Lee Torda

Charade

Reader’s Notes

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I am stuck wondering about Charade. I am not sure what my attitude toward it is. I thought that I liked it, and not, in retrospect, having lived with it in my head for a number of days now, I am less sure. I will start with what drew me to the essay in the first place. I admired her description of landscape most of all. I appreciated the way landscape became a character in the essay--both the exterior spaces of Swall (what a fortuitous place to grow up in--if for the name only) Meadows, as well as the interior spaces of Elizabeth's house. The landscape is wide expanse and difficult weather. And the girls, as they walk, are the largest thing looming on that landscape--except of course that the landscape engulfs them. It is so big and they are so small, so thin, so frail. That things could go very, very wrong for them is a felt sense in the essay almost from the beginning with the image on page 23 of the two of them walking "two tall girls, walking slowly".

The interior spaces of the essay--the house of Elizabeth is, of course, disgusting. The particular image of the kitchen floor that dirtied your feet as you walked with food scraps was particularly disgusting to me (made me wash my floor). The lard that glazes the kitchen sink. The guinea pig living under the wood burning stove that comes out to strew wood chips in the middle of the night. The low, cramped, poorly lit spaces. This house represents in the essay the sense that Elizabeth’s life is largely unsupervised. That while her father loves her (why else would the writer bring up the meals he cooks for her), he can not care for her. He does not keep her safe.

There is the brief moments in the writer’s own house, I am thinking mostly of the one scene in the mother’s bedroom where I thought I was getting at a sense of what this essay wanted me to think about: that this author had these two tremendously important women in her life and that the only way to know either would be separately. At all points here I felt that I understand what the writer was asking me to understand, to follow.

But I found myself questioning the back half of the essay. We have the paragraphs where we learn that the writer’s mother is dying. These are particularly excellent paragraphs in terms of writing for me. I like how she demonstrates how easily a body shifts from regular life to a life of watching someone die. We understand here the Elizabeth was something of a protector to the writer. But we get, rather close to this, the hurried paragraph of the funeral where we are to understand that Elizabeth seemed to keep her distance. I think we are further to understand that their relationship is never quite the same. And yet, in terms of the movement of the plot of the essay, there does some to be times after the mother’s death where the two of them are together. So.

I am trying to decide what I think about this essay and here is where I am at. I believe this writer has tremendous gifts as a user of words. And she is trying to understand herself what happened to her at a very young age—and she still is a very young age. It felt like a young person’s essay.

But, more relevant to what I’m writing here, I struggle to understand her abandonment of Elizabeth at the end of the essay—both literally and figuratively. Elizabeth, though she suffers every day trauma and not one central trauma in her young life goes down a very dark path. Our writer, however traumatized she is, has come to a different place. It’s not clear how great it is, but it is different. I feel sorry for Elizabeth and less sorry for the unkind friend that the writer is.

There is the scene about 3/4s of the way through the piece where the author, spending a last night at Elizabeth’s house, is looking at a picture of Elizabeth’s father—young and handsome and on a track that he doesn’t seem to know, in the picture, is going to lead him to this life the has now with the mess and detritus and daughter that he can’t take care of. And, at the same time, the writer is considering her own dying mother and how in certain moments she sees the woman she was and sees in that woman something of herself. Are we to understand something about where these women will end up? I’m trying to figure that out.

Perhaps it is a condition of the modern essay—well, the recent incarnation of the genre—to have this quality of selfishness and, also, an unfinishedness to the telling—we don’t entirely know what becomes of either woman in the piece.

And then I have spent much time deciding what the title refers to. What is the charade? Is it the act of two young girls trying on the black clothes and the earings? Is that the charade? That neither were that girl—until one of them became *that girl*? Is the charade the friendship (I don’t think so—but I have to put it out there)? What is the relationship between a kind of putting up a front and these two girls, their friendship, and the death of the author’s mothers?