

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/4

David Breitkopf
Palm Trees of Florida

It was just before noon when Daniel and Nina's plane touched down at the Tampa Airport. The pilot announced in that droll pilot-speak that it was "a balmy 83 degrees" outside. It was two days before Christmas. As they waited at baggage claim holding their bulky winter coats, they were already perspiring. In the distance, beyond the line of taxis and buses at the curb, Daniel could see palm trees. The conveyor belt began rolling and bags came sliding and tumbling out of the chute.

Daniel looked at Nina, who was quiet and pensive, her arms crossed over her chest.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"What's that mean?"

"It's just stupid," she said, her gaze fixed on the conveyor belt's interlocking plates as they twisted around a turn.

"Try me."

"You know my parents aren't as wealthy as yours." The first part of their five-day Florida trip was visiting Nina's parents, who lived in a small town just outside of Tampa.

"I'm not judging them or you, for that matter, on the amount of money they have."

Nina was silent for a moment and then almost whispered, "They live in a trailer park."

"No problem," he said. Ahh, a secret. A painful one, withheld from him. "I have nothing against people who live in trailer parks."

"Good." Her eyes met his for the first time since they landed. Then excitedly pointing to a beat-up blue suitcase, she shouted, "That's mine, that's mine." Daniel leaned over and snatched it off the conveyor belt. His bag came soon after and they stopped at the Avis counter, rented a compact, which Daniel drove.

When they arrived, Nina found her parents sitting with another couple at a picnic table between two rows of trailers. It was a warm and blustery day, and Nina's hair whipped around as she reached to hug her mother, who stood up first. Daniel waited behind Nina to be introduced, eyeing the father eyeing him. There was something unmoving in his face.

"And this is Daniel," Nina said, an embarrassed smile crossing her lips. He shook his future in-laws' hands. The mother's grip was firmer.

"Nina has told us good things about you, that you were a very good tennis player," Mrs. Johnson said. "And a good reporter."

Ellen Johnson was tall like Nina. But otherwise she didn't seem to resemble her daughter in the least. She had a hard look, a real working-class body that had gotten too heavy for her white pullover to hide. Her skin

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was surprisingly creased with age. When she spoke, her lower jaw seemed to move separately, like a ventriloquist's doll. She had placed her knitting on the table, having just barely started with a pattern. Both parents were about 6 or 7 years older than Daniel's parents, but seemed like grandparents.

It turned out their trailer was sizable, with two bedrooms, both off the main living room space. But the low ceiling made Daniel claustrophobic, and he found himself at times ducking his head for no reason. A small artificial Christmas tree with a few ornaments and strands of tinsel seemed to crouch in a corner of the room, but there were no presents beneath it. The walls were all bare sheet rock because they were in the midst of refurbishing.

The extra room was for Nina or her brother when he came to town. The bed was too small for the two of them so Daniel slept on the couch, but only in the early morning after they had fallen asleep on her tiny bed. He was exhausted when he finally roused himself and tiptoed out to the sofa in his jeans and T-shirt. There he remained awake for hours because Ted Johnson was snoring in a recliner only a few feet away. Apparently this was the arrangement and had been for years. Nina's mom slept in their bedroom and her dad slept in the living room. Somewhere near 4, Daniel must have passed out. But around 8 in the morning, he woke up from the TV, at first incorporating a news item about Dan Quayle into a dream.

Ted Johnson was now sitting not far from his feet in a rocking chair, almost statue-like, watching the set. Was that the same white T-shirt he'd worn the day before? He had thick horn-rimmed glasses with pale blue eyes peaking through, and far back in some crevices. Even with the glasses, he could see Nina in his face.

"Good morning," Daniel said, feeling that if he didn't say it first Ted Johnson wouldn't have gotten around to it.

"Good mornin' to you," he said, lifting a glass of ice water. "Sleep well?"

"Umm, yeah," Daniel said. That was about it between the two. Daniel sat up and watched the tube listlessly. He needed to go to the bathroom, but he was waiting for his erection to subside before he stood up. Ellen Johnson came out of her bedroom and headed to the small galley kitchen off the living room.

"What do you like for breakfast, Daniel? We have eggs, cereal, coffee, toast."

"All the above, but I'll just take some coffee and toast, thanks." He watched Nina's parents not interact, glancing every so often at Nina's closed bedroom door. Finally he could stand up and went to the bathroom. When he came out, the toast and coffee were ready on the counter.

"Thanks," he said, and sat down at the small fifties-style metal table and chairs. There was a thin bookcase not far away, and Daniel glanced at the titles.

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"Who's the Stephen King addict?" he said. There were twelve King books.

"We both read him," Ellen Johnson said. "Take anyone you want. They're all good. We've read them all two or three times."

"Umm, well, I'm actually reading something right now, Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. I'm not really into horror. I'm more into literature."

"Oh, really," Ellen Johnson said with an edge. "As far as I can tell, if it's a good story I don't really care who wrote it. I've read great Stephen King and lousy Hemingway. It's the story that counts."

"But also the style," Daniel said.

"Sure. I don't like to read crap, but I think you're selling Stephen King a bit short, and probably selling Hemingway a bit too high. They actually have a lot in common. Hemingway was a very popular writer in his time, which can be a real no-no for people who prefer their books highbrow." Did she just call him a snob? "I'm sure Stephen King will also be reassessed once he dies."

"You've convinced me," Daniel said, though she hadn't, but he didn't want to get into an argument with his future mother-in-law over literature. "Which King book would you recommend?"

"*The Stand* or *Carrie*. Those are my two favorites," she said.

"*Carrie*, really? I liked the movie." He pulled it out of the bookcase. "Well, it's a little thinner than some of his other books." She laughed a little, her wooden jaw bouncing up and down.

"He does go on. But that one shouldn't take you too long," she said.

"I can read it on the way to Key West and have it for you by the time we return." Their vague plan was to drive to Key West, check out the music scene and visit Hemingway's home, which was why he was reading *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in the first place. Beyond that, their plans were sketchy.

There was also a fat green loose-leaf notebook in the bookcase, and on its spine, written in magic marker was, "Palm Trees of Florida." Daniel pulled the bulky notebook off the shelf. On the cover was taped a piece of white paper with the book's title and the author's name below it, Ted Johnson, both typed and centered.

Nina came out of her room dressed in her flannel pajamas, her hair tousled.

"You found my Dad's book."

"Good morning," Daniel said. "How did you sleep?"

"Terribly," she said, and laughed. She kissed him on the cheek and whispered, "I missed my Boo's warm butt." Then she stood up and said in her public voice, "He wrote that a few years ago. How many years did it take you to complete, Dad?"

Ted Johnson remained motionless, but his living face seemed to rise out of the sedimentary layers, and he said finally, "About eight years." Daniel leafed through the notebook. There were hundreds of hand-drawn

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images of palm trees, their leaves and bark, simply and carefully rendered, alongside typed descriptions.

"He tried getting it published but apparently there are too many palm tree books in the world," Nina said.

"Yeah, but this is really artwork," Daniel said. "This is a little different than photos of palm trees."

"I think the problem is, he doesn't have any credentials. He's not a professional tree expert," she said in her sarcastic voice, the opening of her mouth sliding just off center.

"Well, it's an amazing amount of work, Ted," Daniel said. It was strange saying his first name. "I had no idea there were so many."

"That's not nearly all of them. There are more than 2,500 species of palms in the world," Ted Johnson said. He lifted himself slowly out of the chair, which oddly didn't rock when he stood up. He stepped heavily in his work boots, an old dray horse of a man.

"A lot of the pictures I drew from palms right outside the trailer," he said.

"Really."

"I'll show you." He took the book out of Daniel's hands.

"Ted, will you leave the poor kid alone. The last thing he needs to know is the difference between a coconut and a spindle palm," Ellen Johnson said, leaning around the galley cupboard.

What was the big deal? Daniel thought. I'm just asking him about palm trees. I just spoke to you about Stephen King. He glanced quickly at Nina, who smiled back sadly.

"I don't mind," Daniel said in his mollifying voice. Then turning back to Ted Johnson, he said, "I've noticed a number of differences between palm trees so I figured there must be at least a few species. I didn't realize how many."

They stepped out onto the small landing of the trailer, and Ted Johnson pointed to one tree and said, "That, by the way, is a spindle palm. Notice how it tapers from the top of the trunk to the base."

"I've seen a few of those," Daniel said.

"Palm trees have a lot of differences if you study them even for a short time. The trunks are different, the leaves are very different. You've got your palmates and your pinnates. Palmate leaves radiate from a single point, and pinnates jut off a central rib." Ted Johnson was close enough to Daniel that he could smell his breath, and it occurred to him Ted Johnson's glass of water was more likely filled with vodka or gin.

Through the screen door, Ellen Johnson blared with an Irish lilt, "Ted, you're boring the poor kid to death. Will you please, please leave him alone."

She really hates him, Daniel thought. Leave him alone, definitely leave him alone. He's just showing me some freakin' palm trees.

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He turned back to Nina's father, who seemed to sag. From this angle he could see the dust on Ted Johnson's glasses.

"Well, I think we've had enough palm trees for one day," he said. He stepped back into the trailer with the notebook. It was getting away from Daniel.

"If you don't mind, if you don't...I would like to read some of your book," he sputtered.

"Sure," the old man handed him the notebook, and Daniel took it with both hands.

Ted Johnson sat down in the rocking chair and his face reverted to stone.