



As a well spent day brings happy sleep,
so life well used brings happy death.
- Leonardo da Vinci

When his things are packed and he has buckled the straps on the suitcase, closed the windows and shut off the breakers to the kitchen and the water heater, he takes his soft brown coat from where it hangs on a hook and closes the door behind him.

It is cold. A dense ocean fog drips from the buildings and trees. It is heavy with salt and smells of tidepool, kelp and wet sand. He takes a deep breath and smiles. *This, he thinks, is exactly how I want to remember this place. As if the ocean isn't satisfied to lie there beyond the field, beyond the cypress trees. It stands up and leaves its bed and comes ashore; it wants to have the sky's place too.*

He locks the door, he takes up the suitcase from where he had set it on the porch. Like him it is old, made of leather, and stretches and creaks with the weight of its contents.

Or maybe that's not right at all, that the sea has come up here. Maybe the hill, my house, the trees, are all under water now. Maybe it all slipped beneath the waves while I slept and never did wake up. The air is really just that wet and heavy, almost hard to breathe. In which case, it's good that I'm leaving today. It's not right for a man to live submerged.

He has lived here a long time; forty, maybe fifty years. It was a good house, set on a little hill. But he rarely felt entirely at home. He was a troubled, uneasy guest in this place. He always felt that something stirred beyond the trees, which knew his name and knew that he did not belong. He got old and learned to dread the steps to the porch and fear the steep path to the beach. And there was such weather that on many long dark nights, he feared the wind might blow his house and everything away.

How could any of that matter now? Why stand on the concrete walk, between the dripping yew trees, beside the iron birdbath full of nothing but a coat of rust, and not at least try to be happy with his memories? There were hours, even days, passed in aching happiness. There were dogs to play with, and a woman with a red guitar. Brown hair – the faintest wisps of it – lifted toward the hills by a breeze off the sea. And leaving cannot take those memories away.

The house will belong to others now. He did not build it, did not dig the well or plant the trees. He added just some coats of paint, a roof or two, and a painting for the wall above the bed: A man in blue with several dogs, holding a book. It's wistful. He has left it behind for the new people. Maybe it will help them sleep.

He has just one regret, that he spent his years here, raking the dry inedible figs from the threadbare grass of his yard, and dreading a moment he heard his father speak of long ago.

"Every man," his father said, "will reach a moment in his life when he is the best man he will ever be. And for that instant, he knows as much as he will ever know; he has the most of peace and freedom he will ever have." And now, carrying the last of his belongings past the mailbox, through the gate, he sees what his father failed to warn him of: that the moment would come and go unrecognized except in the years that followed it. So although it came and passed and flicked away, he did not cease in dreading it, even as all his will and insight flagged.

He has an hour to himself, until the train. Then he will be gone from here forever. Whether he goes far or not doesn't matter. The decision and departure in itself is everything, and more important than the miles or the time required for travel. There is a point of no return, just beyond that curve of coast, where the tracks rise to climb a hill and disappear around the bend.

Does he seem fatalistic? Well. He hasn't always been that way. There used to be abundant hope. He planted a garden from seeds every summer. He picked vegetables and fruit enough to share. If there hadn't been trees to give him shade, he might have planted those as well. He often used to chuckle at a sign in the local bar: Free Beer Tomorrow. And why not? As each day ends and the sun sets to give the undersides of clouds their share of light, another day is promised, isn't it? We have a covenant of more time coming, a fair chance to get things done, get forgiveness or vengeance, or simply see another Christmas come and go. And so they do, until the last. Then someone is the last one standing. The last, who must close the door and turn, take up his bag and walk the road that all the others walked before.

Every step down the sidewalk – raised and cracked here and there by roots – every step becomes a memory, ignited where his heel strikes and racing up his back to light in his eyes. As he walks he remembers the safety he felt as a child, in that home across town that his parents made for him. He was as light as a feather on the world. He listened to the wind off the ocean and understood his future would be bright and blue. And it was, until the wind turned in his middle years as it does today, and the air grew thick. Clouds descended, darkened, and delivered a spattering rain. The future, he saw, was in the past. And then it rained – and now it rains again – most earnestly.

His earliest memory is of sleeping between his parents in their large, warm bed, in a night of fear banked against thunder and lightning; and sometime before dawn watching animals run and play as though projected onto one long wall; then later thinking he had been awake. He was a child for whom the line between dreams and waking life was often blurred, so that his dreams were vivid in his mind throughout the day.

There is a garden in the station yard, where all the departing sit and wait. He arrives early and alone, wearing his brown wool coat, which has turned the rich color of mud in the rain. There are cold stone benches to rest on, plantings of heather growing pale December red, and a memorial plaque for the dead of World War I. It is a quiet, thoughtful place, considering the street is close. Those not traveling away are going by in cars and trucks. They still live here, today, going to school and coming home, on bicycles, on foot, with umbrellas. There are dogs on leash who shake the water from their coats. He takes a last, long look at his town, enough to last his mind for a hundred miles down the track.

It is not just a matter of failure, of having tried and met, despite good effort and high character, a staunch tide that turned against his ship. It is a matter of fraud against life, of never having gone to sea at all. There was a moment – perhaps that moment that his father warned him of – when he stood on the bluffs overlooking the pier and watched the others come and go, and knew that they were better men. He was a light to no one but himself, and now he is a shadow of the man he was; and worse, of the man he knows he could have been.

The rain has stopped. The clouds are breaking up and clearing a path for the sun to light a beautiful sunset.

He has only this case of old shirts with worn collars, folded underwear, and socks the shade of burnt charcoal. He knows they will not let him take it on the train. There is a sign: *No Baggage Past This Point*. Well, no matter. Never mind. Maybe he can be happy anyway, without his things. Couldn't you?

Charcoal. He remembers that afternoon of high summer when his nephews picked tomatoes and sliced them, and how the dog danced around the barbeque as they cooked the hamburgers and corn. And later, the boys flew kites. They were red and green and purple in the bright blue sky. And that night they sat in the kitchen, where it was cool with the tile floor and the windows open toward the ocean, and they all told stories. He told the one about Grandpa loosing control of his mules in the river, and how he almost drowned under his wagon, but lived and said that he'd been saved by Grace, the very gentle hand of God.

The sun is going down. The lights in the station and the street come on. Now he stands and leaves his bag on the ground and his old coat on the bench. He wants a little more of all of it, this place where he has grown and been loved, lost everything, and found this hour of peace as the daylight fades.

He goes to the low fence between the garden and the city street. He leans on the railing and reaches out and calls to a young man walking by. He can almost touch the young man's arm. He wants to warn him about the moment, in case his own father hasn't told him, or can't or won't. Just in case.

"Listen! There is no such damnable moment! Don't believe it. No life changing, metaphorical turning of the tide. Only sunshine and rain, the consolation of prayer in the darkness, a hard wind in late winter. And maybe for a while, there is love."

But the young man doesn't hear him, cannot see him, and now the air is full of the sounds of bells and steel brakes. The train is in the station, and he has but three more steps to climb, to the platform. He is wearing a new white coat as the night comes down, and he joins the others gathered in the station where no one not departing ever stands to say goodbye.