

THE KEY

One of the many cats, an adventurer apparently, a searching wanderer, from the Hemingway House began in the late mornings to hang with casual interest about the door of the small cottage that faced the street alongside the House. Eventually Justin gave the nonchalant calico-spotted wanderer, though not really hungry, a saucer half-filled of milk. It seemed a thing simple to do, a perfunctory show of acquired southern hospitality to a visitor. The cat, acquiescent to the gesture, seemingly nodded at Justin who continued wandering on his way toward Thomas Street and the bodega where he was looking to buy cold-cuts and fruit. The tank top and shorts he wore as on most mornings were loose and comfortable, allowing a circulating breeze to soothe him, and though not exactly fresh, were decidedly Justin's routine daily uniform over his showered and oiled tan. That tan, so honed, gave him the look of a native Conch but he was merely one of the many passers-by, yet he had begun lately to contemplate a perhaps more permanent settling, a noncapricious

residency. The climate and sun were certainly amenable, as well the easy days—and the daily easy complicity of deciding on nothing more previously determined than the grab-ably tossed uniform of shorts and athletic shirt.

At this time in the brightly clear morning the streets and compact gardens were just slowly beginning to come to life from the previous night's jumble, the every evening pulse of the island's flow. Fresh water was sprayed, by coffee-fueled residents stumbling along the little plots of garden, on tropical flora shadowing the paving stones. The stones darkened more as they soaked in the wet; the grass or shrubbery greening with sparkles. Lunch could be relatively close, and then the day would begin of doing whatever was necessary or enjoyable—shop, or chore, or beach. Resort life's pace only seemed to vary when an itinerant hurricane passed near. Even the businesses, each day, seemed to follow a relaxed timetable that allowed for “island time”, so removed from the activity on the mainland more than a hundred miles over water away.

“Good morning”, hello-ed Justin to the people he knew well enough as they washed their gardens along his path. After an appraising survey through the bodega, with his purchase he returned to his little cottage, and busied himself with the planning of his slight lunch and the few necessary chores he felt he wanted to do. Time, really, was of very little concern—it passed only slightly noticed and unremarkable. A walk along the beaches often fills the afternoon, at this southernmost dot that faces open sea, curving along the southern land's end, the winter sand warm beneath Justin's feet. He loved the ease of these beach walks. They were immeasurably soothing, even if his mind happened to be blank at that moment. Something—it must be the colours or the warmth of the sunshine—was as relaxing to all the strained muscles and the tense thoughts as a good cognac at the end of an evening. Justin, not yet at all really discerning that he was troubled with any trauma that was causing him specific concerns, had taken to letting one day follow its' path, and then the next another. Justin would walk, and would often spend an hour, sometimes more, simply watching the turquoise waves' bubbling surf, noting the colours and breezes, counting the splashed glare of seashells

strewn where no tourists had yet wandered. He would notice young men holding hands—unfettered lovers of every accumulative combination—playing or strolling at the foamy edges of the calm incoming surf, coddled warmly in the first days of their vacations from the unmalleable hard world of the mainland. Different other couples, sorts of the more typically conventional, pale pink or various as shades of tan, zigzagged the beaches as well. Key West harboured a multitudinous array of guest houses. All the fleets of trippers were slowing to “island time”, and welcoming its' warm breathing.

When Justin reached White Street he turned back toward the center of town, passing northward past the neat houses and arcing round past the cemetery which lay in the center, thinking he really should get a bicycle. The sun was quite warm, because it was so strong, even in December. At length he reached Duval Street, turned south, and stood among the people looking into the shop windows, sparse knots of couples who were not still partaking of siesta or sprawling on the beach sand. Heat had accumulated above the pavements. The afternoon had slipped

into its' long and arduous descent toward the latter part of yet another day floating in paradise. On a side street Justin ambled toward the Castaway, one of the smaller watering holes he favored. Inside was shade, air-conditioned, in a tight room chocked with bits of nautical décor, fishing nets and some giant conch shells, and a few staring mounted fish on the walls. Mack, who operated the dim minuscule place, kept no distractive clocks inside, except for near the corner above the door a neon-rimmed face which was permanently disrupted to read 5:13; and, his patrons preferred it that way. Some never even noticed. It was a room where time had stood still. Justin's rather almost daily basic, even at some times almost desperate, wanderings lead himself to this haven, where he takes a customary seat at one of the small tables near the end of the bar. Sparse other regulars were already seated as well. Some waved. One old man, customarily at his regarded spot, crinkled and brown, somewhat scruffy, but smiling, motioned Justin to come join him at his table; and Justin, side stepping to order a drink at the bar, complied. The old man was known as Cap'n, from his younger days plying for the tourist trade a charter fishing-vessel among the straits toward west of Cuba. Cap'n was a gregarious

talker, and also as well a concerned listener; and Justin enjoys his company and his stories, and listens to them with deference. The stories are many, not always freshly new, and quite dependent on the amount of drinks; but that rate of consumption also can make it easier for Justin to slip away when he wants to think alone. Some days hours are spent there, on others Justin becomes restless. This afternoon Cap'n had said at one point in his rambling stories something, somewhat blurrily, that had sparked an interest in Justin's inner thinkings. Cap'n, apparently reminiscing about his old gone boat, had said of a sudden, "History is a devil; and the course of hist'ry is the devil's harlot." Cap'n said, "It's as obvious as daylight", then took a long heavy swig of his beer. To Justin, however, it was not quite that obvious. Justin remembered that blurry statement, and subsequently his mind began to meander to reflect on it. "History is a devil, and the course of history is the devil's harlot." Possibly—most likely—true, but what had he intended to mean by the pronouncement. Justin's thoughts sailed away, and toward a new horizon. On the wall the clock's hands had definitely not moved, however long last Justin felt able to slip unobtrusively away, to think with his own private

thoughts on those cloudy words, sidling out the door and into the brightness again back toward Front Street where he once more studied pensively the shop windows with all their myriad of souvenirs and objets and beach accoutrements. Perhaps, perhaps the course of history was the shape, misshapen, that people ascribingly gave to it. People love souvenirs, Justin concluded. We collect things, so many things, collecting all manner of things to be souvenirs to remember every moment of our lives. We strive to remember good moments, and to hold on to them as we can hold on to the souvenirs we have collected. It is why some of us, one can suppose, are reluctant to throw anything away. We want to hold on to the old greeting cards or the letter, to the family silver, to the parents' marriage furniture, the old dining table, or the lock of hair, or the old pair of gloves, or any little thing that we can hold that seems to keep someone from our past here near in the present to us. Those things, visible souvenirs from our pasts, were our visible memory—visible memory made of collected things. Justin still had a watch, kept in a drawer somewhere, one of his father's old watches from when he was a young man. Justin, because the old-fashioned band pinched the hairs on

his wrists, had never really worn it; it had not actually worked in years, but had been placed in a drawer, where Justin could not bear the thought of getting rid of it. It was odd, oddity in its' fascination to him, a beautifully designed but valueless watch that belonged once to a dead man and that no longer worked, kept as a souvenir of a time past and, when that eventual time came around that no one could remember its' past, meaningless. Justin contemplated the watch, and its' not working, and how he could not find the strength to part with it, The old watch, stopped forever in time, was the sole embodiment left of a faded memory. The experience—memory—of its' supposed significance loomed like a roadblock set across the fork in the road of thoughts. Did it really matter which fork was taken?; just as the thoughts themselves were ultimately six of one, and a half-dozen of another. Time would ultimately consume them all. Dead men's watches, and time...meaningless.

Growing up is an odd experience, and growing older is even odder still, as time ticks on. But, Justin thought, I'm in my prime, an imaginary prime perhaps, but... Justin's thoughts sped, and so he considered,

though only in mid-life, thinking: he was staring death in the face, and death was not blinking.

He thought...the primal desire to have children, as progeny, was so exceedingly strong that most people acceded to it without much forethought, and with that move onward if that meant inevitably falling into the acceptance of a conventional life, with the confines of a whitewashed picket fence, then that is what most people found convenient and even satisfactory.

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Occurring randomly to Justin that this might be the time he could stop for another quick drink while watching the growing crowds—the daters, and lovers, the vacationers, and tourists, and bar-hoppers also—along Duval Street, he wandered up the steps of one of the bars that had a verandah facing the street. From this spot he took an end seat, and watched—continuing to let his his thoughts mill along with the crowds. The evening light was glowing, its' heavy golden slant. The crowds chattered, planning their evening's entertainments with laughter Justin's

thoughts were becoming as crowded as the streetcrowd, yet as the streetcrowd was aiming toward Mallory Square so Justin's thoughts aimed off in many divergent directions. Indeed, time was a heedless flowing, a passing heedless current, that gave no genuine countenance of approval to any man—not any single one.

As the light was leisurely fading Justin joined the throng that was finding its' way to the nightly spectacle of sunset-watching celebration in Mallory Square. There the buskers and jugglers and acrobats had already assembled to cajole the swelling crowds, and the crowds were gearing for their evening's merriment in the restaurants and bars and discotheques of this night's Key West. At this precarious edge of the evening the last radiance of golden glow was declining; twilight was falling, some sailboats straining toward port. The sunset was, as always, beautiful, spectacularly so on this evening, and the crowd applauded and cheered it as the orange sun sank into dark deep west at the far edge of the Gulf. At this, huddles of spectators began dispersing, content with awe, happy.

This day had sunk down, the glowing sun leaving its' opaque shadow behind it; and Justin had once more spent it only wandering. Now he wandered back again into Duval Street, behind couples or knots of people, following the glow of lights that lined the bar fronts until he chose one where he stopped for another drink, where the crowds which flocked to this land's end had begun to laugh loudly and a little too often. When some strangers attempted conversation he indulged them, listening or answering until some perhaps mutual lack of attention prompted moving away. A kind of social ebb and flow, like the tides, encircled. As the heir to the crown of the capitol city of the Conchs, and as destination for many cosmopolitan holidays, simultaneously quaint and rambunctious Key West was a fortuitous small town, languid and laid-back in days, and vibrant and lively in evenings; by happenstance Justin had washed upon the shore here. Justin had come to think of it as his port. But at a point curved in the evening when the bright amber lights began to pound Justin's head and the bar seemed about to tilt, Justin edged toward the doorway, and back into the softer cool night of the stroll-worthy streets. The "discos" were beginning to spill pounding music out into the street, and Justin, no

longer always compelled to partake of the excitement of their particular socializing lustiness, out of an now-apparent resignation, sidestepped, the jangle of fervour and frivolity and intense roisterousness left behind, toward the quieter residential by-lanes where he could find his way past the gardens, backlit with the cool blue of the sparser streetlights, toward the little cottage on the quiet and darkened side street.

From the raucous evening, coming home alone to an empty house could often spread a calming balm of rest and peace, soothing, coddling in its' familiarity, not but a hint of tense apprehension. Wherever, it was "home"--and calm refuge. Even so, there were shadows there, but they could be dispelled with the lighting of a candle. The silver-y notes of the windchimes, as if angels were humming, lent their own solace. Home...all the collected accoutrements of a stretch of life, so conspicuously carefully or randomly chosen and preserved, so arranged to give the impression of memories saved, preserved under crystal and kept fresh with vapors and occassional dustings of nostalgia. All the memorabilia scattered about, those collected bits that from which one could not part, the souvenirs of

existing, they gave it an impressionistic daub of painted life. A life clung to tenaciously with talons. Never giving it up, but however weary, clinging to life itself—and all those collected souvenirs. Clinging as steady and sure as the searching beam revolving from a lighthouse along the shore, sending a lifeline into the dark deep. Laying among the collected bits were the memories, the intangible remembrances that were collecting dust as well. Cities, stairways, train rides, a spring bouquet, splashing autumn leaves, sailings, the thrilling stranger, the blatant remark, holidays, the creamy chocolates and port, journies, the touch of hands reaching for connection, the kiss, the music of a dance, remembering a party so crowded and the former love forced to sit next to you on a very crowded sofa...so very uncomfortable to the touch...a devastating, searing, and sad experience, touching so warmly limb to limb but unable to communicate, to cross the chilling space that keeps us separately abandoned.

It is a mortal's sin to become old, however bland its' unintended mortification, a sin to lose the fresh firm fortitude of animal existence, the vigour of breathing in and out new clean air. But time, rapacious, collects

it's own memorabilia, which it grinds down into the fine dust of disintegration. That dust swirls piled into the dark corners.

The wind chimes tinkled with vigour in the seabreeze, then stood silent for a moment...then sang again...

You, either happily, or otherwise, survive a childhood; reach the age of an adult, leap headlong into independence; choose to start a family or (choose) not; pick a job, as one must to make a living; cobble together a life until it expands or begins to unravel, letting life unfold around you, either sometimes happy or sometimes overwhelmed. Does anyone ever know what they are doing? What—the conscious need—to do?

The repeated salty words came back, “History is a devil; and the course of history is the devil's harlot”. Where the lighthouse—the lighthouse that might could illumine those gnarled dark figures striding like sinister shades among the dark shoals? The wind chimes tinkled with vigour in the seabreeze...

--J. F. Lowe