

Eric Miles Williamson

HOPE, AMONG OTHER VICES AND VIRTUES

CHARITY

Four years ago, Duke, my neighbor and employer's husband, introduced me to Agnes, my employer's daughter.

Duke did this before he was my friend.

Agnes said, "I like you. You are everything in a man I want to change."

My employer and her daughter, Agnes, live down the street from the apartment complex in which Duke and I lease one-room flats. The women live in the house Duke built.

When we look out the window of Duke's flat, we see the house he built. Magnolias spread over the lawn. The branches of live oaks arc over the cobbled street of our Texas town.

"I planted the live oaks when Agnes was born," Duke says. "The magnolias when my spouse severed our relations."

When the wind blows, Duke and I watch loose shingles on the roof flutter like a stadium of applauding hands.

ENVY

From the window of Duke's flat we see the women attempt to leave for shopping. We see them try to start the car and find the battery dead, their looks of frustration, their trek back inside the house, where they use the telephone to call Duke and me.

Duke and I do not answer our telephones.

Because we do not answer our telephones, the women sneak up on our apartment complex, in hopes of catching us boozing.

The women are dismayed when Duke and I booze, either independently, or, as is our custom, in manly tandem. They are dismayed when we go to the shooting range together. They are dismayed by the relative proximity of our flats.

They suspect us of covering for each other when we do things we should not be doing.

“‘When armies are mobilized and issues joined,’” Duke says, “‘the man who is sorry over the fact will win.’ Lao-Tzu.”

“Life is a hair shirt,” I concur.

LUST

We live in a difficult situation, Duke and I. His spouse will not divorce him, and yet she will not grant him admission to enjoy the luxuries of her bedroom.

Agnes, Duke’s daughter and the daughter of my employer, refuses, like her mother to Duke, to grant me the use of her feminine upholstery. Although we terminated our courtship four years ago, she continues as if we had not.

With great tact I have suggested that our acquaintance has outlived its pleasantness, though I have not told her, “*In ferrum pro libertate ruebant.*”

I have not told her, “My digestion gives me great concern, these days.”

I fully intend to tell Agnes these things, eventually, and with effusion.

Agnes’s mother, however, is my employer.

WRATH

No quantity of flowers can temper the wrath of Agnes.

The wrath of Agnes can be overt at times, subtle at others. One time, during the second year of our acquaintance, Agnes put Bessie Mae Smith on the record player.

I knew what that meant.

“I know what this means,” I said.

Agnes pretended she did not understand.

When I informed Duke of the incident, he poured gin, our beverage of choice.

He played his Furtwängler *Rheingold*, and he closed his eyes, not unemotionally.

Duke handed me the gin tumbler and shook his head.
“You have my complete sympathy,” Duke said. “In this matter.”

SLOTH

Agnes liked me when we first met. I boozed with great zeal, at that time. Then she stopped liking me.

She asked me to stop boozing.

“I will like you more,” she asserted, “when you stop boozing.”

I stopped boozing, mostly. Still Agnes did not like me.

I booze with Duke. Agnes suspects this, but can prove nothing.

Although she will not admit me to the diamond-tucks of her custom upholstery, she forbids me the company of other women. Nights, she walks outside my window, spying on me.

When she believes she sees me doing something I should not be doing, she drops by unannounced, if uninvited. She searches my apartment for women and booze, and when she finds my booze, hidden beneath my mattress, she pours it down the sink with great ceremony.

I am a tidy person.

I am not one to keep my women hidden beneath a mattress—

JUSTICE

—though I do my utmost to hide them other places.

Early in the third year of my acquaintance with Agnes, I brought a woman to my flat. To show her my platyhelminth collection, and other wares equally of note.

A knocking on my door interrupted a considerable examination of gephyreoids both rare and of common variety.

“We should remain quiet,” I told the woman. “Quiet is best, at such times.”

I took her in my arms, with expression.

The knocking continued, and was soon enharmonied by a voice both shrill and familiar.

“He’s showing you his prize nemathelminthes, no doubt,” Agnes screamed.

The woman recoiled, and I was obliged to release her from my expressive embrace.

After the woman made her exit, Agnes made her entrance.

Agnes discovered my distilled spirits, beneath my mattress. She stood over my sink, pouring.

“You have flubbed an opportunity,” Agnes said. “I was contraceptually prepared.”

I rearranged my platyhelminth collection.

Dread rose in delicate tendrils from the sump-tank of my soul.

PRUDENCE

I keep my booze at Duke’s now, as his wife, my employer, has not been inside his flat these past fifteen years, since the day she found it for him. At Duke’s, my booze rests undetected.

When I am sure Agnes is asleep, I go to Duke’s. We drink until the morning train rattles down the tracks behind our flats. Then we go to work. By the time we get home from work, we are both sober enough to face the women, if we are beckoned to do so.

“Why do we live like this?”

“The examined life,” Duke says, “is not worth living.”

GLUTTONY

Agnes stops by my flat, unannounced and uninvited. She is wearing makeup, and her clothing is uncharacteristically fashionable.

“I bought new lingerie,” she says. “May I come in?”

Inside, Agnes walks my flat as if a model on a runway. Agnes takes off her skirt and unbuttons her sheer blouse.

“So,” Agnes says. “What do you think?”

I approach alluringly, seductively, some would say expertly. My Florsheims are polished like onyx, and their squeaks are not inaudible.

Agnes buttons her blouse and pulls up her skirt. She zips with great ceremony.

“All you want me for is sex,” Agnes says.

Agnes looks at herself in the mirror.

“I understand,” Agnes says, “though I do not approve.”
I believe I should say something.
I consider my options and the possibilities of interpretation thereof.
I say nothing.

TEMPERANCE

Duke is a maker of bullets and a reloader of shotgun shells. Every day when Duke goes to the range to test out a new bullet or a new powder, he saves his brass and his shells and brings them home for reloading.

Duke is concerned with environmental waste.

Sometimes Duke takes me to the range. He brings his pistols and rifles and shotguns and we shoot at targets or clay pigeons. Duke can hit the clay pigeons with his pistols.

Duke is a very good shot.

“From a hundred yards,” Duke says, looking at the house he built, “I could hit a diamond in a goat’s ass.”

PRIDE

“Why your acute interest in ammunition?” I ask.

“I am in search of the perfect bullet,” Duke responds.

FAITH

Not long ago, Duke’s spouse, my employer, and her daughter, Agnes, spend the evening at St. Anthony’s, the local branch of the Catholic church, where they drink wine.

“Wine is alcohol,” I note. “Do you not find your stance concerning my occasional alcoholic beverage in conflict with an activity of which you are soon to partake?”

Agnes touches the cue-lever of her phonograph, on which Bessie Mae Smith already rests spinning on the platter.

My aversion to the singer grows like a well-fertilized wart on the nose of my indignity.

At the bar, Duke and I use cash. Credit card bills have been used as evidence of moral turpitude, though they prove nothing conclusively.

We do not speak of the women.

Instead, Duke breaks three snifters over the brows of impolite patrons, as a favor to the effeminate mustached barkeep.

The barkeep, without expressing gratitude, requests we quit the premises. As we begin our departure, Duke notes a cardboard placard of the entertainer Elvira, dressed in tight black satin, propped abundantly by the door.

In Duke's flat the telephone rings without let and we sit in clandestine darkness, Duke and the cardboard Elvira at his ammunition table, myself in a strategically placed folding chair by the window, looking down the street at Duke's house.

Duke duct-tapes an Astra .44 snubnose revolver to Elvira's shapely cardboard hand.

On his knees, Duke begs for assistance. Elvira does not comply, and Duke pours a gin and turns out the light.

"If your position is formless," Duke says, "'the most carefully concealed spies will not be able to get a look at it, and the wisest counselors will not be able to lay plans against it.' Sun-Tzu."

"There are oil slicks in the harbor," I agree, "but that is preferable to periscopes."

AVARICE

"I want a bevy of zoot-suited handmaidens to jitterbug around my flat while I play Charlie Parker tunes on a throat-warbler and drink fruity rum-based cocktails."

FORTITUDE

Accompanied by my employer, Agnes has decided upon a China pattern. A tastefully spare floral design, I have been informed.

I do not question their taste, in these matters.

"There are men in the world who derive as stern an exaltation from the proximity of disaster and ruin, as others from success," Duke says. "Churchill."

“It’s better to be shot by the wrong gun,” I reply, “than not to be shot at all.”

HOPE

At times, when we booze, we hope the situation will change, Duke and I.