

The World of Willy Gregg

by James Lloyd Davis

It was the 70's when the fashion was shoes for men with very high heels and facial hair was the rage. Long mustaches and a little dot of hair beneath your lower lip. Even your average bag man wore suits and ties, pants with a little flair above the heels. Gold chains, yeah. Jeans? No. Clothes were tight, so you had to have a tailor make adjustments for a shoulder holster.

Bad guys were required to look good.

Though I liked to think I was bad, I was never as bad as the boyfriends my ex went around with after the divorce, gangsters, dealers, not to mention a certifiably crazy Hell's Angel warlord who was actually very charming and could display flashes of brilliance in conversation. He was insane, though, wound up in prison doing life without a prayer after a particularly heinous murder, one that, because of the creative method used and his cold, brutal but flawless implementation thereof, earned him an unusual and uncharacteristically colorful monologue from the judge during sentencing.

Another one of her 'friends' ended up on the six o'clock news, the victim of a four-stick bomb and a Radio Shack detonator. Later a famous case when the hit man who did the dirty turned on his friends and sang the long song to a room full of Feebies, so the short, happy life of this particular friend of my ex-wife has since become the subject of a fairly predictable, ripped from the headlines film with some decent actors going through the motions. As gangsters go, he wasn't all that big, but he had flair, real dignity and physical courage, so maybe he deserved better than a cheesy flick made with more balls than budget. But hey, listen to me, waxing sentimental over here... and about some mobbed up guy who was banging my ex. But my point is... he was dangerous, like all the others, not just some suit with a great car and a haircut, some job in a brokerage. The guy was a psychopathic killer, totally bad, top down and bad as bad can be.

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And, yeah, I thought I was bad too, but I was never as bad as any of the others. Hell, I carried a gun in those days, just because of these guys she hooked up with. I mean, I still hung around with her after the divorce, needed to be close to her as ever before. Sounds pathetic, yeah, but there it is. Maybe you could give it a merciful twist by saying it was heroic to wear my love that way, to wander about in the shadows of her new life with dangerous men. Here I was... armed, willing, and ready to shoot any one of them if I had to, but really? It was all pathetic.

Do you think?

Love can do that to a man, break his balls, turn him into a nut case, but the truth? Once in a while, out of habit, or maybe sentiment, but mostly in between her dangerous boyfriends, she'd welcome me back into her bed. The very definition of pathetic, but I lived for that.

That was the case one Christmas Eve when she threw a party. One of those in-between times.

True to form, out of all those guys who were there, each throwing their own girlfriends and caution to the wind, trying their damndest to get close to the hostess, impress her with the badness of their swing, it was me who wound up as the last man to leave and, then? In the grey light of dawn after a wonderful night of... yeah. It was me.

But the night of this party there was one dude in particular, Irish looking guy, some dealer with the gift of a tongue that wouldn't seem foreign in either a used car lot or one of those uptown gentlemen's fashion salons that sells suits so fancy the sheen seems somehow less cheesy for the weave, or more truthfully, for the name of the weave and the downright Anglo Saxon brand name on the tag. Dealers gotta be salesmen, closers, goes with the trade... and this guy was the original closer.

Talked some trash, this guy, but I was hip to what he was. He was the dealer who supplied the party favors that night, some rich, mellow, sweet Columbian in monster rolls for the floor and a little

discreet coke in the bathroom for those who needed the bump. Also, he was carrying. Had one of those little designer pistols in a cloth rig under the jacket he never took off. Same color as his shirt, you could only see it if you looked and you'd only look if you were aware of the fact that as warm as it was, he never took off that jacket. He was aware of my gun, which is probably because of who he was. And what. God knows, he was on to my ex like a fruit fly on pudding. Wanted to be her new friend. Trick was... knowing whether he was dangerous.

Night went on and it got mellow, til the core of the party, a hip, high, happy half dozen, bemused people all sat in a circle on the carpet, faux long-haired hippie chicks in designer jeans and boots and their men with expensive shoes. Two of us were armed and competing for the rapture, but all of us were high.

My ex came in from the kitchen carrying a plate of cheese and a few candles. She lit the candles and placed them in the center of our circle and people started rapping like they do in the grip of some truly great weed and whatever wine shows up.

But I was aware of my rival and he of me.

She'd sat next to him in a humble half lotus, the envy of women less limber, and during a lull, a long silence with everybody staring at the flame of the candles, enrapt by the hypnotic lure of color and snap of light that seems like life itself, burning down to endings in the chill of the darkness around us, he put his arm around her.

I broke the silence.

Said... staring at the plate of white cheese sliced carefully into thin long squares and candles, similarly soft and white, I said, "Damn. Don't know whether to smoke the cheese or eat the candles."

It was stupid, and so it seems now in a sober light, but in that high, happy moment, it made everyone laugh, laugh themselves to cautionless abandon, laugh to the shake-off of whatever thoughts they'd fallen into, down thoughts, maybe, thoughts of mortality, a zen joke that hits you where you are and strikes the one chord in all

the world that makes sense through nonsense. Stupid as it was, it was the most brilliant thing anyone could ever say in the moment, maybe utter perfection, wisdom, brilliance, elegantly stated. Stupid as it was, people could not stop laughing.

Absurd, but perfect, maybe heroic wit in the history of mumbled confusion.

Do you think?

My ex wiped tears from her eyes with the laughter and crawled around the plate of cheese and the candles, crawled across the difference in the floor between us... crawled away from Mister Glib (I-can-get-you-a-kilo) Designer Pistol and put her arms around me. We fell back on the carpet laughing into a long and wonderful embrace.

The next time I looked up, my rival was gone.

I'd made it my habit to stay the night whenever I got lucky, so I don't know why, but it felt right, proper somehow, to leave her sleeping. Angelic in the half-light, stray wisps of her long hair trapped in her lips, the rest of it a spray of a black wave crashing on the pillow, a still life masterpiece of chance. I stood for a while and watched the undisturbed, careless breath that ruled her lovely breast and sustained her in the innocence of a moment unaware of my witness.

When I left the house, the light was brighter, but dawn was yet stifled in the curtain of clouds above, city clouds in a sky you never really see. Snow had fallen in the night and Christmas morning was going to be like the stuff of some child's dream, magical, silent, expectant.

Wasn't 'til I reached the street that I noticed the broken window on the driver's side of my car and, on the dash, upright and shiny, carefully aligned to the center of my steering wheel, a single bullet placed there, likely, with a smile and a promise. 7mm. A designer bullet from a designer gun. Any bullet so deliberately placed was a message in itself, but underneath, on a piece of paper ripped from a brown paper bag was scrawled best wishes for the holiday.

“Merry Christmas, motherfucker.” It read, “More to come.”

I could feel that thing you get, back of the neck itch, like when you know somebody's watching you and maybe he was, popgun in hand, whispering epithets, hoping I'd turn around, engine running, so's when I turned, he could peel out from the curb, drive past and pop me with his pistol from an open window. Maybe he was furious, hoping that I'd turn, mad to see me turn, maybe talking to himself... “Turn around, motherfucker. Turn around. Now!”

Took everything I had not to turn, but I didn't.

Wanted to, but I didn't. Brushed the glass from the seat, put the bullet in my pocket, started up the car and drove away like nothing special.

Death threats? Just another mumbling day in the world of Willy Gregg. In retrospect, I suppose it was a brave thing to do, not to turn around.

A very brave and disciplined thing.

Do you think?

Of course... and just as likely... he wasn't even there.

