Spring 1978

The Advancement of Learning

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THE ADVANCEMENT OF LEARNING

For the uses of life. (Francis Bacon)

When the history teacher arrived, the father was inconsolable. Old Reston could not resign himself to his daughter’s death. Three days ago a tourist had found her body floating in the harbor. Now the funeral party had just made its way from the cemetery through a fog so thick even those who knew the way were in danger of going off into the deep sea grass. The son-in-law’s house was crowded with relatives, friends and neighbors, talking and eating. Out of delicacy or hunger no one seemed to heed the old man’s grief.

“Three days he’s been this way, Evan — no food, no sleep,” his wife said to the teacher. Her eyes were deep with exhaustion, and the black dress made her waxen. “He’ll never get over it. Alfred, here’s Evan.”

The old man clenched Evan’s hand and nodded. Though Evan had gone to school with Alma, he had gone off to the City to earn his degrees and only this fall, after seven years, had come back to teach history in the high school. The sight of him finally drove old Reston to speak: “Alma was the child of our old age. We were both over forty. All we ever wanted was to make a child who’d make children.” His eyes quivered. “Why, Alma? Why?”

“Alfred, please, dear. It hurts them too.” Her hand soothed his cheek. “Come —” He followed with distracted docility outside into the fog.

“Hey, Teach!” It was little Ace Barnes.

“Ace, sit or I’ll slam you,” Mrs. Barnes whispered, but the boy slid behind Evan, clutching his legs for protection. “Have a bite, Evan,” she said.

In the dining room, table and sideboard were richly set out — and in the kitchen, table and counters — an orgy of food.

Evan found Alma’s husband to offer condolences, not sure Benton, who was several years older, would remember him. “I’ve been away, Benton, since about the time you and Alma married.”

“I haven’t been home much either. Machinists go where the jobs are, and when Republic closed, I couldn’t give up all we had here. I figured I’d make a killing in Detroit, come home, pay everything off —” Benton couldn’t keep himself still; his eyebrows rose and fell
nervously as if he were straining to see. “My parents left me this house — it costs — and we owed so much, so Alma got a job in the fish factory and stayed. I don’t know how I’ll keep two places going now. You never married, Evan?”

“No.” Evan never mentioned Elena to anyone. She was his. She was the secret in him, dead but alive. To anyone else she would be a mere word, a woman’s name.

“Well, it’s easier to live that way,” Benton said.

“I’ve a back apartment with the Rhodes family. I’ve no relatives left.”

“Then why’d you ever come back to this town?”

“The other was finished.” Elena’s family had taken the body to Southampton, and in the City he’d felt under stone, they were all under stone, millions. He wanted air and sand and space and green again. “You have to begin again when you get your degrees.”

“And he’s doing a grand job too.” Reverend Bullen drew Evan down beside him. Benton and Alma were his only Methodists, so Reverend Bullen was an island here, for most of the guests, friends of old Reston, were indiscriminately from other denominations, Catholic, or Jewish. “I see you’ve still got your strange class in imaginative thinking going, Evan.”

“And they’re still giving me problems with it.”

Bullen laughed: He himself had objected to some of Evan’s fantasy, as he called it, especially when the class petitioned to leave the local beaches natural and untouched, with “natural” Adamic drawings by the students in the march. Worse: On Saturdays Evan had a special class for children. They had gone to milk cows at Strauss’s farm. Alice Gates, with her dress open, tried to nurse a sick cat she’d found. Alice said, “She talks, She’s thanking me.” And Evan said, “Of course, if you listen.” Bullen had asked the principal why Evan didn’t stick to facts, and the principal said, “Evan’s church is his classroom.” But it was Evan who smoothed it over; he’d heard Bullen: “What am I for then?” And he knew Bullen felt trapped between generations.

Old Tom, the oldest man there, said, “What do you think?” The town’s making me buy a tag for my pushcart. Said it’s as much a vehicle as a bike and I make money carrying things, don’t I?” His fingers, burned in a fire at sea, were as fixed as motionless claws. “In eighty years I never took a red cent from the government, I built my own house, pay my taxes regular, but if they keep at it, the government’ll have to pay my taxes and my keep to boot. Tell me if
that makes sense."

"Sure don't," Ed Hilton sat thin and very straight without talking to anybody in particular. At sixty-five he had divorced his wife and rented a room from her so both could draw full security. The "affair" was a town joke. "We get the money, but it's killing Manda," he said. "She won't show herself outside — says we tried to do right all our lives, now something's making it a sin." He was ashamed the minute he said it.

"Can't we tell us what to do? We're the government," Mr. Barnes said.

"Used to be," Ed Hilton said.

"Don't knock it. My checks come regular as God." Ralph Fenton, shipshape as anybody, collected; you couldn't get him to keep a job.

"Shoo—oot! It's a miracle to fill out them papers and something at the other end hears you and sends you money every month. Gives you faith to go on." Walt Evert had claimed disability; everybody knew Dr. Fordyce got his cut.

"Them machines! Tell 'm what's your problem and just sit and wait. Can't beat science. Evan'll tell you that."

"He's history," Ellen Last said. "That ain't science."

Evan smiled. "Science is a way of thinking," he said, "and that's what makes history. When you lose sight of things and run down, the machines do too."

"Like the body," old Tom said.

"Machines're sure good to me," Walt Evert said.

But, looking around, Evan thought history was really only this instant with all the generations from old Tom to little Ace Barnes in rooms like this all over the world and each one had to learn everything for himself, and he felt nothing he said in his classes made sense till they felt it on their own — even the force of an idea had to be lived — and everything was more haphazard and constant than history could predict. And where was all this passion in them going?

He reached out and drew Ace Barnes onto his lap. The child was flushed and warm, and the warmth went through Evan.

"Evan's right," Reverend Bullen said. "God gave us a mind to use and we have to work at it continually." One thing about Bullen: his parish he'd never stopped visiting day or night.

"Hear that, Edgar?" Myra Banks said to her son — twenty-two and on unemployment. "You got to use your mind."

"I work it twenty-six weeks and collect twenty-two!"

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“Now just s’pose everybody thought that way? Where’d this country be?”

“Where it is.” Ed Hilton’s old unflinching gaze was as blank as the fogged window.

“Time was,” old Tom said, “young ’ns took care of old folks after a while. But what do you say to kids when their own fathers’re supported by the old folks? Everything’s backwards. How’s a man know what to get ready for? When you’re ready, it’s not there anymore.”

“That’s change. You have to adjust, Tom,” Walter Evert said.

Old Tom didn’t answer.

“And time was,” Ed Hilton said, “people lived together in a house and knew who they were.” Next door to him lived a hive of young, sleeping around; the faces changed by the day.

“Maybe something new is coming into being,” Evan said.

“Young people don’t remember our times, Ed,” Reverend Bullen said, “but we’re working to get them on the right way.”

“Who’d know the right way if he seen it?”

The door opened and the thickening veil of cigarette smoke stirred and swirled: Old Reston came in from the garden. The truth was he longed for talk about Alma.

“It’d take a miracle to set us straight,” Ed added.

“A miracle?” The word struck old Reston. “You’ve no idea how little Alma was. A miracle her head was. At my wife’s age, what it cost to have Alma. I was petrified. ’You hurt, Esther?’ I said. She laughed — laughed, yes, in all that pain. ’Why should I hurt?’ she said. That head — I can still feel Alma’s tiny head.”

Esther too smiled, as if the miracle lay there. And Reston would have kept on, but in the front hall, as if in one part, old Ada Grigg and the Kruzinskis arrived together. No one could say which caused the momentary silence, whether the presence of that rich old lady, who lived virtually entombed at Grigg Heights, or of the Kruzinski boys and Wanda, with their father, old Teodor, scrubbed so his pocked skin and alcoholic red face shone, his white shirt and black suit and tie making him unrecognizably stiff and somewhat apprehensive.


“This house!” Ada Grigg said, and with her exclamation, half joy, half nostalgia, most of the others ceased talking and looked around to see what it was her eyes saw; for the first time the walls seemed to
spread, open to them — the high windows, the chandeliers, the long staircase, all the space beyond, though it couldn't hold a candle to Grigg Heights. "How long it's been. Do you know this house is eighteenth century — one of the few left — before my great-grandfather's time, and in that ell — built when the grandchildren, Benton's grandfather and great uncles, grew too many — Benton was born . . ." Names rose from her mouth and stood there, her head a town memory, and she spoke mellifluously, with dignity, and the sound fell pleasantly over them, a voice which they had no real recollection of but which had some claim on them.

But, Evan thought, you don't know it if it is not in you.

And when at last she recognized Benton, she said, "It can't be . . . Why, only yesterday —" And something clouded her face over, then vanished. "Time. You were —"

And just then the Episcopal chimes struck the late afternoon hymn, making a still instant, as if a stranger had entered the room.

"Like dot day you were little t'ing," Teodor Kruzinski's mouth, thick with English, said to Benton. "Come many people here. Come from everywhere. All town come. Cars here, there. Eat. Drink. Such day!" His laugh showed his rotting teeth.

"Yes! Your christening, Benton! It was an occasion. I believe it was the last one like it in town. Do you remember, Reverend —" But she broke off with a gracious laugh at her forgetfulness, for her minister, an Episcopalian, had died years before.

"My old man's always talking the big times this house had before Benton's pa blew his money," Wanda said.

"Benton they had lain in the master bedroom in a crib with white ruffles, and he wore the longest white gown trimmed with hand-done blue cutwork, and Reverend Warfield came and spent the day — ministers were really part of the family in those days — and Mrs. Kruzinski — you remember, Mr. Kruzinski — worked all night long to make all the fancy sandwiches and cakes, and Minna, Benton's grandmother, directed everything — tables on the lawn, three violinists . . . and how everyone dressed, you can't imagine . . ."

What an avalanche of memories! "And —"

"My Alma was baptized with seven others on Easter Sunday," Reston said.

"On the same day I was," Evan said. He had dreamed of Elena's baby, dreamed they had torn it out of her the instant before she'd died and held it up to him red and palpitating and then hidden it from him;
he had spent the whole dream frantically searching for it; when he woke, when he found out he’d awakened, he was shouting, “Let me in, let me in,” because he wanted to go back into the dream and find his baby. He shut his eyes, willed himself back, but he didn’t get there. The baby was still in her.

“Alma screamed for dear life when the minister wet her head,” Mrs. Reston smiled wistfully.

“My kids — I saved them up — all five together, just to get rid of the whole business at once, and he doused them in the river Jordan,” Rhetta Cole said, “splash, splash — under went their heads — five times, and that was it.”

“What good? Mine change their names like they change clothes,” Laura Bevins said. “You figure it.”

“Mine have a time getting clothes. Lazy! You wouldn’t believe it. Work’s a disease to them.” Abandoned years before, Willa Meier was on welfare. “Now my oldest’s on welfare too. Can’t keep a job, that one. I tell him, ‘When you’re old, you won’t draw a thing.’ He says, ‘That’s why I’m drawing it now.’ He could care less!”

“It don’t amount to a thing when you do get it,” Ed Hilton said.

“If everybody cared for work, it might,” Evan said. Elena had never worked a day in her life; until he’d met her, he did not know what endlessly rich really meant — ‘rich rich’ she used to discriminate.

“Might not too. Look at the ones don’t work — they get along best.”

“No — not!” old Kruzinski said. “We paid gov’ment nodding, so get nodding. Fools maybe. Once, go two weeks out on fishing boats, get four-five hundred dollar, spend — yeah, we like drink — but all years pay nodding to gov’ment. But I got boys. Boys don’t let poppa starve — like Poland, family all in one house, boys pay food, taxes — not, teacher?”

“A good family’s fine, but some aren’t so good, and sometimes sons die first.” But seeing old Reston’s eyes fall painfully on him, the words rose to shame him, and he said, “We have to protect everybody.”


Evan laughed. “We have to protect the fish then.”

“Protect fish!”

Over Evan’s shoulder Benton said, “One thing you can say for
Kruzinski: He may have no morals whatsoever but he works and
depends on nobody despite what he says.”

Evan knew how the worst of the Poles still lived on Easy Street,
sleeping too many to a room, on straw, chickens and pigs and ducks
wandering into the house, weekend orgies of drink and gambling and
whoring, nights ended with fights in the street among brothers and
neighbors and police. Kruzinski was so promiscuous there were
doubts about him with his daughters.

Now Kruzinski bent close to Ada Grigg, smiling. Something of an
old world charm, a courtliness alien to town, began to bloom in him.
She smiled, seated between old Tom and Kruzinski, like an alliance of
years. “Always when not fishing, your fodder and your husband give
old Teddy work. Never t'ink I sit with you like this.” His mouth
opened wide, laughed raucously; his arm went to the sofa back. In his
pocket a pint bottle glinted. She smiled again, but at his breath and
closeness she drew back ever so slightly; in her eyes centuries of
Puritan dignity sealed him off. “Well, Benton . . .” She rose, kissed
him, whispering, “. . . can't tell you . . . sad . . .” and nodded to them
all. “No, don't you bother, Evan. I had the taxi wait.” And her
prehistoric skin smiled again, and she went, slow, a cautious creature
slipping back into the fog.

Wanda whispered, “You, Poppa! Ain't you ashamed with that
bottle!” and to the brothers, “All three of ya! Not decent one single
day. I s'pose it'll be three days of bottles and Emil's accordion and
God knows what. Ain't you got no respect?”

“Aw, Wanda.”

“Don't Aw, Wanda me!”

But Wanda knew funerals always made Kruzinski think Momma
and the dead sons and one daughter, though on two wives he'd sired
fourteen, most still scattered over Long Island.

Kruzinski appealed to old Tom: “Good day forget, eh, Tom?” Tom
had had his share of loss: sons in the wars, one drowned at sea, most
of his family gone — only his grandsons left. And Tom understood
Kruzinski: the old Pole drank from lust, not to forget, but it was
Reston he watched and to Evan he said, “When one child's all, and
that's gone, there's nothing to go on.”

But they all were glad when Maude Allen said, “Never saw such
rich food.”

Her daughter, who never new when Maude Allen was lucid or
gone, said, “You'll be sick, Ma — please.”
Lydia Dalton said, “My great-grandson — sweet thing — brings me home what he don’t eat at school,” but aware of Reston’s eyes on her, her own gaze fled to her skirt and dug, immobile.

“Whyn’t you tell me?” Will Meier said. “I’m forever giving my free food away.”

“Great-grandson,” Reston murmered. “These big houses — once you had to fill them with children because so many didn’t live.” He and his wife would go back to their small house with the carpentry shop out back.

“Benton,” Evan said, “you’ll be moving back to town?”

“I’m going where the money is.”

“And this house?”

“That’s why. Property’s sky high. I can’t let it go.”

“Can’t let go! Can’t let go!” Reston braced up to him. “This house. It’s a person? It can’t die? You won’t let it! But let this house kill her —”

“Alfred!” his wife cried.

“—working, yes, always trying to pay bills when she wanted —” He raised his fists, raised them not at Benton, but at air — at the ceilings, the staircase, the empty rooms, at something high —

“Alfred—” She pressed his arms down, but he shrugged.

“—just to stay home and have babies — that’s so much to ask?—but had to keep this house—”

“Evan,” she whispered. “Come, Alfred —” She took one arm, insisted, Evan the other, and guided him through the kitchen, but that sight made him worse: “—and die for this,” striking the refrigerator, “crazy people — what kills, yes — and washing machine, dishwasher, electric this, electric that, and two cars, and why don’t you get rid of things choking my girl? and who’s here when she’s alone, dying, to love and help her, help, and life, only life, life—” He could hardly stand, but his wife and Evan held him.

Evan was silent, but teeming. Reston might have been talking about Elena: She’d wanted a baby, but with a difference — she wanted no change in the world, “There’s a thing in me — I go where it goes. I can’t stick to your way, Evan, close to work and quiet. I can’t channel drives. What drives? You see what you get into with me. I want you but don’t, want a baby but don’t, though you’re good good good — in bed and out.” He had persuaded her No pills. “Once you start letting the thing grow in you, you’ll want it, it will be another you, cure everything — give it a chance! — you won’t want that other
world you’re from.” She said, “Baby, you don’t know what you’re contending with. Just once go to Southampton with me, will you — please?” Sure, he’d go —

Outside, Mrs. Reston said, “Now sit with me, Alfred.” He sat, holding her hand, but he murmured, “Like she’s under a heap of machines, like all of us; there’ll be no more room, Esther, just miles of dead machines piled up the way we used to pile boxes on the Common for the Fourth of July bonfire, and someday they’ll fill the ocean with machines, miles, miles—” He began to sob. “I want to hate Benton, but it’s not Benton, it’s some sickness we made in the world and it’s turning back on us, and when you think of all the children—”

“We’ll work our way out of it, Mr. Reston,” Evan said.

“So schoolteachers have the answers at last?” His tone bit, but Evan understood — he was used to that.

“There are people who work at where things are going. It doesn’t seem to be true, but some alone, silently, and some in groups — in all fields. You have to have faith in them. If I didn’t believe that, I’d sit and wait for some miracle to come through this fog.”

“How’d we teach them something owes them life?” Esther Reston said. Pain sounded, muffled in her throat. “We have to give to life— Once you knew what part of town poor and sick were, but now it’s every street and class, only it’s not poor, it’s a great sickness. How did we teach them to believe it’s pleasure life owes them, not work? They sit and wait for gifts from some great central office up-island. What kind of heaven’s that? What’s happening to our town, Evan?”

He didn’t answer. He stared into the fog: glows white as angels, and darks — peonies; over, the darks of maples; a vague beyond. He listened, and he felt — as more and more frequently he did feel — that he was in an endless room from which he could hear an incredibly large machine and many independent little ones, and now and then he heard a silence which made him realize something had been sounding all the time: something had stopped. The silences were becoming more frequent. Something was breaking down.

“Alma never had time to touch her own flowers,” Reston said. “Shhhh,” she said.

“It’s better for him to talk about Alma, Ms. Reston,” Evan said.

In the street children’s voices were calling to each other. A can rattled over the pavement: kick the can in the fog. A tussle set up. He smiled.

“Cut that out, you kids!” a woman’s voice cried. “You’ll get hit by a
“Up you!” a boy cried.
“I’ll get you for that!” she cried. Laughs cut through, feet ran, stillness settled, all but for the voices, talks and laughs, through the open windows nearby. Far, a dog barked; farther, a dog answered, setting up a volley in the distance.
“Evan, why didn’t you stay in the City?” Reston said.
He wanted to tell them: Because of Elena. It might even in some way console them, but he couldn’t. “Because there’s a place for me here. All my life I’ve known these people.”
“It must be wonderful in the City — so many people. You could maybe forget.”
Had all the old man’s possibilities ended with his daughter?
“You don’t forget anywhere, Mr. Reston.” He saw Elena in the hospital, doped to the gills, her mind blown, and pregnant. Days he’d waited in the corridor, futile. They’d taken her body to Southampton, but something in him had to go to a cemetery. He went to the Brooklyn cemetery: Stone filled his eyes, a miniature city of stone, endless stone.
“The City’s a terrible place,” he said. “Everybody dreams of it, but it’s terrible.” Yet nights he dreamed of it still. “There’s so much of everything there that you can’t sort it out.” Sex, dope, stealing, murder, unemployment, but mostly fear, endless varieties of fear. “After a while you don’t see things, you take them for granted, and you don’t feel anything either. You wonder what we are that we have to fear each other so much. You want to get back to feeling. You want to make a new city. And where does a man go to begin, but home? The city’s like walking deeper into a sewer, deeper and down.” Pregnant. It was his fault. *Bring nothing into this world*, Elena had screamed, *nothing*, though she wanted to be tied to this world, tied, she did — but not. *Nothing*, she kept crying, *nothing*. Sometimes, staring at the empty sky over the Sound, he heard Elena’s voice fill the sky, *Nothing*.
“But why?” Reston said. It startled Evan.
“Why?”
“Why’d she do that?”
“She? Ahhh.” Reston meant Alma.
“Not a trace of anything,” Reston said. “The door not even locked. She must have just cleaned the house — it smelled so sweet, and everything in place. ‘Alma?’ I called her. Nothing. I went through
every room. Not a sign. Money — she could've asked me. I'm a carpenter. I can still do work.” He sobbed. “Twenty-seven and no babies.”

“Shhhh, Alfred.” But there was a choke in her. They held each other, close as one figure, dark in the fog, which made strange amoeboid shapes now, something invisible moving it, a warm rising motion creating gaps, thickening it, thinning. It made you doubt the hard ground.

Somewhere beyond — across the bay, past Shelter Island and Sag Harbor — lay Southampton. “Come into my world,” Elena’d said. So he had gone— She had wanted to cure him of her, had she? He hadn’t believed what went on in the set, on yachts. Only the skipper stayed sober. “He’s paid to be sober but not chaste.” Elena saw to that. “The only worth’s the trip. When you come down, you’re back in this, and I’d rather be dead than stay in this every minute.” “Once you’re pregnant you’ll want this,” he’d said. “You’re wrong, and if I get pregnant I’ll go over, I’ll have the courage then — the great leap, out. I want out.” But she’d stopped the pills.

He saw her in the fog, always like that, beckoning. He never understood what it was she couldn’t bear. Now he would never know.

“Evan, tell Benton we’ve gone, will you? Come, Alfred.”

“Can't I take you?”

“We know the way blindfolded, thanks.”

“Alma never went far,” Reston said. “We can see this house from ours. Listen—” Through the fog came the melancholy strain of an accordion.

“That’s Emil.” You could tell a ceremony: The old German bachelor in the house across the way, who dug graves, grieved in song.

Evan listened to the Restons’ steps. He stood for a moment in the garden, looking toward the sound of the accordion, but he saw only the veiled deeps and, close, the host of vague white forms in the dark web of stems. He touched a dark peony, damp, and carried the sweet bitter scent to his mouth. The he went toward the shaft of light from the kitchen windows.

Inside the women tidied up as people left, cleaning plates, packing food, washing ashtrays. And the crowd was thinning, perhaps from old Reston’s outburst or satiation or the long wear of the service, the ride to the cemetery, the ceremony there.

Children were picking at the table, stuffing their mouths and
pockets.
"Better swallow one before you eat the other." Evan patted the Edwards boy on the head. The hair was hot and sweaty. "Kick the can?" he whispered and winked. The boy blushed.
"Only good feed I ever get's at buryings," the Barnes' grandmother said.
"You take some home," Benton said. "Lida, make up a plate for Mrs. Barnes."
Reverend Bullen said, "I trust we'll see you before you go back to Detroit, Benton." He held Benton's hand too long — his brows twitched.
"Not go back Detroit?" Kruzinski said. With so many gone he had his bottle in his hand now.
"As soon as I can arrange things. They're expecting me back," Benton said.
"You Harveys strong, got guts," Kruzinski said.
"Will you close up the house?" the minister said.
"For a while. Alma's people'll look after it for me."
"Hooo — not be long and you got one odder wife."
"Shut your mouth, poppa," Wanda said. "Boys, get poppa outa here 'fore I get on my high horse."
Benton said, "He's okay — aren't you, Mr. Kruzinski."
"Say what comes. Don't mean nodding bad, Benton."
"Of course not." Kruzinski grasped Benton's hand and stared. His mouth opened but his eyes quivered, perplexed, and seemed to go numb. He dropped the hand, shook his head, and left. They heard him stumble on the porch step. "Goddamn!"
"Shut your dirty mouth," Wanda said.
They heard the kids playing in the street again. Evan noticed the Edwards boy was gone.
"I'll see my lawyer in the morning, and I'll need to see you, Reverend Bullen. I don't trust the mail," Benton said. There were the costs.
"All in good time. Well—" The minister nodded and left.
"And you don't think of going back to the City again, Evan?" Benton said.
"Not if I ever stop to think first. It was too painful getting away from it."
"You never do that. You'd be a fool to think it any different here."
"Sometimes you have to start where the ground's familiar," Evan
"Not without cash," Benton said. "Everything breaks down without that."

"If you let it." It was old Tom. "Good to see you again, Benton. I'm sorry it was in such sad circumstances." He held out his crippled hand.

Outside you could hear the familiar wheels of his pushcart. The sound was unmistakable.

Now, with the quiet, there was an actual sense of peace in the house, a quiet order with things being set in place, the tumult of voices diminished; and space opened up around them.

"You," Evan said to three of the boys," "I'll see tomorrow."

Lida Hill pointed to hers. "He'll be there, you can just bet."

"I'll count on it," Evan said.

When he shook hands with Benton, he wanted to say something — about what it cost, the worth: And it occurred to him that somehow it was the loss of Elena and the baby he would never see that had driven him back here and he wanted to believe it had a part in all this that was happening, but he knew nothing, he could say nothing.

He went outside. Now the air made the odors of tobacco and food and people stale in the clean salt damp, and he felt the presence of space though he could not see. He imagined how clear the air would be when the fog burned off in the morning and you wouldn't have to stumble so.

He halted — to listen: from across the way, joining Emil's accordion, Kruzinski's deep bass, low now and not raucous, sang in Polish, and Wanda's voice blended into it. And the man's voice and the woman's rose in an old and sad and beautiful song, and they seemed to be struggling to say something about life which they did not understand but felt.

He went down the steps into the street. The fog was still dense, but a warm breeze kept breaking it here and there. All down the street the sound kept on: It told him where he was, though further on he slipped and nearly fell on a small object. He stooped for it — a little wooden locomotive with a missing wheel. He put it in his jacket pocket. Tomorrow he would give it to Tom. All year long the old man collected broken toys and repaired them for kids who would have nothing at Christmas.