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| **Quite Early One Morning** |
| by Dylan Thomas |
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| Quite early one morning in the winter in Wales, by the sea that was lying down still and green as grass after a night of tar-black howling and rolling, I went out of the house, where I had come to stay for a cold unseasonable holiday, to see if it was raining still, if the outhouse had been blown away, potatoes, shears, rat-killer, shrimp-nets, and tins of rusty nails aloft on the wind, and if all the cliffs were left. It had been such a ferocious night that someone in a smoky ship-pictured bar had said he could feel his tombstone shaking even though he was not dead, or at least was moving; but the morning shone as clear and calm as one always imagines tomorrow will shine.  The sun lit the sea-town, not as a whole, from topmost down reproving zinc-roofed chapel to empty-but-for-rats-and-whispers grey warehouse on the harbour, but in separate bright pieces. There, the quay shouldering out, nobody on it now but the gulls and the capstans like small men in tubular trousers. Here, the roof of the police-station, black as a helmet, dry as a summons, sober as Sunday. There, the splashed church, with a cloud in the shape of a bell poised above it, ready to drift and ring. Here the chimneys of the pink-washed pub, the pub that was waiting for Saturday night as an over-jolly girl waits for sailors.  The town was not yet awake. The milkman lay still lost in the clangour and music of his Welsh-spoken dreams, the wish-fulfilled tenor voices more powerful than Caruso's, sweeter than Ben Davies's, thrilling past Cloth Hall and Manchester House up to the frosty hills. The town was not yet awake. Babies in upper bedrooms of salt-white houses dangling over water, or of bow-windowed villas squatting prim in neatly treed but unsteady hill streets, worried the light with their half in sleep cries. Miscellaneous retired sea captains emerged for a second from deeper waves than ever tossed their boats, then drowned again, going down down into a perhaps Mediterranean-blue cabin of sleep, rocked to the sea-beat of their ears. Landladies, shawled and bloused and aproned with sleep in the curtained, bombazine-black of their once spare rooms, remembered their loves, their bills, their visitors, dead, decamped, or buried in English deserts until the trumpet of next expensive August roused them again to the world of holiday rain, dismal cliff and sand seen through the weeping windows of front parlours, tasselled table-cloths, stuffed pheasants, ferns in pots, fading photographs of the bearded and censorious dead, autograph albums with a lock of limp and colourless beribboned hair lolling out between the thick black boards,  The town was not yet awake. Birds sang in eaves, bushes, trees, on telegraph wires, rails, fences, spars, and wet masts, not for love or joy, but to keep other birds away. The landlords in feathers disputed the right of even the dying light to descend and perch.  The town was not yet awake, and I walked through the streets like a stranger come out of the sea, shrugging off weed and wave and darkness with each step, or like an inquisitive shadow, determined to miss nothing - not the preliminary tremor in the throat of the dawn-saying cock or the first whirring nudge of arranged time in the belly of the alarm clock on the trinketed chest of drawers under the knitted text and the done-by-hand watercolours of Porthcawl or Trinidad.  I walked past the small sea-spying windows, behind whose trim curtains lay mild-mannered men and women not yet awake and, for all I could know, terrible and violent in their dreams. In the head of Miss Hughes, 'The Cosy', clashed the cymbals of an Eastern court. Eunuchs struck gongs the size of Bethesda Chapel. Sultans with voices fiercer than visiting preachers demanded a most un-Welsh dance. Everywhere there glowed and rayed the colours of the small, slate grey woman's dreams, purple, magenta, ruby, sapphire, emerald, vermilion, honey. But I could not believe it. She knitted in her tidy sleep-world a beige woollen shroud with 'Thou Shalt Not' on the bosom.  I could not imagine Cadwallader Davies the grocer in his near-to-waking dream, riding on horse-back, two-gunned and Cody-bold, through the cactus prairies. He added, he subtracted, he receipted, he filed a prodigious account with a candle dipped in dried egg.  What big seas of dreams ran in the Captain's sleep? Over what blue whaled waves did he sail through a rainbow hail of flying fishes to the music of Circe's swinish island Do not let him be dreaming of dividends and bottled beer and onions.  Someone was snoring in one house. I counted ten savage and indignant grunts and groans, like those of a pig in a model and mudless farm, which ended with a window rattler, a wash-basin  shaker, a trembler of tooth glasses, a waker of mice. It thundered with me to the chapel railings, then brassily vanished.  The chapel stood grim and grey, telling the day there was to be no nonsense. The chapel was not asleep, it never cat-napped nor nodded nor closed its long cold eye. I left it telling the morning off and the seagull hung rebuked above it.  And climbing down again and up out of the town I heard the cocks crow from hidden farmyards, from old roosts above waves where fabulous seabirds might sit and cry: 'Neptune!' And a far-away clock struck from another church in another village in another universe, though the wind blew the time away. And I walked in the timeless morning past a row of white cottages almost expecting that an ancient man with a great beard and an hourglass and a scythe under his night-dressed arm might lean from the window and ask me the time. I would have told him: 'Arise old counter of the heartbeats of albatrosses, and wake the cavernous sleepers of the town to a dazzling new morning.' I would have told him: 'You unbelievable Father of Eva and Dai Adam, come out, old chicken, and stir up the winter morning with your spoon of a scythe.' I would have told him - I would have scampered like a scalded ghost over the cliffs and down to the bilingual sea.  Who lived in these cottages? I was a stranger to the sea town, fresh or stale from the city where I worked for my bread and butter wishing it were laver-bread and country salty butter yolk-yellow Fishermen certainly; no painters but of boats: no man-dressed women with shooting-sticks and sketchbooks and voices like macaws to paint the reluctant heads of critical and sturdy natives who posed by the pint against the chapel-dark sea which would be made more blue than the bay of Naples, though shallower.  I walked on to the cliff path again, the town behind and below waking up now so very slowly; I stopped and turned and looked. Smoke from one chimney - the cobbler's, I thought, but from that distance it may have been the chimney of the retired male nurse who had come to live in Wales after many years' successful wrestling with the mad rich of Southern England. He was not liked. He measured you for a straitjacket carefully with his eye; he saw you bounce from rubber walls like a ball. No behaviour surprised him. Many people of the town found it hard to resist leering at him suddenly around the corner, or convulsively dancing, or pointing with laughter and devilish good humour at invisible dogfights merely to prove to him that they were normal.  Smoke from another chimney now. They were burning their last night's dreams. Up from a chimney came a long-haired wraith like an old politician. Someone had been dreaming of the Liberal Party. But no, the smoky figure wove, attenuated, into a refined and precise grey comma. Someone had been dreaming of reading. Oh! the town was waking now and I heard distinctly, insistent over the slow-speaking sea, the voices of the town blown up to me. And some of the voices said:  I am Miss May Hughes, a lonely lady, Waiting in her house by the nasty sea, Waiting for her husband and pretty baby To come home at last from wherever they may be.  I am Captain Tiny Evans, my ship was the 'Kidwelly' And Mrs. Tiny Evans has been dead for many a year. 'Poor Captain Tiny all alone', the neighbours whisper, But I like it all alone, and I hated her.  Clara Jenkins, 'Madam' they call me, An old singer with her dressing-gown on, And I sit at the window and I sing to the sea, For the sea does not notice that my voice has gone.  Thomas Evans making morning tea, Very weak tea, too, you mustn't waste a leaf, Every morning making tea in my house by the sea I am troubled by one thing only, and that, belief.  Open the curtains, light the fire, what are servants for? I am Mrs. Pritchard and I want another snooze. Dust the china, feed the canary, sweep the drawing-room door; And before you let the sun in, mind he wipes his shoes.  I am only Mr. Griffiths, very short-sighted, B.A., Aber. As soon as I finish my egg I must shuffle off to school. O patron saint of teachers, teach me to keep order, And forget those words on the blackboard - *'Griffiths Bat is a fool*.'  Do you hear that whistling?- It's me, I am Phoebe, The maid at the King's Head, and I am whistling like a bird. Someone spilt a tin of pepper in the tea. There's twenty for breakfast and I'm not going to say a word.  I can see the Atlantic from my bed where I always lie, Night and day, night and day, eating my bread and slops. The quiet cripple staring at the sea and the sky. I shall lie here till the sky goes out and the sea stops.  Thus some of the voices of a cliff-perched town at the far end of Wales moved out of sleep and darkness into the new-born, ancient and ageless morning, moved and were lost. |