

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/3

James Lloyd Davis

She was the smartest woman I'd ever met. Sometimes, she said things that I didn't understand, but laughed them off without explanation. When she did, I would squint, cock my head, ask questions.

No explanation.

Once, she called me "...a Spaniard."

"Why would you call me a Spaniard?"

She laughed, said, "Don't worry. It's a good thing. A marvelous thing for a man to be. A Spaniard."

She had a way of sitting around in my shirts and nothing else, a way that kept me charmed beyond reason. Last time she was here, she never dissembled enough to sit that way, stayed dressed in jeans and a black silk blouse I can still remember from the way it shone in the slits of sunlight through my blinds.

We talked for a while in my living room.

Can't remember what was said.

More like we both talked our way around the reason it was over. She said only that her husband was coming home. She stopped, lit a cigarette, looked over at the television. It was still turned on, sound muted, blinking blue light into the dark corners of the room. She watched it. I looked over to see what she saw, some stand-up comic on a stage in front of a microphone. We sat there in silence, watched the comic smile with vitriolic intent and gesture with his hands for an unseen audience. She turned to me, said, "I hate comics. Their native tongue is laughter. Not pretty laughter like ... musical chimes, but harsh, unforgiving, like ... pain endured through pain inflicted."

Those were the last words she ever said to me.

I said, "Stay a while ... forever."

She got up in silence, gathered her purse, left my apartment. I went to the door, walked out, watched her get in her car, drive off. She left to be with her husband, finally home from the war, or nearly there, en route from Fort Somethingorother. She wasn't going to leave him after all. It came to a decision ... him or me. She never said it in words, but the fact that she left, the way she left ... in silence ... was decisive, symbolic, clear enough.

I'd asked her to stay.

She left.

I want to say ... I'd like to say ... I need to say I knew her in ways her husband never could, but that's not true, is it? Like her last cryptic words about pain. I wrote those words down, "...pain endured through pain inflicted." Pretty much tattooed those words to the back of my eyelids, repeated them endlessly, but the words never gave me reasons. She never gave me reasons, just those enigmatic words. Then she left.

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No answer forthcoming, not then, not now.

Accident made the front page of the paper.

Slow news day, spectacular photo. The car looked like it had been compressed front and back, one door ajar at an angle reminiscent of a broken limb.

DOA at some hospital in Williamsburg.

I had the nerve to go to the funeral, not that anyone would know me, how I knew her, our history. I watched her husband and seven of his friends in perfect, pressed green coats with medals, berets, shaved jaws, desert tans, sad flags where their eyeballs should have been, grim faces overall, uniform-of-the-day faces.

Every now and then, I go to her grave, stand, kneel, sit, weep, think.

I think about what it means, death, corruption. I think about the worms that will consume us. Silly little worms beneath the grass overwhelm our flesh, digest meaning, corrupt beauty. Busy little worms at work in the filth, in the darkness. Though they dwell in it, feed on it, they dream of nothing themselves, but draw their writhing purpose from the substance of dreams, from the bodies of dreamers, from the beautiful dreamers, from her. It does not give a man peace to know they would die in the sunlight, these worms, but the irony makes you smile.