

FROM

Other People's Love Affairs: Stories

BY D. WYSTAN OWEN



From “Virginia’s Birthday”

Sunday nights along the boardwalk are slow: locals retired, weekenders gone. By midnight, the Blue Parrot has emptied. Tables lie unoccupied in front of the stage upon which May Valentine sings with the band. Where guests dined, candles flicker and die, a highball has here or there been abandoned. Above the piano, catching the light, turns the pale, bluish smoke from Ham’s cigarette. A number ends, “The Nearness of You,” and from his place, sitting at the rear of the club, Walter Chapman applauds, alone in the shadows.

It is a painful evening for Walter. Every week Sunday evening is painful. The club is not open on Monday or Tuesday, and the knowledge that he will not see May in that time makes it so. He watches her now, draped in a shimmering fabric like water: here pooling, here running over hipbone or breast. Her skin is deep brown, pearls iridescent beside it. He has loved her since the day in 1954 when she answered his first-ever call for auditions. “Stardust.” Another Hoagy Carmichael tune. Not thirty, already she sang with a wisdom; her references told of an itinerant past. Mr. Chapman is what she called him that day, and has continued to call him the better part of two decades since.

The band starts again, “You Go to My Head.” The arrangement, like all their arrangements, is sparse. Once soft-textured and warm, May’s voice has begun to grow brittle of late. Sometimes, summoned for a bend or a pickup, it strains and then cracks like a bird’s hollow bone. Walter doesn’t mind.

The fragility suits her. She always had a gift for turning a phrase as if it took all the strength in her body to do it. The suggestion was of privacy, solitude; you couldn't help but fall in love when you heard it, and now, even knowing she does not love him back, it is a comfort and consolation to him. The band plays, Walter has caught himself thinking, with the frail, haunted beauty of a burned-out home: the rhythm section—discordant and lurching—like high ruined rafters and walls, through the cracks in which Posey's trumpet emerges, a shaft of light, the mere suggestion of a note in his breath, and around which May's voice has twisted itself, like the bright, tattered silk of a scarf—not undamaged but somehow, miraculously, spared—lifted on an updraft of fiery air.

After the set, he finds her alone in her dressing room. He knocks, though he knows she will not be indecent. She never changes her clothes in the club.

She regards herself in the mirror, not appraisingly but with resignation, with boredom. The pins have already been removed from her hair.

"It was a good show. You sounded good, May."

"If only someone had been there to see it." She pours a drink: gin, kept among her perfumes.

"Sunday night," Walter says. He watches her swallow. Her lips leave another red stain on the glass.

"I'm glad you liked the show, Mr. Chapman."

She does not invite him to sit, does not offer to pour him a drink. When she speaks, she addresses his reflection in the mirror. She closes her eyes and with the pads of her fingers massages the skin about her temples and jaw.

"Birthday's coming up," he says. "She excited?"

"Virginia? I imagine she is."

Each year at the club there is a small celebration: gifts and a cake. The band plays something special.

"Sweet sixteen."

"That's right." She plucks a stray hair from her brow. "Thursday. And every bit of it, too. Just last week she failed an exam. Algebra. Chemistry, maybe. It used to be she was top of the class."

"She's a good girl," he says. "She'll do well on the next one. Seems no time ago she would come round the club."

May used to be apologetic about it, but he never minded the girl. He enjoyed bringing her soft drinks and pretzels, playing jacks or pinochle while her mother performed. He gave her crayons and pens to draw pictures with, stamps that she pasted into a book.

“Doesn’t it?” May says now, abstracted. “I rather think it does seem a long time. Some days it feels like a million years.”

MAY ARRIVES HOME after two in the morning, having stayed for a drink with Al at the bar and then hitched a ride with him back to the city. Virginia is asleep on the sofa, the TV left on with the test pattern showing. She does not stir when the screen is shut off, as she didn’t either when May had to fuss with the door. May knows that Virginia takes drugs. The kids at school must have gotten her on to them. Pills, maybe: she hasn’t smelled drink or reefer. It worries her to think about that, and because it does she brings over a blanket. It is spring, but the nights are still cold, and the window in the bathroom doesn’t properly close. In the darkness, Virginia looks peaceful. May would like to sit for a while—a girl needs her mother, she knows—but it is so late, and she makes her way instead to the bedroom, from beneath the door of which there comes no trace of light.

She undresses and slides herself under the covers. “Move over, old lady,” she almost says in a whisper, as if she’d forgotten that Agnes is gone.

She runs a hand along the sheet where once a warm body slept. Agnes always took more than her share of the bed, but May never minded that very much. If she were here now, Agnes might reach out to touch her, she might pull her into a folded embrace.

“Did you sing nice tonight?” May hears her say. Agnes used to ask her that every night.

“Yes. We did ‘The Nearness of You.’”

Sometimes she still finds traces of Agnes: small hairs in a comb, perfume in a scarf. After three months that is all that remains. Soon, she thinks, there will be nothing at all.

“Of course, there was hardly a soul in the place.”

They met in a tea shop. Outside was a hailstorm; Agnes had come seeking shelter. She was dressed far too lightly for winter, a trench coat over a thin cotton dress. The first woman May had seen with natural hair. It was

cropped short. Her face was angular, stern, a strength in it that was somehow recalled in the extreme narrowness of her wrists and her hands. Later, May would wonder at that, the power contained in that willowy frame. When Agnes reached for her in the night, her grip was sometimes overwhelmingly strong.

“I’m a singer,” May said, when they spoke in the shop. “A jazz singer as a matter of fact.”

Agnes said, “I’m keen on church music, myself.”

The hail abated and gave way to hard rain, which ran down the windows behind them in sheets. Headlamps from cars could be seen from the street, washed out, indistinct, like jewels glimpsed in water.

“Do you believe in God?” Agnes said, and May admitted she didn’t. “That’s all right. Sometimes love can take time.”

They lived together eight years.

In the darkness, May says, “He’s sure to go under. I don’t know how he’s managed this long.”

There is comfort in speaking aloud.

“Did Virginia finish her homework tonight? Agnes, do you think she takes drugs?”

In the living room, Virginia lifts her head from the pillow. Like a strange, ghostly detail from a dream, she recalls her mother having been in the room. The keys in the lock, the television switched off: these sounds register after the fact. The pills she took are stronger than the previous ones. Jeanene has warned her of that. She doesn’t know what is in them; Jeanene doesn’t either. They make you feel like you are taking a bath. Whatever the color, that’s the name of the pill: red, blue, yellow, or pink.

Another sound emerges, more immediate now. It is her mother’s voice, a murmur from under the door. She is talking to Agnes again; knowing that, Virginia feels sorry for her. These months they have suffered apart, not able in their grief to comfort each other. Fly-by-night is what May called the man Agnes left with. Virginia could not recall having seen him. There had been people who came and went through the years, new congregants and preachers who guided her spirit. She was the sort of person always searching for something; a holy fool, May sometimes said. But nights, when they were alone, she would tenderly braid Virginia’s hair. They would laugh at stories

of childhood mischief, old jobs from which Agnes had got herself sacked. When first she'd come to live in their flat May had called her Virginia's aunt. But Agnes never made any mention of that. Standing over steaming pots in the kitchen, she explained the proper way to make curry, or soup, having been taught in just the same way as a girl.

It would not have changed anything, the truth being spoken. Things would have been better, in fact. She does not mind that her mother is that way. It doesn't matter at all. She only wishes there had been no pretense, that she might have loved Agnes unfettered by lies. Sometimes Fergie Davidson says things about it, and about Mr. Chapman as well. At school, people say Fergie fancies Virginia. That's why he hurts her feelings so much. Four Eyes he used to call her. Lemonade because her complexion was pale. Lately he has begun to say other things, things that make her scalp itch with discomfort: "What's two and six buy me? Three? Have a heart. I'll starve. You drive a hard bargain, Missy."

"There was wickedness here," Agnes said when she left, and Virginia knows that was painful for May. She wouldn't have been in her right mind to say that. It would have been a madness, speaking that way.

She turns over, frightened all of a sudden. The voice from the next room continues to drone.

"How will I manage?" May says in the dark, sleep, like warm limbs, bearing her up.

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