

1959

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Recommended Citation

Grimm, Ed (1959) "Saturday Night," *Exile*: Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol5/iss1/9>

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Saturday Night

BY ED GRIMM

Saturday night was my night. Five days a week, from 8 to 5, I would sort and review over and over again the hundreds of letters and packages in the post office that were destined to me—the dead letter office. I became part of the job, one of the letters, one of the packages, and every night I would go home and seal myself in my one-room apartment. I was a captive five nights a week. While the rest of the world was alive around me an inescapable force held me to my room. Night after night the walls would close in on me just a little bit more and night after night the red blinking neon sign from the five and ten cent store below my room would blink just a little bit brighter—just a little bit redder. The loneliness stalked me like a presence in the room until I could have screamed. Not just a loneliness that you feel when there is no one to talk with, but the loneliness that fills your whole body until you want to run—run without stopping when you know that even your running can get you nowhere. And yet, you feel nowhere would be far enough, Saturday night. There was almost magic in those words. Two little words—Saturday night—and yet, they helped me bear the other six days of the week. Saturday night—the day before the world quiets down to prepare for another week to come and the day I was freed from my work. That's how it had been for the past ten years—ever since I was twenty-two—and that's how it started tonight.

I had dressed a little early tonight because I felt more than the usual excitement about going out and I wanted to embrace every minute of the evening. Once inside a taxi cab I hugged my knees and almost squealed with delight. I was out.

"I'm free, free, free," I screamed over and over again in my mind.

"Where to bud?" asked the driver.

"Drive down Ellsworth Avenue. I'll tell you where to stop," I

said. I wasn't exactly sure what I'd find on Ellsworth, but I couldn't let the cab driver think I didn't know where I was going. Besides, didn't everything come to life on Saturday night? I was sure that everything in Pittsburgh did. I felt sure I could find something on any street. I rolled down the window and let the warm summer air blow against my face. We stopped for a red light and a few shoppers passed in front of the cab.

"Look at them—how they live—how they love to live! I'm one of them!" I cried out.

"Huh? Who? Look mister, I don't know what yer talkin' about," the cabbie said. "You crazy 'r somethin'?"

Crazy? Crazy? Of course I wasn't crazy. On Saturday night I was just one of them. He would understand if he would try. I had to be one of them. Just on Saturday night. I couldn't be different from any of them tonight. He infuriated me, but I let the anger pass and regained the profound excitement that I wanted to overtake me.

The cab turned onto Ellsworth Avenue and I saw a lighted neon sign advertising a tavern.

"Over there! Over there!" I said pointing to the tavern.

"O.K. Bud. Just calm yourself," he said. We pulled over to the curb and almost before the cab came to a halt I leaped out of the back door and ran to the front window to pay the fare.

"Buck and a half," said the cabbie.

"Tonight is life," I tried desperately to inform him as he reached for my money.

"Yea, Yea," he muttered as he drove away.

"He'll never understand. He'll never understand," I thought.

Inside the tavern I ordered a draught. There weren't many people around and it wasn't exactly the type of place I wanted. Not enough class. The steel legs of the bar stools and chairs that were carelessly placed around the uncleaned tables were beginning to rust. Yesterday's cigarette butts and cigar wrappers were still scattered about the floor. It was the kind of place where people stop for a quick beer on their way home from work—if they aren't particular where they drink their beer. But it would do for now because no place would be busy for at least another hour. There was a young couple sitting in the last booth. I walked back to the juke box in order to get a better look at them. I glanced at them and smiled. No response. I looked and smiled again. This time they smiled back. I

was accepted. I was one of them and they knew it. I loved them. I played a song and returned to the bar and finished my beer. The bartender picked up the glass and wiped the bar. He went through the process rather slowly and I knew he was waiting for me to order another drink.

"Whiskey and water," I said.

He smiled and I smiled back. He knew I was one of them tonight. He placed the glasses in front of me and I stared into them for a long time. The liquor was in a small shot-glass sitting next to a tumbler half filled with water. A small, dark, amber glass sitting next to a large, clear, sparkling glass. I quickly mixed them and poured the contents down my throat and walked out the door.

Outside the tavern I leaned against the brick wall and watched the people. They were beginning to fill the streets. Everyone was bustling about with someplace to go. Tonight I was one of them. This was my world tonight and I was in love with everyone in it. I began to walk down Ellsworth Avenue heading for Walnut Street. I walked briskly, savagely inhaling the early evening air. I wanted every part of life. I watched the children and I wanted to be a child so I could play with them. Some high school kids were sitting in a drug store and I wanted to be a kid again so I could drink sodas with them. These were the things I had missed in life, but tonight I was seeing people and I was living with them. This I wasn't missing. On Walnut Street I started toward the Bonfire Club. I had been there often on Saturday nights. There were girls that went to the club without dates, so it was easy to find someone who wanted to dance or talk. I didn't dance very well, but when conversation would drag I would attempt a dance so I wouldn't be left alone. I sat at a side booth to the left of the door where I could see the whole room. To the right of the door was a circular bar. A few customers had gathered around the bar and were slowly sipping their drinks. A small bandstand was at the far end of the bar and the three musicians had already begun to play their slow sad songs. In front of the bandstand was a dance floor about fifty feet square. It got crowded late in the evening when everyone wanted to dance. Thirty or forty black-top tables were scattered around the room and stuffed imitation leather booths lined two of the walls. Men and women were slowly sifting into the club, but a few tables and bar stools were still empty. Blue smoke was beginning to envelope the whole room. That was the way I liked it. The smoke held the people to-

gether in a bond. We couldn't pull apart once the smoke took hold of us. A waitress all in white hurried over to my booth.

"Whiskey and water," I said.

I smiled at her, but she ignored me and headed toward the bar and gave the bartender my order. I wanted to reach out to tell her I understood—she could not be one of us tonight—her work had cut the strings that bound her to the rest of us.

A revolving crystal ball that hung from the ceiling began to rotate. Two spotlights hidden in the ceiling on either side of the crystal ball threw rays of light against the crystal causing tiny round spots of reflected light to dance gaily around the room. The mood was set. My drink arrived and I held the glass firmly with both hands. I didn't want to drink it too quickly and yet I needed it for courage.

Two women had taken the booth behind me and I wanted to ask one of them to dance. I had to be close to someone tonight—physically close—but I needed the courage in the glass in front of me. I could hear the girls whisper something and then giggle with joy.

"I dare you. I really dare you," I heard the first girl say.

"Oh really, Rachel," said the second girl.

"Go ahead. It would be good for laughs," urged Rachel.

"Honestly Rachel! I've picked up lot of men just for a laugh, but he's such a creep," said the second girl.

"I'll admit he's nothing for looks. Some of the other girls who have met him said he doesn't even act normal."

"I just couldn't pick him up. I'd laugh in his face."

"Not so loud, I think he's listening," said Rachel.

The blood rushed to my head and the room began to spin with the crystal ball. I knew they were talking about me.

"It's not true, it's not true I'm not different from other people. I'm not different. They've got to accept me. Help me! Help me!" I could hear the words sobbing themselves over and over again in my mind.

"Oh God, Rachel, it would really be too much," said the second girl.

"I suppose so, but it would have been fun. Did you notice those two men at the end of the bar watching us? Why don't we go up and . . ."

"It can't be so. It can't be. I'm one of them tonight. Saturday

night. They must take me." The thoughts kept running through my mind.

The dancing lights from the crystal ball were causing my head to spin—then, I couldn't see them at all. They had disappeared. My drink was finished. The blue smoke of the room faded through an opened door into the night and I followed it, knowing I could never recapture it.