

A Light in the Window

by Stephen Egbertson

The first rays of the morning light filtered through the small cracks in the blinds and settled gently onto Harry Tills' cheek. The soft touch of the light did not disturb his sleep at first. It was probably the slight warmth that came with the light that first alerted his senses. This first light of day slowly spread across the night's growth of scratchy whiskers, across the pale parchment skin, cautiously creeping into the deeper valley of his left eye. It was at this point that Harry blinked, an involuntary testing of this first manifestation of another empty day. As Harry lay in bed with his eyes closed, ambivalence dominated his consciousness. Another long and lonely day, filled with empty, meaningless moments, had arrived.

The sounds of the street below began to intrude on Harry's senses. There was the squeak of a rusty pulley, as Mrs. Montoni hung her morning wash out to dry far above the alley. Somewhere, far away, a dog barked; a car horn sounded; a child began to cry in a room down the hall. This jumble of sound was ample warning that another day was about to begin for Harry Tills.

As Harry lay there with his eyes closed, he was aware that the longer he put off his rising, the more that rising would hurt. His muscles would ache. His stiff legs would shout with pain. A headache would begin. All of these signals were telling him to rise and relieve those discomforts. Harry knew that he had to face the aches of age with dignity—Harry Tills was an old man.

With a sigh of resignation, he struggled to a sitting position and swung his legs over the side of the bed. The clock hanging above the old ice-box that covered the

crack in the wall read ten o'clock. This meant little to Harry. Time itself meant little to Harry. Time was merely something that had to pass, as he stood aside and watched. When he heard the rattle-crash of the garbage cans in the alley below, he knew that it was Wednesday. It could have been a Monday, Thursday, or a Saturday. All the days of Harry's week contained the essence of sameness, the fragile foundation upon which Harry's life was built. He wondered if this Wednesday would bring a visit from Roger. Roger was Harry's only connection with the joys of family life, his late brother Vern's only child. Roger "looked after" his Uncle Harry, who lived alone in his one room walk-up on Albert Street. Roger would stop by, usually once every week or ten days, sticking his nose into Harry's ice box to see if he had enough to eat and to check on the one leaky radiator.

Whenever he came, Roger would stomp through the door with a robust "Hey there, Harry, where're you at?" It never mattered that Harry was always sitting in the same rocker by the window overlooking Albert Street. Roger would plop a bag of groceries down on the table. "Brought you some vittles, Harry!", he would exclaim. Harry became quite irritated whenever Roger used that hokey, "down-home" manner of speaking when he addressed him. But Harry knew it was useless to ask him to stop.

"How you doing?" Roger would ask.

"Fine," Harry would reply.

"Arthritis actin' up?" Roger asks.

"Sometimes," Harry would pick up on the game.

In between questions and answers there would be long intervals of silence, as Roger shuffled and poked his way

around Harry's room. Harry just suffered in silence.

"You know, Harry, you don't get out enough. You look paler n' hell," Roger went on, "We'll have to have you out to the house again, one of these days. Rose and the kids are anxious to see you again."

This was an invitation Harry had heard many times before. Harry had never met Roger's family, tucked safely out of the way in Martindale, thirty miles away. Harry really didn't care.

"That Roger, I really wish he'd stay to home," Harry once said to his friend, Will, as they sat on the bench by the bandshell in the park, tossing stale bread to the pigeons one blustery October afternoon. "Always poking his nose into my business. Such a jerk! He thinks he needs to look after me, me being old and all. Folks having old relatives feel that way, you know, Will. They need to do for us, even when it ain't needed." This was as close to a speech as Harry would ever get.

One might think that Harry's thoughts, as he sat on his bed, would dwell with some bitterness about his style of life: living in one bare room, the empty days and lack of companionship. But no! Quite the contrary. Harry believed that he was well off. He had his health. He got around pretty well and managed to retain most of "his marbles", as he so quaintly put it.

Harry did not care for Roger's visits. Roger was all the family Harry had, but Roger offended Harry's sense of independence. Listening to Roger's banal chatter might be too high a price to pay for family ties and a bag of groceries. No, Roger was just an unpleasant event that fell into the awesome chasm of Harry's day, the way the occasional shooting star fell into a barren evening sky.

Harry reached over and opened the blinds. Peering out, he saw a sparkling, silvery autumn day. A bright blue sky lay over the buildings across the street, filled with mountains of billowy, white clouds. The sun streamed through the clouds, casting a metallic sheen onto the street below. For Harry, it might as well have been raining.

Harry looked at the sink against the far wall and ran his hand over his scratchy cheek. Harry was old, but he was meticulous. He made it a point to shave and wash every day. "Ain't going to be looking like any old bum!" he would say to himself. Actually, his morning wash-up was one of the major activities of his day.

Yes, Harry figured that he was still fairly fit for a man of his years. He could still do most of the things that a person taking care of himself was expected to do. It just took him longer. This was fine with Harry. It actually helped keep the time from getting out of hand, giving him a little more to occupy his long hours. A couple years ago, the dozen steps over to the sink required no more time and effort than the thinking of it. Now, the essence of the trip was a painful rising from the bed and a slow shuffle, including the cracking of his joints.

Harry gazed into the dusty, smeared mirror, splattered with the remnants of many previous encounters with this corner of his life.

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The face which peered back through the cloudy web of dried water-film began to shed it's aged appearance, as Harry's mind wandered back through the years. The face that looked back was that of a skinny boy of twelve, with bright blue eyes and corn-silk hair that sprayed above the back of his head in an unruly rooster-tail. He was a quiet

lad sitting on a fence rail along the side of Ripley Road, wearing a checked shirt and dungarees. The flies buzzed with a persistence that hot August day, as young Harry Tills sat, waiting for Emily to pass by. Harry waited there nearly every day that past month, waiting to see and to talk to Emily, waiting to be noticed by Emily. Most days, he would sit by the side of the road at about the time that he expected Emily to pass. Young Harry would sit, and his anticipation would build, giving him in time, a loose, nervous feeling. Emily became a goddess at these times, as our hero's self-confidence reached its nadir. Harry rehearsed what he wanted to say, fearing his squeaky, changing voice. It all crashed around his mind in a whirling, dazzling display. Also, distracting thoughts of unfinished chores tugged at our nervous Romeo.

The longer Emily took to appear over the crest of Ripley Road, the more shattered young Harry's confidence became. On this particular hot August day, as Emily passed by the fence at the side of the road, she looked into the cow field where the old bull stood quietly munching the grass, right past the spot that Harry had fled a few moments before.

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The face in the mirror returned to its normal, aged aspect, as Harry noticed that the water that morning was reasonably hot. With delicate and methodical care, he washed, shaved, and combed his thin, wispy gray hair. The rest of the morning was spent with his breakfast, a bowl of corn flakes with milk. On some days, he was able to enjoy an orange or a banana. Last week, that kind Mrs. Andrews from down the hall, had brought him a small bag of fruit. But, he had eaten the last piece two or three days ago. On cold days, he would heat up the milk. Often, he forgot about it and burned the pan.

After rinsing his dishes and leaning them against the side of the sink to dry, he shuffled over to his rocker and sat, looking out of the window onto the street below. The noonday traffic coursed and bustled below him. The sharp, piercing tone of Mrs. Montoni's voice flew up to his ears in a frenzied dialog with Mr. Carter, the mailman. It concerned something about "theesa young kidsa today..." Love, rage, passion, indifference—all the qualities of life on Albert Street billowed up and surrounded the empty gaze of the old man sitting at the window.

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A tall, fine-looking lad of nineteen stood proudly on the railway station platform, dressed in a uniform of brown. The wide leather belt around his waist and the shiny boots on his feet, proudly proclaimed this newly invested warrior, chosen to defend his country and his way of life.

Harry Tills stood on the platform, staring straight ahead, in silent company with the plain young girl at his side. After a lifetime of nurturing and providing for her son, Harry's mother died, leaving him alone and naked to the tribulations of everyday life. He was now totally dependent upon his neighbors and his few friends. Harry's mother was his rock in life. She was his steady companion and his constant provider. She listened to his complaints and filled her son's life with a constant flow of motherly benevolence.

She was his one ministering angel. Now she was gone. Harry was a farm boy and a dutiful, if somewhat uninspired, son. The able performance of his chores posed no problems for Harry. He would labor from dawn to well past sundown with unimaginative perseverance.

He faced the daily toil knowing in his heart that at the end of his day, his Home and his Mother were waiting.

With the sudden vacuum in his life, unable to survive in an unfamiliar state of independence, after a few short weeks of mourning, Harry found himself making the transition from son to prospective husband. Having almost nowhere to turn, Harry proposed to Amanda Proust, who lived in the next house down the hill. For Amanda's part, having always worshipped Harry from afar, she was quite willing to accept the responsibility of caring for her handsome Prince.

As sometimes happens with life's little surprises, Harry's actual entrance into this blissful, symbiotic state was postponed indefinitely. Uncle Sam became Harry's provider with the unexpected appearance of a draft notice. It was along and dismal interlude in an equally long and dismal life. Harry labored on the muddy brown battlefields. The artillery boomed and thundered overhead. The glare of the starshell lighted the nights, providing a second sun for the other side of the day. Back and forth, again and again, Harry's army battled across the same piece of ground, around the twisted and truncated trees, over the empty, blasted craters, and over the mangled and battered bodies of the dead and nearly dead.

Friendships came hard to Harry, even in normal times. Under the circumstances of the war, death and injury removed most of those who were close to him. It was an endless process that erased hope and life from Harry, just as the landscape was shorn of its vitality by the ravages of the war. Towards the end of this ordeal, as if to be sure that the task was complete, as one would give an up-turned, empty bottle a final shake, destiny gave the vessel of Harry's life a final swipe. Amanda Proust, Harry's fiancée, died of Influenza.

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The sharp squeal of tires and the piercing blast of a policeman's whistle brought Harry back from his reverie. The expression on his face, the empty eyes and the thin, hollow cheeks, gave mute evidence of his reflections on the battles he was reliving. It was a face as empty of life as the battlefields over which he had fought a lifetime ago. It was now later in the afternoon. The sun had moved over the building. Albert Street was in shadows. Harry had a thought that he might take a walk down to the park at the end of the street and have a chat with Will. Harry had worked all his life at many jobs: selling books and paper supplies, odd-jobbing on farms, roaming back and forth across the country, looking for something or someone that always managed to stay just out of reach. When Harry came to Millboro, he found his first and only real friend. Will and Harry worked together for a while in the shoe factory, until arthritis forced Harry's early retirement.

After that, they would spend time together in the park, feeding the pigeons and discussing affairs.

"I don't need much anymore, Will," Harry would say as they sat on their favorite bench by the bandshell. "Don't want folks coming around, trying to help an ol' man. I do alright! I get around fine, 'cept when my arthritis acts up every now n' then."

Will never said much; he was a good listener. He genuinely liked Harry and he knew that he was Harry's only friend. So, he usually refrained from comment on Harry's most outrageous declarations. It was a good relationship. Will would take all of the emptiness that Harry could pour into him.

Harry rose halfway out of his chair, only to fall back again with a sigh. He remembered that Will had died two months ago. As it had been the many other times in Harry's life, when the love or friendship he sought was torn from his grasp, not once, but over and over again as he relived his empty life; so it was again that Harry's face became a bit emptier, his light shined a bit dimmer. The room became hushed and darkened as the day receded.

The dull green walls seemed to absorb the light, even after Harry walked over to the cord hanging from the center of the ceiling and turned on the light. The long shadows of the afternoon were chased by the new shadows created by the light. The new shadows of loneliness replaced the old shadows of Harry's reminiscences.

Harry glanced up at the clock with the cracked face and saw that it was approaching five o'clock. With a slightly trembling hand, he reached up and turned on the old radio on the shelf over the counter. Harry's main companions these days were the news programs and the talk shows. Harry would sit in his chair and listen to his fellow citizens complain, praise, and condemn with sometimes-lengthy discourses. He sat there and discussed the issues right along with them, offering his opinions to the cracks in the dull green walls.

After he had eaten his evening meal of soup and crackers, and rinsed his pan and dish, he resumed his place in the chair by the window. The evening chill had begun to set in, so Harry lowered the window, shutting out the rest of the world. Behind him, the radio droned on. The host of the talk show was discussing today's society and its obligation to the elderly. Harry began to follow the drift of the current caller, an aristocratic sounding young man who was boring the audience with an endless list of contributions of our senior citizens: how much we

owe and will never repay. Harry began to think of the sum of his own contributions: his service in the war, how he always paid his debts and taxes, how he never burdened society the way so many do these days. As he searched his mind for these accomplishments, it was like searching a vast arena of mostly empty seats, looking for a familiar face. The shouts and the sounds of conversation would rattle around, echoing off the far walls. He had a feeling of having struggled long and hard.

His body was tired and aching. There was always so much involved in the knowing and remembering of all the necessities of living: filing taxes, renewing licenses, answering letters. He never had anyone to help him since his mother died. He always worked hard at whatever he was doing. He had known only a lifetime of toil and struggle, of trying to keep life from getting too far ahead of him, of reaching the top of a hill only to see a larger hill ahead. Harry wandered through this vast, empty arena of his life, looking for that friendly face, and finding few.

He had managed to take all the abuse that an indifferent and uncaring world could dish out. A small flame would brighten the dark recesses of his life, such as the gift of a friend or an intended mate, only to be snuffed out before he could know it. He really didn't want anything or anyone any longer!

"Where was all them friends before?" he asked his friend, Will, as they sat on the bench one spring day. "I've been pretty good company to myself all these years, I don't want to learn to like anybody else anymore." He had done the best that he could, and deep down, he knew that it just wasn't all that much.

He remembered when he was a young boy, trudging home, past the corner of Sump's cornfield. The field was

trampled where the boys were allowed to play ball. On he went past the boys, none of whose names he could remember; on he went past his lost youth. He went on home to the stingy farm on Ripley Road, on to the chores: the milking, the feeding, and the mucking out, then on to the next day.

Harry was comfortable in his solitude now. He wore it like an old worn pair of shoes, whose soft, scratched and pliant leather was as yielding as he himself had become. No cares anymore. No point!

"An ol' guy like me just wants to be let alone," he'd say. "Don't want anyone to do nothin' for me, just to make themselves feel good."

Harry knew that he was almost finished. He was on the downside and he was comfortable with what little he had and what little he had done. So where was his life? It seemed as if it really wasn't there at all. Things came and went so fast. It was an empty freight train, rushing through an uninhabited region with no one seeing it, or even knowing where it came from, or where it was going, or what it held.

The shadows lengthened and the street lights came on. The light just outside Harry's window momentarily flared. It filled Harry's darkened room with light. It was a brief glory of illumination that quickly settled back to a dull glow. Harry had a flash of realization that the brief flash of the street lamp was as his own life might appear. It was short. It reached into few corners. No one seemed to be around to make much use of it. Yet, brief as it was, it was there. It had happened. Harry closed his eyes, and the light went out.

The end.