

## Identities - W.D. Valgardson

Normally, he goes clean-shaven into the world, but the promise of a Saturday liquid with sunshine draws him first from his study to the backyard, from there to his front lawn. The smell of burning leaves stirs the memories of childhood car rides, narrow lanes adrift with yellow leaves, girls on plodding horses, unattended stands piled high with pumpkins, onions, or beets so that each one was, in its own way, a still life. Always, there were salmon tins glinting with silver, set above hand-painted signs instructing purchasers to deposit twenty-five or fifty cents. This act of faith containing all the stories he has read in childhood about the North – cabins left unlocked, filled with supplies for hapless wayfarers – wakes in him a desire to temporarily abandon the twice-cut yards and hundred-year-old oaks.

The main character leaves the comfort of his home; recalls his childhood.

He grew up in a small, country safe; safe, people are worried about theft

The man now lives in the suburbs of a city that is well taken care of/wealthy.

He does not hurry for he has no destination. He meanders, instead, through the neat suburban labyrinth of cul-de-sacs, bays and circles, losing and finding himself endlessly. Becoming lost is made all the easier because the houses repeat themselves with superficial variations. There grows within him, however, a vague unease with symmetry, with nothing left to chance, no ragged edges, no unkempt vacant lots, no houses rendered unique by necessity and indifference.

The 'hood he lives in is safe, clean, predictable.

The houses all face the sun. They have no artificial divisions. There is room enough for everyone. Now, as he passes grey stone gates, the yards are all proscribed by stiff picket fences and, quickly, a certain untidiness creeps in: a fragment of glass, a chocolate bar wrapper, a plastic horse, cracked sidewalks with ridges of stiff grass. Although he has on blue jeans – matching pants and jacket made in Paris – he is driving a grey Mercedes Benz. Gangs of young men follow the car with their unblinking eyes. The young men stand and lean in tired, watchful knots close to phone booths and seedy-looking grocery stores. Their slick hair glistens. Their leather jackets gleam with studs. Eagles, tigers, wolves and serpents ride their backs.

As he passes the grey stone gates of his 'hood he enters a place that is less cared for.

In contrast, the people in this 'hood are portrayed with darker/more intimidating description.

He passes a ten-foot wire fence enclosing a playground bare of equipment and pounded flat. The gate is double locked, the fence cut and rolled into a cone. Three boys throw stones at pigeons. Paper clogs the fence like drifted snow. The school is covered with heavy screens. Its yellow brick is pock-marked, chipped.

Not well cared for, lack of maintenance/resources.

The houses are squat, as though they have been taller and have, slowly, sunk into the ground. Each has a band of dirt around the bottom. The blue glow of television sets lights the windows. On the front steps of a red-roofed house, a man sits. He wears black pants, a tartan vest, a brown snap-rimmed hat. Beside him is a suitcase. Fences here are little more than fragments. Cars jam the narrow streets and he worries that he might strike the unkempt children who dart back and forth like startled fish.

Street lights come on. He takes them as a signal to return the way he came, but it has been a reckless, haphazard path. Retracing it is impossible. He is overtaken by sudden

The man is lost; he is not sure of the path home.

The man is likely wealthy; has symbols of wealth

This area is suggested to have more potential for crime; needs greater security.

Night is falling.

His wife does not know where he is; he realizes he is not in an environment he knows or feels comfortable in (like the one he comes from).

guilt. He has left no message for his wife. There have been no trees or drifting leaves, no stands covered in produce, no salmon tins, but time has run away with him. His wife, he realizes, will have returned from bridge, his children gathered for supper. He also knows that, at first, they have explained his absence on a neighbour's hospitality and gin. His family may assume he went to visit a friend.

However, by the time he can return, annoyance will have blossomed into alarm.

His safe return will, he knows from childhood and years of being locked in domestic grief, degenerate to recriminations and apology.

When he can, he wants to ensure he lets his family know where he is, so they aren't upset.

Faced with this, he decides to call the next time he sees a store or phone booth. So intent is he upon the future that he dangerously ignores the present and does not notice the police car, concealed in the shadows of a side street, nose out and follow him. A police officer is watching him, likely because he stands out amongst the rest of the neighbourhood; the man only focuses on what he thinks is dangerous.

Ahead, there is a small store with windows covered in hand painted signs and vertical metal bars. On the edge of the light, three young men and a girl slouch. One of them has a beard and, in spite of the advancing darkness, wears sunglasses. He has on a fringed leather vest. His companions wear leather jackets. Their peaked caps make their heads seem flat, their foreheads nonexistent.

The residents hide their identities (sunglasses, hats that cover their face, etc.).

The girl is better looking than she should be for such companions. She is long legged and wears a white turtle-necked sweater that accentuates her breasts.

immunity = safe/protection

In spite of his car, he hopes his day old beard which he strokes upward with the heel of his hand, when combined with his clothes, provide immunity. He slips his wallet into his shirt pocket, does up the metal buttons on his jacket and slips a ten dollar bill into his back pocket. Recalling a television show, he decides that if he is accosted, he will say that the ten is all he's got, that he stole the car, and ask them if they know a buyer. He worries about being attacked/robbed, and puts his wallet out of view, leaving \$10 showing, in hopes they will only take this.

The man is not very street smart, has not experienced other life-styles.

He eases out of the car, edges nervously along the fender and past the grille. The store window illuminates the sidewalk like a stage. Beyond the light, everything is obscured by darkness. He is so intent upon the three men and the girl that he does not notice the police car drift against the curb, nor the officer who is advancing with a pistol in his hand. The man is watching the people outside the shop, who he assumes are a threat, and still does not notice the police officer approaching.

When the officer, who is inexperienced, who is nervous because of the neighbourhood, who is suspicious because of the car and because he has been trained to see an unshaven man in blue jeans as a potential thief and not as a probable owner, orders him to halt, he is surprised. When he turns part way around and recognizes the uniform, he does not feel fear but relief. Instinctively relaxing, certain of his safety, in the last voluntary movement of his life, he reaches his hand not in the air as he was ordered to, but toward his wallet for his identity.

The man has been conditioned by his upbringing to believe an officer would never see him as a threat, and the officer is simply there to help.

The officer sees the man as a thief; he assumes the man stole the car.

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The man assumes his wallet and ID (driver's license will prove he's not a criminal/threat. Unfortunately, the man is shot and killed, as the officer believes he is reaching for a weapon.

This is reminding the reader that this 'hood seems unsafe/need for extra security (bard, etc.)

The cop is new, and reacts with less knowledge and experience.