

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

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Back Then

Andrea's bedroom and bathroom were downstairs beside the pool. I had often been down there alone with her, tormented in luxury by her beauty. Now it was forbidden territory, her boyfriend, Rolf, and his friend, Lothar, having just arrived from Germany.

Andrea had emigrated to Australia with her parents the year before.

I was upstairs with her in the dining-room with her sister, Silke, and Silke's ex-boyfriend Philip, who had also just arrived from Germany, but on another flight, and who was staring through a glass door at harassed trees that were swaying amid pellet rain that thumped the windows with scratching clattering; Roman-artillery weather had been hurling pellets for days.

The drops clinging to the glass obscured Philip's vision of an unnaturally dark world.

"You're unlucky with the weather," I said.

"Yes," Rolf replied. "We'd love to go to the beach."

Whistling storm artillery exploded above amid whining atmospheric yelps, a detonation team seemingly working on the tiles.

Rolf's voice was as casual as he looked: long hair, moustache, polished-mahogany eyes. His artistic look attracted him to Andrea who loved painting.

Lothar had already seduced Andrea's neighbor, a hard-faced woman who paled in comparison to Andrea. Everyone I knew had said: "Andrea's the most beautiful woman I've ever met and she's witty and bright."

The neighbor was beside Lothar at the dining-room table. I was on a low stool beside Philip. Philip had been warned by Silke to stay in Germany. His uncertainty mirrored the weather's unseasonal hissing; subdued and alert, his eyes shivered with indecision. His hopes of renewing his relationship with Silke rose and fell with glances or kind words; although he was getting few kind words from Silke who remains the most naturally confident person I've ever met. To annoy her parents she answered the front door naked. I liked knocking on that door. She opposed her parents' "conservative attitude." They insisted she stop having sex in the pool during the day with her male classmates. The neighbors up the hill had complained about their children seeing Silke "exposing herself" in the pool. Silke had said: "Tell them to mind their own business."

Andrea, who also adored love-making, had backed her sister in the family debate about Silke's behavior. Now eighteen-year-old Philip was hoping to renew allegiances with someone whose recent liberation had been spectacular. Had Philip known what Silke did for kicks he would have been even more depressed.

Before Rolf arrived from Germany, I had chased Andrea with ruthless obsession, ignoring her desire to continue her relationship with the man who had just traversed the globe to ensure that that relationship contin-

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ued, the man she would return to Germany to be with. He couldn't have doubted my intentions with Andrea whom I had met in Queensland. I had been instructed to keep our affair quiet. We had just been friends. Why would I try anything on tropical islands with beautiful women? Romance never even crossed my mind.....

I was too young then to concentrate on women I could get.

A wallop boomed above; air's strident voice shrieked.

Lothar, making the neighbor laugh, glanced at Andrea to see her response. Behind Lothar's light-heartedness brewed pain. His clashing internal tendencies had failed to find equilibrium. He jokes hid his feelings, the neighbor chortling without repartee.

Andrea produced sabre responses to humour, repartee meeting repartee, beauty with banter, Lothar facing boredom with the neighbor's one-dimensional hilarity, the other half of the mental laziness that smeared her face when she wasn't guffawing. Maybe I wasn't objective; but my perceptions arose without me wanting to be critical. I had nothing against these people whom I wanted to get along with.

When the neighbor wasn't smiling she looked calculating. I hadn't picked up her name so I called her Reptillia. Wealth stimulates reptilian instincts, the surface everything to so many that imagination must see the interior matching its exterior counterpart; and you don't want to disappoint imagination.

I wasn't sure who was more dissatisfied: Reptillia or Lothar.

Distracting himself from his pain, whose source was being fed by his inability to turn wit into reward, Lothar said in German: "It's rude to speak a language in the presence of people who can't understand that language, so let's do it. David is a wanker."

Delighted surprise fled into German irises when I said: "You've been looking through my bedroom window again, haven't you?"

I had been studying German for two years.

Andrea giggled; her sky-blue eyes, wit watered, gleamed above enflamed cheeks that resembled sunsets beside her nose's sleek promontory.

"He understood!" she chimed.

Philip's weak grin resembled sunlight on wet footpaths. Silke chortled with canon-fire bliss: "Haaaa!" She put everything into laughter and everything into what she believed was true.

This episode offered faint respite from the abyss that separated my desires from reality, an abyss so enormous that I felt precluded from satisfaction by a malign intelligence that dreamers called God. But I was still naive enough then to remain where I didn't belong-like Philip.

The smile left Andrea's face, unnatural ire left in its wake.

"He only thinks about sex," she said, referring to me, attempting to infuse aggressive veracity into her comment.

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Her fear of exposure had just risen to the surface. Dour acceptance descended upon Lothar's face with the quietude that fell in the room.

I collected the dishes, whining wind's detonations booming loudly, conflict raging above. A more experienced person would not have allowed themselves to have been in that bunker of tension in the first place; but I was young then, failure's accumulated wisdom having yet to create thinking.

Philip joined me in the kitchen whose light's incandescent clarity of brilliance resembled glaring defeat. He, too, needed a break from pig-headed hope, from that hairy-faced beast with pink lips that screams that the present can't represent reality, while, of course, it does.

The bubbly, rainbow froth I filled the sink with epitomized the glamorous thoughts of impractical aspiration.

We chatted as best we could. I felt the pathos of seeing someone tormented by a dream diametrically opposed to actuality, a dream I was recovering from myself.

"How long are you going to be in Australia?" I asked.

An explosion erupted in the tiles.

Whatever meaning may have existed in the rumbling chatter coming from the dining room now only conveyed abandonment's brush-off for us.

"Another week," he replied.

I imagined the visions his hopes must have created on the plane. "Love" often implies not knowing the other person. Silke's face carried a wise, old expression well beyond her years. Her self-confidence made her so sure of her own perceptions that she already had knowledge's comfort without, perhaps, having knowledge. Fate had given her the unconscious GPS necessary for mental survival.

"I suggest," I replied, a meaning beneath, "that you try the Blue Mountains."

"Thanks," he replied. "Good idea."

Nature steadies one after the tarnished tapestry of false dreams gets pulled away to reveal the slag heap left by fruitless endeavours. He seemed to understand what I meant, his eyes sparkling with the hope inherent in a new prospect.

Back in the dining room, Lothar's eyes flashed with envy's deadpan shock as Rolf said: "I believe it's time I rested my weary body," Andrea replying: "I believe I'll join you."

Lothar's sudden fraught eyes made me realize just how much he loved Andrea, therefore how difficult it was going to be for him to maintain his tenuous interest in Reptillia, easier just going home alone to avoid manufacturing bright-faced sincerity towards someone that circumstances would ultimately reveal as a shallow substitute for the heart's desires. He was in a worse situation than Philip or me: we just faced defeat; he faced defeat with failure to pursue the wanted, self-esteem hammered into battered flatness.

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After having said good night to the others, I was outside with Andrea.

"You shouldn't have said what you said," I told her. "Now he's going to know for sure. Maybe you want him to know?"

Sheepish guilt smeared her vast eyes. The yellow specks around her pupils, amid celestial blue, suggested that Beauty painted with golden brushstrokes.

"I know, I know," she said. "It---,"

"Don't worry; I know it's nothing to do with me."

The electromagnetic radiance, exuding from her physique, unleashed frenetic hopes. I adored her because she was fascinated by things that fascinated me, difficult coming across mutual intertwining of curiosity's luxuriant growth, especially when the other forest is so exquisite to behold.

My ego's rubble blocked out the view that she was tempted to tell Rolf about our affair because he had seen that I offered no threat, her potential revelation an olive branch of courageous confidence.

"But If I told him," she whispered, "he won't trust me at all."

"Trust is another dream," I said. "If he can't accept you as you are then he isn't for you."

Tsunami shockwaves raced across her ocean-blue eyes.

"True," she said.

The refreshing intimacy that had previously coloured our relationship came flooding back in after that night's desert distance; the flood could make you believe anything, even Moses crossing rivers.

"It's been a night of collective reality facing," I said. "Philip, Rolf, you, Lothar and Reptillia."

"Sally?"

"Oh, it's not Reptillia?"

Andrea grinned with embarrassed amusement, knowing what I meant, and asked: "Why Lothar?"

"He loves you more than Rolf."

Her silence was typically reflective.

"Probably right," she eventually said.

"Only Silke is escaping reality's hard hand. She seems immune from illusions."

"Dreaming isn't for her."

"Probably. Anyway, have a good trip."

She, Rolf, Lothar and Sally were about to drive around Victoria and New South Wales. I didn't envy Lothar who was going to have to face his inadequacies by being with two women who, in their different ways, would unconsciously enflame his tormenting desires.

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"I'd love to visit you in Perth," Andrea said, "but...."

"Forget it," I said, waving a tentacle hand of comprehension.

I was going back home in two days. She would have preferred it if I had disappeared off *terra firma* during this period of re-establishing trust with Rolf who knew she had slept with Sally's brother; and now with me.

"I'll write," she offered.

I trudged into darkness, glowing bulbs on a wall beside the door that I had seen her cool, defiant, rebellious sister standing naked at. The enraged wind had departed, leaving a stillness of spent-out effort, street-light reflections in soaked paths adding illusory depths to the area's heights, starry patches expanding over those reflections; and over calm air that filled with alleviation's grace.

Feeling insubstantial, as if all had been sucked out from within-when hope leaves it takes a lot with it-the smug, self-contained security oozing from the area's massive houses and high walls highlighted my frailness in an area of realized solutions. I needed a defense against pointless dreams.

My certainty that she wouldn't "like to see" me "in Perth" reflected the start of disconnecting hope from illusion. Justified hope evokes the reassurance evoked by the stars that I was now observing, the emptiness caused by failure in romance being replaced by the deeper consideration of creating an achievable future, rather than being distracted by causes that only yield consistent pain.

Andrea wrote to me: Philip's thinking in the Blue Mountains had also led him to break from the past; Sally had bolted in Victoria, abandoning handsome Lothar who learnt to use common sense when facing desire. That for a man is no laughing matter.

Back in Perth, my father interpreted my subdued attitude with: "You can keep holding a torch for that German woman. You've got to start thinking about your future."

Which was precisely what I had started thinking about.