PAPER KITES AND AUTUMN DAYS

EDWARD L. WILLIAMS

He stood at the door watching her as she walked up the steps. She was dressed as he had expected she would be, not flauntly or demanding, but unmistakably attractive. The wind was tossing her hair about, and she was stroking at the flying strands of tresses that flapped across her face.

"Hi," she smiled as he approached the steps. "Remember me?" He remembered the smile. "You look lovely," he said as he opened the door.

"The great flatterer," she teased as she danced by him and glided into the room.

"May I take your coat?" he offered.

"Thank you." She removed the thin coat from her shoulders and he placed it on a hanger. "Oh, your place is really charming!"

"It's mostly just economics," he laughed. "The charm is collateral."

She surveyed the room—the bookcase, the desk, the stack of unorganized and unkempt sheets of manuscript scattered about.

"You still write poetry?" She was looking at the desk when she asked him.

"I've not yet decided if it's poetry or not," he said. "I never improved."

"You never needed to," she remarked, walking to the desk. "You say that because you don't read much," he answered.

"I used to. Do you mind?" she asked, reaching for the papers. "I always enjoyed—"

"I'd rather you wouldn't. They're mostly unfinished." He shrugged his shoulders when she turned surprised before him.

"Haven't changed," she shook her head. Her lips parted in a smile. "God, I can't believe it's been five years," she sighed.

"I know what you mean." There was silence for an instance and then he added, "I thought I'd never see you again."
"We just moved back two weeks ago. Bill couldn’t pass up the opportunity.” She looked away for a brief moment and then returned to him with a smile. “Your wife seemed so surprised when I recognized your picture on the desk.” She laughed softly. “It was so strange. We were talking and I said, “I know him! May I see that picture?”

“I was surprised myself when you called.”
“She’s a darling wife.”
“Thank you.” He paused. “Your husband—”
“Bill.”
“Yes, Bill. You just said he couldn’t pass up the opportunity. Stupid of me.”
“You’re excited, aren’t you?” she laughed.
“Well, you’re an exciting woman.”
“You make me feel good again, already,” she beamed; but as soon as she said it, her countenance faded. It was as if she had said something she shouldn’t have, or had not want to, had said it more involuntarily than anything else. Silence hung between them for a while before she spoke, “I really can’t stay long, lunch break—”
“I know, I know,” he nodded. She glanced away as his eyes met hers. Adjusting her skirt with one hand, she brushed her hair back with the other.
“Well, are you still going to be that dynamic doctor of English?” she asked, her eyes blinking.

He remembered when he had told her the first time. “No.” He laughed now to remember it so. “NO, I don’t plan to be dynamic anymore. Just quiet, passive, everyday.”
“You’ll never be ‘everyday’ at anything. I know you better than that.”
“It’s been five years since you knew me.” They paused. She broke the silence. “You haven’t changed at all, you know?”
“Yes I have,” he disagreed solemnly. “In many ways.”
“How then? In what way?” she questioned.
“Don’t ask me that.” The statement broke the flow of words and she was once again uneasy and apparently uncomfortable. She glanced at her watch.
“Well, I should be leaving, I’m afraid. I’ll be late.”
“You can’t stay longer?”
“You don’t want me to lose my job, do you?” she said, still smiling.
“No, I’m serious.”

She looked away from him and rose from the chair. She was facing the window with her back turned to him. It was a windy day and leaves were blowing across the yard in whirlpools of flight. The sky was metal grey and seemed on the verge of spilling rain.

“I can’t stay long, Scott,” she said, not turning to face him. Her hands were fumbling together nervously. The she turned to face him and she looked distressed. “I really can’t.”

She looked down. “I feel so foolish.”

Returning to her seat, she sat opposite him and gazed out the window. “It’s hard to believe you’re living here in a house and all. We don’t seem that old yet.”

Then she turned to him. “Do you think we’re THAT old?” she asked, trying, but not succeeding to act excited.

“I guess I feel a little older than I really am,” he told her. “Too many books, I guess.”

Yes, that’s right. I never thought you’d stick with it. The books and all.”

“Well, I have.”

“Nobody would have believed you five years ago,” she said, returning to a smile. Taking a deep breath, she fluffed her skirt and said, “Well, I must leave now. I really will be late.”

She rose and he went for her coat. “You will come by, your wife and you, won’t you?”

He hesitated before answering, “Perhaps.” He slipped the coat up over her sleeveless arms.

“Saturday?” she asked, fumbling with a button.

“We’ve plans then. Perhaps some other time.”

“Then some day next week.”

His hand reached for her arm. She was adjusting her hair. Her eyes were no longer bright, no longer happy. They were strained, but still beautiful.

“Let’s don’t play, Catherine.”

She looked away, unsettled, “Very well,” she whispered. Her teeth bit down into her lower lip. “Scott, please do. Let’s be friends at least.” Her shining eyes had turned red.

He looked at her for a moment, then turned away. His hands found his pockets. She turned from his as he said, “Did you really expect me to change?”
He gazed at the beauty of her face, the softness of her cheeks which were tilted slightly downward. He reached out to touch her and turned her face up.

“I guess not,” she managed.

“I’m sorry,” he sighed. “I would expect things.”

She looked at him, questioning his eyes. “It’s my fault,” she said. “I guess I wasn’t sure.”

She turned for the door. “I don’t suppose you’ll change your mind?” She looked to him for an answer, then tipped her head. “No. I suppose not.”

“I wish it weren’t like this, Catherine.” His hand reached for her arm again.

“Scott—” She began to shake her head. “Don’t.”

She stepped to the door and her hand wrapped around the knob. He fought to remain silent. “Please forgive me. I won’t bother you again,” she said. He turned to the window, remembering.

The door shut and he heard the sound of her feet clicking down the sidewalk. He walked to the door and watched her running for the car. It’s best this way, she said, not looking up. How can it be? But she had not answered, had turned instead, from him, weaving through the trees of the park. Leaving him there feeling empty and alone. The autumn winds blew her hair and her coat flapped behind her. He wanted to chase her because he did not know how long it would be until he saw her again. He watched the white, running legs and her thin, flapping raincoat growing smaller. She was like a child running home in the rain. And he was a child too; but a child three years younger than she. He found it hard to believe that it mattered so.

The leaves blew around her like paper kites and he remembered days in the park spent trying to get the rigs airborne—whole days passed running through trees and pasting newspapers to wooden frames. He turned the knob and threw the door open. Stepping out, he called to her, called her name amid the swirl of the wind and the rustle of the leaves against the house.

“CATHERINE!”

But she had already shut herself within the car, and it pulled away from the curb as if the wind itself had gushed behind it, had caught it in a current and sent it scurrying off to some unknown cloud. He remembered losing kites in the wind and the snap of broken strings. He could smell autumn in the air.