

The Crowd

“There are some secrets which do not permit themselves to be told.”

—Edgar Allan Poe

It was late in the afternoon when I rushed into the street.

My jacket was only halfway on, one arm in one sleeve, the other sleeve brushing the ground. There simply hadn't been enough time.

People were everywhere, all walking in the same direction: eastward towards the square.

I pushed my way through the crowds and nearly knocked over a well-dressed businessman. His face was broad and clean-shaven. “Why are you in such a hurry?”

“Sorry,” I murmured.

“Maybe you didn't hear me, son. What are you in such a goddam hurry for?”

“I said I was sorry!”

His face contorted into a scowl. I was just about to double my pace when I felt him grab my arm.

“Why don't you just fall in step with the rest of us?” He was pinching me.

“Let me go!” I protested. “You've got no right to keep me here!”

“And what right have you got to be pushing people around like that? We're all in this together, you know.”

I looked at him. It was obvious he had no grasp of the situation. He frowned at me uncertainly and slightly loosened his grip on my arm. Without warning I brought my foot up in an arc and gave him a quick, sharp kick in the side. He let go of me and doubled over, wincing. I ran away as fast as I could. I could hear him cursing behind me.

I elbowed my way directly into the middle of the crowd. The boulevard was hemmed in by two unbroken stretches of buildings. The walls had no windows or doorways. High atop one of the buildings I saw a hawk. It was sitting quietly on an eave, watching the procession stream past, waiting for something to happen.

Everyone had come out: construction workers still in their hardhats; women in furs and long dresses; a butcher, his apron stained with blood; policemen, students, factory workers, and clerks. No one had stayed behind.

I heard a child say, “Mommy! Where are we going?” He was tugging at his mother's coat. His mother did not look down at him.

“Why are we walking like this?” the boy whined.

The woman continued walking, eyes straight ahead, pulling the boy after her.

I was suffocated by the crowd. Everyone was walking at exactly the same tedious pace. Shoes hit the pavement in an unchanging cadence. Shoulder to shoulder they walked. No one spoke. Their faces were expressionless.

The vanguard was just ahead of me, walking determinedly, their faces thrust forward in confidence, though in fact they were just as confused as everyone else.

I pushed myself towards the head of the line. A few people glared at me angrily. I desperately wanted to break through, to swing my arms wildly in all directions.

A nun was walking directly in front of me. She was all that stood between me and the open pavement ahead. Impatiently I pressed myself against her, letting the full weight of my body bear down on her back. Without an ounce of resistance, she fell to the pavement. I reached out for her, but it was too late. The crowds behind us did not stop. They continued walking, steadily, in the same unbroken rhythm. I heard no screams. In my last glance back I saw her habit disappear under the trampling feet.

I was not the only one to have broken through, however. There were a few others walking in clusters of two or three in the open spaces before the crowd. Suddenly I saw J. just ahead of me. He was walking arm in arm with a woman.

I called out after them. “Wait! Don't go on without me!”

Neither J. nor the woman turned. In a few seconds I had caught up with them. I put my hand on

J.'s arm. He quickly brushed it aside.

"What's the matter?" I said. "Don't you recognize me?"

J. looked at me a brief moment, then shook his head. "No, I don't know you. You're a total stranger to me."

"Listen!" I cried, walking beside him and struggling to keep up. "Don't you realize? I can no longer dream!"

There was no response.

"Didn't you hear me? *I can no longer dream.*"

J. stifled a laugh. "You're sick, man! You're really sick. Why don't you just admit it?"

"You don't understand," I insisted.

"Of course, I do!"

He snapped his head back, eyes fixed straight ahead, his legs moving faster but stiffly. The woman, seeming annoyed, adjusted her steps to his.

I left them and ran madly ahead. Stumbling down the boulevard my screams were barely coherent. I was soon enveloped by a fog so thick I could hardly see my own feet.

There were still a few others in front of me, but I quickly raced past them. I ran until I was alone, until I had become a procession of one. Then I fell to the pavement in a daze.

When I came to, the fog had risen and become clouds in the sky. Before me was a huge domed building. It was in the middle of the square. The roof of the portico was supported by Doric columns.

I climbed the steps to the entrance. The doors were locked. I could go no further. I pounded on the doors. "Let me in," I cried. "Let me in!"

Though still standing outside, I could hear my voice echoing inside the temple, bouncing from wall to wall. Gradually other voices began to mingle with my own, one by one, until I heard the cries of all humanity merge into a deafening babel of laughing and weeping, groaning and singing. Then, piercing the din, I heard the words, "This, my friend, is paradise. This, my friend, is bliss."

Now the crowds were approaching. I looked behind me and saw people spilling into the square. Inside the sanctuary the cries were growing louder, more persistent. Is this what had awaited them? Would they recognize the cries as their own?

For a moment there was a disbelieving silence. Then the crowd roared up in anger. People began shoving and pushing each other. Fighting broke out. Men were running everywhere. Women wept. Children screamed.

I knew that I must escape, but there was no way forward. I looked up in prayer and suddenly saw a sign carved in stone above the doors. The sign read:

HEAVEN HAS NO GATES

As soon as I understood, the doors of the temple opened. From the outside the temple had appeared cavernous. But once I stepped inside, the walls immediately shrank to the size of a small chapel. The light was ethereal. The doors closed behind me. The crying voices could no longer be heard. The sanctuary was completely empty, except for a raised platform a few steps ahead at the very front. On the platform sat J., legs crossed, with the woman standing to his side. Somehow they had arrived before me.

I walked across the stone floor to the woman.

"May I see him now?" I asked.

"It might be better if you didn't," she replied.

"But it's been such a long time."

"Yes, I know, but—"

"Please," I pleaded.

She finally consented and I approached J. His hair was uncombed. His beard was in tatters. His eyes were open, but vacant. The skin around his nostrils was pinched.

I put my lips to his ear and whispered, "J., it's me."

There was no reply. The eyes continued to look vacantly ahead.

"Is he dead?" I asked the woman.

"He is in a deep trance," she replied.

I touched my hand to his shoulder. Again I whispered, more urgently, "*It's me.*"

I shook him very gently. But, again, there was no response. J.'s lips were parted slightly but I wasn't

sure if he was breathing. I looked at the woman. Her face seemed as sad as my own.

“You know you can’t stay here,” she said.

“But I can’t go back to the crowd either,” I replied. “They would kill me.”

She motioned for me to follow her and showed me a secret door in the wall just beside where J. was sitting. Passing through an archway, I found myself in a narrow alley. It was dark and quiet. I followed the alley into a town I had never been to before. The shops were all closed, the streets deserted. There were no people. I was finally alone.

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