

Alfred Henry

White Napkins

I remember him well; an older man, maybe in his early sixties, his face worn and sad. He moved slowly. He'd walk into the bar, wearing his old gray trench coat and strange hat; walking as if burdened by the weight of his own organs. He came in everyday for four days at exactly the same time (2:00 p.m.) and, unless it was taken, sat on the same barstool - in the corner, against the wall. It was 1988 and I was still in college, bartending part-time at a dive called The Dead Tulip. He didn't say much. He'd slump into his stool, order a Manhattan, and gaze at the TV without actually watching it. After a couple of drinks he'd start writing on bar napkins. After a couple more drinks, he'd pay up and stagger out, leaving the napkins behind. He did this, as I said, for about four days and then I never saw him again.

But I saved the napkins...

1st napkin: A thousand chimpanzees roar their approval as the sun disappears behind a symphonic eclipse. A vast landscape of broken glass stretches before a weary goat-herder; jeweled and glinting and he without his sandals. The broken sky has not held a cloud in two-hundred days and parched, sun-scorched multitudes moan toward heaven.

Whenever someone tried to talk to him, he would nod, say nothing, and then turn back to the TV. He didn't seem interested in sports...

2nd napkin: A child sitting in the dust sweats, and each droplet contains a tiny slow-motion film-clip of his life: Eating applesauce with Mommy. Playing catch with Daddy; his awkward, still-new child-hands struggling with the size and shape of the yellow rubber ball. His grandma dying in her diseased bed, transmitting fear and grief through her clutched, withered hands.



His printing was neat and tiny; standard cartoon block lettering. Sometimes he'd doodle odd symbols on the napkins. But mostly he just wrote prose...

3rd napkin: The goat-herder frowns and turns back. There is no water here. His last remaining goat bleats weakly and collapses onto a bed of broken glass. The goat-herder shakes his head but there is no time to mourn. He marches on.

Decayed skyscrapers line the horizon like dead sentries. The chimpanzees scream as the sun returns. People report hearing thunder, of seeing an approaching storm, but it is all rumor and hallucination.

4th napkin, 2nd day: A slender woman dressed only in a tattered slip happens upon a field of kitchen appliances. She searches through them. All the blenders are broken.

A man who used to be a surgeon dissects dead children and finds strange things in their stomachs; bottle caps, coins, flashbulbs, and shards of old credits cards. He places each item in a small paper sack and gloats over them.

5th napkin: A young man who has lived solely on a diet of starfish and raisins scratches equations in the dirt which prove the existence of God. And then dies. Two days later, a tired caravan passes through, erasing his work.

Bodies hang from silent telephone poles, their rotted flesh pecked at by screeching crows and seagulls. Birds flourish here.

An old woman studies the blue veins in her legs. She believes they are a roadmap to the afterlife, but the way they scatter into endless directions sends her a fearsome message. She cannot sleep.

He never ate. The food at the Dead Tulip was lousy, but he never tried it...

6th napkin, third day: A man pinches lice from his beard and feeds them to his son. The boy's outstretched tongue is always begging, his face an unending expression of need. The man will never shave again.

A little girl plays with a severed hand by the side of a crumbling road until her mother makes her put it down. The mother scolds the child and tells her the hand is dirty and dangerous. The mother examines the hand and then yanks the gold wedding band from the ring finger.

7th napkin: A man has an erotic liaison with a beautiful blond woman every day at two P.M. He stares up at her. She is wearing a red dress and holding a glass of wine. The billboard is worn and some of it is missing but he ejacu-