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My Love, My Love, My Love

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WITH HER EYELIDS CLOSED against the sun Ella saw orange. Anyway, it was not black. Nature lover, she thought, basking, serene, an animal. She failed to convince herself and flicked open her lids. She could see the brown skin of his thigh. By slightly turning her head she saw his closed sleeping face. Ah, then... if he was asleep. And so she began the minute tireless journey against which, a moment before, she had closed her eyes.

His close-shaven black beard was almost obliterated by the sun so that his face seemed very much as it must have been in adolescence. Charming. She would have liked a new word for his face but automatically she had thought charming. On up to his black hair on an almost flawless head with the strong short neck going into really fine shoulders. She couldn't see the small of his back but she knew that he had one and that it was covered, rather shockingly it had been for her at first, with fine brown hair. And his legs satisfyingly sturdy. She hated thin-legged men. She had often told herself that if he had had thin legs she would not have married him. It was her only loophole and might conceivably have been true of any other man.

They were lying on the grass of an enclosed courtyard belonging to a group of apartment buildings. Ella looked horizontally at the other tenants taking the sun. The couples all looked different, one from the other, and mostly the women were better looking. They interested her so that her mind was filled with little spent exclamations—"Ah, so? And then. If I may say so. So—so—" Whenever her mind said "Voilà" she wanted to laugh. She would have liked to tell Dick
about the *voilà*, but it had to be brought off, and that was for another time.

As though she had awakened him, Dick opened his eyes without turning to look at her. He looked at the sky and then down and across to the other people. A full-figured blonde girl crossed not far from them and Ella saw that she was close to being beautiful. She knew that Dick had seen all of her beauty instantly in the subtle ways of bone-joining and personal mannerisms. He would almost know what she would say in any hypothetical instance. He knew women without knowing any of them well. It was because of men like him that women had pride and felt justification and did not resent their weaknesses.

He turned toward Ella and smiled. Her returning smile was just right, very easy. He turned on his belly and buried his head in his arms.

Ella held her wrists close to her face and looked at them. They were quite brown and the tan made them seem strong. She propped herself quietly on her elbows and looked at her legs. Long and nicely shaped with knobby knees that looked as they had when she was ten. She lay again on her back. Dick had not stirred. "Yes? Well? So?" Her mind rejected its little coquetries. And the cumulative urgency returned as though it had never been away.

Her stare swung doggedly back to the other couples. It was so easy to see the telltale signs. Now, for instance, nothing was so funny as that woman in the big sun hat would have it. And they always looked at their husbands when they spoke. Some of them even walked around aimlessly. Fighting the good fight, Ella thought, and could feel her contempt for them becoming displaced by an incipient pity.

"Dick."
"Mmmmm."
"Were you happy when you were a kid?"
She heard her own light words and almost simultaneously saw the old and artful escape she had made for herself. Poets had always been unhappy. But he turned on his arms to look at her.
"I'd say yup."
"I suppose you ate drumsticks in paper pants."
"Sure."
"And had your own ball and bat and a nickname and swam when you were four."
"Well," he laughed. "Does my happy childhood disturb you the way it disturbs my agent?"
"No. Only mine was different. I was kind of grubby."

"Oh, well, I was constipated for an entire week at summer camp just because I liked being."

She laughed unbelievingly.

"Finally on the last day I started up a hill and fell down. I couldn't get up. And Jack Betz came running and I said, 'Get the Scoutmaster' and Jack started to howl because I couldn't get up so I said, 'My God, I'm constipated, you fool.'"

Their laughter destroyed her resolve. Walking in front of Dick back to their apartment she was glad to be leaving the sun, toneless even in Virginia, falling like whitewash on the concrete and the filling station at the corner. The moment had passed and with it most of its urgency. Only she had wanted to tell him about the small-town grocery stores she'd sat in on Saturday nights, and all the thinking she'd done. And how she'd noticed this one thing all the time about men and women.

She composed her massive theorem.

You see, Dick, I saw so many marriages and I was always struck by the woman's vitality. Really ruthless! How to describe it! The wife devoured her husband without appetite and when there was nothing left she shopped. With him in tow and the children. (I saw them only in grocery stores, you see, those awful Saturday nights!) And there was no longer any appeal she could have made to him. Only she didn't know it. Because silently and long ago and for a long time she had devoured him and all of it without embarrassment. I was the only one embarrassed. Yes, yes, yes. Have you noticed this survival of women? And how they are not shamed that a man has been stripped of his adventure and all romance and how they don't turn away from him when he looks at them and sees them. How can I say it?

She wondered how Dick would have replied, but nothing suggested itself. She had a feeling that the summer-camp story had been inevitable. At any rate, there would have been a laugh. She squinted at him. Sometimes it seemed irrational even to her that he wrote poetry. He did not look or act like any sort of artist. How did he live so secretly? Lightly, lightly—like a leaf. His talent was osmotic. She saw the little feelers of his talent absorbing life. A great relief seized her. She could have wept.

Their apartment was cool after the sun, all red and green and gold. Like a stranger she surveyed it.

"What's the schedule?" He was eating cold chicken at the same time
that he plucked dishes from the icebox and opened lids. She came up back of him and clasped his waist, resting her cheek against his sunwarmed shoulder. He grinned round at her.

"What chic white little teeth you have," she said.

She moved away from him through the apartment to their bedroom where she stripped, got into a robe, and took towels and soap into the shower. He knocked on the bathroom door as she was adjusting her shower cap; then opened the door to look around it.

"Some tomato."

They grinned at each other.

"It's Hilary and Van and that blasted movie tonight, isn't it?"

"Yup."

He withdrew. She leaned forward and looked intently at her reflection in the mirror.

What had she wanted him to say? That she had a nice tan? He did not know that she had never been tanned before. She stretched her arms above her head and looked at them. He didn't know that the curve of her forearm was a delicate thing and had never appeared in anyone in her family before. Nor that it was miraculous—this line from her hip to knee; nor the miracle of words that only occasionally smacked of a schoolmarm on an Iowa prairie, nor the pensive expression on a face that was called sérieuse rather than serious.

He did not know that she was a starved and desperate fugitive from farmers and washing machines and easy-installment terms of yellow oak and Max Parrish. He did not know that she was the weary survivor of summer nights when she'd known for sure the world was going to end. He hadn't heard the voices of children on the thin summer air and known thereby that the world was going to end sometime for sure.

For a moment she felt quite overcome with fear of loneliness and the ailing to be held and comforted. Or to hold, she thought, sickened at herself. After the careful months of touching him only when she was quite sure he wanted to be touched, of being clever only at a significant moment, after all the sly distortions of reality and the choking of country passion, she remained exactly what she'd always been—the devouring female.

When she returned to the bedroom Dick was sitting in white shorts on the edge of the bed. He was reading the funny papers. Walking past him gave her a queer disembodied feeling, as though she did not exist. He continued to read but her own glance fell bright and deadly...
on his shoulders. *Regardez-moi!* He did not look up and, the spell broken, she crossed to the bureau and began meticulously to gather her clothes. Snares and pitfalls! these gossamer hose and delicate underpants. Then she wanted to laugh. He had no idea what her underclothes consisted of. She had a mole high on her left thigh, too. And in one place on the nape of her neck her hair was very fine and light—much finer and lighter than the rest so it didn’t look good shingled. Remarkable, hey? She’d had a paper route, too, when her brother got one, and sometimes when it stormed the lightning was pink and she’d been scared but had always put the paper inside the screen the way she was supposed to.

Well, she’d known it for a little while now. He had never really possessed her. He didn’t want to, she reflected, being free of a certain base craving. His ego needed no propping. For—after all—wasn’t that what she needed when it came right down to it? For a certainty. But, oh, how sad it made her feel! so that her body seemed actually to have shrunk and she hurried to cover it. It occurred to her that she would grow increasingly thin throughout her lifetime. Some women got fat but she would gradually strip down. She might even look a little hectic and feverish. Suddenly she wanted to say something cruel and bitter, cruel and bitter.

When they were both dressed, he put his arms around her and pretended to spoil her lipstick.

“You look nice,” he said.

“You feel proud of me?”

“I’m always proud of you.”

The buzzer sounded and they went hand-in-hand up the hall to let in Hilary and Van.

She found herself watching them too closely as they settled atop their little green chairs, integrated by the black oval of the table into a charming composition of dark and light, man and woman. She busied herself with the fragrant Chinese tea and the tiny spice cakes. Two lumps for Hilary, the same for Dick. She hated the meek womanly pose that pouring tea required of her. It made her feel like a servant. Handing Hilary his tea she looked squarely into his eyes. He was kind and intelligent, and, God help her, she had always liked him. There was nothing to fight against. The small of her back touched her chair as she sat sipping her tea.

It was when Hilary and Dick started talk about their projected
hunting trip that she finally had her say. She had known for a week that they planned on the next weekend. Now it was no, no, it could not be! They were surprised and looked at her in polite expectation. To tell them of her deathly fear of guns seemed like a self-violation. She gave no reasons.

"But darling..."

"Please, Dick, I just don’t want you to go...

"Some other time, Hilary." She saw Dick was only faintly embarrassed. There was something mild and patient in his face. She had never seen that look in his face before. Yet she had seen it a hundred times before on the faces of the men who walked in front of their wives into the stores. She had seen the men, lounging over the counters, mild and impotent while their wives picked over the vegetables and haggled at prices. She had seen a man's face when he was going out the door, close to his wife so that he saw the crooked parting in her hair and the coarse pores around her nose.

And she had been fooled, by Christ! She'd felt sorry for those poor men with their wives grown monstrous before their eyes. And the idle feminine gossip while the men (hah!) waited.

Oh she'd like to see the bonfire those red hair ribbons would make that had been thrown away the second month of a marriage. Ribbons that’d never been looked at. She’d like to see it! And all the quiet pretenses of sleep when a husband climbed into bed, they’d fill a book. Because there’d been too many other times of refusal, only going the other way. The bastards.

Walking to the neighborhood movie, she felt like a gargoyle in the shadows. She even touched her face to see whether its features had changed, and averted her eyes from her friends, unable to see them except as mortal enemies walking stride in stride. Hilary helped Van over a curbstone and it caused in her a silent fit of laughter. The obsequious way Van looked up at him, accepting the crumbs of his felicity, his gratitude for a good dinner (and more to come, hey, hey), a proffered hand at a curbstone. Well, the way had been swept clean for fine gestures. Hilary lived in a woman-made freedom. For Van always stopped short of him. Carefully, discreetly, in word and look she allowed him to live as he pleased. And the day Van's vitality could no longer be satisfied with such meager fare? Oh, the fine contempt. The fine everlasting contempt.

The dark of the moviehouse was welcome, and the anonymity of
being a body in a seat while a story of young and exquisite love unfolded before them. It was the way everyone wanted to be in love and few ever were. But Ella and Dick had attained it. For every phrase uttered on the screen Ella could match it with one of their own. She saw the lightness of a gay moment turned into sorrow and the deft turn from sorrow before it should become grief. She saw the irretrievable loss taken courageously and heard the words which were human but always a syllable away from humanity.

This is well done. The audience sighed, enraptured. This is the way it should be. Isn’t love wonderful when it’s lovely like this? And see, they suffer, they suffer too.

Then it was over. They moved back up the aisle to stand blinking under the garish light of the marquee. Dick captured Ella’s hand. He had known (O insufferable ape). Feel the soft pressure of his hand, knowing (O pedant poet). It had been their story. Feel the soft sheen in his eyes, like a caress falling in pride upon you.

Oh you go in to see Ginger Rogers and the gayety and the lightness and the incredible humanness of Ginger Rogers in love and you go out again and you find the heaviness of your own love under the marquee waiting the leprosy the red light the trundling lumber truck of your love the methodism of your love the unbearable crushing weight slowing swelling your movements today it is not wanted today I will dance for you with my big feet making little movements with the great arcs of my arms performing incredibly small loops a ton and a half of stone poised on a nine-inch base.

He smiled at her. Her returning smile was just right, very easy.