Alfred

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Lewis: Alfred
Reflections on the Journey

Don't be angry because you have not made the whole journey. For the journey is sought but a series of steps. As long as one foot follows the other, no matter how slowly, the journey is underway. There is no shame in traveling slowly, for those who move too quickly oft miss the true pleasures of the voyage.

Travel, then, quickly enough to be content with your own progress. There is no call for anything more, nor justification for anything less. He is the fool who strives to travel at the other man's pace; for if that were to be meant by he would surely have been given the other man's feet. Move quickly enough to see, when looking back from time to time, that distance has indeed been covered. But do not move so swiftly that you arrive at the end of the road all out of breath, unable to recall the events you've encountered, and those who've crossed your path along the way. For that is folly most regretted. And moreover, be wary not to move so quickly that you arrive at your journey's end alone, for it is surely a one-way voyage. One is never granted the privilege of going back to pick up those who have been left behind in haste.

by Peter McCarthy

"Must be close to noon," muttered Alfred, halfheartedly closing the flaps of the box he was working on. He tore his eyes away from the blue dress and across the way, peered through the scratched, milky plastic crystal of his large watch. He hurried to the little washroom and dashed a few drops of water on his hands to remove most of the foul-smelling packing glue. He stabbed his hair with a partly toothless comb which was caked with dirt and ranced body oils at the base of each tooth.

He usually ate at the Hamburger Haven, a burger and a malt for a $1.50. No, he wouldn't go there today. He would go into the arcade of the building and eat at the Tex-Mex Chile Store lunch counter. He entered the brightly lighted arcade, turned in the door of the fast-food store and wormed his way to a stool at the crowded counter.

"Hamburger with everything in a malt, pelase," he said automatically. Sitting there, Alfred's mind was a complete blank. What finally got his attention was the loud popping and crackling of chewing gum by someone sitting next to him. He glanced, averted, then focused, into the mirrored wall back of the lunch counter, and promptly froze. The moisture crept onto his palms, his throat dried up, and he didn't quite know what to do with his hands. There beside him sat his vision in blue!

"Would you mind passin' the menya, bud," wheezed a nasal voice. He reached for the menu, then stopped, immobile. No! No! The voice couldn't be coming from her! A bony knee slammed against his leg. "Poddin' me, but if it ain't no trouble, could ya pass the menya?"

Alfred, repulsed and galvanized by her touch, continued the movement and handed her the menu. His hand shook. He noticed the blond hair which was dark brown at the roots. He noticed the greasy, penciled eyebrows arching high over the stubble of the originals. With a start he noticed the powdered-caked pores, the cute red lips painted on the much larger lips, and the stark lashes which were stuck together with black beads of mascara. He tried not to see the powder- and-dirt-soiled collar of the blue dress. The blue dress! The knitted blue dress! Some of the yarn had been snagged and the ends were beginning to disappear into the ever-widening holes.

"Gawd, ain't it hot for September?" whined the girl. She half turned on her stool to adjust the baggy dress and Alfred was assailed with the odor of cheap perfume and old perspiration.

Heartick, Alfred gripped the counter to steady his whirling head. His fingers and nails, now drained of blood, turned white in their effort to keep him on an even keel while his ideals and dreams crashed all around him.

The girl in blue, attracted by his slight reeling and the sudden- alarmng lack of color in his now sagging face, watched with interest as the counter girl placed a sandwich and malt before him. His jaw muscles were visibly working. He made an effort to say something. Only a strangled gurgle was heard. "Pardner?" asked the counter girl as she was making out his check. Alfred tried again. "Sorry. Can't eat it," he rasped. He slapped some money on the counter and staggered from the store.

As he stumbled into the busy, bright arcade, a shrill, white- ridden voice chased after him. "Gosh, what a jerk; a real screwball. Ain't it hot, honey?"