Morning, Noon and Night Overture

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Abstract

All right, so you don’t like my poetry.” I recrossed my legs. My left foot was going to sleep. “Well, I didn’t say that. I just don’t understand it.” Rosha sat plumply on the couch, sedate, her hands relaxed palm-up in her lap, like the girl in the corny print I’d seen somewhere called Age of Innocence.
Morning, Noon and Night

Overture

(Peer Gynt Suite)

by Eleanor Mautner Fernelius

Special Student

"ALL RIGHT, so you don’t like my poetry.” I recrossed my legs. My left foot was going to sleep.

“Well, I didn’t say that. I just don’t understand it.” Rosha sat plumply on the couch, sedate, her hands relaxed palm-up in her lap, like the girl in the corny print I’d seen somewhere called Age of Innocence.

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

“Not exactly, I can’t say I’m crazy about something I don’t understand.” Rosha’s voice was cautiously honest. “I guess I like light poetry to read for relaxation . . . that rhymes.” Her voice ended on an up note as though she’d like to add more but wasn’t quite sure what.

“I don’t particularly like poetry that rhymes. I’m not saying I’m so good, but if I wrote like Edgar A. Guest I’d give up. Maybe I should give up anyhow, who knows, but I won’t . . .” trying not to sound too pugnacious. Rosha was a nice placid person to talk to even if we didn’t agree on many things.

"Say," I changed the subject, “did you get to the concert last Saturday? How did you like the duet?”

Rasha’s voice pulled back into some remote corner of her ample chest cavity. Her words, small precise icicles suspended from a stiff wire, slipped through cold lips. “They are both good piano technicians.”

“Oh . . . Well, I haven’t heard her but he’s terrific. Plays as though he and the piano were one. I can’t forgive myself for being sick and not being able to go.”
"Who asks to be sick?" The icicles melted.

Piano teacher Rosha had had her hackles up. Professional jealousy, I thought. "I've been looking forward to hearing her ever since I heard the duet was scheduled, but," I philosophized, "can't get to everything."

"Yeh." Rosha nodded for emphasis. "Isn't that the truth."

We were both familiar with the vicissitudes life had to offer. Rosha had four children. I had three. "If it isn't one thing it's ten others. Always something. How about some coffee?"

"Don't bother," Rosha adjusted the cushion behind her back, "I can only stay a minute. You know me and coffee . . . I just half drink it. My young hopefuls start coming at three."

"Gives me a chuckle . . . what you call your students."

"Well, they're young and I'm hopeful. What else should I call them?"

"I like it."

Rossa placed her hands, one on each side of her on the couch, and heaved away from the cushion behind her back. "I'm glad you're feeling better. I'd better get home so I can start my supper before they come." She pushed with both hands and stood up.

Rising, I turned with her toward the front door and, reaching it first, pulled it back.

"Say, don't get a draft on you. Not now!" Rosha waved me back and looked through the glass of the storm door. "Looks as though you're getting more company."

"Hi, there," Madeline's slightly husky voice came through the outer door. "I've been trying to call you for days."

"Oh, hi. Sometimes I forget to turn my phone on, but this past week I've been sick and just didn't. You remember Rosha, don't you?"

"Oh, yes. Nice to see you again."

"Nice to see you, too. I was just leaving. Take care of yourself, Dot."
Rosha plodded heavily, taking the long way round over the cement path, instead of cutting across the lawn toward her home two houses away.

“Come in and sit down.” I backed away from the chilly air.

“What’s been wrong with you?” Madeline took the largest ashtray I owned from the top of the record cabinet and settled herself on the couch, rummaging in the bottom of her bag for cigarettes. She coughed hoarsely as she extracted one and put it between her lips.

“The usual bugs everyone else is fighting. We’ve been passing them back and forth like jugglers here. How’s your family doing?”

“My son thinks he’s in love again. He’s still paying for the engagement ring from last time he was sure he was in love. Barely nineteen! She’s the same age and she’s been married and has a baby. God!”

Madeline puffed out a huge mushroom of smoke and tapping her foot tensely she shook ashes from an already bare-tipped cigarette.

“She’s probably a nice girl,” I soothed.

“She’s nice enough and the baby’s a doll, but Ben just drives me crazy. With all the money his father has he doesn’t want to go to college. I think he’d be happy being a mechanic. He drinks too much, runs around too much, never gets enough sleep. Thank God he finished high school. I can’t wait until the draft catches up with him. It may make a man of him yet. I wish he got along better with his father, but then his sister sets the pace. When she got that first scholarship it didn’t bother Ben too much. Now that she’s gotten this scholarship from the Rockefeller Foundation and is going to New York in September, he has given up completely. Maybe he’d never be the genius Barb is, but he could try something. If his father would just stop rubbing in what Barbara’s accomplished.” Madeline paused for breath and took three quick puffs of her cigarette, tapping the ashes off until I thought she would shake the lit tobacco out of the end.
“He'll find his way. Sometimes it doesn't do any good to talk. Just wear yourself out.”

“Don't I know. I still think all children should be pushed out of the nest at eighteen. Let them fight it out for themselves. They won't do anything you tell them anyhow!”

The air between us was fading from clear to blue-gray with smoke.

“Like some coffee?”

“Thanks, no. If it weren't so early I'd ask for a drink. But I have to stop at my sister's house before I go home. She has some literature for me to read, from the League of Women Voters. That's all I'd have to do... smell like alcohol. Yata ta ta, yata ta ta to my mother. Then my church-going mother, who has never raised her voice, and I wish she'd say goddamn just once, will say, 'Now Madeline!' Oh! Christ! Shit! I'm in a vile mood. Maybe I will anyhow. Do you have any beer? Can't be arrested for drunken driving on one beer.”

Madeline crushed out her third half-smoked cigarette and followed me into the kitchen.

“Aren't you having one, too?”

“No. If I had your petite shape I would.” I reached for a glass.

“Never mind the glass. The can is fine. The mood I'm in I'd put my mouth right to the spiggot. God, I feel lousy. I'm letting it all out on you.”

“Doesn't bother me. Go ahead. Something tells me you had another argument with Ben, senior.”

“He got drunk again last night. And you know what he had the nerve to ask me? It's his secretary's birthday. He wants me to get her a gift and he's taking us both out to dinner Saturday night.”

“That's not so bad. He's not taking her out alone...”

“Alone! She's ten years younger than I am. He's flaunting her under my nose. How would you like to have your husband take you to a bar... sit between you and HER and talk to no one but her, practically. I feel like a fifth wheel. I keep thinking... God knows what they do when
he’s not in the mood to ask me along to stick pins into. It’s not the first time he’s made me the extra . . . . He has a brilliant mind. Why does he have to be such a louse?”

“Did you ever say anything to him about it? Sounds as though he’s just trying to make you jealous. Maybe he thinks you don’t care about him anymore.”

“No, it’s not that. I’ve said enough. He knows how I feel. He’s just a stinker. When I think back . . . he wasn’t this way when he was in metallurgy research back east. Money’s nice, but public relations . . . all these out-of-state buyers who have to be wined, dined, and girled. Sometimes I think he’d rent me out, like the Eskimos, if the other kind weren’t so available. Those are the nights I stay home alone. You’re lucky.” Madeline gulped the last of the can of beer and with an unseeing look in her eyes pushed it to one side, and without protest closed her hand around the other can I had already opened.

“Oh, I don’t know. I often wonder if my husband isn’t having a big fat love affair in the fifteen minutes it takes him to get home.”

Madeline smiled wistfully. “Yours isn’t the type.” She sighed . . . again the far-off look.

“Who knows who’s the type? It’s something that could happen to anyone. I’ve always wondered if three quarters of it doesn’t come from within the meanderer. I mean, I’ve seen men with attractive nice wives—whom they say they love—play around. Somewhere along the line, after the honeymoon is over, a man decides this is what he will, or won’t, do. Women too.”

Madeline gulped some more beer, while I watched the dust dance in a bar of weak sunlight across the kitchen cupboards at eleven o’clock high.

“Your plants look nice.”

“Only what no one can kill grows for me. You’re the one with the green thumb.”

“I wish I had it with husbands. I’m good in bed. I like sex if you don’t mind my saying so.”

“I don’t mind.”
“Psychologists tell us it's usually the other one's fault when someone strays. I don't know what mine wants. Say, do you have any peppermints? I'd better not get too close to Betty. If my sister could only run her own life as efficiently as she tries to run mine! One beer, and she calls you an alcoholic.”

“Sorry, I don’t.”

“Ach, I'll call and tell her I'll stop by tomorrow. All she wants, really, is check up on: am I brushing my teeth with salt, doing my exercises, not drinking, sitting straight on my chair . . . you know, I think my sister is a nut!”

“Maybe she feels like half a mother to you. She's about ten years older, isn't she?”

“Eleven. She can't take care of her own home even with a maid. What she ever had four for I'll never know. With her temperament she shouldn't have had any.”

“Statistics say three quarters of the babies conceived just happen.”

“Ha, not ex-nurse Betty. She just did her duty, and hates every minute of it. She's always off with the League of Women Voters or doing church work, while Mother and the maid run her house.”

“It's an interesting group. They don't accomplish much, but . . . .”

“They're not supposed to accomplish . . . in that sense. It's educational, for members, and the public. I've always been interested in politics. You know, I was one of those red, white and blue girls for Stevenson. I worked so hard for him I almost had a nervous breakdown when he lost.”

“He impressed me . . . I don’t know when I've gotten so stirred up over a public figure. There's something wonderful about that man. He's an intellectual. Something you can't say about most politicians. I actually cried when we were listening to his concession speech on TV. It was so . . . so pathetic.”

“I bawled.”

“That Time picture showing the hole in the sole of his shoe . . . .”
"It's a Republican rag."

"Yes, but it's so well written from the literary standpoint. Gives me something to sharpen my wits against when I disagree with what they say. I enjoy their snide captions . . . like that bosomy photograph of Sophia Loren in the Cinema section once. Underneath, it said *She's pointless in this picture.* It was that movie with Gary Grant and Frank Sinatra a couple of years ago, where they drag some cannon half-way across Spain."

"I didn't see it."

"It was based on the Spanish Revolution."

"Mmhumn. Say, have you read Huxley's *Point Counter Point?* Best thing he's done."

"So I hear. Maybe I wasn't in the mood when I tried to read it. I have a copy. If I ever get into the proper mood I'll take another stab at it. Just finished reading Herbert Wendt's *It Began in Babel.* Very exciting! History . . . archeology . . . anthropology . . . ethnology! Borrow it if you like."

"I will, when I've finished the three books I'm reading now."

Madeline reached for her fourth can of beer and took a piece of cheese from a plate I'd put on the kitchen table, placed it on a Wheat-thin and stuffed it into her mouth.

"Say, you don't mind if I start my supper while we talk."

Madeline shook her head, her mouth full of cracker and cheese . . . made a wild pointing gesture toward the phone, her eyebrows raised questioningly. She chewed rapidly to get the cracker and cheese down to where she could talk.

"Sure, go ahead." I was dicing onion into the dutch oven to get my pot-roast started.

Madeline made an obvious effort to swallow . . . took some beer to wash her dry throat. Finally cleared her sound track and rounded the kitchen table toward the phone. "I'll tell my sister I'm cleaning my basement. Then when she calls back to check on me, I'll have a good excuse not to hear."
“Oh! She wouldn’t do that.”

“Wouldn’t she! You don’t know Betty.”

I began to mince a bud of garlic into the pot as Madeline’s over-unctuous voice flowed through the receiver.

“I’m so sorry, Betty. I got involved in this basement cleaning binge and I can’t leave the basement this way. No one will be able to walk through. I’ll have more time tomorrow and I’ll be less tired . . . we can talk . . . .”

Evidently Betty was convinced. Madeline hung up. “God, I wish I were home, just to hear that damn phone ring when she calls me back. She’s such a bastard.”

“She probably has her good points. Aren’t we all stinkers at times? You should hear me scream like a banshee, when I have the strength and the cause.”

“Listen, any mother who screams at her lousy brats is still an angel. Why do we have them? Why do we get married at all? Why do we torture ourselves? Next book I read is going to be *Sex and the Single Girl.*”

“That’s something we’ll never be again.”

“Yeh, but I want to find out what I *could* have had if I knew then what I know now.”

“I have a feeling dopes like us would do exactly the same thing.” With my face still over the pot, I rubbed my eyes as smoke from the browning meat stung. “Phew, this is going to drive me out of the house.”

“Smells good!” Madeline sniffed audibly. “Aaah! I love the smell of garlic and onions.”

“Not this close.” A tear trickled down my cheek as I maneuvered with two forks, to brown the roast on its reverse side. I covered the pot, lowered the heat under it, and turned the stove exhaust-fan on. “Let’s go back into the living room.” I waved my hands in front of my face, like a grizzly on its hind legs.

“OK, but aren’t you going to join me with even one?” Madeline closed her hand around her sixth can of beer and picked up the loaded ash-tray with the other.

“Here, let me empty the ash-tray. Yeh, I’ll join you.” I emptied the ashes and gigantic butts in the garbage bag and took a bottle of lo-cal Bubble-up from the refrigerator.

“Here.” I placed the empty, smudged ash-tray on the little table next to the couch where Madeline was sitting with her shoes off and her feet tucked under her.
"I really should go. I have to stop downtown and get Miss Secretary something poisonous for her birthday."

"Why don't you refuse?"

"If I do he'll get something too expensive. He only asked me, to twist the knife. I read somewhere once that some character died and left everything to his wife except for his brand new five thousand dollar car. His wife was to sell it and give the proceeds to his secretary. You know what his wife did? Sold the car for fifty dollars. Not so dumb! Some car-buyer was lucky. It gives me ideas."

I laughed for an answer and swallowed some Bubble-up, choking a little on the fizz.

"Dorothy . . ." Madeline was alcoholically serious now, "if you were me would you get a divorce? I know he's sleeping with that goddamn bitch."

I waited a moment. "I'm not sure what I would do. Right now, I don't think Ron is doing anything, so it would be easy for me to be indignant and make all kinds of independent statements. I don't think I could really be sure . . . unless I were actually faced with the situation . . . especially where children are involved . . . I don't know, Madeline. I don't think anyone can tell anyone else what to do. Whatever you do, you're the one who has to live with it."

"I feel as though I just can't stand it anymore." Tears were coursing down Madeline's cheeks . . . half desperation, one quarter self-pity . . . one quarter alcohol.

"Just be sure to think long and hard before you do anything."

"I'm always bothering you with my troubles. I must sound like a broken record. I'll probably go on raving and do nothing."

Madeline wiped her eyes and blew her nose. Slipping her feet into her shoes, she rose from the couch. "I guess I'd better be going." She ran her arms through the sleeves of her coat and, starting for the door, turned . . . "I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have you to talk to . . . ."

"What are friends for? Don't I borrow your ear, too?"

"Hope you feel well soon . . . Bye."

"Bye."

The phone rang as I walked from the front door and I hurried across the kitchen, turning off the fan over the stove on the way.

"Hello?"
"I had a minute because one of my young hopefuls hasn't shown yet, so I thought I'd call. Just saw Madeline leave. What did she have to say?" Rosha's voice had its arms folded on the back fence.

"Oh, nothing much. We just chit-chatted," I evaded.

"Oh . . . well, I just wondered," trying to sound like polite disinterest as her voice faded away into disappointment. "Someone's ringing my door-bell. Must be my pupil. Bye."

"Bye." I hung up, relieved, and headed toward the bedroom. "Saved by the bell," I invented, and fell, weakly, face down on my bed, not thinking, just half breathing, as I waited for the children to come home from school.

**Departure**

*by K. P. Kaiser*

*Architecture, Jr.*

looking back
far behind,
i see my road
stretched
from mind to mind
until
each individual,
no longer
distinguishable,
blends
with his group
and each group
with
the Mass.
having no end,
the Mass
stretches beyond any
God's knowledge,
or
wish to guess.