

# WILLOW REVIEW

2010



# WILLOW REVIEW

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**“Humming Dreams”**

2010

detail view,

Elmhurst Art Museum,

ceramic, sound, fabric, acrylic and rope

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Address correspondence to Michael Latza, *Willow Review*, College of Lake County, 19351 West Washington Street, Grayslake, IL 60030-1198.

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Walter B. Levis

## ASSISTED LIVING

So Eddie Rosen went alone, and he spotted the woman in charge sitting behind a shiny wooden desk. No sign of being a nurse, he thought. She had bright blue eyes and red hair and wore a snug-fitting sweater that accented some truly excellent posture. An athletic type, he figured, not a day over forty-seven. Square shoulders, long neck, muscular arms. In one hand, she held a thick stack of file folders; in the other hand, a bottle of vitamin water. Eddie felt better already.

He walked up to the desk and stood in front of her, his hands folded behind his back. Like a cop on duty, he waited. After a moment, she put down the folders and the bottle of water, and looked up.

"I was supposed to check in today with my mother, but she backed out."

The woman's large blue eyes scanned the room.

"It's just me. And I'm done fighting with her. If she wants to stay in the city and live alone, fine. But I've made a decision. I have decided to stop trying to take care of my mother. I would like to move in myself."

"Excuse me?"

"I've studied the brochure and toured the facility and I know what this place offers. It's wasted on the elderly. But, believe me, assisted living is exactly what I need."

The woman hesitated, then smiled and shook her head, chin lowered, eyes rolling upward. A chuckle rose from somewhere deep in her chest, a pleasant little rumble, Eddie thought. Did she find him charming?

He reached for his notes, a two-page printout from the internet. The pages were folded, crumpled actually, in the pocket of his New York Yankees windbreaker, the jacket he had worn quite deliberately today, hoping it would have a positive effect on his mother. Although she was a quiet and bookish woman, his mother was a hardcore Yankees fan, a scream-at-the-TV bang-her-fist-on-the-table fan, and between she and Eddie this was a special connection, a shared passion, partly because his father, who grew up in St. Louis and was, therefore, a National Leaguer, was excluded. Sure, Dad watched the games, respected the team's history, appreciated the peculiar pressure placed on the Yankees, a team of such stature, but Dad's politely rational interest fooled nobody. Eddie and his Mom were the real fans, and they knew it.

But with Dad gone two years now Mom had stopped caring about the Yankees, stopped caring about... everything. She spent her days sitting in front of piles of unread mail, sorting through boxes of old bills, old clothes, old photographs, always claiming that she was organizing

things but always making more and more of a mess. Not Alzheimer's, not exactly, but certainly an advanced case of what Eddie half-jokingly called "the disorder of disorganization." Joking aside, whatever you called it, she suffered. A few weeks ago, he stopped by the apartment after work and found her sitting on the couch gazing absently out the window, tears streaming down her face. "All day long," she began, a wheeze in her voice, "I've been looking for my reading glasses. Nowhere. Disappeared. That's why I can't get to any of this." She waved vaguely toward the piles of mail on the couch, then she added, as if the idea had just occurred to her, "Maybe it was that housekeeper? The Polish one? She once told me she needed new glasses."

Eddie hesitated, fighting a sick feeling of dread, a faint nausea; then, trying to remain calm, he told his mother that he didn't think the housekeeper, who was from Russia, not Poland, would have taken her glasses. "She's a perfectly nice woman, Mom. Not a thief."

His mother didn't answer. She just sat there staring out the window. After a moment, Eddie searched the apartment and in five minutes found the glasses. They were in her purse, which was hanging from a faucet in the bathtub.

Now, fingering the scratchy edge of the crumpled pages in his pocket, Eddie gazed into the deep blue eyes of the woman behind the desk and imagined telling her about all of this, every crazy detail, including the fight from this morning, when his mother grabbed the notes from his hand and squeezed the pages into a tight little wad, then cocked her boney arm and turned to the wastebasket in the kitchen's corner like an outfielder making a throw to the plate, heaving with all her strength, the edge of her flower-pattern nightgown slipping off her shoulder as the ball of paper sailed wide of the mark, landing in the sink, which seemed to anger her. She turned back to Eddie with a gleam in her eye, breathing hard, like a player about to argue with an umpire's call.

Yes, Eddie wanted to tell all of this to the attractive woman behind the desk, but instead he said, "Laundry, meals, and housekeeping are standard, right?" The sound of his own voice, the words themselves, came as a sort of surprise, like a hiccup. He tried to clear his thoughts, slow down, relax, but he found himself squeezing the crumpled pages in his hand harder and harder, burying the wad as deeply as possible, grinding it into the pocket of the Yankee jacket. Then he blurted, "How much extra for an occasional sponge bath?"

Immediately, he cringed. *Did I just say that?* he thought, and his neck and arms stiffened, a blast of heat rising from somewhere in the center of his body, making his mouth turn sour and dry. He swallowed hard, then tried to speak, but it was more of a moan because his lips felt glued together. Meanwhile, he watched the woman's gorgeous eyes narrow and darken as she shifted her weight in her chair, squaring her shoulders,

steadying her focus—a batter digging in at the plate. “Sir,” she said, firmly. “I don’t have time for jokes.”

A joke, yes. That’s all it was, right? “The name’s Rosen,” he managed to say, still fighting a feeling that he had sand in his mouth. “Edward Rosen. Please, call me Eddie.” More swallows, a trace of moisture returning. He felt his hands trembling. “And I’m not really joking. I mean, forget the sponge baths. That was—well, I’m sorry. A bad joke. But, seriously, is there a minimum age for living here?”

Her blue eyes offered nothing—ice cold. Still, her soft, round, fair-skinned face seemed to glow. Or was it burning with anger? “May I ask how old you are, Sir?”

“Call me Eddie, please. I’ll be forty-eight next week, which reminds me: the brochure says that you celebrate birthdays here. That’s great. A bingo break, some sugar-free diabetic cake—”

“Forty-eight years old, sir, is—”

“Please, Eddie.” He took a step back, grateful he could speak but wishing he could shake off this trembling feeling. And he was sweating, he knew. Nervous sweats—they had plagued him since high school. Every infamous yearbook photo showed his hair matted to his forehead.

“Sir, you are far too young—”

“Is that a state regulation or just a house rule because I’ll fit right in,” he interrupted, trying to do a quick hand-comb, hoping it would have some cooling—and calming—effect. But he couldn’t slow this racing thoughts, and he feared that trying to smooth his hair made him look more like a dog scratching its fleas. “Last year,” he barked, “on my birthday—I had a cake that was dairy-free, sugar-free, wheat-free, and gluten-free. My wife has food allergies.”

The woman exhaled loudly, her lips pursed, a strand of her red hair lifting, then falling. And just then a crazy scene flashed into Eddie’s mind, pure fantasy: he’s at the gym, on the treadmill, huffing and puffing and breaking a healthy normal deeply-masculine sweat while right next to him this gorgeous woman with the great blue eyes is smiling a wide bright glittering smile worthy of a Greek Goddess...

And, in fact, at that very moment she was smiling, but Eddie felt a sudden damp chill as he registered the reality—it was a cheap, fake, corporate smile.

“Perhaps, Mr. Rosen,” she said, quietly, “I could talk with your wife—”

“My wife?” he growled, in a voice he knew sounded angry in spite of his effort to be calm. “I’ll tell you exactly what I told her: life is all about making choices. We can choose how we live, don’t you agree?”

She cleared her throat. “Are you retired, Mr. Rosen?”

The question was refreshingly direct, and Eddie had a moment of simple clarity. “I’m self-employed. A certified financial planner, phone and computer work, mostly. One day a week I’ll have to be in the city.

Banker friends, networking, client meetings. I was with Citigroup for twenty-one years.”

There was a pause. Eddie felt that rattling off these work credentials somehow compensated for the crack about the sponge bath.

“I expect my wife will sell the house and join me in a few years,” he went on. “She just turned 43 and, understandably, wants to wait until our daughter finishes high school. But just this morning she promised to visit me here. You have sing-alongs on Sunday afternoons, is that right Ms...?”

“Johnson.”

“Ms. Johnson, nice to meet you.” Eddie reached out, suddenly confident that this attractive, well-built, corporate woman would shake his hand because, just like him, she had been trained to be polite and kind and meet the expectations of others. “The stainless steel handrails are standard in all shower stalls, is that right Ms. Johnson?”

Silence. He wondered why he suddenly asked about the handrails, and he also noted that he was leaning quite far over Ms. Johnson’s desk and holding her hand far too tightly. He released his grip. “Look,” he said, “I’ll admit that I’m having what my wife called a classic ‘midlife crisis.’ But it’s not like I’m having an affair with some young chick or anything like that or buying a Harley or giving up my job to travel cross-country and become a Blues musician in some hole-in-the-wall gin joint—I-I-I mean I’m just looking for some assistance with my life.”

He stared down at his trembling hands. The sweat on top of his upper lip was thickening. He wished Ms. Johnson would stand up. He suddenly hated the feeling of towering over her like some out-of-control inferno while she sat calmly protected by her desk. “Four daily dining options including a restaurant-style dining room, a private dining room, and a casual café,” he began quietly, almost as if he were telling her a secret, only vaguely aware that he had practically memorized the website information word for word. “That sounds pretty great to me, you know, one bill that covers everything—heat, air conditioning, electricity, and cable, as well as my property taxes and homeowner’s insurance and all interior and exterior maintenance services, daily housekeeping and a weekly flat linen service in addition to annual heavy cleaning and regularly scheduled transportation within a 30-mile radius. How can anyone say no to that? And at no additional charge, there’s 24-hour on-site security and an emergency response system, and a comprehensive Health and Wellness Program! I love it. A fitness center, certified trainers, an indoor heated lap pool with daily Aquasize classes, and access to skilled nursing and comprehensive medical care for life. For life!”

“Mr. Rosen—”

He wiped his lip on the back of his hand, then took a quick breath. “And I’m sure I will enjoy the Art Room,” he went on, still speaking

quietly, as if he were sharing something strictly confidential. "I like that Picasso guy, and the Card Room—I been to Vegas once or twice ... well, a few times, and the additional Lounge and Meeting Rooms, as well as the auditorium, the library, and the conveniently located on-site Chase Branch Bank. And talk about convenience—how about the unisex hair salon with manicure and pedicure services! Clean toenails! I mean I'm not one of those ... what are they called ... metrosexuals?" but wow, what a life! And you got tennis courts, a bike path, the half-mile of private beach. I could actually show off my clean toenails, not that I'm into that, or anything. Oh, and just so you know, I don't worry about losing touch with my middle-aged friends in the city because you have those guest rooms and guest parking and—"

"Mr. Rosen, please! I know what our facility offers. It is nonetheless completely absurd to think that a forty-eight-year-old man who is perfectly healthy and completely capable of living independently would—"

"What? Want a little assistance? Sure, independence is great. It's what built this country. But I've been strong and independent for plenty of years—now I want help, comfort, convenience. I want assisted living."

Ms. Johnson stood up, finally. She was smaller than Eddie expected, but even more attractive. Her eyes reminded him of something—a princess, or a fairy. She seemed to gaze simultaneously directly at him and beyond him, and to understand him, to know him, to feel his pain. He imagined her stepping out from behind the desk and giving his slightly achy shoulder (from early arthritis?) a supportive and encouraging squeeze. "If you'd like me to speak to your mother, Mr. Rosen, I'd be happy to call her myself. Caring for an aging parent is difficult, I know. Clearly, it's been stressful for you. Would you like to talk to our social worker?"

"But Ms. Johnson," he said, quietly. "It's all about choice, don't you agree? We all have the freedom to choose. Everything. How we live, how we age, even how we die. There should be no suffering, only pleasure, only comfort, especially for those who have worked hard and are entitled—"

"Mr. Rosen, if you don't want to talk to our social worker, that's fine. But I'm afraid you'll have to leave."

Just then she lifted her hand and waved, and Eddie saw two uniformed security guards coming toward him.

"What the—? That isn't necessary, Ms. Johnson." He took a step away from her desk. "I may seem unreasonable," he said in a firm tone, "but I am not dangerous."

He turned away from her, nodding as politely as possible at the

approaching guards, both of whom were extremely large and muscular Latino men with round but stern faces. They stopped just short of Eddie, then one of them went back to the main door and held it open while the other gestured with a quick nod in the direction of the exit.

Eddie turned back to Ms. Johnson. "I'm disappointed in you," he said, in a thick whisper. Then, more loudly, he added, "Maybe my mother is right. This would be a terrible place to live. Yes, a terrible place." He felt his voice suddenly grow louder, rising and rushing out uncontrollably, like water spurting from a broken hose. "A terrible place," he shouted. "A horrible, empty, terrible place to grow old and die!"

One of the guards stepped forward, but Eddie turned quickly and walked past him with his head down. He went directly to his car and started the engine and pulled out of the driveway. It would be at least forty minutes back to the city. His throat burned from the embarrassing burst of shouting. He drove for awhile, turned on the radio, then turned it off. Then he pulled onto the shoulder of the road and stopped the car. The burning in his throat was getting worse. It tightened and tugged and made it difficult to swallow—until he cried. He cried hard for several minutes, and when he finally stopped, his nose dripped and his head ached and he realized that he had been not only crying and crying like a lost little boy but also calling out, over and over, "Mommy, Mommy, Mommy!"