

The Lost Boy: A Novella by Thomas Wolfe ed. James W. Clark, Jr. (University of North Carolina Press, 1992) Part IV pgs. 59-77.

.... "This is King's Highway," a man said.

And then I looked and saw that it was just a street. There were some big new buildings, a big hotel, some restaurants and "bar-grill" places, of the modern kind, the livid monotone of Neon lights, the ceaseless traffic of the motor cars – all this was new, but it was just a street. And I knew that it had always been a street, and nothing more – but somehow – I stood there looking at it, wondering what else I had expected to find.

The man kept looking at me with inquiry, and I asked him if the Fair had not been out this way.

"Sure, the Fair was out beyond here," the man said.

"Where the park is now. But this street you're looking for? – Don't you remember the name of the street or nothin'?" the man said.

I said I thought the name of the street was Edgemont Street, but that I was not sure. But that it was something like that. And I said the house was on the corner of this street and of another street. And then the man said, "What street was that?" I said I did not know but that the house was on the corner of the street, and that King's Highway was a block or so away and that an interurban line ran past about half a block or so from where we lived.

"What line was this?" the man said, and stared at me.

"The interurban line," I said.

Then he stared at me again and at the man with him, and finally, "I don't know no interurban line," he said.

I said it was a line that ran behind some houses and that there were board fences there and grass beside the tracks. I said it seemed to go right through somewhere behind some houses. But somehow I could not say that it was summer in those days and that you could smell the ties, a kind of wooden tarry smell, and feel a kind of absence in the afternoon after the car had gone. I only said the interurban line was back behind somewhere between the back yards of some houses and some old board fences, and that King's Highway was a block or two away.

I did not say King's Highway had not been a street in those days but a kind of road that wound from magic out of some dim and haunted land and that along the way it had got mixed in with Tom the Piper's son, with hot cross buns, with all the light that came and went, and with cloud shadows passing on the mountains, with coming down through Indiana in the morning, and the smell of engine smoke, the Union Station, and most of all with voices lost and far and long ago that said "King's Highway."

I didn't say these things about King's Highway because I looked about me, and I saw what King's Highway was. King's Highway was a street, a broad and busy street with new hotels and hard bright lights, and endless flocks of motors swarming up and down. All I could say was that the street was near King's Highway, and was on the corner, and that the interurban trolley line was close to there. I said it was a stone house, and that there were stone steps before it, and a strip of grass. I said I thought the house had had a turret at one corner, I could not be sure.

The men looked at me and one said, "This is King's Highway, but we never heard of any street like that."

I left them then and went on till I found the place. And again, again, I turned into the street, finding the place where two corners meet, the huddled block, the turret, and the steps, and paused for a moment, looking back, as if the street was Time.

So I waited for a moment for a word, and for a door to open, for the child to come. I waited, but no words were spoken; no one came.

Yet all of it was just as it had always been except the steps were lower and the porch less high, the strip of grass less wide than I had thought, but all the rest of it as I had known it would be. A graystone front, three-storied, with a slant slate roof, the side red brick and windowed, still with the old arched entrance in the center for the doctor's use.

There was a tree in front, a lamp post, and behind and to the side more trees than I had known there would be. And all the slatery turret gables, all the slatery window gables going into points, the two arched windows, in strong stone, in the front room. The small stone porch, stone-carved, with its roof of gabled slate beside.

And it was all so strong, so solid and so ugly – and all, save for the steps and grass, so enduring and so good, the way I had remembered it, the way I knew that I would not get fooled, the way I knew it would not lie to me, really just the way that it has always been, except I did not smell the tar, the hot and caulky dryness of the old cracked ties, the boards of backyard fences and the coarse and sultry grass, and the absence in the afternoon when the street car had gone, and the twins, sharp-visaged in their sailor suits, pumping with furious shrillness on tricycles up and down before the house, and Simpson coming back from somewhere with his basket, and the feel of the hot afternoon, and that every one was absent at the Fair.

Except for this, it all was just the same, except for this and for King's Highway, which was now a street, except for this, King's Highway, and the child that did not come.

It was a hot day. Darkness had come, the heat rose up and hung and sweltered like a sodden blanket in St. Louis. It was wet heat, and one knew that there would be no relief or coolness in the night, and one knew the heat would stay. And when one tried to think of the time when the heat would go away, one said, "It cannot last. It's bound to go away," as we always say it in America. But one did not believe it when he said it. The heat soaked down and men sweltered in it, the faces of the people were pale and greasy with the heat. And in their faces was a kind of patient wretchedness, and one felt the kind of desolation that one feels at the end of a hot day in a great city in America – when one's home is far away, across the continent, and he thinks of all that distance, all that heat, and feels, "Oh God! But it's a big country!"

The way it made one feel was the way one feels when he is far away and all alone in a big city on a day like this, and hears the sound of trains, of bells, of engine whistles, and of boats out on the river, and when he walks along the street beneath hot clusters of electric light, or seeks the park – the bleached grass, the littered rubbish of soiled newspapers, and people sprawled out on the yellowed grass – or when he sees the kind of bench they put in the parks here in America to make one cheerful at the end of a hot day – a concrete bench, with the hard hot glare of the dead electric light upon it, so that people will behave themselves, and with a concrete arm or barrier across the middle, so that people won't lie down.

Or it makes one feel the way one feels in a city like this when he comes out on an open place, a fine square, a civic center, and sees a fine new city or community center, all lighted up with searchlights and surrounded by fine new standard lamp posts, each with five hard grapes of dead

electric light. He sees men in shirtsleeves and sag faces lounging at the corners, or women sitting on the porches with no stockings on, relapsing limply to the heat with the hard hot white of dead electric light upon them.

And he hears the trains, the engine whistles and the boats out on the river, and thinks of all that distance, all that heat, and not with joy, and not with hope, and not as one who thinks of the Great West and of the rampart of the shining mountains, but as some one drowned and lost and sunken on the sea floors of unending desolation, as of some one swimming in a dream.

He knows that it is endless, he is drowned, that he cannot escape. He knows that he is lost and sunken in America, that it is too big for him, and that he has no home. He knows he cannot grasp and hold it or comprise it, shape it to a flaming word, as once, in the exultant hope and madness of youth and loneliness and night, he knew he could. He knows now that he is only a nameless atom lost in vacancy, a brief and dusty cipher, whirled homelessly in unnumbered time, and that all the dreams, the strength, the passion, the belief of youth have gone amont.

And he feels nothing but absence, absence, and the desolation of America, the loneliness and sadness of the high, hot skied, and evening coming on across the Middle West, across the sweltering and heat-sunken land, across all the lonely little towns, the farms, the fields, the oven swelter of Ohio, Kansas, Iowa, and Indiana at the close of day, and voices, casual in heat, voices at the little stations, quiet, casual, somehow faded into that enormous vacancy and weariness of heat, of space, and of the immense, the sorrowful and most high and awful skies.

Then he hears the engine and the wheel again, the wailing whistle and the bell, the sound of shifting in the sweltering yard, and walks the street, and walks the street, beneath the clusters of hard lights, and by the people with sagged faces, and is drowned in desolation and in no belief. "Why here? What shall I do now? Where shall I go?"

He feels the way one feels when one comes back, and knows that he should not have come, and when he sees that, after all, King's Highway is – a street; and St. Louis – the enchanted name – a big hot common town upon the river, sweltering in wet dreary het, and not quite South, and nothing else enough to make it better.

It had not been like this before. I could remember how it would get hot, and how good the heat was, and how I would lie out in the back yard on an airing mattress, and how the mattress would get hot and dry and smell like a hot mattress full of sun, and how the sun would make me want to sleep, and how, sometimes, I would go down into the basement to feel coolness, and how the cellar smelled as cellars always smell – a kind of cool, stale smell, a smell of cobwebs and grimy bottles. And I would remember, when you opened the door upstairs, and went down to the cellar, the smell of the cellar would come up to you – cool, musty, stale and dank and dark – and how the thought of the dark cellar always filled me with a kind of numb excitement, a kind of visceral expectancy.

I could remember how it got hot in the afternoons, and how I would feel absence in the afternoons, a sense of absence and vague sadness in the afternoons, when every one had gone away. The house would seem so lonely in the afternoons, and sometimes I would sit inside, on the second step of the hall stairs, and listen to the sound of silence and of absence in the afternoon. I could smell the oil upon the floor and on the stairs, and see the sliding doors with their brown varnish and the beady chains across the door, and thrust my hands among the beady

chains, and gather them together in my arms, and let them clash, and swish with light beady swishings all round me. I could feel darkness, absence, varnished darkness and stained light, within the house, through the stained glass of the window on the stairs, through the small stained light and absence, silence and the smell of floor oil and vague sadness in the house in a hot mid-afternoon. And all these things themselves would have a kind of life: would seem to wait attentively, to be most living and most still.

I would sit there and listen. I could hear the girl next door practice her piano lessons in the afternoon, and hear the street car coming by between the backyard fences, half a block away, and smell the dry and sultry smell of backyard fences, the smell of coarse hot grasses by the car track in the afternoon, the smell of tar, of dry caulked ties, the smell of bright worn flanges, and feel the loneliness of back yards in the afternoon and the sense of absence, absence, when the car is gone.

Then I would long for evening and return, the slant of light, and the feet along the street, the sharp-faced twins in sailor suits upon their tricycles, the smell of supper and the sound of voices in the house again, and Grover coming from the Fair.

... And again, again, I turned into the street, finding the place where the two corners meet, turning at last to see if Time was there. I passed the house, some lights were burning in the house, the door was open and a woman sat upon the porch. And presently I turned and stopped before the house again. The corner light fell blank upon the house. I stood looking at the house a moment, and I put my foot upon the step.

Then I said to the woman who was sitting on the porch:

“This house.... excuse me.... but could you tell me, please, who lives here in this house.”

I knew my words were strange and hollow and I had not said what I wished to say. She stared at me a moment, puzzled.

Then she said, “I live here. Who are you looking for?” she said.

I said, “Why, I am looking for....”

And then I stopped, because I knew I could not tell her what it was that I was looking for. My words were wrenched and foolish now when I felt her looking at me, and I did not know what to say.

“There used to be a house –“ I said.

The woman was now staring hard at me. I said – “I think I used to live here” – she said nothing.

In a moment I continued – “I used to live here in this house,” I said, “when I was a little boy.”

She was silent for a moment, looking at me, then she said, “Oh. Are you sure this was the house? Do you remember the address?”

“I have forgotten the address,” I said, “but it was Edgemont Street, and it was on the corner. And I know this is the house.”

“This isn’t Edgemont Street,” the woman said, “the name is Bates.”

“Well, then, they changed the name of the street,” I said, “but this is the same house. It hasn’t changed.”

She was silent a moment, then she nodded: “Yes. They did change the name of the street. I remember hearing that it used to have another name. When I was a child they called it something else,” she said. “But that was a long time ago. When was it that you lived here?”

“In 1904.”

Again she was silent, looking at me for a moment. Then presently: “Oh... That was the year of the Fair. You were here then?”

“Yes,” I now spoke rapidly, with more confidence, “my mother had the house, and we were here for seven months... and the house belonged to Dr. Packer,” – I went on – “We rented it from him –“

“Yes,” the woman said, and nodded now – “this was Dr. Packer’s house. I never knew him. I’ve only been here a few years, but Dr. Packer owned this house ... He’s dead now, he’s been dead for many years. But this was the Packer house, all right,” the woman said.

“That entrance on the side,” I said, “where the steps go up, that was for Dr. Packer’s patients. That was the entrance to his office. That’s the way his patients came and went.”

“Oh,” the woman said, “I didn’t know that. I’ve often wondered what it was. I didn’t know what it was for.”

“And this big room in front here,” I continued, “that was the doctor’s office. And there were sliding doors, and next to it, a kind of alcove for his patients –”

“Yes, the alcove is still there, only all of it has been made into one room now – and I never knew just what the alcove was for.”

“ – And there were sliding doors on this side too that opened on the hall – and a stairway going up upon this side. And half way up the stairway, at the landing, a little window of colored glass – and across the sliding doors here in the hall, a kind of curtain made of strings of beads.”

She nodded, smiling. “Yes, it’s just the same – we still have the sliding doors and the stained glass window on the stairs. There’s no bead curtain any more,” she said, “but I remember when people had them. I know what you mean.”

“When we were here,” I said, “we used the doctor’s office for a parlor – except later on – the last month or two – and then we used it for – a bedroom.”

“It is a bedroom now,” she said. “I run the house – I rent rooms – all of the rooms upstairs are rented – but I have two brothers and they sleep in this front room.”

And we were silent for a moment, then I said, “My brother stayed there too.”

“In the front room?” the woman said.

I answered “Yes.”

She paused a moment, then she said, “Won’t you come in? I don’t believe it’s changed much. Would you like to see?”

I thanked her and I said I would, and I went up the steps. She opened the screen door and I went into the house.

And it was just the same, - the stairs, the hallway, and the sliding doors, the window of stained glass upon the stairs. And all of it was just the same, except for the absence, absence, in the afternoon, the stained light of absence in the afternoon, and the child who sat there, waiting on the stairs, and something fading like a dream, something coming like a light, something going, passing, fading, like the shadows of a wood.

It was all the same except that I had sat there feeling things were Somewhere – and now I knew. I had sat there feeling that a vast and sultry river was somewhere – and now I knew! I had sat there wondering what King’s Highway was, where it began, and where it ended – now I knew! I had sat there haunted by the magic word “downtown” – now I knew! – and by the street car, after it had gone – and by all things that came and went and came again, like the cloud shadows passing in a wood, that never could be captured – the memory of another house, and sunlight, April, and the seasons passing, as the shadows pass, a train, a river, morning and the hills of home.

For all would come again, and I would sit there on the stairs, in absence, absence, in the afternoon, and try to get it back again. And it would come and go and come again until I had it back, I had it back, and it was mine and I could remember all that I had seen and been – that yet had all the lights of time on it, the shadowy echoes of a thousand lives, that brief sum of me, the universe of my four years that was so short to measure, so far, so endless to remember.

It would all come back to me like his dark eyes, his quiet face. And I would see my small face pooled in the dark mirror of the hall, my grave eyes, and my quiet self, the lone integrity of Me, and know that I was just a child, yet know all-clearly that a man could ever know, which was, “Here – a child, my core, my kernel – and here House and here House listening – and here absence, absence in the afternoon – oh utter universe, I know you: - here am I!”

And then it would be gone again, fading like cloud shadows in the hills, going like lost faces in a dream, coming like the vast, the drowsy rumors of the distant and enchanted Fair, and coming, going, coming, being found and lost, possessed and held and never captured, like lost voices in the mountains, long ago, like the dark eyes and the quiet face, the dark lost boy, my brother, who himself like shadows, or like absence in the house, would come, would go, and would return again.

The woman took me back into the house and through the hall. I told her of the pantry, and I told her where it was and pointed to the place, but now it was no longer there. And I told her of the back yard, and the old board fence around the yard. But the old board fence was gone. And I told her of the carriage house, and told her it was painted red. But now there was a small garage. And the back yard was still there, but smaller than I thought, and now there was a tree.

“I did not know there was a tree,” I said. “I do not remember any tree.”

“Perhaps it was not there,” she said, “a tree could grow in thirty years.” And then we came back through the house again and paused a moment at the sliding doors.

“And could I see this room?” I said.

She slid the doors back. They slid open smoothly, with a kind of rolling heaviness, as they used to do. And then I saw the room again. It was the same. There was a window to the side, the two arched windows to the front, the alcove and the sliding doors, the fireplace with the tiles of mottled green, the mantel of dark mission wood, the mantel posts, a dresser and a bed, just where the dresser and the bed had been so long ago.

“Is this the room?” the woman said. “It hasn’t changed?”

I told her that it was the same.

“And your brother slept here where my brothers sleep?”

“This was his room,” I said.

And we were silent for a moment. I turned to go, and I said, “Well, thank you. I appreciate your showing me.”

And she said that she was glad and that it was no trouble. And she said, “And when you see your family – you can tell them that you saw the house,” she said. “And my name is Mrs. Bell. You can tell your mother that a Mrs. Bell has got the house. And when you see your brother, you can tell him that you saw the room he slept in, and that you found it just the same.”

I told her then that he was dead.

The woman was silent for a moment. Then she looked at me and said, “He died here, didn’t he? In this room?”

And I told her that he did.

“Well, then,” she said, “I knew it. I don’t know how. But when you told me he was here, I knew it.”

I said nothing. In a moment the woman said: “What did he die of?”

“Typhoid.”

She looked shocked and troubled, and said involuntarily: “My two brothers –“

“That was a long time ago,” I said. “I don’t think you need to worry now.”

“Oh. I wasn’t thinking about that,” she said. – “It was just hearing that a little boy – your brother – was – was in this room that my two brothers sleep in now –“

“Well, maybe I shouldn’t have told you, then. But he was a good boy – and if you’d known him you wouldn’t mind.”

She said nothing, and I added quickly: “Besides, he didn’t stay here long. This wasn’t really his room – but the night he came back with my sister he was so sick – they didn’t move him.”

“Oh,” the woman said, “I see.” And in a moment: “Are you going to tell your mother you were here?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I – I wonder how she feels about this room.”

“I don’t know. She never speaks of it.”

“Oh..... How old was he?”

“He was twelve.”

“You must have been pretty young yourself.”

“I was four.”

“And..... you wanted to see the room, didn’t you? That’s why you came back.”

“Yes.”

“Well” – indefinitely – “I guess you’ve seen it now.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“I guess you don’t remember much about him, do you? I shouldn’t think you would.”

“No, not much.”

.... The years dropped off like fallen leaves: the face came back again – the soft dark oval, the dark eyes, the soft brown berry on the neck, the raven hair, all bending down, approaching – the whole ghost-wise, intent and instant, like faces from a haunted wood.

“Now say it: Grover!”

“Gova.”

“No – not Gova: Grover.... Say it!”

“Gova”

“Ah-h – you didn’t say it.... You said Gova: Grover... now say it.”

“Gova.”

“Look, I’ll tell you what I’ll do if you say it right.... Would you like to go down to King’s Highway? Would you like Grover to set you up? All right then..... if you say Grover and say it right, I’ll take you to King’s Highway and set you up to ice cream.... Now say it right: Grover.”

“Gova.”

“Ah-h you-u. You’re the craziest old boy I ever did see; can’t you even say Grover?”

“Gova.”

“Ah-h you-u.... old tongue-tie, that’s what you are. Some day I’m going to.... Well, come on, then. I’ll set you up anyway.....”

It all came back and faded and was lost again. I turned to go, and thanked the woman and I said: “Good-bye.”

“Well, then, good-bye,” the woman said, and we shook hands. “I’m glad if I could show you. I’m glad if-“ She did not finish, and at length she said, “Well, then, that was a long time ago. You’ll find it all changed now, I guess. It’s all built up around here now, - way out beyond here, out beyond where the Fair grounds used to be. I guess you’ll find it changed,” she said.

And we could find no more to say. We stood there for a moment on the steps, and shook hands once more.

“Well, then, good-bye.”

And again, again, I turned into the street, finding the place where corners meet, turning to look again to see where Time had gone. And all was there as it had always been. And all was gone, and never would come back again. And all of it was just the same, it seemed that it had never changed since then, except all had been found and caught and captured for forever. And so, finding all, I knew all had been lost.

And I knew that I would never come again, and that lost magic would not come again, - and that the light that came, that passed and went and that returned again, the memory of lost voices in the hill, cloud shadows passing in the mountains, the voices of our kinsman long ago, the street, the heat, King’s Highway, and the piper’s son, the vast drowsy murmur of the distant Fair, - oh strange and bitter miracle of time – come back again.

But I knew that it could not come back – the cry of absence in the afternoon, the house that waited and the child that dreamed; and through the thicket of man’s memory, from the enchanted wood, the dark eye and the quiet face, - poor child, life’s stranger and life’s exile, lost, like all of us, a cipher in blind mazes, long ago – my parent, friend, and brother, the lost boy, was gone forever and would not return.