

Light, Coming Back

Ann Wadsworth

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Those who are romantically inclined tend to declare that, in love, age makes no difference. Although a graying businessman's possession of a "trophy wife" may draw criticism, the lovestruck often say that with true devotion the number of years between lovers is irrelevant. Realists believe otherwise. In her elegant, finely tuned first novel, the author, who is editor of publications for the *Boston Athenaeum*, explores the theme of age, as well as sexual preference, from the viewpoint of both romantic and realist—a tricky feat that she manages superbly.

The main character, Mercedes Medina, is a refined and delicate soul, the type of intellectual Boston professor who wears tweed jackets with a Hermes scarf and, at nearly sixty years old, skims along the surface of life wanting nothing more than flowers, music, and an excellent tagliatelle. Her cellist husband, Patrick, is twenty years her senior and is letting go of his life, just as life is also letting go of him. After nearly three decades together, the couple has settled into a conversational rhythm, a slow waltz of light jokes and minor squabbles, and a routine schedule of meals that become increasingly important as Patrick weakens.

Into this somewhat pale but gentle life comes Lennie Visitor, a young woman whose sexuality and straightforward nature derail Mercedes from her everyday thoughts and actions. As a couple who indulge in flirtation and the occasional affair, Mercedes and Patrick both take Lennie to be what she is named, a visitor in their lives, but as infatuation turns to desire, Lennie becomes a more central, and confusing, part of Mercedes' existence.

When Patrick dies and Lennie disappears, Mercedes is set adrift. Her feeling of loss and grief leads her to check into a hospital, where she gazes out the window and follows the action on the street with disinterested curiosity, the state in which she seemed to have lived for so long before Lennie's rise and Patrick's decline.

One of the most fascinating things about Wadsworth's writing is how artfully she captures what is unsaid and what is unknown about her characters, with so few sentences. She unmoors Mercedes in the course of a page with only a smattering of dialogue between her and Lennie, and she establishes the tension of a room simply by describing how it's furnished. This is lyrical writing at its finest, in which the reader savors long passages and brief bursts of dialogue. Like the cello pieces that Patrick performs, there is thought to the literary music here.

After her first kiss with Lennie, Mercedes' turbulent emotions are described, skillfully, in the softest terms: "She touched her mouth with one finger. Lennie kissed me, she thought. She sat down on top of Patrick's laundry hamper and put her face in her hands. I should be delirious. Her eyes were full of grit. She felt weightless, almost; as if she were floating on her back, unable to move: pulled toward the shore, then toward the open sea."

Lennie, by virtue of her age and self-confidence, provides the staccato counterpoint to Mercedes' smooth, legato thoughts. Her conversation style is short and sharp, betraying a life of action without deliberation. To have these two together as lovers is fascinating, and Wadsworth explores every aspect of their relationship—from the age and class differences to the similarity of their desires—to make it more compelling still.

What the author captures most effectively, however, is the tide of emotions present when a loved one falls away. The way Mercedes must deal with Patrick's approaching death while still trying to maintain a façade of normalcy is wrenching, and Wadsworth depicts it with telling details: "She helped him off with his clothes and into his green pajamas. As she tied the cord at his waist, he leaned his frail body against her, frail, but still slightly taller than hers. She wanted to lean on him at this moment, she was longing just to feel his body as it had been twenty years ago, always firm, always strong, clearing up the confusion."

For all of Wadsworth's characters, age really doesn't matter in their desires and their capacity to give love, but it does in their actions and their outcomes. The workings of time are both with and against them, like a wave smoothing, then abandoning, the shoreline. Wadsworth's ability to describe this tide is breathtaking and beautiful, showing us the fullness of a life captured.

ELIZABETH MILLARD (November / December 2001)

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