

“Identities”
W.D. Valgardson

- 1 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.

How is the first word in the story important?

Using the word “normally” clearly explains that what is about to happen is out of the ordinary, the exception, not the rule.

Who is the protagonist? What sort of neighbourhood does he live in?

The protagonist is a typically well-groomed male who seems to have perhaps grown up in a small town, based on the fact that he recalls a time when vegetables were sold on the roadside on an honour system. His neighbourhood is also well-groomed and seems quite nice and established, as he has a study on the properties have “twice-cut yards and hundred-year-old oaks.”

Why does he leave home? What is his motivation or goal?

He wants to abandon his current life and return to a simpler time.

- 2 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.

Does he know where he is going? Why does he get lost?

The protagonist “has no destination.” He gets lost because where he lives, everything looks the same and “the houses repeat themselves with superficial variations.” He is unable to see any differences that would help to lead him home.

What note of tension is introduced in this paragraph? Which words create mood?

The protagonist is becoming uneasy within his surroundings because they are so much the same. Words that create mood include “meanders” to create a sense of calm, “labyrinth” to create a sense of suspense or perhaps of entrapment in a maze, “a vague unease” to create a growing tension, “ragged edges” and “unkempt lots” to create a sense of decay.

- 3 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.

Describe the new setting. How does this neighbourhood and its people contrast with his own neighbourhood and himself?

Stone turns to wood and, unlike the protagonist and his neighbourhood, this neighbourhood is unkempt, with garbage and unmaintained landscape, and the grocery stores are “seedy-looking.” The men here are “tired.”

What does the reader learn about his social status? What are other people’s reactions to him in this section?

The protagonist learns he is clearly better off than those who live in this new setting. He has a fancy car and even his simple clothes come from overseas. That said, no one reacts to his presence at all, following the protagonist in his Mercedes-Benz with “unblinking eyes.”

- 4 Their slick hair glistens. Their leather jackets gleam with studs. Eagles, tigers, wolves and serpents ride their backs.

Whose hair “glistens?” What is the reader’s impression of the people described?

The “gangs of young men” in this neighbourhood have glistening hair. The reader may think that because of their slick hair, leather jackets and jacket insignias that these young men are part of a literal gang.

What mood is created by the images in this paragraph? Are any of the images symbolic or stereotypical?

Answers may vary; however, there is a general sense of rebellion and toughness. The images are symbolic or stereotypical of gang members or greasers in the 1950s.

- 5 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.

What impressions are created by the writer’s description of the playground and the school?

The playground creates a sense of emptiness and abandon, of more decay and even hopelessness. The locked gate gives a sense of a need for protection, and the heavy screens on the school windows imply that break-ins are common and property needs to be secured. The fence has also been cut as a seeming act of vandalism.

So far in the story, what have all of the reader’s impressions been based on?

The narrator’s description of the setting and the narrator’s sharing of the thoughts of the protagonist.

- 6 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.

What does the first sentence suggest about the neighbourhood? Why is the man sitting on the step? Why might this man be mentioned?

The first sentence suggests that the neighbourhood is old and falling apart, with “squat” houses appearing to have “slowly, sunk into the ground.” Metaphorically, people may have stood tall once, but over time have been pushed down. The man sitting on the steps appears to be waiting to go somewhere; perhaps he, too, wants to escape his current reality, much like the protagonist.

Make a list of the colours used in the story so far and speculate on possible associations.

Answers will vary. May include the following:

- 1 – “yellow leaves” and “tins glinting with silver” – yellow as fall or the colour of sunshine; silver as money and brightness (positive images)
- 3 – “grey stone gates” and “blue jeans” – grey as dim or faded, formal (negative); blue of no real significance
- 5 – “It’s yellow brick is pock-marked, chipped” – yellow should be happy but contrasts with decay (positive to negative)
- 6 – “blue glow of television sets,” “a red-roofed house,” “black pants, a tartan vest, a brown snap-rimmed hat” – blue as muted or glowing as if in a trance perhaps; red as bright in contrast to the squat, sinking houses beneath the roof, as though perhaps something good still exists (positive); black and brown as formal with tartan adding some pop, making the man seem well-kept like the protagonist (positive)

- 7 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 guilt. He has left no message for his wife.

How does the protagonist feel at this point?

Nervous about where he is and the fact that no one else knows where he is.

Why is he nervous? Does he have any reason to be?

He has traveled into the unknown and outside of his comfort zone. He is lost and already believes he is in a dangerous neighbourhood. He is making some assumptions about people who have less than he does. The reader does not have enough information to know if the protagonist is justified; however, based on what the reader does know, and the fact that the men in the neighbourhood “unblinkingly” drove behind the protagonist’s car, it seems unlikely that he is at risk and needs to feel nervous.

- 8 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. 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.

How does this paragraph tie in with an earlier one in the story? What is learned about the man's family's attitude toward him?

This paragraph ties in with the first paragraph. The protagonist left his neighbourhood in search of one that reminded him of his childhood, and here the narrator acknowledges that this childhood memory has not been, and perhaps cannot be, recreated. The reader also learns that the man's family seems to take him for granted, perhaps, but will still show concern when they realize his pattern has been broken.

Look up the word "recriminations" and then describe his marriage.

Recriminations – angry statements in which a person accuses or criticizes another person by whom he or she has already been accused or criticized (Merriam-Webster).

It would appear the protagonist and his wife do not get along, and have not gotten along for quite some time. Each regularly accuses the other, and it seems inevitable that the pattern will continue.

- 9 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.

In what sense is he unaware of the present? Why is he being followed by the police?

He has drifted off in his own mind to thoughts of his family and the arguing that will ensue if he does not soon notify his wife of his whereabouts. The police are perhaps following him because his distractions have led to distracted or faster driving, and perhaps because he seems out of place in the neighbourhood.

- 10 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 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.

Why are there bars on the windows? What are the four people like? How can the reader tell?

There are bars on the windows to prevent break-ins. The men appear to be rebellious, with sunglasses and leather jackets. The girl, however, is described in contrast to the men as "better looking than she should be" for such a group, with long legs and large breasts.

What is the protagonist's attitude towards the girl? What does this reveal about his character?

The protagonist looks at the girl as better than the men because of how she looks and dresses, and he sexualizes her. This reveals that he makes assumptions about people based on appearances, and of lesser significance that he is perhaps somewhat chauvinistic and hormonally driven.

- 11 In spite of his car, he hopes his day old beard which he strokes upward with the heel of his hand, will, 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.

What kind of “immunity” is he thinking about? Why does he put his wallet in his shirt pocket? Why is he prepared to tell a false story?

The protagonist is thinking about immunity from being robbed or otherwise harassed by the men who live in this neighbourhood. He puts his wallet in his shirt pocket in the hopes that it will not be seen or taken. He is prepared to tell a false story because he expects to be robbed and does not want to lose all of his money.

- 12 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.

In what sense is the man on “a stage?”

With the only light coming from the store onto the sidewalk, the protagonist is illuminated and attention is drawn to him at a time when he does not want to be noticed.

Why does the policeman have a gun in his hand?

The officer likely has a gun in his hand because he is expecting trouble and wants to be prepared to defend himself.

- 13 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.

In this context, what is likely the policeman's view of the protagonist? Is there any foreshadowing that the officer would view the protagonist this way?

The officer, who is inexperienced, frightened, and ill-prepared based on his training, views the protagonist as a criminal who has not only stolen a car but may be looking to cause more trouble. The foreshadowing or hint that the officer would view the protagonist this way can be found in paragraph 11, when the protagonist himself hopes that being an “unshaven man in blue jeans” may help him fit in with the men he believes are criminals.

What is ironic about the protagonist's reaction to seeing the police officer?

It is ironic that the protagonist relaxes and feels safe when he sees the police officer and yet the officer is the only person the protagonist has to fear.