

'Tis twilight, the hour when the day burns into the night. A hundred lamps come aflame in this city when the heavenly lights fade; lights in every corner and nook of this monstrous place. I do not know how many people live here, but then, as you will shortly see, I have never been one to care much for people, let alone people in large numbers! But it is a nice thought...to imagine people flicking lights on, slowly, one after the other, concomitantly, in multiple households, across foyers of offices, lights precisely timed to be switched on at six o'clock – seven o'clock - eight o'clock - whenever the darkness sets in.

'Tis the same hour that I light my candles.

Some of the candlesticks are old fashioned brass, some are new fangled glass brackets. I collected them over the years, if you must know, buying them like women buy jewelry. Cass (wasn't she the short one with the pouty lips?) had a new trinket to show me every single time. But I have rarely seen her *wear* them. No, she brought jewelry to show them to me (and possibly others, it is a possibility that occurs to me only now) and then lock them up. In fact, I don't remember her having worn (or rather shown) the same piece of jewelry twice. It was not that she was not fond of them - rather, she was so fond of them that she would have them safely ensconced in a locker.

I have no such misgivings. Yes, I have seen my finest crystal candelabra shatter to a thousand tiny pieces when a little girl dining at one of my tables knocked it down. But no, I grin broadly, I cheerfully take the risk of putting another one on the table. I would even risk losing a candlestick everyday and be bathed in their light than sit gloomily in the dark. I bring them out every night, the brass polished and cleaned of wax, the glass glimmering. I set them on the tables, one for each table.

Slim white candles, the best and most fragrant beeswax that can be procured. Lighting them is a ritual, something I learned from a woman who looked something of a candle herself. When I started out to manage my own place, she was one of my first waitresses.

A tall, curvy woman. I set her to polishing the tables every morning, arranging the flowers and lighting the candles in the evenings, solely because she made a very nice picture. Bathed in the low red lights above, bending over the black tables as she went about her task, her slim white legs in pumps making a precise clickety-click sound as she moved over the floorboards...I learned what candles should look like by looking at her. Sunflowers were her favorites, and we would have the tables adorned with the sunflowers in the mornings and lit candles in the evenings. Strangely, my memory does not supply me with details of her name or her face. All I remember of her is her figure, clothed invariably in white, the black heads of the sunflowers she would put into the tall vases, and the slim candles she lit by night.

And so, with my stooped back and my shock of white hair, I go around the empty restaurant with candles and flowers, placing them precisely in their brackets and lighting them with my silver lighter.

It is quite a sight, my part of the city, with its yellow twilight lights. Candle lights. Bits of yellow suns floating in the black.

It is just the sort of thing young girls find 'romantic'. Exactly the sort of romance Hilda associated with the holding of hands, interlocking of fingers, kissing on the sly and the full red moon. Very appealing when you are seventeen, of course, especially if you have never done any of those things before... but laughably silly in retrospect.

But let me be frank. While I mentally chide certain young people for their foolish notions, I must own that I am no less a fool myself, even at this age. Do you know how old I am? Know this, I am eighty-six. Can you even imagine how old that is, how much you have to carry, how weary your back would be? How much your eyes have dimmed with all the sights it has seen? No, you can't. Unless you are precisely eighty six yourself.

But why was I talking about my age? Certainly not to boast of my experience, but to tell you how much of a fool I am despite my venerable age. What business do I have running

a restaurant at my age? Well, I am not running a restaurant. I run nothing. This place is mine, I still have the lease and pay the rent. I have my tables, I have my candles. I have an ice box for the wine. I have a deal with a florist who delivers fresh stalk of sunflower every day. But my kitchens are bare, I cook nothing here. I have no customers. Don't ask me how I pay for all this; I am not going to go into details. Let it suffice to stay that I am well fed and well groomed, and I can afford to pay for my little foolish delights.

So, as the twilight sets in, I walk from table to table, lighting candles with a silver lighter, adding a fresh sunflower to every centerpiece vase. As the lights dim outside, the lights inside grow. I set up crystal glasses on the table, clean, sparkling glasses. The wine I pour into these glasses is never drunk. It is not to warm anyone but myself.

I once knew a girl who had long white hands and wore a bracelet of rubies around her wrist. She had a tinkling laugh and held the stem of the glass between three fingers, her rubies drooping, exactly the color of the wine in the glass. When I pour the wine out, delicately, every night, into each of the glasses on each of the tables, I hear her laugh again, I see the flame again.

When I am done serving the wine to the empty tables and lighting the candles which will burn to nothingness, I sit back in my dinner jacket and observe the sight before me. Granite topped tables lit aflame with candles, glasses of wine, silent sunflowers. I savor the emptiness. I like the fact that none of the people who had defined what is before me in some miniscule way are here.

With stiff, arthritic fingers, I pick up my solitary violin and begin to play. I do not think of tomorrow, when I shall have to throw away full glasses of undrunk wine and scrape spent wax off the brass. For it is twilight now, and for all the darkness without and the light within, the day might never come for me. So, with wild abandon, with the joy of a lifetime, I play.