

After 40 Years, The Magic & Fun Shop on W. Tennessee Street Has Closed

And in its place there is a hole in the heart
of everyone who is drawn to enchantments,
 charms, witchery, hoodoo, voodoo, mesmerism,
 and spirit rapping as well as all things cabalistic,
 talismanic, necromantic, and incantatory—in short,
everything that isn't the rational, the reasonable,
 the regular, for is not our world composed equally
 of that which is sunny and vitamin-enriched
 and fluoride-coated but also dark, hairy-legged,
sclerotic, that which thrills not to the lark
 and the dove but to the owl, the bear, the werewolf,
 all the brutes, beasts, and fauna that our friends
 the vampires, in their ancient wisdom, call
the children of the night? The people who
 worked at The Magic & Fun Shop looked,
 well, *different*, as though they might have lived
 in the store after hours, hanging upside down
from the ceiling like fruit bats, or, if they did go home,
 to a place where they had dragons
 as footmen who brought them big bowls of glitter for breakfast.

There was an old man who sat at the door
and grinned at everyone as they came and went,
 and some customers thought he was the greeter,
 and others figured he was there to stop shoplifting,
 and a third group whispered that he was Satan.
That said, there was no store anywhere more efficient
 and well-run than The Magic & Fun Shop:
 once I wanted to dress up as Poseidon, and when
 I inquired about tridents, I was asked if I were
interested in *the six-, nine-, or twelve-foot model*,
 and on another occasion, when I said I needed
 to make a dynamite bomb for a Hallowe'en costume,
 I was met with a simple *How many sticks do you need.*
There was always an air of menace about
 The Magic & Fun Shop, especially if
 you were walking by at night and thought for a moment

about rattling the door knob but decided not to,
for what would happen if the door opened
and you went in, and the next day
the people who stopped by to pick out their masks

would find one of your face between those
of Elvis and Nixon, your mouth wide in wonder.

The night I dressed up like
a bomber, I strapped my dynamite sticks to my head

and set out for a party, and at a stoplight, I glanced
over and saw a patrol car in the lane next to mine,
and when I mouthed the word *Hallowe'en*,
the officer nodded in a way that said *I get it*, that he knew

I was wearing a costume, though there was something
in his eyes that suggested he might be thinking

I was a man dressed like a bomber *who*
might actually be a bomber, so it was just as well that the light

changed then and he went his way and I mine,
because I could tell the officer was looking
at the people in the crosswalk and the ones
farther out under the street lamps and, beyond them,

the ones in the shadows that he can only see
the outlines of, people who might step out
at any minute or stay hidden till it's too late
and who might not even be people at all

but some other life form newly freed from
the dungeons of our dreams and as mad as hell
about it, and he glances down at his clipboard
and then up again and thinks *Jesus, what next.*

The Look On That Man's Face

When a log pops in the fireplace, everybody jumps and then laughs
because Roger has just told us that, before they had any children
of their own, his parents were playing poker in the house of a friend
whose mother had died, and the old lady had the habit of tapping

her cane in a distinctive way, and it was late, and someone is just about
to deal when they hear a *tap, tap-tap, tap, tap-tap* from the basement,
and nobody knows what to do, and finally Roger's dad says he'll go
down and take a look, and the woman who owns the house tells him

*to be careful, there are so many boxes down there, you don't want
something to fall on you*, and of course everyone's too scared
to play cards, but when he comes back fifteen minutes later or so
and someone says *See anything?* he says *No*, just that *it was hard*

to get around, and somebody makes a joke, and they go back
to their card game, though Roger's mom keeps looking
at her husband, she recalls years later, and when Rogers asks why,
she says *I can't really explain. But the look on that man's face,*

and then her voice would trail off, and she'd turn away.
And that's when the log pops in the fireplace and we jump
and laugh ourselves, because nothing happened to Roger's dad
or any of the other guests at that long-ago poker party, but still.

Do you believe in ghosts? I don't, either, and I think people who say
they've seen them are just showing off. That said, there's a ghost
in our house. Her name is Mrs. Middlebrooks, and she was
the mother of the woman we bought the house from.

While I'd hear her at night, moving from room to room
and even playing the piano, I never saw her, but plenty
of other people did: housekeepers, dinner guests,
even our son Will, who was brushing his teeth one night

when he was a little boy, and the water was running,
and as he watched, the handle slowly turned, and the water
went off, and when Will tells this story the next day at breakfast,
his brother Ian says *Yes, I know about her and sometimes*

she comes into my room at night and lies down next to me,

and when I say *What's that like?* he shrugs and says *I don't know*
and then *I like her* and *She's nice*. A friend came by once
to drop something off, and he rang the bell, but nobody answered,

so he pressed his face against the glass and saw an old woman
standing across the room with a puzzled look on her face,
and when he tapped the glass to get her attention, the old lady
rushed across the room *at an unnaturally high speed*, he said,

at least for an old lady. When I asked him what she looked like,
he said she had tight curls and wore wire-rimmed glasses
and a white blouse and a high-waisted black skirt that went
all the way to the floor, and when I say that to our neighbor

across the street the next day, he says *Oh, that sounds*
like Mrs. Middlebrooks. Of course, once I tell our friends
around the fire this story, they tell theirs. Lorna says she saw
the transparent shadow of a lanky old man in a fuzzy robe

walking slowly down the stairs and then again several times,
always the same, always deep in thought, always the same time,
and when she asked the neighbors if the former owner
was *a tall, lanky, quiet guy*, they said, *Oh, so you knew him?*

and Lorna said *No, but I just saw him*. Chryssy says there was
a ghost in her house that no one talked about, and then one day
a glowing creature walked straight out of the wall and offered
a flower to my toddler daughter, who ran and hid under a blanket.

And Sarah says there was a penny in her mother's house that kept
disappearing and showing up in the same spot every few days
because my dad was a penny-picker-upper, and Mom thinks
this is his way of teasing her. It's getting late now, and it seems as though

all the best stories have been told, so I don't bother to say that, a week
earlier, I'd been reading Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*
to Barbara when Patsy, who was on the bed with us and who
can sleep like no other cat, jumped up and let out an ungodly screech

and stared eyes wide at something only she could see—at that time of night,
Patsy just likes to cuddle, but I could have lit a firecracker in front
of her face, and she wouldn't have budged, and when I said
What's she looking at? Barbara said *I think Mrs. Middlebrooks is here*.

The fire's almost out by now, so people began to gather their things
and leave, and Barbara starts to straighten the house, but as I start

to collect plates and glasses, I can't stop thinking about that first story,
the one Roger told about his dad leaving the poker party and going

down into that basement and coming back and giving Roger's mom
the impression that he had more to say than he'd said to her
and the other card players, so I say *What about your dad, Roger?*
Did he ever say anything else? and Roger says not to him,

but his mom couldn't stop thinking about *the look on that man's face*
when he came back up those stairs, so she tells Roger she asked him about it
years later—not long before he died, actually—and Roger's dad said
You know, that basement was a lot bigger than it seemed.

A Man is Standing by the Roadside in His Pajamas, Holding a Possum

The man standing by the roadside in his pajamas is me,
and I'm holding a possum because, just 20 minutes earlier,
I'd heard a noise at three a.m. in the kitchen which turned out
to be a possum who freezes and hisses but otherwise
doesn't seem to mind when I grab him or her by the back
of his or her neck with one hand and find
my car keys with the other and drive to a woody area a mile south

and get out and am surveying my options and wondering
where I should let the possum go when a pair of headlights
appears, and a man who looks as though he's either going
to or coming from work slows, gives us the once-over,
and continues on his way, and later I will think of the guy
who is having a coffee outside a Paris café
and sees the great mathematician Henri Poincaré pass by, elegant

in his top hat and gloves and cane, and he is followed
in short order by Paul Verlaine, giggling like a madman
and staggering from the ravages of syphilis, and it's lunch time,
and both men are obviously going to lunch, and the observer
thinks *well, that's it, everybody goes to lunch* or at least
is going somewhere: before they became
the Beatles, the Beatles were driving back to Liverpool one icy winter's

day when their van went off the road and landed on its side,
and once the boys had made sure that no one was injured,
one of them asked how they were to get home, and one
of the others said, *Something'll happen*, and it did, because
a lorry driver picked them up soon after and drove them
the rest of the way, and in this manner does the world care for us,
and in this manner, too, do we care for the world, for as it says

in the Zohar of the old Jewish mystics, something went wrong
when the world was made, and sparks were scattered
everywhere, embers that needed to be gathered and restored
to their rightful place, and at the same time, God himself
was fragmented, and there are pieces everywhere, and it is
our task to repair the face of God, not the way superheroes
do in the movies but with little moments, one after the other,

like the man's wife handing him a cup of coffee when he gets
home and asking him how his shift had gone and him saying
*I'll tell you later, but first let me tell you about this man
I saw standing by the roadside in his pajamas holding*

*a possum and her laughing and saying What the hell was that
all about and the man saying It was
just something that happened, and I know this sounds crazy,*

*but for a moment I felt as though the world stopped
and everyone in it became, I don't know, a better person
in some way or at least a different one, but just for a second,
and then the lights came back on and the motors began
to hum again, and it happened so fast that nobody noticed,
and the wife says You really think that? and the man says I do,
I think it happens all the time, I think it's happening now.*