**The Far and the Near**

**by Thomas Wolfe**

On the outskirts of a little town upon a rise of land that swept back from the railway there was a

tidy little cottage of white boards, trimmed vividly with green blinds. To one side of the house

there was a garden neatly patterned with plots of growing vegetables, and an arbor for the grapes

which ripened late in August. Before the house there were three mighty oaks which sheltered it

in their clean and massive shade in summer, and to the other side there was a border of gay

flowers. The whole place had an air of tidiness, thrift, and modest comfort.

Every day, a few minutes after two o’clock in the afternoon, the limited express between two

cities passed this spot. At that moment the great train, having halted for a breathing-space at the

town near by, was beginning to lengthen evenly into its stroke, but it had not yet reached the full

drive of its terrific speed. It swung into view deliberately, swept past with a powerful swaying

motion of the engine, a low smooth rumble of his heavy cars upon pressed steel, and then it

vanished in the cut. For a moment the progress of the engine could be marked by heavy

bellowing puffs of smoke that burst at spaced intervals above the edges of the meadow grass, and

finally nothing could be heard but the solid clacking tempo of the wheels receding into the

drowsy stillness of the afternoon.

Every day for more than twenty years, as the train had approached this house, the engineer had

blown on the whistle, and every day, as soon as she heard this signal, a woman had appeared on

the back porch of the little house and waved to him. At first she had a small child clinging to her

skirts, and now this child had grown to full womanhood, and every day she, too, came with her

mother to the porch and waved.

The engineer had grown old and gray in service. He had driven his great train, loaded with its

weight of lives, across the land ten thousand times. His own children had grown up, and married,

and four times he had seen before him on the tracks the ghastly dot of tragedy converging like a

cannon ball to its eclipse of horror at the boiler head—a light spring wagon filled with children,

with its clustered row of small stunned faces; a cheap automobile stalled up the tracks, set with

the wooden figures of people paralyzed with fear; a battered hobo walking by the rail, too deaf

and old to hear the whistle’s warning; and a form flung pas his window with a scream—all this

he had seen and known. He had known all the grief, the joy, the peril and the labor such a man

could know; he had grown seamed and weathered in his loyal service, and now, schooled by the

qualities of faith and courage and humbleness that attended his labor, he had grown old, and had

the grandeur and the wisdom these men have.

But no matter what peril or tragedy he had known, the vision of the little house and the women

waving to him with a brave free motion of the arm had become fixed in the mind of the engineer

as something beautiful and enduring, something beyond all change and ruin, and something that

would always be the same, no matter what mishap, grief or error might break the iron schedule

of his days.

The sight of this little house and these two women gave him the most extraordinary happiness he

had ever known. He had seen them in a thousand lights, a hundred weathers. He had seen them

through the harsh light of wintry gray across the brown and frosted stubble of the earth, and he

had seen them again in the green luring sorcery of April.

He felt for them and for the little house in which they lived such tenderness as a man might feel

for his own children, and at length the picture of their lives was carved so sharply in his heart

that he felt that he knew their lives completely, to every hour and moment of the day, and he

resolved that one day, when his years of service should be ended, he would go and find these

people and speak at last with them whose lives had been so wrought into his own.

That day came. At last the engineer stepped from a train onto the station platform of the town

where these two women lived. His years upon the rail had ended. He was a pensioned servant of

his company, with no more work to do. The engineer walked slowly through the station and out

into the streets of the town. Everything was as strange to him as if he had never seen this town

before. As he walked on, his sense of bewilderment and confusion grew. Could this be the town

he had passed ten thousand times? Were these the same houses he had seen so often from the

high windows of his cab? It was all as unfamiliar, as disquieting as a city in a dream, and the

perplexity of his spirit increased as he went on.

Presently the houses thinned into the straggling outposts of the town, and the street faded into a

country road—the one on which the women lived. And the man plodded on slowly in the heat

and dust. At length he stood before the house he sought. He knew at once that he had found the

proper place. He saw the lordly oaks before the house, the flower beds, the garden and the arbor,

and farther off, the glint of rails.

Yes, this was the house he sought, the place he had passed so many times, the destination he had

longed for with such happiness. But now that he had found it, now that he was here, why did his

hand falter on the gate; why had the town, the road, the earth, the very entrance to this place he

loved turned unfamiliar as the landscape of some ugly dream? Why did he now feel this sense of

confusion, doubt and hopelessness? At length he entered by the gate, walked slowly up the path

and in a moment more had mounted three short steps that led up to the porch, and was knocking

at the door. Presently he heard steps in the hall, the door was opened, and a woman stood facing

him.

And instantly, with a sense of bitter loss and grief, he was sorry he had come. He knew at once

that the woman who stood there looking at him with a mistrustful eye was the same woman who

had waved to him so many thousand times. But her face was harsh and pinched and meager; the

flesh sagged wearily in sallow folds, and the small eyes peered at him with timid suspicion and

uneasy doubt. All the brave freedom, the warmth and the affection that he had red into her

gesture, vanished in the moment that he saw her and heard her unfriendly tongue.

And now his own voice sounded unreal and ghastly to him as he tried to explain his presence, to

tell her who he was and the reason he had come. But he faltered on, fighting stubbornly against

the horror of regret, confusion, disbelief that surged up in his spirit, drowning all his former joy

and making his act of hope and tenderness seem shameful to him.

At length the woman invited him almost unwillingly into the house, and called her daughter in a

harsh shrill voice. Then, for a brief agony of time, the man sat in an ugly little parlor, and he tried

to talk while the two women stared at him with a dull, bewildered hostility, a sullen, timorous

restraint.

And finally, stammering a crude farewell, he departed. He walked away down the path and then

along the road toward town, and suddenly he knew that he was an old man. His heart, which had

been brave and confident when it looked along the familiar vista of the rails, was now sick with

doubt and horror as it saw the strange and unsuspected visage of the earth which had always

been within a stone’s throw of him, and which he had never seen or known. And he knew that all

the magic of that bright lost way, the vista of that shining line, the imagined corner of that small

good universe of hope’s desire, could never be got again.