

JIM

Time hung heavy and old on young Jim's life. The sun scorched him with its intensity during the day and the darkness of each night seemed to become more and more unbearable. It was slowly moving in on him. Pressing in to absorb him into its blackness. Life had become an ongoing misery.

Each morning following the sleepless nights began with a searing headache. Then all of the thoughts of people let down and all of the unfulfilled commitments started their stormy cycle of anxious throbs. And even the few paltry bills from month to month added to the growing strain. More than once he had broken out into a cold sweat shuddering over the thoughts of joblessness and the lack of his pitiful income. He was without friends and without money, a failure at twenty-five, a pathetic, fruitless artist!

Then to aggravate each day's woes there was the old man in the apartment across the hall. For some reason every time he saw him, bitterness would well up surging as a poison. He always had that same disgusting face. Eyes sparkling brightly and face shining. With a radiant smile he always gave out a pleasant greeting. Always so calm and quiet. So polite. So warm with a putridness to him! It was at best a kind of stench that stirred and heightened everything else.

It had even gotten to the point where avoiding that glance and those soft works was of prime importance, when going to the market or to his evening class at the local college or to the endless stream of places to hunt down as job. Often he would listen at the door to make sure the old man's radio was playing before going out. That muffled radio went constantly when he was home. It was always tuned in to one of those renegade religious stations the government tolerated because of international public relations. You could always tell when he would come and go. And when returning, Jim would peer down the hallway checking for light under his door. At every cost that look, that countenance must be avoided!

The whole thing was so hard to explain. But ever since the pressures began to build with the money tensions mounting and the host of fears about his anemic art career gripping, Jim began to notice the strange contrasts in the old man, especially when he talked and their eyes met. The peculiar peace and confidence coming from him seemed to cut at Jim's already tenuous, shaky life. And the more intense the days became the more difficult it was to put up with until now, a rush of angry bitterness welled up at each meeting. Since then the turbulence grew and grew with the conflict growing to a pitch within Jim's emotions and mind.

The worse things became for Jim, the more he knew that something was terribly absent from his life. And that lack or want ached within him. Yet, at the same time a hatred for having to acknowledge that need or weakness, or anger for having that need raged as well. The bitterness seethed, for the old man seemed to have it- whatever "it" was!

Many times while alone in his room he would weep and pound the floor at his miserable circumstances. Why had this maddening thing come upon him? How could he get out of it? Then would come the tears, anger and rage, a fiercely burning rage. Then came waves of irrational fear and whimpering. It felt as if he was being torn inside out

and left each time emptier. He had invisible wounds with no healing possible. He had no desire to paint or write or anything else.

Then the old man's door would click as he left for his evening walk to get a paper. As he looked through the keyhole, Jim could see that same plaguing look. It drew him. It repulsed him. It angered him! Yet, time and time again he would rush to the door each time the old man made a move. Always that same bright look, that aggravating countenance.

This last week had been one of the worst. The money had totally run out. The food was nearly gone. Every effort to sell his few remaining paintings proved futile. He had even tried to pawn his art supplies. And now the landlord was demanding rent money with a threat of calling in the police. He no longer felt as if his mind was going, he knew much had already been lost. Now the migraine headaches stayed with him all day and all night. Even the cheap wine couldn't help him sleep. He was a prisoner of himself. Something desperate had to be done, and now!

He decided first of all to deal with the strange, tormenting old man. He must be a key to what was happening, somehow he deserved blame. The old man with the continual youthful look and freshness had something. And he must find out what it was. Had he discovered some kind of fountain, some kind of source? What was the explanation? Was he somehow sapping his spirit and stealing what belonged to him! He must find out. He must. It was driving him mad.

That very evening he heard the door click outside, which meant the old man was leaving right on schedule. Being a Sunday evening, he would certainly be gone for a period of hours. So, as he listened at the door, he waited for the footsteps to die out. He opened the door quickly and crept after him, tracing his steps until he watched the old man go off down the street. He had followed him before until he went into his usual cryptic, old church that the State still allowed. Rushing back to the tenement, Jim hurled up the steps until he was back to the apartment door. If nothing else he would force the lock. While his chest heaved from racing up the flights of stairs, he felt a peculiar new anger stir within. He tried the doorknob. The door swung open, unlocked.

Quickly now he was inside the room, his back to the door. His heart thumped wildly. He flashed his eyes about, darting them as arrows. Then he simply stared. The chairs and the other few pieces of furniture were neatly spaced. The bed was made with nightclothes laid out by the single pillow. Everything was arranged in a cozy, comfortable pattern. It was all unusually clean. His own apartment was a "rat nest" caught in violent crosscurrents of wind. Jim almost forgot what he was doing there and felt a sudden wave of quiet. A surge of calmness came over his soul until in confusion he wanted nothing more than to simply leave. An old black leather Bible was on a table next to the bed.

Quickly again he slipped out without disturbing anything and silently moved across the hall into his own place. Shutting the door behind him seemed like shutting a dark lid on his own head. This only ushered on a new wave of fear. The headache began to throb violently. His heart was burning. He could feel the pounding and aching within his chest. With tears of bitter rage he started smashing everything. He shredded all of his worthless paintings. The packets of writings were torn and crumpled and thrown out his window into the winter street. They were energy spent on nothingness. They were all

less than a cup of air. They had been like trying to capture the wind. As he slumped to the floor finally in an exhausted sweat, his lonely sobbing turned into tortured moans as the deep waters of darkness crept ever closer, ever more his only faithful, steady companion.