

A Walk Home

“Useless slippers...”

The woman spat these words out like a venom left to fester. And she did so as she kicked at the rubber mud-caked soles dangling off her toes by their straps. When they came off, they did so, peeling patches of blistered skin along the way. These sores found the late January air to be their new shoes, worn like a belt of razors that ate into them. And on her face, the woman wore a look of stony jadedness and a kind of indifference to her plight. She embeds a hairpin into the rubber soles of the slippers to keep the slippers together, by the place where three other broken hairpins lay.

And the woman's name was Grace Evans.

A woman of an age that could be placed between her thirties and fifties – one could see it in plain that she had at some point a gentle attractiveness that either age or hard times of sorts stole from her. All things left better in the past; things no longer within Grace Evans' purview here, lugging a bag of foodstuffs with her. Worn and ratty, her bag strained to support the weight of an equally battered selection of produce in it – dented tin cans filled with some kind of lentils, oranges, cabbage and two whole onions, accompanied by a loaf of dense baguette-shaped bread that one could not chew through without a great effort.

Certainly, this was something that the three children of Grace Evans could agree with.

The last of the glow from town faded as the rugged footpath Grace took gave way to a rather steep slope beneath her feet. Very quickly, any heat that could be sucked from the air of this early evening faded. Quicker yet for Grace Evans as she made briskly for her house. No haste, however, could have kept that horrid stench away from her. Her eyes watered. Her head felt as though a rubber implement bludgeoned it in the back. Yes, even the thin film of mucus half-dripping from her nostrils was stained with it – the familiar scent of a violation truly repugnant.

The hog farm lay just barely out of view from town, though its mark long remains, hung over Crediton: Sanguine clouds coated entire pools of water. Lumps of churned refuse masqueraded as bubbles, drifting about as stray flesh flies landed and took off from them. Grace Evans had half a mind to pack up and leave this place; This place that had footpaths so trying, and roadsides so difficult. She wiped off the sweat beads that obscured her vision wholly on her sleeves. And she did so, craning her neck from her shoulders, opening her eyes to the sight of a woman staring back at her from the reflective sheen of grease on the water surface right in front of her – wholly disdainful.

It faded as quickly as it had come – a certain kind of clarity in Grace's eyes – something that fought to penetrate that plaster of resentment. How long had it been since the last time that she'd been able to find a day where a candid smile floated onto her lips the same way her scowl did then? But when that feeling left her, all she was left to was the bile that she choked down that roughened her gullet, and the bag of groceries that were making queer acquaintances with the stink of sewage and shit.

Auburn skies faded into the night. Blessings where they could be found, the hairpins still embedded in Grace Evans' shoes held firm. And still, the clap of skin on rubber punctuated the silence where little else did. The streetlamps that adorned the side of the footpath made themselves decently scarce; they left behind entire stretches of pavement unlit.

There was the smell of rain in the wind. Perhaps, it had been the bitter numbness that had lingered in Grace Evans' sinuses. Or perhaps the pungence that clung to her sweatied blouse this evening. Regardless, it had not been till a quarter past seven when the last lavenders kissed the treeline that Grace Evans finally began picking up on the first droplets of an oncoming shower pelted her hair. The umbrella came out, as did her hastening footsteps that resembled a broken staccato. And though the road was one rugged and seldom-trodden, it was one marked well by the past footprints of folks like Grace Evans, who knew how far till the next shelter came up.

Yellow, yet so hollow and cold that it made a nearly chartreuse glow on the grassy knoll that Grace ran down from – these lights shone from the forlorn effigy that hung at the forefront of the uncanny monument. The McDonald's stood as the only building in Grace's surroundings. Flat and grey, it had lost the lustre of its former years, uncoupled from anything more human. At this point, the rain beat down on Grace's cover heavily, wetting her feet as well, just before she nearly crashed into the side of the wall. The place was empty, its staff in some backroom of the restaurant. Upon closer inspection, however, Grace gleaned that scornful gaze of a woman staring back at her through the glass. Doubtless, those defined lines that extended from the base of her eyes accentuated all the things she had to say about her day so far. But somehow, something older that resembled a life that someone else had left still glimmered from those windows. Grace saw a little girl who wore the floral hand-me-downs of the eldest sibling from her family. The girl lapped up folds of ice-cream with a carelessness that had allowed the white cream to stick to her fingers. Then came a napkin brought by the little girl's chiding mother. It would seem that the girl always made a mess when eating. Grace's fingers twitched for the dessert. Perhaps then, it hadn't been this mother of three that reached out for the last of the ice cream, but rather that little girl instead.

Weighted like lead, Grace's head snapped downwards before her waking erected it once again. Her arms were crossed as she leaned against the back end of a wall, bag tucked neatly in her bosom. Her bag was filled with groceries – the very same ones that she had meant to bring back quickly earlier in the night. The rain had already stopped some time before, dusk leaving that same gloom that the weather had made before. So she left the shelter of the building and continued swiftly onwards to her house.

Certain unreasonable hours of nighttime fast encroached upon the folks of this side of Northern Ontario, and its sleeping town of Crediton, to those who found it. Though her trips to town often ended with her getting home after any sensible dinnertime, she had to admit that this time constituted one of the latest that she had been yet. Grace Evans had already phoned home, of course. The first to answer was her husband, whose voice could be read as less unbothered and rather plain tired. Grace asked him how his day at work had been, reminding him to park his car in their garage as it was likely to snow that night. She asked him about whether Danielle, her youngest daughter, of age twelve years old, had completed her homework or not. She asked if Christine, her middle child, was adjusting well to her new school. And she asked if Charlotte was still seeing that loafer of a guy from her class. The call went on for a good several minutes – enough time for the looming shadow of the school near her house to come into view against the backdrop. It was enough time for the thinnest film of sleet to form at the edges of patches of mud here.

The weather forecast had said that there was a chance of snow that evening after a week of warmer weather. Suddenly, Grace regretted that she hadn't brought anything thicker than her windbreaker with her that evening as she approached the avenue that snaked around her old elementary school. It was nothing that she could change at the moment, though. The faint illumination from a streetlight revealed the drawings that had been on the brick walls of the compound for as long as she could recall. Even from when she'd gone to the place decades back, some of the older and more faded crayon depictions of happy children holding hands with their flat triangle dresses and rectangular shirts still remained. A groundedness to the present and doing everything she ought to do for her family acted as a thick barrier between her and old memories from her childhood. However, the events of the evening had thinned it out, bringing back wistful memories from a simpler time from years past.

She remembered a time when she could see her mother, a rather statuesque and broad-shouldered woman, standing at the gates of her school from her classroom every day. Sometimes, a snow day came by where the children from the school were given a day or two off. When one came, her mother would take her to this mound outside, where fresh and clean snow piled on just around the corner. She would bring along a tin of condensed milk along with her, fresh from her own trips to the local market. And she would comment about how funny it was that Grace had always enjoyed eating desserts, even when it was snowing, over hot chocolate or teas. And so, every time a snow day came by, they would take up a scoop

of snow to serve with a layer of condensed milk over it – “softer-serves” – as Grace had liked to call them before.

She reckoned that there'd been a time when snow tasted less coarse and more powdery.

That's right, she and her mother and she had not been well-off either. Then, they'd eat simply, yet live in a more blissful world of theirs. There had been a time, Grace recalled, when her father would hide her in her room to stay up late before the end of winter break because she wanted the holidays to last longer. She still remembered the harmonica she got from her grandmother that she had no idea how to play, but played with nonetheless, much to her mother's amusement. And she remembered a time when she'd still been a proper little brat who asked for bigger portions at the dinner table and fought with her older brother for the egg stuffed at the centre of her mother's meatloaf. When did she begin to run away from all of it?

Grace blinked, and she came back to the sight of the fence that surrounded her property. How scary, she thought, that she had autopiloted herself back home through a stretch of a good mile or so of road. She saw the recent tracks of a car pulled back into the garage, formed on the mud. And she saw the warm glow from the windows of the second floor blocked by the silhouette of a girl behind the curtains in her study, reading up on some material for school. Another one on her phone with someone else, chatting the night away. And lastly, a man still in his work clothes with a stubble, sleeping tiredly on his recliner in the living room.

When had her own children begun to run away from their own youth?

Snapping herself back to the present, Grace became aware at once of her shoddiness and began dusting herself and correcting her hair, preparing to enter her own house. She began to walk down the path to the wooden steps that led to the front door, taking off her beanie and gloves, rubbing her hands together for warmth. Her breath made a visible cloud of condensation as it left her mouth.

She was finally at her door, setting her groceries down on the porch, no condensed milk inside, taking a short breather outside. Again, when did she stop buying it? She stared at the sky that was now plain black for a small while. Something cold and wet pecked at her neck when she removed her scarf. And Grace looked up at the patch of clouds right above-head.

“Ah... It's snowing again.”