

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

Robin Billings
Playing Pretend

The fluorescent lighting inside the convention center buzzed through the air like it was alive, coated the world inside with a false, hard sheen. It made me sleepy after a while, being in there, made my eyes tired, made me feel like everything in front of me might just disappear from view if I blinked one time too often, might just go away and leave me in a big echo chamber cavern of a concrete room.

I was off the clock at eight on Saturday night, so I went for a walk up and down the aisles, waiting for this girl I was working for to finally close up her booth because I told her I'd drive her home. I was beginning to be tired of pretending I didn't know she'd only asked me to help her out at this big home and garden show over the weekend and make myself some extra money so she could hitch a ride with me, and I was thinking about how I was gonna say no next time she asked, when I rounded a corner and saw a booth with this local celebrity woman who sold carpets on TV commercials during the late night scary movie on Saturday nights.

I stopped by to chat, because how many times would that ever happen to me, getting to talk to the late-night TV carpet commercial lady, and we were just talking along and talking along when she starts telling me her husband left her and she's divorcing him, from her life was how she said it, because neither one of them was really happy anymore, and maybe I missed something but that sure seemed to me to come out of the blue, me being basically a stranger and all.

So I said something like sorry about that, then she said that was all right, because it turned out, she said, masturbation feels a lot better than he ever did anyway, and I'm watching her mouth move, and I know she's the one saying the words, but right then I'm noticing her lips look wide and really colorful like a duck's bill against her pale, pale face, and I'm wondering if that's why her husband left her, because he couldn't stand to look at her once he'd maybe looked down at her when he was up on top of her and he noticed that part about her lips looking like a duck's bill. You have to admit, that would be a hard one to get over.

And when she smiled, that made it even worse.

Everybody always said she's sure pretty back when she was on the news, before she got off the news and started up with the carpet commercials, so I always thought she was pretty, too, by default, because you can't exactly think through every single thought you ever have. Some thoughts, you just have to go with what you're told if it doesn't matter much. But she wasn't that pretty, especially when she smiled, when her lips stretched out.

She went on and on about how the split up was all mutual, but she seemed too needy about me believing her for that to really be true. So I nodded along and nodded along, and after a while I smiled back at her, making sure to show her most of my front teeth and as little of my lips as possible. Somebody else walked up to her about then, so I waved good-bye, and then I walked around the corner to another row of booth after booth on each side of a long aisle, and people still filtering slowly down the spring green indoor-outdoor carpeting between them.

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

On Sunday afternoon, I avoided the duckbill woman's aisle like the plague was on sale over there, even though she was on TV all the time. I just had to, really. I didn't want her asking me did I want to go out and do something together later on.

Stuff like that never works out, knowing somebody away from their original place and time, like the stuff that happens in fairy tales and other stories you hear when you're a little girl and you think magic happens, and then you find out later on about that magic part being bullshit, and by then you're just kind of landed somewhere. That's all right, though.