**GOING HOME**

*By William Saroyan*

This valley, he thought, all this country between the mountains is mine, home to me, the place I dream about, and everything is the same, not a thing is changed, water **sprinkler**s still splash in circles over lawns of Bermuda grass, good old home town, simplicity, reality.
Walking along Alvin Street he felt glad to be home again. Everything was fine, common and good, the smell of earth, cooking suppers, smoke, the rich summer air of the valley full of plant growth, grapes growing, peaches ripening, and the **oleander** bush **swooning** with sweetness, the same as ever. He breathed deeply, drawing the smell of home deep into his lungs, smiling**inwardly**. It was hot. He hadn’t felt his senses reacting to the earth so cleanly and clearly for years; now it was a pleasure even to breathe. The cleanliness of the air sharpened the moment so that, walking, he felt the magnificence of being, glory of possessing substance, of having form and motion and intellect, the piety of merely being alive on the earth.
Water, he thought, hearing the soft splash of a lawn sprinkler; to taste the water of home, the full cool water of the valley, to have that simple thirst and that solid water with which to **quench** it, fulfillment, the **clarity** of life. He saw an old man holding a hose over some **geranium** plants, and his thirst sent him to the man.
“Good evening,” he said quietly; “may I have a drink?”
The old man turned slowly, his shadow large against the house, to look into the young man’s face, amazed and pleased. “You bet,” he said; “here,” and he placed the **hose**into the young man’s hands. “Mighty fine water,” said the old man, “this water of the San Joaquin valley; best yet, I guess. That water up in Frisco makes me sick; ain’t got no taste. And down in Los Angeles, why, the water tastes like **castor oil**; I can’t understand how so many people go on living there year after year.”
While the old man talked, he listened to the water falling from the hose to the earth, leaping thickly, cleanly, sinking swiftly into the earth. “You said it,” he said to the old man; “you said it; our water is the finest water on earth.”
He curved his head over the**spouting** water and began to drink. The sweet rich taste of the water amazed him, and as he drank, bethought, God, this is splendid. He could feel the cool water splashing into his being, refreshing and cooling him. Losing his breath, he lifted his head, saying to the old man, “We’re mighty lucky, us folk in the valley.”
He bent his head over the water again and began again to swallow the splashing liquid, laughing to himself with delight. It seemed as if he couldn’t get enough of it into his system; the more he drank, the finer the water tasted to him and the more he wanted to drink.
The old man was amazed. “You drunk about two quarts,” he said.
Still swallowing the water, he could hear the old man talking, and he lifted his head again, replying, “I guess so. It sure tastes fine.” He wiped his mouth with a handkerchief, still holding the hose, still wanting to drink more. The whole valley was in that water, all the clarity, all the genuineness, all the goodness and simplicity and reality.
“Man alive,” said the old man. “You sure was thirsty. How long since you had a drink, anyway?”
“Two years,” he replied. “I mean two years since I had a drink of this water. I been away, traveling around. I just got back. I was born here, over on G Street in Russian town; you know, across the Southern Pacific tracks; been away two years and I just got back. Mighty fine too, let me tell you, to be back. I like this place. I’m going to get a job and settle down.”
He hung his head over the water again and took several more swallows; then he handed the hose to the old man.
“You sure was thirsty,” said the old man. “I ain’t never seen anybody anywhere drink so much water at one time. It sure looked good seeing you swallow all that water.”
He went on walking down Alvin Street, humming to himself, the old man staring at him.
Nice to be back, the young man thought; greatest mistake I ever made, coming back this way.
Everything he had ever done had been a mistake, and this was one of the good mistakes. He had come south from San Francisco without even thinking of going home; he had thought of going as far south as **Merced**, stopping there awhile, and then going back, but once he had got into the country, it had been too much. It had been great fun standing on the highway in his city clothes, **hitchhiking**.
One little city after another, and here he was walking through the streets of his home town, at seven in the evening. It was great, very amusing; and the water, splendid.
He wasn’t far from town, the city itself, and he could see one or two of the taller buildings, the Pacific Gas & Electric Building, all lit up with colored lights, and another, a taller one, that he hadn’t seen before. That’s a new one, he thought; they put up that one while I was away; things must be **booming**.
He turned down Fulton Street and began walking into town. It looked great from where he was, far away and nice and small, very genuine, a real quiet little town, the kind of place to live in, settle down in, marry in, have a home, kids, a job, and all the rest of it. It was all he wanted. The air of the valley and the water and the reality of the whole place, the cleanliness of life in the valley, the simplicity of the people.
In the city everything was the same: the names of the stores, the people walking in the streets, and the slow passing of automobiles; boys in cars trying to pick up girls; same as ever, not a thing changed. He saw faces he had known as a boy, people he did not know by name, and then he saw Tony Rocca, his old pal, walking up the street toward him, and he saw that Tony recognized him. He stopped walking, waiting for Tony to come into his presence. It was like a meeting in a dream, strange, almost **incredible**. He had dreamed of the two of them playing**hooky** from school to go swimming, to go out to the county fair, to sneak into a moving-picture theater; and now here he was again, a big fellow with a lazy, **easy-going** walk, and a **genial**Italian grin. It was good, and he was glad he had made the mistake and come back.
He stopped walking, waiting for Tony to come into his presence, smiling at him, unable to speak. The two boys shook hands and then began to strike one another with affection, laughing loudly, swearing at one another. “Where the hell have you been?’’ Tony said; and he punched his friend in the stomach, laughing loudly.
“Old Tony,” he said, “good old **punchdrunk** Tony. God, it’s good to see you. I thought maybe you’d be dead by this time. What the hell have you been doing?” He dodged another punch and struck his friend in the chest. He swore in Italian at Tony, using words Tony had taught him years ago, and Tony swore back at him in Russian.
“I’ve got to go out to the house,” he said at last. “The folks don’t know I’m here. I’ve got to go out and see them. I’m dying to see my brother Paul.”
He went on down the street, smiling about Tony. They would be having a lot of good times together again; they might even go swimming again the way they did as kids. It was great to be back.
Walking by stores, he thought of buying his mother a small gift. A little gift would please the old lady. But he had little money, and all the decent things were expensive. I’ll get her something later, he thought.
He turned west on Tulare Street, crossing the Southern Pacific tracks, reached G Street, then turned south. In a few minutes he would be home again, at the door of the little old house; the same as ever; the old woman, the old man, his three sisters, and his kid brother, all of them in the house, living simple lives.
He saw the house from a distance of about a block, and his heart began to jump. He felt suddenly ill and afraid, something he had forgotten about the place, about that life which he had always hated, something ugly and mean. But he walked on, moving slower as he came closer to the house. The fence had fallen and no one had fixed it. The house suddenly appeared to be very ugly, and he wondered why in the hell the old man didn’t move to a better house in a better neighborhood. Seeing the house again, feeling all its old reality, all his hatred for it returned, and he began to feel again the longing to be away from it, where he could not see it. He began to feel, as he had felt as a boy, the deep **inarticulate** hatred he had for the whole city, its falseness, its meanness, the stupidity of its people, the emptiness of their minds, and it seemed to him that he would never be able to return to such a place. The water; yes, it was good, it was splendid; but there were other things.
He walked slowly before the house, looking at it as if he might be a stranger, feeling alien and unrelated to it, yet feeling that it was home, the place he dreamed about, the place that tormented him wherever he went. He was afraid someone might come out of the house and see him, because he knew that if he was seen, he might find himself running away. Still, he wanted to see them, all of them, have them before his eyes, feel the full presence of their bodies, even smell them, that old strong Russian smell. But it was too much. He began to feel hatred for everything in the city, and he walked on, going to the corner. There he stood beneath the street lamp, bewildered and disgusted, wanting to see his brother Paul, to talk to the boy, find out what was going on in his mind, how he was taking it, being in such a place, living such a life. He knew how it had been with him when he had been his brother’s age, and he hoped he might be able to give his brother a little advice, how to keep from feeling the **monotony** and the ugliness by reading.
He forgot that he hadn’t eaten since breakfast, and that he had been dreaming for months of eating another of his mother’s meals, sitting at the old table in the kitchen, seeing her, large and red-faced and serious and angry toward him, loving him, but he had lost his appetite. He thought he might wait at the corner; perhaps his brother would leave the house to take a walk and he would see the boy and talk to him. Paul, he would say, and he would talk to the boy in Russian.
The stillness of the valley began to oppress him, losing its piety, becoming merely a form of the valley’s monotony.
Still, he couldn’t go away from the house. From the corner he could see it, and he knew that he wanted to go in and be among his people, a part of their lives; he knew this was what he had wanted to do for months, to knock at the door, embrace his mother and his sisters, walk across the floors of the house, sit in the old chairs, sleep in his bed, talk with his old man, eat at the table.
And now something he had forgotten while he had been away, something real but ugly in that life, had come up swiftly, changing everything, changing the appearance and meaning of the house, the city, the whole valley, making it all ugly and unreal, making him wish to go away and never return. He could never come back. He could never enter the house again and go on with his life where he had left off.
Suddenly he was in the alley, climbing over the fence, walking through the yard. His mother had planted tomatoes, and peppers, and the smell of the growing plants was thick and **acrid** and very melancholy to him. There was a light in the kitchen, and he moved quietly toward it, hoping to see some of them without being seen. He walked close to the house, to the kitchen window, and looking in saw his youngest sister, Martha, washing dishes. He saw the old table, the old stove, and Martha, with her back turned to him; and all these things seemed so sad and so **pathetic** that tears came to his eyes, and he began to need a cigarette. He struck a match quietly on the bottom of his shoe and inhaled the smoke, looking at his little sister in the old house, a part of the monotony. Everything seemed very still, very clear, terribly sad; but he hoped his mother would enter the kitchen; he wanted to have another look at her. He wanted to see if his being away had changed her much. How would she look? Would she have that angry look? He felt angry with himself for not being a good son, for not trying to make his mother happy, but he knew it was impossible.
He saw his brother Paul enter the kitchen for a drink of water, and for a moment he wanted to cry out the boy’s name, everything that was good in him, all his love, rushing to the face and form of the boy; but he restrained himself, **inhaling** deeply, tightening his lips. In the kitchen, the boy seemed lost, bewildered, imprisoned. Looking at his brother, he began to cry softly.
He no longer wished to see his mother. He would become so angry that he would do something crazy. He walked quietly through the yard,**hoisted** himself over the fence, and jumped to the alley. He began to walk away, his grief mounting in him. When he was far enough away not to be heard, he began to sob, loving them passionately and hating the ugliness and monotony of their lives. He felt himself hurrying away from home, from his people, crying bitterly in the darkness of the clear night, weeping because there was nothing he could do, not one**confounded** thing.