

AH-HA AH-HA

BY WILLIAM SAROYAN

O WEEP not, dear child, for there will be a morning of brightness. O smile and say *ah-ha ah-ha*.

Being of the time, I wanted money. I took all my phonograph records to the music store and sold them. The nice old lady with the thin lips and the Seventeenth Century poise looked over the records, reading the names of composers. Ah, Brahms, she said.

I must have a few coins, I thought. I will give my coat and my hat for a few coins. It is the style to have money in the pocket. When everything else is lost, money is the thing to have.

She turned the records over and over, making a small but highly exciting situation.

These are records of good music, she said sadly. There is no demand for good music. My customers want lively things, good loud jazz, noise.

I must have a dollar or two with which to gamble, I thought. Here is Brahms, and Bach, and Beethoven. Music of mortality, deep-living groans of flesh and blood, anger and weariness of spirit.

Any sum, I thought. I must have a dollar or two.

She made arrangements of the records.

There are Schubert, she said. No one wants to hear Schubert any more.

A few coins. Even my heart I will give.

No, she said, I do not want the records.

What are these records worth to you? I said. In money? Not as music; as mer-

chandise. As matter. Not as grace and strength and grief and joy; as substance. Stuff. Whatever it is. Rubber and science and manufacture and merchandising. What are they worth? I said.

No, said the lady. They are all good. The best. Brahms. Ah, Brahms, she said. The very best. No, I do not want them. They do not sell. Noise is what they want.

Anything, I said. Any sum you please. This music I no longer want. I have it within. I am selling only the body of it. How much? The music I have.

They are so fine, she said. It is a pity.

Any sum you please, I said.

A dollar, she said.

II

I took the money and went to the place where the others sat, staring at the cards, seeking grace and God and precision. I was hungry, but I did not eat.

In disorder the cards came. Once, and then again, and again again, and I said *ah-ha ah-ha*, I know, death always, gracelessness, imprecision. And there was no smile from God and the universe, and I left the place without money.

I was and am still a gambler, and I can smile about it. In my own way I have been a composer, but my symphonies have been lost. There was the great third, the even greater fifth, the glorious seventh: all lost.

It was *ah-ha ah-ha*, again and again: my knowing.

Giants go down humbly to humiliation, and I went walking to the deck of cards, the music of Bach and Brahms sold.

O fret not, dear one, there will be a time of laughing, O smile and say *ah-ha ah-ha*.

I must have money, I said. I must have much of it. I will gamble and win. I must have enough of it to show that it is evil, a nothingness. Enough, so that I may carry it to the rich and say, You are saving this: here is more. You are cripple: more. Graceless: more. Enough, so that I may throw it about in the streets, saying *ah-ha ah-ha*, this is the thing that keeps us from grace: well, then, see that I throw it into the gutter. See that I have much of it, yet throw it into the gutter.

The cards came in disorder, and I went away without money.

When I have enough of it, I said, I will carry it to the rich and throw it about in the streets. There is a chance that some day I shall be lithe and unencumbered.

Walking to the place where I have my other coat, I came upon the weeping child. She stood in the doorway of the house in which she lived, alone in the great world. She wept slowly, with thought and remembrance, sobbing the timeless anguish of man.

Within me my blood groaned and I could not think, and my heart cried out to the child and to all living, O weep not, dear child, there will be a morning of grace and godliness, O fret not, dear one, there will be a time of laughing, O smile and say *ah-ha ah-ha*.

I had nothing to give her, no toy, no doll, no flower.

I must have much of it, I said. I must have enough of it to carry dolls and flowers to children who weep. O weep not, dear one, O smile and see that life is good.

I walked on, hearing the child's grief, the sobbing of life.

The torn heart turns to easy wholeness, and I turned my eyes to the street, thinking of an easier grace. What I like about the automobile, I said, is its sculpture. The motor is boring, but the names of its parts are prose. The fender has been evolved like a hot-house flower. The hood has been given the grace and precision of a pillar, and the body has acquired the poise of fact, of truth itself.

I walked to the place where I have my other coat, and while I walked I looked, saying *ah-ha ah-ha*, I know. We have given a number of things the grace we ourselves need, and we have become cripple and unwhole. We have made a perfection of the wheel, and we ourselves stumble and fall. O fret not, dear child, there will be a time of excellence.

One thing about traffic is holy, I said: the small distance separating safety from catastrophe, as when a half-mile of highway remains in one place while ten dozen vehicles, three abreast, travel at the rate of sixty miles per hour, north and south, the torn mind seeking easy precision. There is something elastic and dangerous in this daily event which is worthy of artful enumeration and scientific pause: unaccidents are infinitely more common than accidents, and undeaths are much more regular than smashness.

It is purely vaudeville, and my amusement, bitterly, *ah-ha ah-ha*. And it is the sudden sobbing of life, and my heart torn by it, turning to the easiest of contemporary graces.

Money I despise, since the desire for it humiliates. Because of it, breathing is not enough. Sleep is not enough. Clean vision is not enough. Deep hearing is not enough. Because of it, everything is not enough, and everything we do is vaudeville.

We have perfected the wheel and the machine, and we have given substance the grace we ourselves need, and we are cripple and unwhole. We come and we go, and what happens in between is bad acting. It is the theatre always. We perform and we make pathetic speeches. My speech is simple and kindly, *ah-ha ah-ha*. We have given the inanimate motion, and we have lost grace. The cards came in disorder and in the end I had no money. I could not take dolls and flowers to children. I had to remain unspoken, saying only, O weep not, dear child.

The whole thing amounts to error by mutual agreement. It is manufacture, the

making of things. I myself am a manufacturer, but the products I make have no value. I deal mostly with essences: laughter and weeping, living and dying. For this reason, I am not a patriot. Still, a manufacturer with my record for honesty deserves some small recognition: I have swindled no one, and even when I say *ah-ha ah-ha*, I mean also *hosanna* and *amen*.

I do not speak unclearly and it is all very plain and quiet, O weep no more, dear child, fret not, O smile and say *ah-ha ah-ha*, for there will be a morning of grace and godliness, O smile, dear one, for there will be a time of laughing, it is not ended yet, O smile and say *ah-ha ah-ha*.