

FAREWELL, AND MAY WE MEET AGAIN IN HAPPIER TIMES

BY H. WILLIAM DAVIS

The lights were best that time of year, black and orange crescents drifting aimlessly above the guests as they wandered in and out of the house, cups in hand. Zooney sat on an old iron rocking chair propped up on the corner of the balcony, her legs dangling carelessly over the side. She watched the repetitive blinking, the small incandescent shadows overturned by the glow of autumnal equinox. The world was good for a flashing moment, the blinking of a bulb, the lightning strike of a camera. She smoked her cigarette slowly, letting the smoke billow out of her mouth as red lipstick stained the filter. The act of inhaling alone was a pious joy for Zooney, for whom *joy* was not such a simple matter in her life. She had moved out of the country, away from her home, and attempted to forge a successful career in a strange new city, and at last disaster had struck in the quick, unsuspecting way it always seemed to. Three weeks into her new job and her new life Zooney had received a phone call from her childhood neighbor. Her mother had fallen down a flight of stairs. These stairs connected the upper and lower halves of a rather large house in the middle of the country some 100 miles away that Zooney had once called home. The lower half of this fine estate was where Zooney's mother spent most of her time now that she was alone. The upper portion contained only a few rooms, several of which were now of little use to Zooney's mother. It did, however, house Zooney's old room, a place which her mother visited often in life once her only daughter had left home for good.

There was no spouse, no child, only a series of empty rooms in a house that was much too big for a solitary woman who crept upon death. Zooley knew her mother would never leave the house behind though. She imagined her mother pacing the halls endlessly, observing the room that she once slept with her husband in, the room where her only daughter had grown up, the rooms where they had all lived before leaving her. Zooley tried not to think of these images but they continued to haunt her from the second she hung up the phone.

She would later stand morbidly in the funeral home as the neighbor woman explained the situation. Zooley tried not to listen too intently as she recounted the incident. The only thing she took solace in was knowing that she had died before hitting the bottom- there was no time to feel any physical pain as she plummeted from upper to lower level of the house she had built her life around. The wake itself tormented her. Zooley's mother had taught Art at the local high-school for thirty years and the majority of the guests were her former students and Zooley's classmates. Few of them knew Zooley but her mother had all touched them in some way. She was many things to many people but she was a mother to Zooley alone and she began to resent her now middle-aged classmates as they walked slowly up to the casket with their decade-old memories.

One man, however, ignored the casket all together. He stood on the opposite side of the room, a mirror image to Zooley who resembled an ivory statue watching over the viewing. As the rest of the crowd began to disperse he finally walked over to Zooley and introduced himself.

“You're Irene's daughter, Zooley, are you not?”

“Yeah. I’m her. How did you know my mother? Were you one of her students?”

“Yeah I took her every year in high-school. I would have never became a painter if it wasn’t for her. My name’s Albert”

“Well, Albert, I’m glad my mother inspired you. She touched a lot of people.”

“I’m sure not as much as you, the connections between mother and daughter and whatnot. Listen, I’m having a party on Friday and I know you’re probably busy and such with the arrangements but if you need to get your mind off things you’re more than welcome to stop by.”

Zoey thanked him and said she might visit but also assured him that socializing wasn’t one of her main priorities of the moment. However, the week passed and Zoey sat at her typewriter for two consecutive nights, after the drive home, after the wake, the funeral, and the burial without a formidable word ever finding its way onto the page. All she could do in remembrance of her mother was to weep. No matter how beautiful her intentions as she laid her hands on the keys, only tears came. Zoey found herself simply staring out her bedroom window the same way she had as a little girl. Her street was lined with oak trees, now fully mature after spending most of their life growing with Zoey. She couldn’t remember the trees being small as it would have been far before her time but she wondered if they, with their leaves now falling in red and yellow clumps on the ground, could remember her dancing around them as a child.

So, on the third night, with her thoughts unmoving in her mind, Zoey decided to take up Albert’s offer as she followed his scribbled directions to a house on the edge of town. She entered cautiously and poured herself a drink but was unable to find Albert. Instead she took refuge on the porch and let late-autumn engulf her with the scent of

pumpkin and spices and dead or dying leaves crunching beneath the feet of the other guests entertaining themselves and each other. The party continued to exist around her but she felt out of place. No one spoke to her. The crowd treated her as if she were the corpse, something so ghastly, so cold, so remarkably dead that even a mere glance in her general direction could be life-threatening. The only friendly gestures she received were halfhearted sideways glances as she left occasionally to refill her drink or use the restroom. Just when she began contemplating leaving Zooley saw Albert creep through the sliding-glass doors and approach from the other end of the porch.

“So... you decided to come after all.” Albert said.

“Oh yes,” she smiled, “but no one particularly wants me here, I fear.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“They’re all afraid of me. They think they’ll catch the misery.” Zooley stated with exaggerated dramatic intensity.

“Is it contagious?”

“Oh, terribly so.”

“Well, I think I’m up to date on all my shots.”

“Then would you like to enjoy this scenic balcony with me?”

And so they sat, alone but together under the marquee moon hung delicately in the sky, Zooley again decorating the ledge of the porch with her long silvery legs glowing dimly in the moonlight with eyes so dark they seemed to belittle the night around her. Albert pensively leaned against a white stone pillar next to her with the darkness of his jacket crushing the night around him. They sipped eagerly on their drinks and chain

smoked furiously and let small morsels of conversation drip between them in the meantime.

“Look at these trees,” Zooley said, observing what at once Albert found a charming souvenir of the season as she found an intimidating sign of things to come, “they’re losing their leaves. They’re dying. Everything ends. Everything beautiful just fucking ends.”

Zooley remained quiet after her prolonged outburst. She was sure she was going to scare him off in the same manner she always seemed to push people away. Not many were able to keep up with this sort of morbid table-turning.

“But these trees started out as saplings, hell, as seeds,” Albert began, surprising Zooley with his ability to converse, “These leaves will regrow in the spring. Everything ends, sure, but everything has to start somewhere. New things are *beginning* all the time.”

“But isn’t it all meaningless if it just comes and goes?” Zooley retorted with exasperation leaking out of her troubled voice.

“Not if you can look back at a moment and still understand why it was important. Are these trees not beautiful all year round? Do they not look as nice in summer as they do in the fall or winter? Does the temperature change the memory?”

“I suppose it doesn’t but it’s just as depressing.”

“Only if you fashion it that way.”

Silence overtook them for a moment as Albert’s unwavering belief began to sink into Zooley’s rigid pessimism. As Albert wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer Zooley let everything she was thinking spill out of her mouth. Neither

was much concerned with the party anymore. Zooney was simply glad to be able to speak for once and Albert relished the opportunity to listen again. Closeness had become a foreign idea to Albert. The summer months had come and went and the sweltering heat of July persuaded Albert to discourage any affection to linger about his sweaty shoulders.

“Do you follow your own advise?” Zooney finally whispered.

“I try to, but it’s easier to give than to take.” Albert admitted.

“So do you think there’s something else out there?”

“You mean after death?”

“Yeah, I suppose”

“I mean there has to be something.”

“Where do *you* think it all goes?”

“The same place it was before it came here, I guess. These trees just sit here uncaring of how they grow or what will become of them and they certainly are not concerned with the future as long as there is one.”

“And trees don’t worry about death.”

“Well, theoretically, you can’t really care about death too much if you *are* dead and you probably shouldn’t worry about it as long as you’re alive. I mean, come on, Zooney. Are you upset because your mother left you or because you left your mother?”

Zooney couldn’t believe it as she drunkenly attempted to make her way home. The poor boy had let her go on and on forever weeping and raving like a lunatic amongst a host of drunken party goers. This man, Albert, just sat there so collected while she went

on about her mother for the better part of the evening and only when she asked about his parents did he reveal that he was an orphan. No big deal he had said, immediately making Zooney feel selfish for stealing the conversation. She had made her lose the biggest deal in her life and here was a man who didn't even know what a parent was trying to calm her down.

He had seemed like such a wonderful possibility at first but Zooney could now only wonder what she had done wrong as she drove home alone after Albert refused her invitation back to her childhood home. A few blocks before her house she saw the flashing lights of police cars, ambulances, firetrucks. There had been an accident. Zooney watched the collection of crumpled cars against broken guardrails and wondered what Albert's mother might have looked like, his words still echoing in her mind, a question that she was still unable to answer. Who had left who?