a taco shop and brought the Oldsmobile to a pulsing halt in the carport that lie next to the pale green mill house.

That night he finished up a sanding job on a desk he was rebuilding from parts of an older one, staining it all with a dark satin finish. His work done, he sat and studied it beneath the single overhead bulb of the carport. He felt repulsed. The shine of it was grotesque in its uniformity. In the gloss he saw his own gray and wrinkled reflection and he saw Joanne's blonde head walking past the brick buildings, past Mark's and Hamlin's feed store. He saw the youthful tears in her eyes and the make up running down the soft, pointed edges of her cheeks and he felt tears well up inside of him. He heard his voice trembling and saw the disbelief in her eyes and felt the gap widening in his entrails as she walked slowly away.

There on the steps to the side door he sat and wept. Eventually he got up and walked, past the striped blue wallpaper of the living room and the worn beige couch and the uniform green hallway, into his pristinely made bed that sat in stoic isolation between wood stained walls.

He closed his eyes and willed it to stop, but it wouldn't. At some point, he heard a faint sound of voices that slowly got louder, until he opened his eyes into the gray dawn and hit the button beside him on his silent walk to the coffeemaker.

As he took the few steps from his room to the kitchen, he swore he could hear the crackling of bacon and the drip of freshly brewing coffee, but when he walked out into the kitchen and the dim light that had started to slip in through the windows, he saw nothing. Just the receding contours of the darkness. He pulled out his tin of Folger's and added it to the filter and an utterance shot from his mouth. "What a shame."

