

# These Foolish Things (Remind Me Of You)

by Daniel Shen

*Every one-night stand involves at least three people: the man, the woman, and the child each of them failed to outgrow.*

It is a civilized lie that desire belongs in the present. It does not. It arrives burdened with older humiliations and older hungers. I did not know this when I met Laure in Paris, 1966, though as a young academic I would certainly have pretended to.

I read of her death in the news on Christmas Eve, 1983. There was snow in the street below the hotel, though by then it had already been walked into something less pretty. The account was imprecise in the way such accounts often are with women of her nature. By then Laure had become the sort of actress people called gifted when what they really meant was that they could not stop looking at her. There was mention of cocaine, or perhaps only of collapse. No one seemed to know whether she had died suddenly or whether she had merely been dying for years.

I no longer remember what the notice actually said after that, but ignorance has never prevented the mind from picturing its own scenery, and where fact failed me, memory—helped along by vanity, desire, and the cold winter air—returned instead to the only night I ever spent alone with her.

The woman in the papers was already beyond me by then. She had become a face, a voice of a lost generation, photographed and discussed. The Laure I remember was younger, less finished, and much too alive.

It was not her apartment. I should say that at once. An hour earlier we had been among fifteen or twenty people, drinking bad wine in the rooms of some painter from Cologne. By the time I found myself alone with Laure, the others had gone, or passed out, or become irrelevant in the way other people do when one is twenty-five and being looked at by a woman. She was standing by the window of a small overheated apartment on the Left Bank, smoking, and the first thing she said to me was not kind.

“You can sit down, you know.”

“I’m all right here.”

“Or not...” She tapped ash into an empty glass. “Have you had any whiskey?”

“I think so.”

“Good. I can’t talk to sober men for very long.”

“Why not?”

“They remember too much.”

I found a bottle in the kitchen cupboard and poured for both of us. The apartment was too hot, and somewhere behind the wall, water was running.

“I don’t believe we’ve been introduced properly,” I said.

“Laure.”

“James, but you can call me Jamie.”

She took the glass from my hand and drank at once.

“I was beginning to think you were dull,” she said.

I sat down then. She remained by the window.

“What do you do?” she asked.

“I teach. Or I will.”

“That sounds uncertain.”

“I’m in Paris for research.”

“On what?”

I told her. She smiled a little and looked back out at the street.

“So you spend your life reading dead people.”

“Some of them.”

“I like the living,” she said. Then, after a moment: “But they’re usually worse.”

I remember that I wanted to say something clever then and failed. At that age I still believed seriousness was an advantage with women. Sometimes it is. More often amusement asks less of them.

“And you?” I asked. “What do you do?”

She shrugged.

“Whatever is needed.”

“That sounds even more uncertain.”

“No,” she said. “Only less respectable.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It means I do what's available.”

“And what is that?”

“Tonight?” she said. “Drinking with you.”

She crossed the room and sat on the arm of the sofa

“You can stop standing like a schoolmaster,” she said. “It makes me want to lie.”

I sat down.

“Better.”

“You think I'm very easy to read.”

“No,” she said. “Only eager.”

“That sounds unflattering,” I said.

"It's meant to be accurate."

She held out her glass and I poured again. She did not thank me.

"And what does eagerness usually want?" I asked.

"Everything," she said. "Very gently."

For a moment neither of us spoke. She slipped one shoe off with the toe of the other and let it fall beside the sofa.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Twenty-five."

"That explains it."

"What does?"

"You still think questions are harmless."

"And you think they aren't?"

She looked at me then with an expression I did not understand at the time.

"No," she said. "Only expensive."

"For who?"

"For the one stupid enough to answer."

She said it looking at the glass, not at me. The radiator knocked once behind us.

"And are you?" I asked.

She smiled, though not with much amusement.

"Sometimes," she said.

She put her cigarette out and lit another at once.

“You don’t look like a teacher,” she said.

“No?”

“No. Too careful.”

“I’m not sure that’s an insult.”

“It isn’t,” she said. “Not a compliment though.”

She leaned back and looked at me through the smoke.

“You still look as if you expect to be let into something.”

“Into what?”

“Everything.”

“And you?” I asked. “What do you expect?”

She smiled then, though only with her mouth.

“Less,” she said. “That’s why I’m calmer.”

She held out her glass and I poured for her again. This time she did not take it at once. Her hand rested lightly against mine for a moment, not tenderly, but as if to make clear that accident had little to do with anything in that room. Then she took the drink and turned her head toward the window.

“You don’t come from money,” she said.

It was not a question.

“No,” I said.

“I know.”

“How?”

“You still care too much where you put your coat.”

I looked at the coat folded over the chair. She laughed once.

“Don’t mind me,” she said. “I notice things when I get bored.”

“And are you bored?”

“Not yet.”

She drank. The room had gone very quiet. Somewhere in the building a pipe groaned and settled.

I said nothing.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “It’s not shameful. Everyone in Paris is pretending. Some are just better at it.”

She sat down properly then, not on the arm of the sofa but in the corner of it, one leg folded under her, the other bare foot still on the rug beside the fallen shoe. Up close she seemed at once younger and harder, as though fatigue had reached her before maturity had finished its work.

“Come here,” she said.

I moved to the other end of the sofa.

“Not like that,” she said. “Nearer.”

I did as I was told. She gave a small nod, as though some private measurement had been satisfied. Turning towards me, I could smell smoke, whiskey, and the faint sweetness of perfume that had grown stale in the heat. She put the cigarette down in the glass and rubbed her thumb against her forefinger, as if feeling for ash that was no longer there. Then, with no change in expression, she asked,

“Have you done this often?”

“What?”

“Hit on women you don’t know.”

“Not often.”

“How often is not often?”

“Less often than I’d like to admit, and more often than would sound respectable.”

That made her laugh properly. It changed her face for a moment. I could see then how men might once have mistaken lightness in her for innocence.

“Good,” she said. “I dislike inexperience. It expects too much.”

“And experience doesn’t?”

“Experience expects exactly enough.”

She lifted one hand then and touched the knot of my tie with two fingers. It was such a small gesture that for a second I thought she meant only to inspect it. Instead she loosened it slightly and let her hand rest there.

“You dress like a man who wants to be taken seriously,” she said.

“I am serious.”

“That isn’t the same thing.”

She pulled the tie free another inch. I did not move. Her hand left the tie and moved to my collar, then my throat, lightly, with none of the hesitation I had been congratulating myself for overcoming. It occurred to me then that I had mistaken passivity for restraint, and restraint for virtue.

“You can still leave,” she said.

“Can I?”

“Of course.” She looked at me calmly. “But you won’t.”

I remember that I wanted to answer her with something measured and superior. I did not. Instead I put my glass down on the floor beside hers.

She nodded once, as if a matter had been settled. Then I leaned toward her and kissed her. Without a word, her hand moved from my collar to the side of my face, then into my hair. Mine found her waist, narrow and warmer than I expected in that overheated room.

“Take your shoes off,” she said.

I did. By then she was close enough that any further hesitation would only have been another form of compliance. Her hand passed from my neck to my shoulder and lower, slowly, with no more uncertainty than there had been in her voice. I remember the stale sweetness of her perfume, the smoke in her hair, the heat of the room pressing through my shirt. Somewhere behind the wall water was still running. I was conscious, even then, of beginning to interpret what should merely have been felt. There was no sacredness in it, only the humiliatingly simple fact that I wanted her more than I wished to appear to.

Afterward the room went quiet. The radiator knocked once or twice. At some point we slept.

In daylight the room was smaller. One glass had tipped onto its side. My tie was under the chair. The air smelled of smoke, whiskey, and stale heat. Morning made the place look shabby.

When I woke she was already sitting up, trying to light a cigarette. Her hair had fallen loose at the sides, and in that first light she looked both younger and more tired.

“There’s no coffee,” she said.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It isn’t your apartment.”

She got the match to catch on the third try. I sat up and reached for my shirt. For a while neither of us spoke. The pipes moved behind the wall. Down in the street, someone was dragging open a shutter.

“Did you sleep well?” I asked.

“Enough.”

She took another cigarette from the packet on the table and looked at me through the smoke.

“You were easier to deal with before you started thinking again,” she said.

“Was I meant to do otherwise?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “Only not so soon.”

She said it without cruelty which made it harder to answer.

She dressed first. There was nothing hurried in it. She seemed already elsewhere. I found one of her shoes under the sofa and handed it to her.

“Thank you,” she said, as if we had become ordinary.

At the door I asked whether I would see her again.

“In Paris?” she said. “Anything is possible.”

Then she smiled, not warmly, but not unkindly either, and opened the door...

Walking back through the morning streets, I remember the cold more clearly than the sky. The pavements held that whitish Paris light that makes one think of snow even when there is none.

For years I thought the lesson of that night was that desire is never innocent. That was true, but insufficient. It took me longer to see that intelligence can be a kind of hunger, and that I had mistaken mine for character. At twenty-five I thought understanding people made me better than them. It did not.

The woman in the papers was not the woman in that room. But neither was the woman in that room the one I remembered afterward. Between the public Laure and the private Laure, I had made a third: part memory, part desire, part vanity. It was this third woman I mourned longest, which is only another way of saying that I had not yet finished confusing grief with self-regard.

I do not know how Laure truly died. That is the plain truth. Perhaps in a hotel, perhaps in another borrowed room, perhaps under a hospital lamp. The details were poor, and I improved upon them. Even the snow was mine. I gave it to her because

whiteness flatters the dead. It conceals the room, the body, the vulgar fact of an ending.  
Maybe that came later too. Maybe I put it there myself.