

Saturday Morning

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I SAUNTERED to the end of the road, kicking the clumps of grass that grew between the cracks in the pavement. At the end of the street the crumbling sidewalk was almost obscured by weeds so thick they seemed to grow from the cement. There was no path from the street to the river, and the tall grass was cool and wet against my legs as I stepped from the last broken slab of the sidewalk. My footprints crushed the grass into a white path behind me and water shivered over the edge of the blades. In the opaque dawn the sun had the hard quality of the dew but none of its brightness, as jagged apertures in the grey clouds filtered the light through in a shifting haze. The clouds became thinner and whiter, breaking up into uneven shapes in the unsteady light. Wet jimson-weeds struck me with their evil-smelling leaves as I struggled through the thickening underbrush toward the fog-blanketed river. A milkweed broke in my path and juice ran down the shattered stalk like thick white blood oozing from a severed vein.

The mist over the river dissolved reluctantly, lifting its thick vapor to reveal shadowy trees on the banks. As I burst from the underbrush onto the spongy mud bounding the dark, slow-moving water, the pungent odor of the river was sharp and raw. Silence hung over the trees and river. I walked along the shore listening to the squishing sound the moist earth made beneath my shoes, and watching my footprints fill with water.

The sun gave a clear indication of day as it began to send a flood of light through the widening valleys between the clouds. To the west, two gigantic cloud-faces seemed to be arguing, their movement giving them strange mobility. A vulture wheeled slowly in an ever-tightening circle in the distance, and above me sparrows chirped quickly in a staccato frenzy, while the crows cawed bitterly in the treetops. Half-submerged in the water lay a rotting tree-trunk which was marred by malignant fans of flesh-colored fungus. A centipede writhed feverishly in the slimy mica-bright trail of a shell-less snail that hunched sluggishly over the bark.

The simmering sun had put to rout the few remaining clouds, and in the growing warmth the air was heavy with the odor of decaying fish and watercress. A dragonfly darted along the curve of the bank, its wings glinting gold and purple as it skimmed over the water in search of food. The vulture was circling closer now, its long leathery wings beating easily as it neared its prey.