

Tepid Night

In Which Nicholas Lands in Sacramento and Loses Everything in the Search for His Old Friend.

Nicholas was a wandering minstrel in spite of himself. As a minstrel, he had only contempt for the notion that life was a song, yet music was his life's driving obsession. And as for wandering: a person's excursions are always either journeys or wanderings. Journeys have a goal and a plan, but wanderings begin when journeys fail and are always in spite of one's self.

He left his home in Bishop and wandered seven years under the sun. He covered miles of burning deserts half by foot and half by hitching rides. He mended his boots in Needles. He worked through college in a faded California town and lost his mind. He traversed the blinding peaks from Lone Pine to Independence, breathed the cool air, and met a man who'd weathered three years on the summits of the White Mountains, who'd endured fierce storms, bouts of flooding waters, parched days and nights, and who'd seen Saint Elmo's fire sprout among the pine tree tops on thundery summer nights. Nicholas stayed three days on the shore of a windy lake amid wastes of volcanic ash, in what was once a great mining district filled with thousands of gold and silver mining men. He saw the old volcanoes by starlight on moonless nights, heard coyote drifting through sage. And when, days later, he recrossed the snowy mountain divide and headed west, he caught the faraway scent of lilacs and lilies.

He tagged out at the bag end of his resources in Auburn, crawled over the last few hills to the hub of the drifty river land, Sacramento. At a little restaurant near the river, he sang songs for dinner and change. He spent the night on the river with bums. His guitar was stolen. He would have left right then but two things in Sacramento detained him: his old friend Austin and the lingering myth of a black-haired woman named Alisondra. At first he could not find Austin, but he did, in the end, find word of Alisondra.

The tepid nights of the sultry city began to cool his wandering feet. The dreamy streets shimmered in the evening heat; steam from wet grass and swimming pools softened the air, to where a quiet reflection sapped his brain of pitch, his movements slowed; his mind filled with pleasant, silly abstractions: small numbers and the purposefulness of dogs sniffing the streets. Conversations filtered sluggishly from alleyways:

"What do you mean you're drunk? You're not drunk!"

"Easy, easy!"

"I got eyes in the back of my head, you're damned right! I can see through you a damned mile away!"

The sounds of bottles smashing violently.

"Easy now, come on!"

"No fucking easy, no come on nothing, pimp, pick up every whore!"

Little sounds: crunching wood, thudding feet on asphalt, rattling shades. Nicholas's clothes clung to his skin, and he pulled his clammy hands from his pockets to wave them in the air. His hands cooled, but his head soon swam. He sat down on a little stone wall and watched the cars go by.

Sweat: the lawns glistened with beads of it; the dogs panted it. It seeped into Nicholas's mind like molasses. He had erected walls in his mind so that the world might not enter. And yet the first thing to breach the barriers was sweat. It welled up along his hairline like lukewarm spit and slid gently down his face. It cemented his shirt to his shoulder blades and ribs. It oppressed him like a fever until a heedless scream perched and hissed from behind his teeth. He abruptly stood and walked helplessly down the block.

This ridiculous fury that he felt: It seemed impossible that he could not control the idiot anger aroused by sweat. And yet the anger increased his heat, and the sweat, and turned all other thoughts from his mind. He swiped viciously at some low hanging leaves, then timidly looked around to see if anyone watched. His eyes met the eyes of a man a few yards behind, who suddenly crossed the street, looking straight ahead, turning his head neither left nor right. He started to look for his destination, so that he might duck into it and cool down.

He wandered downtown in an aimless sort of way, although he was looking for 16th Street. He found it, turned onto it. Some noise came out of a place with a small awning and a sign: *The Merry Magdalene*. He hesitated outside, examining the menu pasted in the window, peering inside; he ambled forward as if continuing on down the sidewalk. Then he suddenly turned to walk in. A woman near the door had been watching his peculiar dance, and he automatically started to back out but his signals were so hopelessly crossed that he simply continued to walk in. He smiled bashfully at the woman but she continued to look at him with a complete lack of expression.

It was slightly cooler inside but so packed that the air was faintly steamy. Nicholas was aware that he had little money in his pocket, and that the coffee would take half of it. He chose an empty table in a dim corner near the back. "To hell with it," he muttered under his breath.

All through the heat of the day, amid the baking sun, the trucks, the dead grass and the panting birds, Nicholas had not thought of himself. But he does not have his guitar now, and his mind begins to turn toward his stomach. This happens automatically, it seems to him, although he is not hungry. He has only ordered coffee, and for the moment this seems good enough. But what about tomorrow? This thought begins to peck and nag with a seeping, sweat-like insistence, and again Nicholas feels the dull fury, which builds in proportion to his efforts to bury it.

A waitress with curly black hair brings his coffee. He counts the change with sullen attention. He could buy a potato with it. An onion. But how would he cook them? He flips a quarter into the air.

This room in which he has found himself is dark, with only the dim light of little candles illuminating the tables. Thirty or forty people sit in pairs throughout the room, talking very loudly. In the opposite corner a small jazz combo packs its gear. High up the walls, half hidden in the gloom, huge oil paintings of camels and birds swirl dimly amid the rising smoke of cigarettes. Nicholas sips his coffee, and his self-consciousness begins to pass; he is finally able to see himself, and reflect with some detachment on his situation.

The first thing he notices is a certain desolation in himself that the activity in the room doesn't touch. He is an utter stranger here and there is not a soul in the room that he knows. Well, except for Laura, but she does not appear to be in the room. And he is penniless. For the past week, as his money dwindled and his energy waned, he castigated himself for having wasted years in

purposeless wanderings. And now the criticism leaps into his mind with renewed force and reason. He sips his coffee quietly and thinks about all of this, gnawing the ends of his mustache nervously and fiddling with his ring. What has he learned in seven years? But this is not really a serious question; it has no real hold on his mind: he pulls it out for a moment at a time as if to size it up, not knowing what use to make of it. When he attempts to look at the question closely, he immediately responds: And what is "learn"? I've learned a thousand different things that most people never learn. In this manner he quickly overcomes the minute but insistent voice that whispers to him that all his learning has been beside the point, that he has wasted the time that is only his, and that time is running out.

Nicholas looks around the room and twists the ring around his finger. He can find no point of comfort on which to rest his mind. There is only doubt and uncertainty. And yet with sudden insight he feels that he has somehow arrived at a nexus, that a crucial time has arrived, a turning that concerns him but is out of his control. And so he chews his mustache, frowns into his coffee, and furtively eyes the waitresses who move between tables like deadpan angels, silent and ministering.

* * * *

Laura saw Nicholas sitting stoop-shouldered at the little table in the back. She raised her eyebrows involuntarily and began to smile, then suddenly frowned. What was he doing here? He could only be looking for Austin. Nicholas had not been around for ages, it seemed, and she was happy to see him but he could only be looking for Austin. She hesitated. Nicholas would see her in a moment. A fuzzy little scenario tiptoed forth from her mind, unbidden and relentless: a little passion play where a moment of history repeated itself in a gay reverie.

She picked up the cigarette package on the table, tapped one out and lit it. She did not want to be dragged back into the splash and slop simply through the appearance of Nicholas. Yet there he sat. She sat and smoked for a moment. There really was no way around it. She got up from her table. She saw Nicholas look up as she threaded through the aisles. He hadn't noticed where she'd come from but knew that she wasn't one of the waitresses.

Suddenly he recognized her. She smiled and nodded to several people that she passed, and eventually came to Nicholas's table. She saw his face light up as she approached and this made her feel embarrassed and a little nervous.

"Nicholas you dog," she said.

He stood up and held out his arms. She stepped into them and embraced him and kissed him full on the lips. They sat down at the little table.

"You've come for our little poetry reading tonight I see," Laura said.

"God no," he said, "I hate them."

"Well then why are you here?"

Nicholas smiled in astonishment. "You haven't seen me in at least a year and you think I come for a poetry reading... That's pathetic. I came to see you."

"Well then, here I am!" She laughed.

Pause.

Nicholas looked down at the table and said, "Naturally I didn't come for a handout but I'm fairly broke now. Can you help me out?" He smiled and looked up at her. "Let me rephrase that: I don't care how you are and don't tell me what you've been doing. Just give me some cash because I need it and I deserve it."

Laura smiled faintly and looked at table. She absently poked at a puddle of water with her finger tip and smeared it around. "Why should I help you out? It seems to me anything I'd give would be wasted, seeing you aren't responsible enough to even keep a roof over your head."

"My God you don't beat around the bush with your morals. How do you know I don't have a roof over my head?"

Laura smiled. "Well, I'll buy you a beer."

"That's big of you since you own the place."

Laura drummed the table top with her fingers. "What snotty ingratitude. What I own is a piece of paper called a bank loan, and that doesn't cover the beer."

"All right. I suppose I could use a beer."

Laura motioned to one of the waitresses. "I've got to go greet our poet; I notice he has arrived. Be back."

Nicholas turned toward the door as a gentleman who was undoubtedly the poet walked in. He carried an immensely striking dark brown leather portfolio with a Hopi stylization of a humpbacked flute player on the side. Equally striking was his belt which appeared to be corn husks woven to resemble the hide of a rattlesnake. He was moderately tall, with pale brown hair, gray eyes and a clean, square face. Nicholas watched him enter with some interest, and saw that he was followed by three friends, or cohorts (or disciples, he thought, given the deference in their manner). Laura deftly weaved through the crowd and buttonholed him before he'd gone much further into the restaurant. "You must be Peter Moreland," she said quietly, extending her hand, "How was the trip?"

He shook her hand and smiled. His smile had a distant, serene quality that did not quite touch his eyes. "You're Laura Dobson? I'm pleased to meet you. The drive was unmentionable so I won't mention it. And I'm thirsty. Do you have any milk? Or juice? Let me sit down for a few minutes, it won't be long, but I'm so tired." He dropped into a booth with his companions. The noise level in the room, which had dropped suddenly when he entered, now began to resume itself.

Nicholas observed this little scene with awe. Corn husks, briefcase, a glass of milk: Moreland was obviously, on the initial impression, nothing more than a fraud. Nicholas looked at Laura wonderingly as she brought Moreland his milk. She also brought a beer for herself. As she sat down at the table she absently tossed Nicholas a glance that was triumphant and apologetic simultaneously. Nicholas shrugged. She seemed pleased that Moreland had arrived.

The waitress came to bring Nicholas his beer. She seemed more relaxed and friendly than she did the first time around. She even said "Hello." Nicholas asked her if these little poetry affairs went on very often.

"Every week," she said. "Are you new in town?"

"It's the first time I've been back in a while." Nicholas appraised the waitress with some interest. "I'm looking for a friend---I came to town to stay with him, and now he's off somewhere. Someone might know him---his name's Austin. No? I'm sure someone around here knows him. Tell him I'm stuck over at Oddfellows Park. If it's tomorrow morning I'll just be on one of the benches."

The waitress frowned. "If you're counting on me to find your friend you're liable to be on that bench with the bums all summer."

Nicholas shrugged and looked into his beer contemplatively. True enough, and what did he expect? Yet he was not pleased with this reaction; in his imagination he had somehow expected conversation leading to an offer of a place to stay.

Nicholas sipped his beer and surveyed the crowd. While Moreland and his party of newcomers engaged in chit-chat around the table, Nicholas noticed that most of the people in the restaurant seemed to be poets also. The scattered conversations centered upon lengthy comparisons of one poet with another. Occasionally Moreland was mentioned. It appeared that Moreland was something more than a poet. He was the purveyor of a new lifestyle. He had begun a community of poets in the mountains that had attracted quite a few hopefuls. He had developed an entire philosophy that he expressed in the body of his poetry.

Whatever their relation to Moreland and poetry, the restaurant crowd seemed otherwise mongrel. But everyone seemed to know everyone else, and they all had, from the sound of things, a lot of wine under their belts. Although a couple of conversations were getting noticeably louder, no one was remotely boisterous, or looked like they might produce a gun. Nicholas noted all this with a perfunctory sort of smugness. He sat back, and was immensely curious to hear what Moreland had to say.

Laura Dobson finally went to the microphone to introduce Moreland. "Hello," she said, "I'm glad you all waited over our little delay. Mr. Moreland has just arrived from Eureka and will read some selections from his new book of poetry which will be published this fall." She stepped down and Moreland walked up amid scattered applause. He stepped onto the little stage with a wry solemn expression, bowed his head slightly, then raised it abruptly and in a booming baritone voice recited, in an unfamiliar language, a drawling monotone chant which he later explained was the Hopi song of the humpbacked flute player. There was absolute silence in the room. Moreland then launched into a monologue concerning the origins of the chant, and in what manner similar chants were central to the daily practices and beliefs of many southwest Indian tribes. He explained that while it was true that shamans took on the heavy spiritual tasks of healing and major prophesy, the Hopi, like all primitive peoples, were generally far more spiritually inclined than the average, upwardly mobile European or American citizen. Then he related several anecdotes centering around certain experiences he and Katie (who Nicholas could only guess was Moreland's wife) had had on a recent visit to the Hopi reservation in Arizona. He finally read five or six poems. The whole presentation took slightly over an hour.

At this point many in the audience ordered more drinks and fell to discussing various modes of literary expression. A few came over to Moreland's table to congratulate him and ask various questions. Soon a general discussion developed. Laura opened the microphone to the floor and

the people who had signed up began to read their poems. A tall woman with a small voice began to read a series of love poems but could not make herself heard to the satisfaction of her friends, who quietly began hissing, and asking people to please be quiet, and telling everyone to shut up, until a big drunken man in a plaid shirt stood up and belligerently declared that love had been run into the ground years ago as far as poetry was concerned, and that in any case he didn't want to hear some mousy-voiced twit whispering about shit that belonged in the toilet. Laura overheard this and immediately walked over to the man and told him to please leave immediately. The tall woman, now in tears, walked off the stage and threw the manuscripts she'd been reading into the drunken man's face. He then sat down, shook his head, and said that he would be damned if some mousy-voiced pom-pom girl was going to throw paper into his face and tell him to leave, and that he would damn well stay here all night. Laura immediately went to the phone. Another man had walked to the stage and looked as if he was going to begin reading his poetry, but he hesitated and finally sat back down. Moreland looked apprehensive and followed Laura with his eyes.

Nicholas set down his beer and went over to the man. He bent down and whispered something into his ear for several seconds; the man slowly looked up and grinned tentatively. He stood up and followed Nicholas out of the restaurant. Nicholas signaled to Laura as they passed her. She was pale with anger, but she put the phone down.

The two men walked out of the restaurant and stood out on the sidewalk, gesturing amicably under the dim light of a street lamp. Brief snatches of conversation filtered through the door: "... the nerve of these bitches who puff themselves up and spout off like love professors." After several minutes Nicholas returned alone. He weaved through the room to his table and sat down to finish his beer. His shirt was damp and clung to his skin in the breezeless room; little sweaty rivulets rilled down his face and neck. The beer was cool in his hand; he tried to concentrate on that, as if his concentrated thought and a process of osmosis would work the coolness from his hand up through his limbs and neck. He gazed through the humid air to where Laura and Moreland sat. As he watched them speak he felt a certain contempt for Moreland arise in him, accompanied by an elation that fanned the contempt and prodded it forward. He smiled. He noted the way Moreland held his glass, which was an absurd two-fingered grip that reeked of affectation. And then his eyes... No one with discernment would ever think there was anything but the shallowest self-interest behind those shabby eyes. He was simply an absolute fraud.

Nicholas noticed that Laura beckoned to him with her hand. Did she want him to come over to their table? Now he would have to say something to them, to make conversation. He simply wasn't up to it. Taking care not to move his head he refocused his eyes to the beer bottle in front of him. He had not been looking in Laura's direction after all; he was just looking absently at the beer bottle. Laura was waving to him in the mistaken assumption that Nicholas was looking in her direction, but he was not and did not see her beckon.

Laura excused herself and turned directly toward to Nicholas. "Nicholas!" she shouted across the room. She saw him turn up from the table hesitantly. "Nicholas!" she repeated, and beckoned vigorously with her arm. Nicholas got up from his table and walked over. Laura smiled as he approached. "Nicholas, this is Peter Moreland." She turned to Moreland. "Nicholas is a musician and composer who just returned to town." Moreland nodded and looked up to Nicholas with a faint smile. Nicholas nodded and did not smile. Laura got up from the table and put her arm around Nicholas, leaning to speak in his ear. "Have a seat here," she whispered. "Entertain them

and don't be your usual clammish self. I've got to go to the kitchen." Nicholas reluctantly sat down and said nothing. Conversation resumed between Moreland and his entourage.

During the first break in the men's conversation, Nicholas said "I understand you've started a commune up the coast."

Moreland observed Nicholas with a cool glance. "On the contrary; you don't understand," he smiled.

Pause.

The man on Moreland's left replied that it could hardly be called a commune seeing that it was not remotely communistic in either conception or organization.

"But you do have a community of some sort that you've started," said Nicholas.

Moreland shrugged; he turned to a companion and smiled. Everyone remained silent.

The man on Moreland's left impatiently said, "It's not a community in the modern sense at all. If you really need a term for it, it's a spiritual confraternity. People with the same spiritual goals come together, grow their own food, and have the solitude they need to pursue their meditations."

"A sort of community garden cum Zen retreat," Nicholas offered.

Moreland threw back his head and laughed aloud. He stopped, looked at his companions, and shook his head.

Nicholas looked at him with apparent pleasure and smiled. "But where do the Hopi fit in? Or do they?"

Moreland focused his gray eyes on Nicholas for several seconds without speaking. Then he said: "You keep asking these idle, curious questions. As long as you continue this, you will continue to irritate me, and you will learn nothing of value to boot." He paused. "If you knew anything about the Hopi, or had listened to what I said earlier, it would be very clear that their ways run right through all of this."

There was polite silence around the table, and it soon became clear that Moreland would say nothing more.

Nicholas set down his beer and lowered his eyes to the table. "It is not clear at all," he said slowly, "And actually, I am nearly full blooded Hopi. In fact I grew up on that reservation that you and your wife found so delightful and amusing."

Moreland's companions fidgeted. Moreland did not look particularly ruffled, but his eyes became dead and impenetrable. For some moments he continued to look at Nicholas without expression: he observed Nicholas's curly black hair; his square face with its thick mustache and wide, luminous eyes; his dark skin. He looked like a Cretan, or a Cossack. Moreland finally said, "You don't look at all like a Hopi, or like any Indian for that matter."

Nicholas shrugged. "And you don't look like an imbecile."

One of men across the table rose, muttering angrily, but Moreland restrained him with his hand. Then he and the three got up; they left without another word or glance at Nicholas.

Nicholas sipped his beer alone. He nursed his antagonism along with his beer, his odd emotional mixture of anger and satisfaction at his life and its circumstances. "I've become a clown," he thought. Why else would he feel such a prickly sense of inferiority and shame in the presence of asinine poets? And then stoop to antagonize them with obvious fabrications, which posted his inferiority on a billboard for all to see? He was no less asinine than they. To cap it off, what would Laura think? She had entrusted her hospitality to him; he'd made a sad thing of it.

Laura soon came back from the kitchen and found him alone. She stood over the table and looked at him in exasperation before sitting down. "Why did you scare them off so fast?" she said. Nicholas shrugged and smiled. "They were not worthy of you so I sent them off."

"I suppose that's true enough," she said.

Pause.

Laura sipped her beer quietly and finally asked, "What brings you back here, Nick? Where have you been sleeping at night since you're so broke?"

Nicholas looked up and smiled faintly. "I've been playing my music town to town, sleeping here and there. I suppose I got lonesome for you and Austin so I came back. The bums took my guitar and my money ran out. I guess I need a job."

"Well I can tell you that Austin isn't around. He's in town someplace but he doesn't come here."

"At all? That's hard to believe."

"You believe what you like but he doesn't come here. You'll have to hunt him up. As for me---you found me easy enough."

"Yes, and now I have a chance at you."

"Spare me. Get a job."

"I've always thought that love was based on something more spiritual than jobs. How crass."

Laura nodded and sighed. "I suppose I can put you up for a while. If you can manage a steady job you can even rent part of the house; it's available. But please don't bring Austin around, assuming you find him."

Nicholas drained the rest of his beer and set the bottle down. "So I don't even have a stab at you until I get a job?"

Laura nodded sadly. "God Nicholas, I feel so stale."

Pause.

Laura finished her beer and stood up. She motioned a waitress over to the table. "Why don't you have another beer; we'll close in an hour. I've got to go back to the kitchen."

Nicholas nodded. The waitress brought his beer and he sipped it quietly. He felt uneasy but at

rest. He had found Laura and had a cold beer in his hand. And there might be further opportunities, he thought, although a superstitious dread of reflecting too closely on them, that they might come to nothing, stopped him from counting the chickens. He would have to get a job; the thought of being further prey to meandering bums depressed him. Their dead-beat hobo existence, once touched on, had siren calls that bound one to wandering, and led further into a narrow world that became narrower, with no turning and all motion becoming reluctant. And so he resolved to stay away from the benches at Oddfellow's park.