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IN PURSUIT OF THE WELL-BELOVED

BY LYDIA WILLIAMS

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Once again, Don was reciting poetry under his breath, and I tried to make out what he was saying as I drove. I heard him say, "Ach, du," which sounded like a foreign sneeze and couldn't have been from anything optimistic. But I had my sights set on an intimate dinner-for-two and romance for once in a very long time, and so I considered interrupting that nail-gun language he was mumbling with a few lines of a sweet poem he wrote me, "Ode to Constance." I never could tell, though, whether Don would be in the mood for or not. I'd sometimes made Don squirmy by blurting out one of his lines—I knew a ton of his poems by heart—while he and his students sat around our living room quoting poets such as Mr. Depressed and Mr. More Depressed. They followed Don home every Tuesday night after his poetry writing class and had ever since Don moved in a few months ago. They'd argue about topics like "no ideas but in things" then get uncomfortable when I brought "things" like our new fridge into the conversation. Soon it became clear that the only "thing" I had in common with Don's students was that a lot in life reminded us of the poetry we knew by heart. But reading one of Don's poems was like delivering a package whose destination you weren't sure of until you arrived there, and I guess it was a trip you had to be in the mood to take. Don wasn't always in the mood.

Don sighed and when I glanced over, I saw that he was fiddling with his passenger seat-adjustor, bouncing his leg impatiently. The bouncing caused his wiry body to vibrate, which of course only frustrated his attempt. If Don's history with anything remotely mechanical had any bearing now, Don would end up breaking the seat.

I looked at the adjustment knob, trying to keep my attention on the road at the same time. "Need some help?"

"Thanks." Don played back against the seat.

When I pulled up to a red light, I leaned over, tweaked the knob, and shoved his seat back. Then of course, being so close to something so bookish and serious, I felt the need to make it a little wild, and I kissed his neck for a few seconds and slid my hand over his chest. Traffic could go to hell. By the time a car behind us tapped its horn, my move worked, and Don was grinning.

From the car to our right I could hear the thumping, bubble-gum voice of a talk radio host. When I glanced at Don again, he was resting his head against the window, staring at the passengers and rubbing the skin around his thumb, a habit he had when he was distracted. If Don was distracted, even though this was the only semblance of a date I could talk him into in weeks, then that was fine by me. Distracted was better than moody, and I hoped that tonight, for once in a very long time, Don would not be moody. I followed Don's gaze to the SUV. A large man sat high, clutching the steering wheel. A woman was fussing with something in her lap.

If I looked into other cars often, I would wonder what made me and Don so different that I always drove instead of him. But I was just a better driver—better, in fact, at all the handy, practical things. Don was better at things it seemed like I never had time to bother with, like smelling oak in wine.

"Guess I'll let you pick the wine at Red Lobster," I said. Often if I threw something out in the middle of a long silence, Don would tell me what he'd been thinking as if I'd said, "Tell me what you're thinking."

Don picked at the skin around his thumb, still looking off to his right. "Why do you suppose that different colors put us in different moods? They say soft yellow promotes happiness."

I smiled. "I'm not so sure about all that. I think it's more like what we pair with the colors in our head. Like yellow and sunshine." The light changed and we continued to travel alongside the SUV until the next light, when once again we hit a red.

"Association may have something to do with our responses to color, but happiness and the chemicals which produce it are all linked in our brains." Don smoothed his hair then leaned back against the headrest, still looking at the SUV. He was always staring at other people until I told him to quit. Don was the kind of guy who was happiest when he was trapped in a public place, where he could watch everyone else mind their own business. "Say I believe yellow makes me happy. Sooner or later I may chemically nudge my brain into producing serotonin when I see it."

This was an unfortunate case of Don believing everything he heard. "Did you read this on the internet?" I turned the heat down. Don was usually in control of temperature, but he must have been too distracted. Not that I minded a little heat in the car with the smell of his aftershave. Not that I minded at all.

The light changed again, we moved a few yards, the SUV pulling slightly ahead, hopeful, it seemed, of making it through the yellow light, but it didn't, and we all stopped again. "What the hell? How difficult could they possibly be to coordinate?"

Don nodded and tapped the window as if he had expected precisely such a response from me. "You see," tap, tap, "you live mostly in the world of reality—"

I laughed.

"Let me finish."

"Sorry. Go ahead." I put my hand on his thigh.

Don didn't seem to notice. "You react to most of the world on a literal level. You are wearing a red dress because red looks good with your pale skin tone and your brown hair. But," he paused dramatically, "I live in the world of imagination. Even without thinking about it, I know I love that dress because it reminds me of the first time I saw passion in your eyes—the night of the eclipse." Don turned to me and his look made me want to pull over and show him some more passion.

The SUV moved forward and turned right, and Don's attention snapped back to the window. I squinted and saw that he had not, in fact, been looking at the SUV. He was looking at a cemetery all along.

I almost groaned out loud. I knew what this meant: Celia nostalgia coming my way. Celia, who Don dated for six or seven months before dumping her, without remorse or high drama from either of them. Their breakup had been of the ordinary see-you-around variety. I was only buddies with Don at the time, just another one of his buddies at the bar. But all of a sudden one night after they broke up, when I sat beside him and took a swig of the fancy beer he always ordered, I realized he was sexy as hell, and I guess he saw me different, too, because we started dating pretty soon after their break-up and soon after that, he moved into my place, where it was the Fourth of July every night. That's when the doctors discovered stage four breast cancer in Celia. A few weeks later, Celia died.

After Celia's death, something remarkable happened. In Don's mind, Celia attained the status of a saint. I started finding mementos of hers around the

apartment, started catching Don watching Law and Order, her favorite show, a show he always hated, never having been a fan of violence or of crime-solving or, as it was turning out when it came to Celia, emotional problem-solving.

Last week, in fact, I came home from work to find Don sitting on the couch, staring at the coffee table. "She was so good to me, and I, I was so awful to her."

I knew from the dramatic way he said it—those two "I"s taking twice the blame—that he was torturing himself. For the record, he wasn't awful to her, and that's what made his grief so annoying and pitiful. In fact, when they were together, there wasn't a weekend that went by that when Celia would let Don out of the apartment to shoot some pool, he didn't show up with his tail between his legs because of something or other she'd said to make him feel terrible. Oh, tonight Celia said my new haircut made me look like an eighteenth-century retard. Or, Oh, tonight Celia said I should go hang out with the losers because I need to reconnect with my roots.

Now I know as well as everybody that you can't say shit like that to Don. He's one of those sensitive types, and Celia knew it, too. So Don would come to the bar all mopey, staring into his beer, which he hardly drank, polishing his stick, which he hardly used because he hardly played. Eventually he'd scribble a few lines of poetry on a napkin and leave. I knew it wouldn't last with her. So finally he broke free, and oh well, good riddance, she told him. To look at him after Celia's death, with the way Don carried on, you would think a different person died. For the past month, I was beginning to feel like I was watching Don grieve for an imaginary lost love.

But we were on our way to Red Lobster, hadn't really let any sparks fly in I don't know how long, and damned if I wanted to have indigestion from having him squirm and sigh all evening. "You must be thinking of Celia. I'm sorry."

Don did that thing he does, cocking his chin up to the heavens. "Yes. I am." He let his hazel eyes drift to the clouds.

For Christ's sake, I wanted to say. But I knew better. I would help him to avoid the kind of indulgence that would make him brood all night. How you did this lately was to face thoughts of Celia head-on and suddenly, then brush them out of the way with incontestable force. "At times, it must be so difficult to pass by a cemetery without being reminded of her," I said, facing things head-on. "There will surely be pain whenever you see gravestones for the rest of your life. Be at peace, though, knowing that once we pass on by, the pain will lift." This was the brushing part. "Let it wash over you then ebb away. You'll feel remarkably grateful for the short time on earth we do have. Such is the nature of death." Oh, I thought that sounded pretty darn good! I mean, Don was the big-deal poetry professor, but I knew a thing or two.

"We have to go there!" Don sat up. "We have to visit that cemetery."

I then realized that at some level he was on to my ploy, and that my brushing had only forced him to heighten his reaction. I wondered what on earth I could do to save dinner and our romantic evening. "I think her memory will best be honored —"

"Please," Don was looking at me and his thin limbs tensed, all leaning toward me.

I put the blinker on to get over to the cemetery entrance. "Don, I'm trying to help you through this," and I was also trying to match his life-or-death tone, but I'm starving, I wanted to say, in more ways than one.

I knew better than to say anything about all that, though. I had to be subtle to get Don into my frame of mind. Don liked it when I was somewhat elusive—that way, when we had sex, he thought he'd seduced me. And I, in turn, privately liked thinking things were the other way around. I pulled into the cemetery's gravel-lined horseshoe drive and parked, arching my back as if I were stretching, then lifting my dress slightly to scratch my thigh.

But Don didn't notice. He sat there for a moment, his eyes scanning the stately

grounds. It was my turn to sigh. Perhaps he was looking for the ghost of Celia. Having no other choice, I looked, too. And as a matter of fact, the cemetery's grass was such a bright, unnatural green with eerie yellow patches that a ghost would not have looked out of place.

Don got out of the car and started walking. I could tell he was heading toward a grave on a distant hill with a large concrete angel statue looming over it. I guessed I'd have to follow him and kiss the angel with him, or some damn thing. I always went into his states of melancholia with him about as meditative as a groupie, but of course, I went nonetheless. While other couples were going to restaurants, here we were, paying symbolic homage to the dead. That was the thing about Don: when you were with him, life and all its expected tragedies somehow mattered more.

As I followed Don's careful tread along the narrow gravel paths to the grave with the concrete angel, I thought about how he'd helped me when my grandma Mimi died a few months back. I wanted to call in sick from work, but I delivered the mail anyway, and I'm sure neighbors were getting each other's mail that day, I'll tell you that. But when I came home, Don had fixed fried chicken and potato salad and baked a chocolate cake, all from Mimi's recipes. Not only that, lying on the counter was an album he bought, along with all the pictures of Mimi that I had around the house here and there, all just so I could make a "Mimi album." Sitting next to the TV was a boxed set of *The Andy Griffith Show* that I watched with Mimi when I was a kid. Best of all, after I ate too much and slapped pictures in the scrapbook, he let me cry as much as I wanted, right in the middle of *Andy Griffith*. He read me some poetry about someone dying before I went to bed that was depressing but made me feel better at the same time, if that makes sense. It was comforting, somehow, to be with someone who treated sadness with such respect, who treated death as something sacred, all because it had something to do with me.

As Don walked ahead of me, his long leather coat billowing dramatically, I thought about how, in a lot of ways, his life was an examination of the extraordinary and mine of the ordinary. He taught poetry, read it out loud when I was in the bathtub, wrote it for me, and sure, even though I mostly felt like life was like delivering mail, right on schedule, no surprises, Don made me feel like sometimes life was something more, something important and special and urgent where we were concerned. So I'd been telling myself with this Celia thing, hey, couldn't I make him feel the same? For once, couldn't I be poetic and soulful and empathetic for real, like he had been with me?

As we got closer to the concrete angel, it became apparent that a large area of the graveyard was devoted to this particular grave. On a red, marble pedestal at the top of a small hill, the concrete angel loomed at least seven feet high with womanly features but magisterial musculature, expression, and wingspan. There were concrete benches arranged in a viewing area at the bottom of the hill, and the gravel paths grew narrower until they merged into one which led around the hill and up a slim path to the top of the grave.

Don reached underneath the coat to his back pocket and retrieved his wallet, from which he extracted a folded piece of paper. I caught up with him and stood by his side. His cheeks were flushed and he was a little shaky as he unfolded the paper. Don gave me a solemn look I couldn't read and for some reason, that frustrated me. Then he began reading from his paper and I moved closer to him so that I could see it.

"The Well-Beloved," Don read, "by Thomas Hardy."

Mr. Depressed. I couldn't help rolling my eyes. Don wasn't paying attention to me, anyway.

"Yet I wanted to look and see
That nobody stood at the back of me;
But I thought once more: "Nay, I'll not unvision
A shape which, somehow, there may be."
So I went on softly from the glade,
And left her behind me throwing her shade,

As she were indeed an apparition—
My head unturned lest my dream should fade.”

Don looked up again at the stone angel presiding over his little poetry reading and as if that weren't enough, he started to cry. It began to mist chill gusts over the graveyard as if we were on the special effect stage of Don's own personal cinema. I turned to look at Don and his long mouth was drawn down, his eyes red-rimmed and loitering over the features of the stone angel.

Something bugged me. While Don stared at the angel, I took the poem from him and looked at it. Paraphrased, it said something like, "I know there's nothing behind me, but if I turn, I won't be able to keep pretending that there is." Don wasn't pining for Celia. We came out here in pursuit of Don himself. Don was in love with his own devotion to Celia.

I turned and walked back to the car. I didn't care if he was behind me or if he thought I would wait—I drove off. Fancy bells and whistles didn't make real grief, real passion, or a real heart to feel it.

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