

***If today you hear the voice of God, harden not your hearts . . .***

In Eudora Welty's short story "The Hitch Hikers" we read of a thirty one year old traveling salesman, Tom Harris, whose only home seemed to be a highway. The towns he served were but pit stops along his interminable route. Sales were what mattered. As to whatever else was happening in places like Thurston or Flat Top (like love, sadness, joy, worry) *none of any of this was his, not his to keep, but belonging to the people of these towns . . . coming out of their rooted pasts, out of their remaining in one place, coming out of their time. He himself had no time.*

May not Eudora Welty be describing modern people; for what is modern, secular humankind but someone who, influenced by centuries of iconoclasm, no longer feels at home in any inherited creed, is skeptical of every sales pitch but his own; for whom settling down and sinking roots is impossible because of his obsession with reaching for the moon or building a better mousetrap? And for what? Except perhaps to find diversion from today in whatever tomorrow may bring?

But then Tom slows down one day to pick up two hitchhikers, one a sullen fellow and the other holding a yellow guitar. Tom resumed speed and turned on the car radio – something he never did. *Well, music,* said the man with the guitar; and he began to sing *The One Rose that's Left in My Heart.* Tom would ask whether the men had eaten or needed a place to sleep – and the fellow would pluck the strings of his guitar in response.

The couple awoke a latent care in Tom's heart. He pulled into a road stand and bought the pair some hamburgers and beer. In Clearwater he took the time to find them a hotel room – but only to be called out to find the car surrounded by people and the man with the guitar bleeding unconscious on the front seat – done in for some reason by his sullen partner. Tom found himself involved in things beyond his reckoning. Why had he broken his routine in the first place? Too late now! His new sense of concern compelled him to get the fellow to a hospital and remain in town until he knew the outcome of his injury.

And what else should happen that evening but that he should run into someone else he knew – a young woman of his past who loved him and reminded him over coffee: *You used to play the piano . . . You'd put your hands down on the keyboard like you'd say, "Now this is how it really is!"*

Next day the injured fellow died. No reason to stay. Business called, where his momentary recovery of a musically caring engagement with people would only be a handicap. He polished his car, washed the blood off his front seat and steering wheel. A boy asked, *"Mr. Harris, does you want the box?" "The what?" said Tom. "The po' kilt man's guitar," said the boy. "No," said Tom; and he drove off.*

Was that boy and indeed Tom's whole experience the Holy Spirit's way of getting Tom to be a musical, caring being, to cease to be running away from a heartfelt involvement in this world, a world that fashions us by so many experiences to become human – no longer a runaway from Being in the deepest sense of the word?

***Geoff Wood***