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End of a Day

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END OF A DAY/ James Keats

Descending upon a narrow, worn, badly lit staircase, an old man with a desiccated, wrinkled face circled with long white hair and topped with a once fashionable derby, groped his way from step to step. His lean, but firm hand acted as a guide along a wooden banister and with the other hand holding his handsome walking stick, he, although badly favoring his left leg... it still held fragments from some forgotten war, hobbled to the street level. Once outside he stood on the wide sidewalk and for several minutes watched the Paris traffic upon the Rue Rivole, and then reaching into the pockets of his suit--his suit which like his hat belonged to an era wholly different than the one in which it was worn--he produced gloves and with aristocratic deportment slid them upon his hands. He then slowly turned to gaze into the window of a fashionable jewelry store for which he had been the bookkeeper for forty years.

As he looked into the neat display window of the store with eyes sparkling and expressing more than words of voice could ever, these same eyes became melancholy and the corners of his fragile mouth quivered; but only slightly.

Andre, a young salesman in the store, came out into the street. "It's closing time you know," and he started to put the shutters on the show windows.

Monsieur Dupee smiled back at him.

"Goodnight Monsieur Dupee," Andre said.

"Thank you Andre," Monsieur Dupee said in acknowledgment, and then he began his walk home.

It was a long walk, but Monsieur Dupee enjoyed it; it was one of the few things, and one of the simplest, which he found felicity in doing. He had no enjoyment with the crowded busses or the blatant Metro, only on his walks did he actually feel himself congruent with his city. The city he loved, as he felt many people must, but even more than that he thought he knew why he loved it--something most people can't explain. He felt he had become a part of the surrounding stone, that he too had gained immortality through his love and that Paris had--but just a little--assimilated something of his being.

It was dark now as he crossed the Seine on the Pont Neuf Bridge. Once on the left bank, he turned right on the Quai Conti and walked several

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blocks along the river, then turning left, to enter a small street, he paused for a few minutes standing in front of a small plaque on the side of a building. It was the same thing he did every evening, but he felt he must since most people were too busy to be troubled. Beneath the plaque, but connected, was a small bowl which held some newly cut flowers.

Ah, Francoise is still true to her husband, he mused. It was 1944, during the uprising, when he was killed here. As he meditated he lifted his walking stick and searching, poked it into some of the bullet holes that still stood, like individual monuments on the side of the house. Next he read the plaque, slowly and to himself. He knew it by heart he had read it so often, besides it was like all of the others throughout the city. His eyes slowly passed over such words as revolution, liberty, country and freedom. He wished they had some meaning, but he could find none. Anyway, he thought, death had come to this man because of the cause for which he had fought. Dupee wished he had a cause for which he too could fight and die. But he had none and probably never would. He placed his walking stick on the ground and turned to go up the street.

Fifteen minutes later he was at a small cobblestone square; it was here that he lived. But, before going to his quarters, he stopped at a small candle store that occupied part of a basement.

"Good evening Monsieur Dupee," said a little middle age man behind the shop counter. "Do you wish the usual this week?"

"No, I shall need but one candle--a small one please. I plan a trip."

Slowly he climbed the one flight of stairs to a landing holding four doors. Here he produced a latchkey from his small vest pocket and opened one of the doors. Inside, he closed and locked the world outside, then walking to an old table standing in the middle of his diminutive room, he placed, in a cheap bronze holder, the candle and lit it with a match. He could have used electricity for light, but he never did; he much preferred the antiquity of a candle.

He then walked to the foot of his bed where he bent down, but not without effort, and examined several bottles of wine. Finding the one he wanted, he rose and with the smile of a connoisseur he poured its contents into a wine flask. Finished with this, he obtained a small dark bottle and with the adroitness of a master alchemist, he also poured its liquid filling into the wine flask. Then he threw the empty bottles into the garbage. Next he stirred the mixture. Presently he sat in his old chair, poured a glass of

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wine and relaxed while drinking.

Quite early the next morning, a maid arrived to clean Monsieur Dupee's room. She tried the door; he usually left it unlocked for her, but it would not move. Perhaps he was yet asleep. She knocked, but still no answer. Angrily, she went down the stairs to find the owner of the building and his keys.

The owner was an old man and objected to any extra work. He laboriously climbed the stairs and unlocked the door. Inside, Monsieur Dupee sat in his chair, an empty wine glass in one hand; his unblinking eyes were fixed on the now opened door, but he looked not at the landlord, rather through him. A wind blew in from the street. It ruffled the landlord's hair, passed around him and filled the room. Then Monsieur Dupee's jaw dropped, as though he were ready for speech, but instead it looked more like a smile of derision. The landlord left the room to call an undertaker.

OPPORTUNITY

I am passing swiftly by,
On the deathless wings of fate;
Catch me mortal, catch me now,
Before it is too late.

I am passing swiftly by,
I will help to make you great.
Use me mortal, make me yours,
And glory's in your wake.

I am passing swiftly by,
I, the thing for which you wait.
Catch me mortal, hold me fast,
Or else I will escape.

Barbara Fiedorek