

## MIMESIS OF *HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS*



JOHN STRATIGOPOULOS

The hills across the valley of Ebro were white and arid lusting for the rains. I stepped off the train and walked across the platform, the sun's rays mercilessly beating upon me as I searched for a cure to my sobriety. Spotting the bar I made my way across the station and through the strings of bamboo beads towards asylum. The barkeep was nowhere to be seen so I made myself comfortable, as comfortable as one could be in a sweat-soaked Hawaiian shirt in the middle of the scorching countryside. Looking out the cloak of beads that swayed lightly in their constant struggle to break free from the doorframe I saw that even trees had not found this piece of shit station a worthwhile place to spend their years. The two rows of tracks gleamed in the sunlight, reminding me that Madrid was only a few hours away, a civilization on a scale none of the sad peasants that ran this limbo of a station had any respect for. "What can I get you?" echoed the barkeep's voice pulling me back into the sad reality that was this station on the Ebro

"BUDWEISER," I REPLIED QUICKLY, "A BIG ONE."

All I received in return was a blank stare, looks like my impression of these people was more fitting than I had initially perceived. I was here as a journalist, a definition of objectivity here to convey to the American horde the reality of the Spanish people and some shit along those lines that the editors at the Times would eat right up.

I WASN'T HERE FOR THEM, I WAS HERE FOR ME.

"Cerveza, una cerveza grande, comprende?" My patience quickly wearing thin. The dripping sweat of my arms reminded me of all the torturous summer afternoons I had endured in Virginia growing up, the valley might be a haven for the miserable, but at least it didn't harbor the indiscriminate humidity and stillness of an August day in Fairfax. It had been almost a decade since I had been back there, a place that held nothing but dark memories I had been running from since the day I shipped out for Europe. Apparently this place was not Americanized in the

least, a shame actually, these people could probably use a dose of the pain we Yankees have internalized as everyday life.

## THE SIMPLICITY OF THE PLACE WAS ALMOST SICKENING.

The barkeep filled a glass out of the tap and placed it in front of me on a small felt pad.

"Gracias."

"Dos reales," she replied

"Put it on the gonzo tab, I'll be needing a few more."

I occupied myself with staring out the beaded curtain for the barkeep was no looker and probably didn't care to have a bastardized spanglish conversation with a foreigner. I sipped the golden brew in peace for a few minutes trying not to think about the watery donkey piss that I was guzzling to avoid becoming more lucid and avoid the torture of thinking of Lucy, her bastard and my father rotting in their graves. The subdued babble of Spanish conversations acted as white noise as I watched the slow current meander between the banks, not the Potomac, but close. A woman brought me back to my senses as I heard English faintly from the table outside. A young couple sat just within earshot and unconsciously they had become a narrative to occupy the painstaking wait.

"Listen," the man called into the bar as I stared through him towards the river. I lit a cigarette and took a long pained drag.

The barkeep swung her ghastly frame past me through the screen of smoke, then again with two beers towards the table outdoors as the girl looked off into the distance.

"Americanos," she muttered under her breath as she past me again shaking her head.

Looks like my intuitions again had served me well. I moved down the bar to get within ear-shot of the couple as they began to sip their beers.

"THEY LOOK LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS," THE GIRL OBSERVED IN REGARD TO THE SWEEPING BOUNDARY OF HILLS IN THE DISTANCE. SHIT SHE MUST HAVE SOME BETTER STUFF THAN I HAVE AT MY DISPOSAL, ELEPHANTS?

The ebb and flow of restless passengers on the platform occupied my vision, scurrying to and fro like ants, pawns.

The conversation continued outside; some incessant babble about Anis, bad choice in my opinion, a horrid concoction.

“Cut it out,” the man snapped back at her, her distress more apparent to anyone on the platform than he.

“I said the mountains looked like white elephants, wasn’t that bright?”

“That was bright,” the man assured her.

Christ she really was looking for validation.

“It’s really a simple operation, they just let the air in,” the man blurted.

The situation was becoming all the more apparent; I bet he has a wife at home and this piece was nothing but the flavor of the week. Morals are fickle in this heat. Dumb broad getting knocked up, leave it to a naïve girl to get knocked up abroad and cheat her way out of responsibility. Time to see if he has any manipulative skills whatsoever.

## HER SILENCE SCREAMED DESPERATION.

“I’ll go with you and stay with you all the time. They just let the air in and then it’s perfectly natural.”

Considering her mental state I doubt that bit helped any, I mean really, I’m not even a party involved and it made me cringe. Natural, that’s a stretch, having the bastard spawn is natural, that’s what Lucy tried to do to me. Leave it to the Irish to promise themselves to you in the eyes of God then laugh in his face as soon as you go off to the trenches. Lucy O’Henry was my lover, emphasis on the was. As soon as I got my orders and headed off to the front to report on the war my fiancé decided to whore herself to the most basic of men, real character in that one. Nothing like sitting in the trenches seeing the evils of war, feeling the blood of countrymen on your boots and trying to survive another night while your girl throws it all around town. Adulterers are all the same, professionals in the art of hindsight. Go ahead debate how this is going to fix your life, your problems, your relationship. Lie away sir, but you better get more attune to the craft, and fast.

“If I do it you won’t ever worry?” she asked with a face of a whore in a confessional trying to repent.

“I won’t worry about it because it’s perfectly simple.” He responded.

Good deflection sir keep it up, you’re not out of the woods yet.

“THEN I’LL DO IT. BECAUSE I DON’T CARE ABOUT ME,”

was the stoic response.

She’s a better liar than him. As this became apparent she did not frighten me, I tried to catch her gaze and stare into the blackness of her soul, a place so full of wrongs that right was a foreign concept, a morally palpable battleground of moral injury, a past that wasn’t quite right.

"We can have everything," he's really stepping it up now, playing with her I thought.

"It's ours." Quite the romantic, he made me even feel sick with his feigned optimism.

The wind blew through the bar hot and dry making me return to my second, or was it third beer? No matter it didn't really have any bearing on my state. I was no slave to the substance, just a desperate employer of the effects.

"I'll have a scotch," I snapped at the barkeep who also retained a seat in the audience of this interchange.

She set to fixing my drink and I purveyed the contents of my wallet thoughtfully as the drama raged on not twenty feet from me. Out fell a picture of her, Lucy, her strawberry blonde hair rustled in that breeze as I closed my eyes thinking of how it all shouldn't have gone so wrong so quickly. I opened my eyes more sober than I had been when I entered, ready to keep running from a past no man wants to face. Once the breeze settled I caught the culmination of the conversation.

"Would you please please please please please please please stop talking?"

Apparently his pleas for his own self-validation of this act had finally worn her down. The interchange ended, silence ensued with only the whispered conversation of the fluttering beads filling the void. Silence as striking as the silence that I knew had ensued as soon as Lucy had birthed that bastard spawn stillborn, the wait for the cry that never came entering the room and the nurses staring through the floor not wanting to be the one who gave the verdict to the whore.

The man got up and carried the luggage across the barren platform and out of view. He entered the bar beside me within moments and ordered an Anis. Looking slowly around the scene he surveyed the patrons eventually resting his eyes on me. Glancing up at him swiftly

**HE UNDERSTOOD THAT THERE WAS NO CONSOLATION TO BE HAD IN THE PRESENCE OF STRANGERS,**

we all seemed to be reasonably waiting for the train to Madrid. He identified me as reasonable, poor fuck, if he even knew the way that I knew death he would be on his knees. Killing the drink as he would soon his child he casually walked out of the bar and back to the table. Looking at the empty glass on the bar all I could think of was how he was doing the same thing to her; the glass as her womb, him emptying it for his own benefit, humanity at its best. He sat at the table and she smiled.

"You feel better?" he asked

"I feel fine," she said.

“THERE IS NOTHING WRONG WITH ME I FEEL FINE.”

LIES.

There is nothing wrong with you yet.

Go fix your problem.

Then you'll have something to commiserate about.

It's your gamble, you think you have the odds fixed for the win and a future then cheat nature by all means, but if Lucy taught me one thing about human nature it's that the loss you are about to endure is not within the realm of caring or not caring about yourself, which you say you do not. Your child is not yourself, if you end this now you'll probably end up just like her you pretty little thing, nursing the wrong end of a Colt in your mouth and ending the pain. Give Beelzebub my tidings, good riddance and good luck, not that my wish will do you any good in the end.

