Ode to Happy Little Men

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Ode to Happy Little Men
Daniel J. King

There is no bronze monument to happy little men, 
No soot-swept portrait in a politician’s den, 
On every marble immortal’s frozen face instead, 
You’ll often find the spilling sigh of the lovely, youngly dead.

Or the plowed barren brow of the long-forgot mystery, 
Or the damning glassy glare of the long-ignored history, 
Or perhaps a serpent sneer, as if hissing to say, 
“Trade your mortal troubles for our pithy passion play.

“And join us now, the muted, the refuted, and the vain, 
Scowling from the sky as our cratered memories wane, 
Rule the world for a year, or a day, or an hour, 
And enjoy the pop-popping of your firecracker power.

“And then gaze down from your mantle at those happy little men, 
Who never owned a thousand, but loved their five or ten, 
Waking up, making love, and then lying down to die, 
And owing no tithe to tortured thoughts of why.”

I heard glass breaking. Without turning around I knew exactly what it was; our family portrait. It hung between the front door and window. My mother always touched the corner of the frame on her way out. I remember the day we took that picture. It was right before Christmas two years ago and we sat under a tree in the back yard. I usually avoided the camera, but it was important to her.

You should have seen how upset she was when my father spilled coffee on his newly starched shirt and had to wear one of his old ones. I didn’t really see the big deal; it was just a stupid shirt. He told her it was an accident, but I still thought I heard her crying in the laundry room as she tried to get the stain out.

I walked through the lawn (something my father hated) but today I didn’t care. I found myself stomping down the sidewalk without a destination in mind. All I knew was that if I stayed in that house a fraction of a second longer, I was going to burst.

The sun was beaming down on me so hard I had to wipe my forehead every few steps, and soon my shirt was soaked with sweat. I could feel it trickling down my back, pooling just above my waistband. My heart was running a marathon inside my chest. It was suffocating me, making it hard to breathe. I could feel it bouncing off my eardrums and radiating through my entire body. The pounding was so loud that for a second I thought someone behind me must have his iPod turned up too loud. I looked around; I was alone.

My legs could not keep up with the rest of my body and began to ache. I could feel my muscles twitching under my jeans. I almost stopped to catch my breath, but thought it better to walk it off and keep going. The pain began to fade, or maybe I just stopped feeling it.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a small shadow trailing slightly behind me. I tried to ignore it, but he was still there.

“When are you going to show me the dollar trick?” His chubby freckled face was sticky from the ice cream he held that was melting more quickly than he could eat it.

“Not today, Tommy.” I tried not to look him in the eyes.

“But, you promised!” He stomped his foot and I watched the jiggle travel up his leg.

“Yeah, but I didn’t promise I’d show you today. Now go home.”

“But...”

“Go HOME, Tommy!”

I walked away and left him standing on the sidewalk a couple doors down from his house. I caught a glimpse of him in the reflection of a parked car as he ran back to his porch. He was probably going to cry and tell his mother. I felt bad for being so mean to him: he was just a kid, but today was not a good...