

Julie's Commute

Life was hard these days. After Julie got her last DUI, she lost her license. Now she had to hike 3 miles downtown to get to her job sitting at the desk of three-man law firm. It was easy work and it paid ok, so she had no mind to try and get anything else. Julie didn't tell any of her bosses about her own legal trouble, though they probably knew anyway.

She had carefully planned her route to keep her comfortable and looking as much like if she had driven as possible. Down Enston Avenue then a left on San Souci where there weren't any trees. She had to go quick to avoid sweating in the June heat and messing up her thin cotton blend blouse. Then she got to Rutledge where she made the main stretch of her trip. Right after the park, she had to make a block at Race Street because she didn't want to pass Castle's. Julie couldn't afford to tempt herself, and that place was bad luck anyway. After she got back on the main drag, it was easy. She only had the one obstacle.

Of course she had been going to meetings. That was the easy part of the whole thing. Her high horsing sister wasn't good for much, but at least she'd give her a ride up to a church outside of her neighborhood on Thursday nights. Then they'd stop at a Cook-Out or Lois's Spot for a quick bite before returning quietly to their separate homes only to start the weekly ritual over again.

After a few weeks at it, the routine seemed workable. Nobody at work was asking why her hair was stuck to her face with sweat when she got there, and Caroline the paralegal even complimented her new shoes, that could double for walking and work, the other day. That's why it was all the most stressful when she woke up at 8:15. Everything seemed to be working,

but just sleeping through her alarm was enough to throw it all out of balance. Julie rapidly dressed and fell down the stairs out the front door.

She went down the street in a sort of broken gallop for the first few blocks before settling into a walk as brisk as she could muster without turning any heads. Just because her gait was more steady did not mean her mind was any more at ease. She knew she'd get yelled at by someone if she was late, but if she could just keep up this pace for the whole way, she could just squeak by unnoticed.

Perhaps she was too focused on the road to look up, or perhaps she was too pressed for time, but she kept on going right on past Race Street into the block she had dutifully avoided for this whole time. She stumbled over a tree root that grown under the sidewalk and looked up. The sign jutted out and mockingly read in bold, blue script *Castle's Fine Spirits*. "Fine," she thought, though her heart was beating uncomfortably fast. "I've seen this damn thing a million times from a block off, who's to say I can't just up and walk past it?" Her knees trembled gently, but she kept on.

Julie's head began slowly pulsing as a few beads on sweat collected on her lips. Her pace slowed a little, but her resolve remained unshaken. It was just one building she had to get past, 20 feet at the most. The three windows of the storefront made the whole place blaze yellow in the morning sunlight. There was a crack in the pavement at the wall of the store, and Julie stopped to step over it cautiously, knowing that she was entering another space from the regular sidewalk. Her first step taken, marked, and counted, Julie paused and wiped the

moisture off her face with both hands. Her skin, usually the soft pink and white of an azalea had turned flush.

Her breathing became like a drum, meticulous and deep, as she walked past the red dot in the first window. "Two to go," she thought. Her mouth was full of stale sludge that dripped down her throat and nauseated her. She spit. The sweat kept on trickling no matter how hard she tried to dam it up, and her knees shook harder the more she tried to steady herself.

The second dot marked the majority of the obstacle surmounted, but Julie couldn't afford to pause to rejoice. "I can't think it. I can't can't." She repeated this little mantra in the rhythm of her steps. Before she knew it the third dot had passed her by. "Huh," she thought, "it's done with." Instinctively, Julie turned to face down her accomplishment. Joy came over her, and she couldn't help but lean against the wall of the next store and grin a little at what she had done. She finally got her breath back to normal.

Looking back at it, it all seemed so trivial. It was just one shop, 20 damn feet, on a three mile trip. "Time to keep going. I can't be late after all." But her legs weren't ready to budge. It all started again; that script C was too much. The golden glass persevered in its sparkling, and the neon sign kept pulsing like a siren's wail. "It's time to move on," she thought again, "time to go." But she didn't go yet. Instead, she inched a little closer to the door of the shop that she had vowed never again to walk past. Her head turned to look down the street where she was going, but it soon settled back on those three red dots in the storefront.

The cool of the conditioned air hit her as soon as her fingers settled on the door handle. “There ain’t no relief like hearing those little bells sing for me once again” she thought. The door slapped behind her.

Gothic Elements

In all of my stories, I write loosely in the Southern Gothic tradition, so it did not take me much adapting of my style to write this one. In fact, this idea had been in my notebook for a while waiting to be written. I had three primary models that I looked back at for inspiration. First and foremost, I looked back at Eudora Welty’s “A Worn Path.” I conceived this story as a sort of “road tale” from the beginning, so I went back to look at my favorite such story of all time. Then I looked at Virginia Woolfe’s “The Mark on the Wall” for inspiration in developing the interior of Julie’s life. But rather than the sort of upper middle class British woman, I wanted her to be Southern, so I turned to the way that Flannery O’Connor writes dialogue as a way to capture the regionalism that I wanted without hitting the reader over the head with it.

The main Gothic element I used was the grotesque. I focused on repeating the descriptions of bodily fluids, particularly sweat but also saliva, to unsettle the reader. I also played with the agency of Julie which I thought fell in line with many of the Gothic stories we read. She’s not locked up in a tower, but all the same, she is still not able to assert her own will over her body’s physical need for alcohol. I also very briefly eluded to a potential supernatural in Julie’s acknowledgement of the ontological difference between her usual route and the space occupied by the liquor store.