



kelly braffet's last seen leaving (2006)

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Something that never ceases to amaze me about TV shows such as "Cold Case Files" and "Forensic Files" is how very often, for incredibly long periods of time, horrific crimes go unsolved. Most people are familiar with the case of the Black Dahlia, perhaps the most famous unsolved murder of all. It took modernism a long time to catch up to fiction; until, maybe, twenty or thirty years ago, in the literary genres of mystery and the thriller, cases like that of the Dahlia never appeared. Even in detective fiction that functions as serious literature (i.e. that of Ross MacDonald's Lew Archer novels), all the loose ends are tied up, all the i's dotted and t's crossed, by book's end. We seek closure and resolution, and tend to be frustrated if we don't get it. In Last Seen Leaving, Kelly Braffet offers us an account of murder and disappearance that renders us as hung out as a cold case file. In an interview with Scott Snyder, Braffet discusses her view of secrets and the ultimate impossibility of understanding another's motives and behavior.

She also spices her novel with a pretty original mixture of philosophy and cutting edge observance of contemporary young adult culture, of questionable areas of foreign policy and parent-child relationships, and of the magnetic lure that the possibility of danger and harm seems to hold for certain people. She's as comfortable with Nietzsche and Heidegger as she is with video games and lipstick.

Speaking of Nietzsche...one of the principal philosophical concepts that scholars and researchers have always associated with him is that of Nihilism—a word which appears to take on different meanings, depending on which thinker is being discussed. Nietzsche was a metaphysical nihilist, believing that, in the final analysis, life is completely meaningless and that, in our attempts to understand it, we simply throw psychological projections onto the blank canvas of the universe: The scientist presents science as Ultimate Truth, the artist presents art as Ultimate Truth, the theologian presents religion as Ultimate Truth—all simply employing a coping mechanism invented by human beings in an effort to defeat nihilism. Last Seen Leaving examines this point in a sharp way, as seen in this passage wherein we meet Seth, a beach bum and philosopher:

In Seth's real life—the nonsummer part that had nothing to do with waiting tables or brushing sand off his sheets so that he could crawl into bed with her—he was a graduate student who read thick books with tiny print and no characters. He taught eighteen-year-olds about Heidegger and Nietzsche. He ate sushi, went skiing in Vermont, and was writing a dissertation about Being And Time. She didn't think any of the girls he knew in that life had dragons tattooed around their bellybuttons.

The "she" having these thoughts is Miranda Cassidy, one of the book's two main characters (the other is her mother, Anne); the point is that a true Nietzschean—perhaps Seth is one, as he seems to truly savor all experience—would not compartmentalize his or her life into this life and that life, real life and beach town life, work life and play life, etc.; life is simply one integrated thing, not a thing to be cut into sections like a piece of fruit. Thus, Miranda is representative of a different sort of nihilism—that usually referred to as Russian Nihilism, a belief system in which young people hold in contempt the beliefs, values, and attitudes of their elders. This is pointed out in a second, later passage about Miranda and some of her friends:

They think of themselves as creatures of the world, hard and brutal and unflinching. They listen to dark angry music, watch dark angry movies, collect dark angry comics. They read Neal Stephenson and William Gibson and William S. Burroughs and Philip K. Dick and Mervyn Peake. The modern world, to them, is but a pale imitation of the dystopian universes that they read about...

So, they wait. In the meantime, they jealously guard their disillusionment and its trappings, because, as far as they're concerned, you either get it or you don't and, if you don't, you'd better not act like you do. Their disillusionment is all that they are sure of, and they do not want it used casually.

What, you might ask, are these kids so disillusioned *about*? The answer is the same as the answer to quite a few key, questions raised in the book: we don't know. In one way Braffet follows the sort of strategy used by Paul Auster in City of Glass—a crime story, a mystery, unsolved and unsolveable, all questions and no answers. However, in another way, she opens up an equally mysterious avenue of plot and character that hinges, for its effect, precisely upon our knowledge of it as being mysterious: covert operations of the C.I.A. in Latin America, in the '70s and '80s. As I read Braffet's novel, I felt somewhat fortunate to have been familiar with an important American 1980s writing about the C.I.A. in Latin America, Robert Stone's A Flag for Sunrise, as well as Tina Rosenberg's 1991 nonfiction account Children of Cain: Violence and the Violent in Latin America, which helped me appreciate Braffet's work that much more. Braffet is excellent at just skimming the horrors that lie underneath the mouth of the volcano. This methodology is attractive to us as readers because we know that the author knows much more than she's letting on, that her knowledge of such things is sufficiently strong so as to enable her to write about them in a minimalist fashion with confidence and plausibility.

Anne Cassidy is a middle-aged mom living in Arizona, having moved there from the Pittsburgh area, years ago, when her husband Nick, a pilot employed by an enigmatic, shadowy company called Western Mountain, goes down in his plane while flying a mission over Central America and is never heard from again. (Significantly, no remains of the aircraft are ever found). Her rebellious daughter, Miranda, originally accompanies her out west but returns to Pennsylvania as soon as she's old enough to be on her own. There, she disappears one night after crashing her car, picked up on the road by a passerby named George, who takes an unusual interest in her. She takes a ride with him, ending up, somehow, in a Virginia beach town.

Meanwhile, Anne, after not speaking to her daughter for many months, grows frantic as her many calls to Miranda go unreturned. The sense of dread and menace gets turned up several notches by

the unintentionally mocking greeting on Miranda's answering machine: "You know what to do." Here, this fairly common greeting morphs from being a simple everyday phrase into a reminder of Anne's helplessness; she *doesn't* know what to do. A few days of frantic calling are followed by Miranda's phone number being taken out of service and Anne hopping a plane to go look for her. She encounters only dead ends, and a detective named Romansky (a holdover from the detective yarns of yesteryear, an impotent Sam Spade or Phillip Marlowe; say the name "Romansky" very slowly to yourself) tells her it's probable that her daughter has simply moved along, no foul play involved. Anne won't have it and, when she is granted access to Miranda's vacated apartment and figures out how to listen to her phone messages, she finds a series of them, from a boyfriend named Jay, that grow progressively drunken and nasty. Naturally, she fears the worst.

Miranda and Anne are shown to often disagree, argue, misunderstand and frustrate one another, behave divergently, and take different perspectives on Nick's death/disappearance. Braffet points this up in two remarkable contrasting passages that symbolize the differences in the "soul content" of mother and daughter. First, about Miranda:

When she drove, she liked to think she was plugged into a huge, powerful machine. Like science fiction: the car's nervous system joined with her own through the sole of her right foot.

About Anne (who, by the way, works in a New Age shop and is into all sorts of mystic spirituality and healing):

She imagines herself in Sedona, standing barefoot in red soil, mysterious energy thrumming up through the bottoms of her feet and welling up inside her, filling her with something pure and real.

They both channel energy through their feet, which makes them similar, but one does so through the gas pedal of the car, the other through the dirt of the earth, which makes them different—impossibly different. Their attempts to make genuine emotional contact are, perhaps, doomed to failure. The fundamental discrepancies in their natures may be insurmountable.

This novel has intensely interesting secondary characters, chief among them a pilot colleague of Nick's called X-ray and a juggler boyfriend of Miranda's named Rainier. It also makes sophisticated use of scenes that aren't really related to the main action but suggest, comment, and stand adjacent to it. For instance, one morning, Anne finds a man dead in his car in the parking lot of the store where she works. He'd been a customer the day before, purchasing a book entitled *Healing Yourself With Chakras*. The whole situation is, by turns, absurd, ironic, sad, funny in a very dark humor way, meditative, and sensually arresting (Braffet's writing is auditorily-oriented, cued-in to sound), but it functions in another way: it provides us with the closure we crave, but does so with a totally incidental character and is, thus, not satisfying at all. It takes some spine to write this way, and Braffet's up to the challenge.

In Last Seen Leaving, mood and atmosphere, in my opinion, take precedence over the desire to write a "well made story", in the Aristotelian sense, and it's a refreshing approach that more authors should probably give a whirl. But that's not to say it doesn't succeed with traditional narrative elements such as characterization, because it does. And I think a blend of the modern and the traditional, well done like this, is always welcome.

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