

One Day

by DeWitt Henry

“I was ashamed of my conscience” --Tim

O'Brien

I was ashamed of my conscience. Ashamed for worrying because this wasn't a riot. That I was not with otherwise respectable and law abiding friends, who, when the mobs of heat driven protestors broke wild suddenly, when shop windows burst from anonymous bricks, when burglar alarms sounded futilely in a melee of emergency sirens; one and all, without second thought, joined with looters on all sides, climbed through display windows in a holiday of theft and lust.

There was no Bernice, star law student at Boston University, child of Scarsdale, impressive feminist and environmentalist, suddenly rushing and climbing, pushing with faceless others into Orlando's on Newbury Street, madly grabbing lingerie and cocktail dresses, coats, slacks, scarves, sweaters, and more and more, arms full to spilling.

There was no Stan, fitness buff, computer engineer, breaking loose in the darkened liquor mart, brazen with a shopping cart.

There were no strangers, no wild-eyed hoards.

Just me, alone.

Doors opened and unlocked. Silence. Familiar city streets deserted. No cars, no busses. No planes overhead. A clear, brisk winter day. Is this my dream? I am there, as if transplanted, poof! Three blocks from my bachelor apartment on Marlboro Street. The

world to my perception is as unnaturally empty as, say, it is bizarrely preempted and flooded by crowds at the finish of the Boston Marathon, streets closed by crowds. Expensive shops. Overpriced Boutiques. Curio shoppes. Sports stores. Tower Records! Shop by shop of categorized pelf, luxuries that I would never buy, if, for instance, by some obscene trick, a trick akin to being mugged, I won a million dollars in the Lottery. Shop by shop of goods I had no desire for or need. But here they are, displayed, laid out and waiting. And there are some of my heart's small desires, rationally foregone as superfluous. Trifles. A digital television, say, with a wall-sized screen. A compact camcorder. A handheld computer notepad. Top of the line running shoes. Water weights. On line skates and protective gear. A luxury wristwatch. A halogen reading lamp. Reclining chair. A cell phone. Laptop computer with DVD and wireless modem. J.Crew slacks and pullovers. A new coat. A cordless razor. I don't know. Imagination fails. For a lifetime, I have repressed consumer wishes as conditioned, a tease; lashed myself to the mast of reason, like Odysseus, enduring mermaid songs.

But suddenly everything, anything waits untended for my taking. And the next street over, perhaps. The next. How far? The whole city deserted? Everything open and waiting, as expectant as the three bears' home to Goldilocks's noblesse oblige?

Is it a trick? A dream? A test? Have I been drugged and wakened after some catastrophe? What threat or invitation would empty a city, or even one neighborhood, or one store, for that matter, so abruptly? No birds either. No dogs anywhere. Not even squirrels. Should I worry?

What do I want, really? What does all this variety really mean? Diversion, convenience, amusement, pleasure, status? Am I tempting fate?

I recall in my childhood weekends, when my executive father would take my older sister and me into the family candy factory, the building deserted, conveyer belts frozen, chocolates scattered for the taking, and we would fill paper bags, our privilege, while he worked in the front office. Production was always a season ahead. At Christmas there would be five pound chocolate covered coconut eggs; or in midsummer, gift assortments for Christmas. The packaging departments were in refrigerated rooms, which we entered through insulated doors similar to those on a butcher's freezer. Searching in open gift boxes, off the belts, or in the bins for damaged pieces, sampling bites of dark or milk chocolate, of different shapes and coded swirls, I kept getting nougats, nuts, or gummy caramels, until at last I found the chocolate covered marshmallows, my favorite. There also, despite strict taboos at school and elsewhere in the populated world, I dared to explore the women's bathroom and discovered that its only difference from the men's was the absence of urinals.

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As I cross the threshold, even to this Subway's, as I help myself to the fresh rye roll, the makings, oil, salt and pepper, I don't feel right. Habit is strong. I have to pay. The register rings open, loud and startling. The tray is filled with bills and coins. Two dollars and sixty-three cents. I slip in my five, take out two dollars and thirty-seven cents. I eat and swallow, contemplating new ground, new rules, and feeling the panic of my privileges without cost, or contest, or deserving.

From the ceiling, a surveillance camera blinks.

