

NOT FAR FROM THE TREE

JOHN FRIEDMAN

From his place in the line of passengers arriving at the Raleigh Airport gate, at first Will caught only the large cardboard sign *she* held above her head. On it was the name "Altissor." Because of the crowd, he did not at once recognize her, especially as she was the last person he wanted to see. Far off across the room she looked around for him anxiously. He saw through a camel's hair coat, edges flying open, long legs. She wore a brown, pill-box Jackie Kennedy style hat.

The intercom's high-pitched crackle announced flights boarding or departing. A row of posters on the walls touted Raleigh's Research Triangle and told you how to find Hertz or Budget counters. And then there she was, nearly in front of him, abashed, still holding the sign up in the air.

Closer to her now, he saw under the coat a charcoal grey sweater, a plaid skirt and loafers with stockings. Casual, but not careless, she wanted her faculty status made clear to him.

Suddenly, something about her springy, lilting walk toward him, the straightness of her back, the curve of her throat and the angle of her head, curiously seeking him, made Will think of her mother, Rose. The girl resembled her at near the same age, heart-stoppingly similar. There were the same slender, lithe outlines, shoulder length wavy hair, a wide, ironic mouth, and luminous skin.

"Are you Professor Altissor, *William* Altissor?" she asked, out of breath, looking up at him. "I'm Hazel Aphthorn, in Classics. I'm here to pick you up. Professor Coupaye couldn't come today. Of all things, she has terrible food poisoning. I know she'd want to be here to welcome you to Blanchette College, but I'm going to have to do it for her." She smiled at him.

They shook hands while looking around for the baggage carousel. "That's fine," he said. "I don't want to bother people. Maybe tomorrow. I'm sure she'll be better by then." It must be especially ironic, he thought, for his old graduate school friend, Lilliane Coupaye, to have food poisoning. She was a terrific cook and had once made him a *tripes à la mode de Caen* which was the best dish he had ever tasted.

He came back to Hazel, touched by her earnestness. She was staring at him, still holding her sign stapled to a long stick, as if part of a political demonstration somewhere. As they clumsily retrieved his bag from the conveyor, they even bumped heads in a Marx Brothers sort of way. She wanted to take it, but he reached it first.

He could not imagine any comedy in his life associated with Rose, but here it was with her daughter. He still was not quite over the shock of actually seeing any emanation of Rose, any reminder of a period in his life which had destroyed his marriage and paralyzed him emotionally for so many years. He actually dreaded walking next to Hazel in the airport, his stomach tight with acid.

"In the meantime," Hazel was saying, as she guided him quickly past the incoming passengers. "I'm supposed to get you settled and then to show you around campus tomorrow. Though I've not been here so long as to know everything. How was your flight?"

"The usual, shoes and belt off, long sit in the middle. I read." As Hazel looked down at the book he was holding, Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale*, Will saw for an instant another of Rose's mannerisms, looking askance at things. *What was genetic in people and what was simply the results of upbringing? Speed in race horses, a great nose for quail in a pointing dog. These could all be passed on in breeding. But could a walk, could a laugh, could a nerdy manner be transmitted like that in people?* He wondered. *Whatever enabled it, it was eerie.*

"You should have a good audience. This morning, I told my Latin class it was non-negotiable. That if they weren't there, every one of them, at the lecture to hear you, it would be death, or worse," she said giddily. Her nervousness was obvious in her voice, in the way she fidgeted.

Will, towing his suitcase behind him towards the parking garage, thought of Rick Blaine in Casablanca: "of all the gin joints in all the towns," why did she choose this one? And, of course, Googling the University of Texas, Austin, Classics website last spring, he saw that Hazel had got the job at Blanchette. Just as he Googled Rose occasionally too, as humiliating as it was to do it. It was even more so to admit it to himself, typing the letters of her name on the keyboard, as if sounding out random yet familiar notes on the piano.

Learning that Hazel was now teaching at Blanchette was why Will nearly declined Lilliane Coupaye's invitation to lecture on Montaigne's Classical reading, a talk to be jointly sponsored by French and Classics. He had originally told himself the chances of running into the daughter were slim. And yet, here she was, walking along beside him.

He chatted idly as they approached her car, neatly tucked into a compact bay next to several closer full-sized empty spaces. So, she was a rule follower like her mother as well. It was a white Honda Civic. "Have you been here long?" he asked, putting his bag in the trunk, though he already knew the

answer. The chords of Sam Cooke's "I Don't Know Much About History" from a CD player in the dash filled the car as she backed out of the space.

"Nah, I just got my degree last May," she said. "And this is my first full-time job, though I TA-ed in Greek and Latin in Austin. It's pretty exciting, but I have a lot of work, grading and they give junior faculty these duties whenever there's a visitor like you." Looking away from the mirror at him for a second, she said with embarrassment, "Oops, sorry, I hope you know I don't think this is a chore."

"No, not a bit." He turned to watch her drive. He was comfortable enough now to tease her a little. "I just hope I won't need *that* much care." He was enjoying the words to the song. Glancing over at her, he tried not to dwell on her profile, her bold, even prominent nose.

Hazel took him to the Red Roof Inn the French Department had arranged for him, a huge pile of stucco and balconies. Several sixteen-wheel tractor trailers were in the parking lot, idling.

"I know it's not what you'd call luxurious, but I hear it's OK" She gave a strange, stilted laugh and seemed very vulnerable as she appealed to him about the motel, as if somehow his opinion of her would hinge on his comfort. She was toying with a loose button on the camel's hair coat.

"I've slept in far worse," he smiled at her broadly. "You've really been very thoughtful to do all this and I can imagine you're busy with your teaching." He went to the trunk to collect his bags.

They agreed she'd pick him up after breakfast there and show him the campus before his lecture, followed by the faculty dinner at the Tip Top Steak House in the town of Blanchette.

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So, Hazel was about thirty years old. He could easily have been her father instead of that stick, the shipping historian Apthorn, Will told himself. A man of seventy in a sleeveless fleece and jeans, tall, neat, and polished, he was only a few pounds heavier than he'd been with Rose. Greyer certainly.

He took stock of the room, staring into the wall mirror above the bureau at his eyes, puffy from worry and travel. *Il ya des valises*. It was a face, he thought dispassionately, on which emotional experience had stalled quite a while back. Stalled with Rose. He had no children. His long-divorced wife had died. Most of his scholarly friends had faded away after his retirement. Women had loved him once, he knew, and they might do so again. But now he suffered from that most Dantescan of punishments, desire with no hope, with remorse, with shame. Still, he thought, more cheerily, it was going to be interesting to watch Rose's daughter on his visit here.

Will put his few things in the bureau and hung up the suit, shirt and tie intended for the lecture. He puzzled, sitting on the bed, at the way things had turned out. If Hazel was about thirty, it must have taken her a little longer than usual to get her degree at Austin. He remembered vividly getting a note from Rose enclosing a blurry photograph in 1984. Her gold-colored glasses frames were slipping down her nose. She was holding the infant Hazel wrapped in a bunting. It was the first time he had heard from her in years.

In the 1990s, through casual questions to friends, he had kept up with Rose's career change from Classics to Information Technology, her two marriages, and her children. He wondered if Rose cared, or even knew that he had finally acted boldly in divorcing Paulette.

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As he stood in the parking lot, having breakfasted at the nearby Waffle House, he watched Hazel roll up in her little white car, brakes squealing.

"How'd it go?" she asked, as he got in, nodding towards the building before she backed out of the lot.

"It's quiet and the bed was good. What can you say about Red Roof Inns? They're pretty generic." She smiled at this and turned toward him. "I don't think our budget can sustain anything fancy, but they're going to spend real money on you for dinner. Since I've been here, I've already heard good things about the steak place we're going to tonight, and they are supposed to have a good wine list. I'm a vegetarian, so I wouldn't know, myself."

"Oh, I hope I won't have to feel guilty," he said, turning to her playfully.

"Nah," she said, smiling at him. "You'll be fine."

With Rose it all began in August of 1974 at a movie screening done by the University of Michigan French Department. Besides his regular courses, he liked to teach film. The first week of her senior year, she approached him in the auditorium, introducing herself. She needed his permission to audit his graduate class in Roman Literary Influence on the French Renaissance. The next day, she came to his Office Hour, and then, when they extended their talk in a coffee shop off campus, she mentioned in a flood of other personal details she was a vegetarian. Well, no doubt she would certainly have raised Hazel to share her values. So, not surprising.

It was bizarre though, as was most everything else about this visit. Will realized then that he had not actually addressed Hazel by her name or title

since they had met, and he wondered if it was because he feared he might by accident call her Rose.

He had already asked her about the small campus art museum that held some Edward Hopper paintings. Hazel took him there, but they had to wait a while till it opened at 10. They sat on a bench in front of the building, housed in a small Ante-Bellum white frame house, looking out at the small lake and rush-filled stream running through the center of Blanchette's Gothic Revival campus. Bronze equestrian statues of Civil War figures with raised sabers guarded each side. A pair of swans at the narrower end of the stream back-paddled against the current invitingly, the curves of their muscular necks intersecting now and then as they hunted for food among the reeds, their eyes constantly circling the horizon whenever they raised their heads out of the water.

He was so aware of Hazel's presence, her warmth, the imagined texture of her camel's hair coat, that he tried to diffuse his unease. "What was your dissertation on, by the way?" Her face lit up with pleasure at this question by someone who could understand the answer.

"I wrote on cosmetic lore and material culture in Ovid's *Amores*. "She laughed with embarrassment. "OK, I know, I know, it doesn't really sound like an Amazon page turner, but I loved writing it." She got up to settle her coat around her legs. "I actually grew up with this stuff. My mother was a Classics major in college, so she read me the *Iliad* instead of Maurice Sendak. I guess she passed on her tastes to me."

She leaned back and crossed her legs, then changed direction, looking over at him curiously. "By the way, I see you taught in Ann Arbor most of your career. Weird, you know, because that's where my mother got her degree in 1975. I bet you didn't know her though? Rose Hoffmann. She was *Summa cum Laude*. She kept her maiden name."

"Well, it's a huge place." Caught, Will waved his hands vaguely, as if bestowing a blessing on the enormous crowds of students streaming across the Michigan campus quadrangles since the 1970s. He wanted to be up and gone, walking in the museum looking at the Hoppers, but that would be worse. He tried to imagine being anywhere else, but the beautiful, clear North Carolina morning light, and the girl, her voice, were insistent. Behind their bench, acorns falling from a pair of large oaks bounced on the pavement. Banks of clouds shaped like croissants rolled over the campus on the wind.

She left it. Will watched Hazel's slim ankles, her loafers, the leather a little scuffed as she crossed and uncrossed her feet. Now she was studying the swans. Even the ankles were like Rose's, he thought. There was something in

the lyrics of the *Greek Anthology* about girls with lovely ankles, Sappho maybe, and he was about to ask her, but it would seem strange.

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As Will sat next to Rose's daughter in the morning sun, his history with the mother came back to him, first in single images, and then in a rush of feeling. He and Rose parted in the summer of 1976, when he began a 1200-mile leg of the Bike Centennial ride where thousands of cyclists were crisscrossing America from coast to coast, or as Will was doing, from Kentucky to Virginia.

After graduation from Michigan, Rose had been admitted to McGill University as a first-year graduate student in Classics, had gone to Montréal to rent a cheap apartment near Parc Lafontaine. She said she would miss him and think of him constantly during the summer. She would "spend this time apart," filling the various mail drops the Bike Centennial people had arranged for them in little Appalachian towns along the route with letters and packages of cookies. She would be in Illinois with her mother before going back to McGill in August, and then, in the fall, he would stay with her for a few days in her new place. Will already knew how iffy it was. He'd have to be blind not to notice the little ways in which for several months she had been drifting away from him.

After pedaling up the three-mile grade with its many switch-backs to that first town of Feely, Kentucky, most of its houses built on stilts to keep them out of the frequently flooding creek choked with household trash, he walked at a rapid pace with the other riders to collect mail in the store housing the post office. He could not believe these first climbs could be so demanding, but he was, in fact, the oldest guy in his group. He hoped he didn't look stricken when he realized no mail was waiting for him.

This was the pattern for the next two weeks. He would arrive at these little post offices and, getting stamps and envelopes, drop off his letters to Rose. At night he wrote her of the things he was seeing and hearing, like the twang of a banjo on someone's front porch after a mile-long descent into a mist-filled valley. He wrote her on scraps of paper, on wrappers of things, on postcards of kitschy rural Kentucky scenes in fly-specked Kodak blues, on which he scribbled up and down the margins and across the pictures. Soon, his messages ended with strings of question marks. By mid-summer, it was clear she was not going to reply.

A friend at McGill mentioned that in late July he had spotted Rose sitting with her medieval Latin professor in the guy's library carrel, and they looked pretty *close*. She'd moved on, and ironically, to someone like himself.

As soon as he returned to Michigan, and his wife, Paulette had left for work, he turned on the small desk lamp in his little library off the living room

and sat in a pool of light, dialing Rose's number at her house in Illinois. It was a Monday and he thought her mother, a librarian, might also be at work. But it was the mother that answered. He stared down at his bare feet, still blistered and sore from the month of riding. Asking for Rose, he heard commotion and whispering on the line. As the familiar voice said questioningly "Hello, Will?" he knew he couldn't speak. He would simply weep into the phone, so he hung up. It was, he thought, the worst moment of his life. On the cool, polished oak floor in front of him were his sweaty fearful footprints, tracks to mock him in his outsized folly.

Surfacing from these recollections, he looked for Hazel, who had walked over to the little stream to examine the swans. They expected breakfast handouts from museum visitors.

He was sure Hazel knew nothing of his history with Rose. As she stood in the sun, outlined against the pond with its pair of white paddlers, its few mallards, drake neck feathers breaking up in shards of iridescent green, Hazel would never imagine her beloved mother having brought so much misery thirty years ago.

He thought about looking in the mirror in his motel room, about aging, getting past the point of desire. Though on a downhill slope, he was not there yet, he could see, as these memories of Rose flooded back into him. He wondered at how he had held on to all this so long. These forces in him, in Rose, and he was sure, in Hazel, had that power, even if briefly, to charm, to fascinate. For him to be once again the intensely desired object of another person, still seemed mysterious. And to feel in himself, even now, as he had in his days with Rose, the reciprocating force of that desire for the mother in the daughter. She was back from the water.

"Do you think they really mate for life?" Hazel, nodding at the swans, asked suddenly.

"Yeats thought so anyway. 'Lover by lover, / They paddle in the cold / Companionable streams or climb the air,'" Will quoted thoughtfully. Hazel smiled at him in delight, deeply moved by the aptness of the words.

It was only 9:45, so they still had some time until the museum opened. They discussed her dissertation. She was revising it for an Italian press, and he made what he hoped were some helpful comments. He heard about her advisor, who had been wonderfully hands off and let her follow her material wherever it led her. For her, graduate school had been an altogether happy experience.

"I was lucky to get this job," she explained. "When I finished, the only other thing was a sort of postdoc in Austin, and, I, I wanted to get away from there. I was . . . with a guy and . . . it was not going well. So, it was easiest to

leave the *place*. I guess you'd call, it", she laughed a little, shamed at her admission, "geographical ghosting."

"How'd that work out then, for you, or for him?" he asked neutrally, watching the swans who, disappointed of food, turned their attentions to some reeds.

"Well, I'm here. But you—" it was as if she suddenly remembered her official role, "Professor Coupaye said you've been retired quite a while?"

"Yeah, it's nice to have so much time for research, though of course, travel money has dried up and I had to give up my office and my library carrel. But I work a lot with digital scans, and it can be done at home. The talk for this afternoon was mostly put together that way." They

watched as a student worker unlocked the museum, but still they sat. The activity at the door made the swans face them, their bills in parallel, remote in their arrogance and self-absorption.

"You know," she blinked in the sun. "I hope I can say this to you. I think I can. You seem like really different from what I expected. Younger, closer to my generation."

"You mean less stuffy, patriarchal?" He laughed.

"Well, call it that too, but somehow you look at me as if you totally know me. As if a lot of the introductory chat between people like us, when they first talk, "have you read Joan Didion's whatever?" and do you like Rhiannon Giddens' newest album?" has already been dispensed with. But I'm certain we haven't met."

"No, I'm sure not. I would've remembered."

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The Chair of French, Lilliane Coupaye, was still indisposed. It appeared he was not going to see her on his visit. Will had been missing her fluttering Parisian scarves, the frosted highlights to her hair, her look of the stylish young mother she had once been pushing a stroller in the Parc Monceau. He had talked with her over the years about Rose, but never gave a last name or mentioned the daughter. She had told him once love could be *la merde avec la merde*, as if she knew.

Instead, he was introduced to the audience by a Racine guy, Michel Nancier, a Breton from Rennes, who acted as if Will ought to recognize who *he* was, even as he read Will's listed accomplishments, his degrees and grants. There had been a hint of dogs lifting legs on fireplugs as Nancier tried to size him up while chatting before the talk. But Will, who had seen this behavior

many times at other small colleges, made it clear he had no designs on Nancier's turf.

The lecture went smoothly. His complex but forceful PowerPoint showed for comparison in hyper-text many passages from Seneca's moral treatises and how Montaigne had smoothed, adjusted and reworked them in the *Essais*.

Hazel walked in early with a dozen of her students and sat them in the front row. She was joking with them and they appeared really to like her. He turned to her from time to time as he spoke, watching her expressions as he clicked from image to image. When he was done, the audience posed lots of questions, but Hazel simply smiled appreciatively and applauded at the end. She waved as she led her students out.

For the dinner at the Tip Top Steak House, Hazel, having changed her clothes and shoes, was much less *bas bleu*. She wore a maroon rayon dress with charcoal *petits pois*. And her high heels changed her posture and gave her hips a flare. Her arms were bare and slender in the dim lighting. From her wavy hair, wound in a chignon, wisps anarchically escaped and curled against her face, which was cosmetic-free in a way that only a young woman could bring off.

As the guest of honor Will was seated along the middle of the table. To his left was Nancier, who, his work done, seemed more interested in a conversation about money with a Dean going on across from him. To Will's right was a professor of Spanish Golden Age literature, whose name he never quite got. Mola, maybe. He had an old-fashioned gold front tooth. As they chatted about the lecture, this man was asking if some of the same computer techniques could be applied to Juvenal's *Satires* and to his particular interest, Luis de Gongora. As Will answered abstractedly, he glanced at Hazel, who as the only attractive and youthful woman at the long table, was getting a lot of male attention, her wine glass constantly filled. He could hear her laughing every so often, a beautiful sound.

"Your *cicerone*," Mola was saying, all of a sudden. "We were lucky to get her. She's been a real hit with the students, and Classics could use some livening up. She has already upped their enrollment for next semester, I hear. FTEs, FTEs . . ." he waved his fork, his tooth glinting. Will agreed that she was charming, and that she came from the very department of an eminent gadfly of academic life, William Arrowsmith, the translator of Classical texts. Hearing Mola's remarks, he felt a sudden and unexpected burst of pride, as if Hazel were his and Rose's child and he was getting a good report of her.

Thinking about Rose, which his time at Blanchette had caused him to do far more than he liked, reminded Will of the sad aftermath of some small-

town fireworks display. First the flash, the spume of iridescent stars, and sparks falling, but then the sodden ash and paper shells of the rockets lying spent in the rain. His romance with Rose had been like this for him, but he was oddly buoyed with pleasure at seeing how well the infant in the bunting had turned out. How she carried in her walk, her openness, her quick wit, her mother's very best features.

Tip Top Steak House had delivered as promised, Will had to admit, looking at the remains of the prime rib on his plate and wondering how Hazel had enjoyed the lasagna they

had brought her specially. Several bottles of a very nice Margaux, *Paveil de Luze*, 2014, mostly empty, stood up and down the table with purple drizzles staining the labels.

Will, watching Hazel whenever he reached for his water or the lovely wine, thought there were moments when he was with Rose. As if time had not passed. In the hum and buzz of conversation, Hazel shone with the same excitement he remembered seeing on her mother's face when they were first learning about each other in stolen moments and borrowed beds around Ann Arbor in 1975.

When he made Blanchette's official goodbye, Nancier passed him an envelope with his honorarium. Then he nodded at him with a Gallic grin, "*ça va et ça marche?*" as Hazel came from the coat check room carrying a scarf and looking around.

It was the first time they had had a chance to talk since the lecture. At the door, he took her scarf and draped it over her shoulders. He stepped back, "I hope it's politically correct to tell you how you rule that dress. My era," he said lightly.

She was looking directly at him now. Her eyes, almond-shaped, and languid from wine, gleamed in the light from the foyer wall sconces. "Yes, I saw it in a thrift shop in town a few days before you came and I tried it on," she laughed sheepishly. "You can probably tell from my clothes I go there a lot. But then, I didn't wait too long before returning this morning to buy it."

She was flushed at how he had noticed the dress and tugged at the fringe of her scarf. "For tonight's occasion."

"I'm suitably impressed." He leaned towards her to admire the scarf's pattern. "I like thrift shop stuff too, something about lives lived in the clothes. They're almost like portraits."

She thought about this a moment and then changed the subject. "And I loved your talk. May I call you William?" She burst out, turning toward him, as they walked toward the parking lot. "And how you got all those passages to line up. Cool. That was the most solid kind of evidence. I think my students were blitzed and they certainly went for the PowerPoint. It was terrific scholarship."

"Actually, I prefer Will, and I guess it's going to be Hazel from here on," he said, a bit taken aback by her enthusiasm, by her attention focused on him in such a narrow and powerful beam. She was far less reticent than when she had first picked him up yesterday.

He said, smiling at her, "I'm happy that you think it went well today, and I'm sorry Mme. Coupaye couldn't attend. You know, since she suggested I give the talk here in the first place."

She drove him over to the Red Roof Inn. An Über would take him to the airport the next morning early, they had agreed, so this was goodbye.

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They sat in the deserted lot in front of the red door to his room at the end of the block. It was number 30. He wondered if that signified anything. Hazel showed no desire to leave, and he thought best to follow her mood. So, he leaned back against his headrest too. Only faint truck traffic on the interstate a few miles off and the tick of the cooling car motor broke the silence. He saw, next to his messenger bag just behind her, in the back seat, the end of the long stick with the sign "Altissor" attached like some flag signaling *terra firma* on an antique map.

Hazel was stimulated by the evening, the wine at dinner, the candles on the table whose soft light showed her off so well. She wanted to talk. After a moment, and without saying more, she slid her seat back in its rails as far as it would go. Glancing over her shoulder at him, her eyes were evaluative, her lips ironic, as if to say "Here we are, look at us."

"I know this is going to sound weird," she finally broke out in a self-conscious tone, "but I want us to keep in touch." She gestured with her phone. "Can I give you my number, and there it would be? And I also know how *generational* this way of doing it is," she said mockingly, looking at him. He passed his phone to her, thinking she probably had her number in a thousand phones.

“Call it just the excitement of the day, but I’ve not been so . . . at one with myself since coming to Blanchette, so free of assessment. Know what I mean? I’m always on the spot, being one of the few women on the faculty here and the only one in Classics, which is a kind of boys’ club everywhere.” She took his hand in both of hers for a moment. Her hands were warm and he could feel all the fine bones in her fingers. Then she fiddled her number into his phone. He put it away and reached over to touch her cheek. The softness of her skin was shocking to him. Her head angled back, her eye lids half closed, she looked over at him as if she expected more of this.

“Hazel,” he said, as casually as he could, “I’m touched. I don’t hear things like that these days from anyone of any age. I’ve had a great time and I’m delighted to have met you. But I think I’d better get going as my Über is coming early.” Then he said softly, musingly, more to

himself than to her, “Not far from the tree.” Startled, she glanced at him, her eyes now open and suddenly intense, as in one motion he lifted his bag over the seat and got out, closing the car door carefully.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John B. Friedman's work has appeared in *Academic Fiction*, *Accent*, *December*, *The Greyhound Journal*, *Inland*, *The Maryland Literary Review*, *Northwest Review*, *The October Hill Magazine*, *Oregon Centennial Anthology*, *Perspective*, and *Quartet*.