

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

DeWitt Henry

A Tribute To "Tornado At The Club," From Evan S. Connell's, Mrs. Bridge (As Revised Into The Screenplay, Mr. And Mrs. Bridge, By Ruth Praver Jhabvala)

1. Mr. Bridge

I determined a special occasion to surprise India with the steamship tickets for the grand tour, Rome, Florence, Venice. We had planned on dinner at the Kansas City Country Club, itself a special occasion in our routines. We drove there in good weather, though there was some prediction of a storm; I know my weather, nevertheless, having lived in Kansas man and boy now for 58 years. I saw no cause for alarm. The waiter, although distracted, showed us to our usual table. I saw Heinrich Auslander, the psychiatrist, brazen in public with his young mistress at the corner table. Muriel and her husband were across the room. The lamb roast appealed to me and I ordered it for both India and myself. In my pocket nestled the tickets, my surprise.

When our plates came, no sooner had we begun eating, when the waiter came over and said something about a tornado. The radio, he said, was advising shelter. Well, I thought, there is no need for panic. No need to spoil an appointed evening, one that I had planned so definitely. The winds outside were high, but not alarming. The rain was heavy. It would pass by. These storms usually did. This club had stood here for a good two generations. True disasters by tornado were exaggerated and improbable. But people were alarmist. They enjoyed alarm. I have no truck with alarm.

One, two, three, then all the patrons lost their nerve and headed like cattle for the club shelter. The waiter came and begged us to accompany them. He was polite, despite his scared eyes and manner, eager himself to escape. I told him, No, No, thank you. We will stay here. That is my philosophy. And that is India's philosophy as my wife. She is a sweet, good woman, though given to childishness. She asked me whether the girl with Heinrich was his daughter and I had to laugh, saying "Not exactly," and she smiled and shied from the impropriety. Heinrich himself topped at my shoulder on his way out and said with evident sarcasm, which I pretended to ignore, "Quite the Napoleon, eh Walter?"

I have no truck with the likes of him. He doesn't even belong in our club, except for his money.

I saw that India was growing alarmed. I wanted to reassure her as I always do in world by insisting on my own credit that nothing was out of the normal. Even if it wasn't, even if we were in the slightest danger, I felt it was more important to shelter her with her trust in me, than to subject her to distress.

I asked for butter, which she got up to steal from a deserted table. Outside the lawn furniture was blown against the window. The lights went out.

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"India," I said, pulling out my envelope. "Here is a surprise birthday present for you." Sitting across from me, loyally paying mind only to me despite her evident worry about the storm, she took the envelope and opened it and astonished delight illuminated her lovely face. Tickets to Europe! Steamship tickets and the trains, from Rome to Venice to Florence. We would have, now that the children were grown, our long awaited honeymoon.

At that moment the storm had passed. The lights came on. "India," I said, "have I ever been wrong?"

2. The Waiter

I'd been listening to the radio. Tornado watch! Heading this way! 75 miles per hour! I don't like to alarm the guests; a false alarm to these people could cost my job, but so could ignoring real danger. And me, I'm a careful man myself. I'll do my job with the best, but I'm scared myself and from what the radio says, it's high time to head for shelter. I go to each table and tell each party. Tornado warning. We are closing the dining room just to be safe. Outside the wind was strong and sky dark as dusk, driving rain. Lawn furniture was turning over and blowing – one chair hit the French doors. The Iversons, the Smythes, the Daggots, all got up, leaving their elegant meals, napkins on their chairs, to hurry out, orderly fashion. I was edgy to follow them. This was too big a storm, too fast, heading right on top of us. If it hit us with the funnel this whole establishment would suck to kindling, fancy clientele or not. But some of these people, that Doctor Heinrich and his lady, he just sat there calm as anything by the window watching the others. Then thank goodness he got up. I went over to the other party, Mr. and Mrs. Bridge. I tried to warn them politely, like I wasn't too scared, but I was doing my duty and a man has to look out for himself in the face of catastrophe. I told them, Folks, there isn't much time. That funnel is going to hit here any minute. Please, Mr. Bridge, we are asking the guests to wait it over in the basement shelter. Mrs. Bridge heard me and that was a frightened lady. Her eyes were wide. She was looking behind me at the clatter of lawn furniture and the sideways rain and sudden ripping of the dining room awnings clear off in the wind. But that Mr. Bridge just smiled up at me, chewing his lamb roast, mouth too full to speak and made the smile and wink to say, Thomas, my man, the lamb roast is excellent, excellent! I said, I told him, I can't stay, I can't stay, folks. Please come! Then I turned and I saw that huge funnel cloud real as life, and it was filling the sky. The Doctor Heinrich was watching and urging his girlfriend there, when he stopped by the Bridge's table. I heard him laugh and say, "Such a brave man, your husband is, Mrs. Bridge!" Then laughing he joined his girl, thank goodness, and he was hurrying alongside me, though I let them go down first, and I followed. The lights were out. I had the emergency flashlight shining for them. Those Bridges! He was my witness. I warned them all I could. I did my duty to the last and I was risking my life for that Bridge man's bravery, if that's what you can call such craziness. That man is crazy. That man's wife is crazy, staying with him too. And both them crazy rich or not are going to be blown off God's earth, while this brave man, brave enough

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and sensible enough too, did his level best to the last for their good. But comes a time, a man's life is his own, to stay or go. Listen to that! Down here with all the people now. Lanterns lit. All close here huddled and joking. And that doctor lighting his cigar, joking, "That Walter Bridge. Why he's like one of Napoleon's fourteen year old foot soldiers." But I pray for us all. Please God, let us live. Save us from your wrath, Lord, and save us from the fools amongst us too. Amen.

3. The Tornado

I was following my nature, gathering energy, building up to a forward vector at 75 miles per hour. I roared and churned and spun, my funnel twisting down from the strength of storm cloud, rain, lightning. My funnel crossed farmland, sucking dirt and crops. It tore up fences and trees and telephone and electric lines and drove and danced and meandered, mocking and teaching the earth – which is me too; we are all one thing. Houses, barns, cars, animals, all churned into my vacuum, lifted and spun into my heart. I cut across the outskirts of the city, through crowded neighborhoods and roads and factories and drove on over hills, craving, seeking, like history itself, like war, the juggernaut of happening past resistance. Out of my way, survivors! Hide in cellars! Try to outrun and dodge my path! Take shelter! I want you. There. There, ahead, the country club. Exclusive. The rolling fairways and landscaped greens. But then the clubhouse. Lights shining in my darkness. Fragile lawn furniture. Awnings flapping. I want them. My winds seek and test and tear. And inside now the lights go out. Man efforts to make light. Man shelters.

And there sit two diners, openly exposed, denying my power. The Bridges, Walter and India. I rattle the French doors. I rain and pelt and roar. I tear the awning clear off. But inside they ignore me. They match my very force with their denial. I don't exist. They don't care if I do exist. I feel the pure insistence of their eating. They don't care if I tear the roof off the club and I suck them out of their chairs. I believe if they were in my winds, if they spun in my funnel upside down or sideways, still they would keep the posture of sitting, even without chairs. Still they would talk, even if they were separated, the other somewhere out of sight above or below. The force of their intentness not only equals, it defies mine, I confess. It turns me aside. My funnel misses them. I am lessening, even as I pass towards that horizon, over those trees. I spread into the sky.

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