

SOON AFTER DAWN

Debra Cope

It breathes, silent, burning, joyous morning.
Now I feel its warm touch, its ecstasy.
A resonant silence sounds softly and
Reaches me on my quiet early way.
Pure and lustrous, morning's blessings flow.
This marvelous silence envelops me.
Day's beauty, bright grace! Its blissful powers
Take me now, and I, tacit, whisper "yes."

MADMAN AT NOON

Mark Murray

When I first saw him, I was totally fascinated. He just looked interesting. I wanted desperately to talk with him, even though I knew nothing about him. He was a stranger to me.

It seemed unusually warm and humid outside this afternoon. The weather was hot, terribly hot, even for Chicago in July. My shirt and pants were sticking to my body with perspiration as I moved along the sidewalks in the downtown area. Salty beads of sweat trickled down my face, pooling under my chin and dripping onto my wet chest.

I was walking along State Street on my way to lunch. It was twelve after noon; the streets were very crowded with hungry business people. Masses of bodies were pushing and shoving for all they were worth. Everyone was in a hurry. Pedestrians refused to pay attention to the orange and green flashing walk/don't walk signs that aimlessly warned them about traffic situations.

The man that I found so interesting was stumbling about at a very slow pace, irritating those people that chose to walk faster. Men and women shoved their way around him, glaring and grumping as they went by. I judged his age to be about fifty-five. He was wearing a purple felt hat with a red feather on top that seemed grossly out of place, even for Chicago. The tennis shoes on his feet didn't look quite right with his three-piece corporate blue business suit. He looked forward as he walked, eyes fixed on some indeterminable point along the horizon somewhere. He gave me the impression that he didn't notice or care about the briskly moving world around him.

I thought about trying to catch up with him; he was about half a block ahead of me, walking in the same direction as I. I'm kind of a shy guy so this would take most of the courage that I could muster up. Today had not been a particularly good one. I felt as though I had reached my quota of courage for the day.

I followed the old man for about three blocks. I tried to stay at least a half block behind him so he would not notice me, until I was ready to approach him.

Walking to lunch in downtown Chicago, without any definite destination, being among a great crowd of humans and knowing none of them, can be a terribly lonely ordeal. I went through this hell six times a week. Somehow, I thought the funny old man must go through this all the time. I felt sorry for him, and for myself.

It seemed that the hot and humid weather had made people a little irritable and nervous. I was nervous. I wanted to duck into some air-conditioned shop for a few seconds to cool off and relax before I continued walking with the mob. But I knew if I did that, I would lose track of the man. He was the most important item on my mind right now.

I spent a great deal of time observing him. Then I observed how the strangers on the sidewalk were reacting to his presence. After they passed him, some people began to snicker and laugh. Others laughed directly at him, loud enough to where he could hear them. They didn't care. They had no tact at all. That kind of people makes me angry. He was just a poor misfit thrown into a world of charm machines. He didn't belong, but that didn't seem to bother him.

I looked down at my watch and saw that I had about twenty-five minutes left on my lunch break. I could swear that the second hand was moving faster than it should, stealing away precious moments. I knew of course that there was really nothing wrong with my watch. My mind was probably playing tricks on me.

All of this time the sky had been getting darker. I hadn't really noticed that the weather was changing. It's so hard to tell what the weather is going to do because the tall buildings block the view. It looked like we were going to have one of those light summer rains: a mild storm that comes up on you and then leaves as quickly as it comes. Then it started to sprinkle. The people on the sidewalk were moving closer to the buildings, hoping for some protection from the moisture. The man I was following continued in his path.

It was easier to follow him now that the crowd was moving away. Finally, I decided that I would go up to him and say hello or something.

For some reason, and I don't know why, he stopped dead in his tracks when I was about ten feet behind him. I stopped too. I didn't know what to do. I was becoming increasingly aware of my precarious position. He turned around and looked directly at me with a bland expression on his heavily wrinkled face. Maybe that was the only expression he was capable of. I just stood there. The other people left on the sidewalk didn't notice us.

He turned back around without saying a word and continued his walk at a faster pace. Did he know he was being followed? Was he frightened? I couldn't figure it out. But, I knew that I *had* to approach him now in order to alleviate any fears that I might have caused. I felt very guilty. I started jogging in order to catch up with him.

Then it started to rain very hard. The heavy rain just increased my need and passion to talk with him. The purple felt hat protected his gray hair from the dampness. The tennis shoes gave him that necessary grip to scurry across the now slippery pavement. He was running as fast as his aged frame would allow. I was easily catching up.

When we passed Clark Street, I was almost run over by a cab. My obsession with talking to the man outweighed the normal precaution I exhibit when crossing streets.

I was only about a foot behind him when I yelled, "Hey!" He stopped again dead in his tracks and turned toward me. At that instant life and motion seemed to slow down. What I was experiencing was the feeling of slow motion that occurs seconds before a person realizes that he is going to die.

I looked down at the man's hand. He had produced, from somewhere inside his blue suit, a knife that was about eight inches long. He spoke to me in a velvety soft but forceful voice that posed the question,

"Why don't you leave me alone?" Then he whimpered and drove the knife elegantly into my stomach. he then turned the handle of the knife and began to slice upward to my chest.

I looked down at the bizarre scene with the knife. Then I looked up at the earnest expression on his face. He was breathing heavily and I could smell the stale odor of his breath. Oddly, the people on the sidewalk were not paying attention to this macabre incident. Nobody called for help. For all they cared, the old man could be striking at thin air.

I was surprised at the amount of blood falling to the pavement. It collected in small pools that were washed down the cracks in the sidewalk due to the heavy rain. I was scared, frightened that I would soon be gone.

At first I experienced no pain. I knew that the cracking noise I heard was from the blade breaking through my ribs. The gurgling sound was blood and air seeping from my punctured lungs. I was completely unaware of the pain until moments before I felt like fainting.

He pulled the knife from my body and returned it to wherever it was kept. He moved away from me and continued walking.

The others on the sidewalk didn't even glance toward me. Nobody saw me or cared about what had happened.

I fell to the ground hoping the rain would wash my wounds and make me clean before I was gone. But I knew better.

I began to faint, disappear, fade away.

He had gotten me this time. Today he had won. How much longer could he keep this up? I didn't know for sure, but I would try again tomorrow. He knew that.

That poor, lonely, neurotic, crazy, schizophrenic old man. He was probably proud of his victory. He should have been because its not easy. It's not easy at all.

I shall try again tomorrow afternoon. It should be a better day. Maybe tomorrow will be the day he gives in to me. Maybe tomorrow will be that day that I take over. He can't keep killing me forever.

I'm just a figment of his imagination. That bothers him.