

# *A Literature of Reticence*

— AN ESSAY BY —

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**M**y maternal grandmother was a cabaret singer. My father (who is musical, too) immigrated from England in 1968.

I don't often say much about my own life. As a writer, I haven't found it terribly relevant, and anyway, privacy matters to me. But it turns out these details are important. A first book is a uniquely personal artifact—unique because it has, in effect, taken the author all of his or her life.

I worked on *Other People's Love Affairs*—directly on the writing, that is—for the better part of ten years. In that time I was married, held and left jobs, moved halfway across the country and back. I experienced joy and great sadness, disappointment, success. I read many wonderful books. By the time I had reached the end of a draft, it was hard to claim the stories even shared an author, since each one seemed to have been written by a different, irrecoverable self. Reading the manuscript was disquieting, strange. It didn't seem quite my own. To finish, to make it cohere, required an excavation, a search for threads to pull through, strands that might be woven together.

There were small ones I recognized, naturally. Chiefly the influence of all I had read. Here, I could see, was V. S. Pritchett's "The Saint." Here was Anton Chekhov's "The Kiss." Here were Katherine Mansfield, Graham Greene, J. L. Carr. The writers we love tell a kind of life story, which is perhaps why I began to more closely consider May Valentine in my story "Virginia's Birthday," singing in that frail, haunted way.

My grandmother, as I said, had been a singer, a torch act, at the famous "hungry i" nightclub in San Francisco. Afternoons, when we were at her house for a visit, she liked to draw my sister and me to her room, where a small cassette deck played piano accompaniments to the numbers she wanted to practice for us. Later still, after my grandfather had died and dementia had robbed her of everything else, she could still recall the lyrics to songs.

(I suppose the melancholy of that found its way to the Blue Parrot, too: the performer carrying on long after the audience has gone home.) Her favorite singers had been the ones—like Sarah Vaughan, Mel Tormé—whose talents seemed boundless, from whom notes seemed to flow without effort or impediment. Here we differed. I favored acts who performed the way May does (for that matter, the way my grandmother did): Miles Davis, whose horn seemed to probe and retreat, Billie Holiday, who would rearrange lines until they sounded like questions, apologies, pleas. As if reaching out with both longing and dread. This seemed more honest to a person like me, for whom speech has always required an effort.

My father was born in Bristol, UK, and raised in a borough west of London, near Heathrow. He moved to the US to marry my mother, and—it must be said—experienced immigration of the smoothest kind, sheltered from harsher circumstance by his race, native tongue, and the stability of his academic career. Still, one was conscious always in my house of two languages being spoken. This was not merely a question of his accent, but of grammar and cadence and syntax: all the gaps and pauses, emphases and avoidances that give shape and nuance to the meaning of words. To a writer, this awareness can be beneficial, but it can also cause a subtle estrangement from language, a constant awareness of the limits of one's own fluency. There is a grasping in this kind of speech: on the one side toward an unrecoverable past; on the other toward a sense of home in the present. The result is a kind of *linguistic* reticence, which I have always felt, and which came to resonate for me with the emotional reticence I recognized in the characters populating this book.

And so it was this reticence—this *effort*, above all—that began to bind the stories for me. An effort that became a grammar, a language. It was the strangest thing, probably, about these otherwise traditional stories: the ambivalence they embodied in the telling. In Colm Toibin's book on Elizabeth Bishop, he writes, "For her, the most difficult thing to do was to make a statement . . . [Her] writing bore the marks, many of them deliberate . . . of things that had been said, but had now been erased." I began to see my own stories as aspiring to a similar tension, in which the assertion inherent in every sentence was opposed by a competing desire: erasure.

Reading the book in this way, as participating in what might be called a literature of reticence, I began to see its evidence everywhere. In the title, for instance, which suggests a remove, a limit to what can be known of its subject. (Where that title came from, I am not sure, but I suspect I had in mind a sentence from *The House of Mirth*, about Lily Bart's shy and diffident cousin, Gerty Farish. "Such flashes of joy as Lily moved in," Wharton wrote, "would have blinded Miss Farish, who was accustomed, in the way of happiness, to such scant light as shone through the cracks of other people's lives.") In the village, too, whose name, Glass (chosen for no loftier reason than its pleasing my ear), connotes not just delicacy, but also a transparent, impermeable barrier. And in smaller, equally unplanned details: the childlike paintings of Klee and Kandinsky to which Johnny Elford is drawn in "The Patroness"; the windows through which Louise views the world in "Housekeeper"; the annihilation (the *erasure*) longed for by Rose Goodrum in the final pages of "The Well Sister."

The book coheres finally, I think, not because it is the product of a coherent self, but because it is the means through which a self was created: cautiously, painstakingly. Its characters are attempting the same, reaching across fractured space, time, or language. There is strain underneath this; there is effort. If their hands shake, if they stammer, if they even briefly lose heart in the telling, perhaps then I may trust that they are telling us the truth.