M.L.

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Abstract

APPLE-BLOSSOM shampoo, whipped to creamy-fluffiness, trickled behind Mary Lou’s ears, over her face, down her smooth, young body. She bent her head back, letting the water drum on her forehead . . . sweeping her long, black hair into the water-fall that rushed down her back...
The concerto recorded

You
sit and talk

While heart and soul delivers forth
out of the bond of heart-tearing years
from the quivering wires
That which was poured out on the pages

By another one
who sat and pondered
much as I do

While you
only talk

M. L.

APPLE-BLOSSOM shampoo, whipped to creamy-fluffiness, trickled behind Mary Lou's ears, over her face, down her smooth, young body. She bent her head back, letting the water drum on her forehead... sweeping her long, black hair into the water-fall that rushed down her back. She started singing, "I've got a wonderful feeling, everything's going my way!..." Funny how good I sound in a shower. Can't even sing in church... at home. But the church here, with the big organ, does things for me!

"That little old church at home... where Nicky and I used to go. Funny how things here at school seem bigger. Big buildings, big crowds... big dates... like the one tonight."

Mary pivoted under the warm water. It was a blind date... one of the actives had fixed it up... with Donovan Lee. According to the actives, Lee was an "utter doll." According to the annual he was in practically every organization on campus, and president of three of them.

A wide, silver bracelet, which said "Mary Lou" on the outside and "Nick" next to her arm, clanked against the nozzle as she turned off the shower and rushed to her room...
She was on the floor near the radiator brushing her hair with long steady strokes when Jan, her roommate, came clomping in. Jan hung a dripping shower cap on the door knob. "We'd best hurry to make it to dinner."

"I'm not going down. My hair'll completely fall if I don't have it up for a while . . . then wouldn't Donovan be impressed?"

"Yor date's not till eight, is it?" Jan took three white articles and a pair of bobby-socks from a drawer.

"No, but I've got things to do, and I'm much too excited to eat. Oh, Jan, how shall I act?"

"If he doesn't like you the way you are, you'll get awfully tired putting on an act, M.L." The diamond on Jan's left hand flashed white light.

"But there are so many 'the-way-you-are's' that I can be. Suave, cool, sophisticated" . . . She flicked ashes from an imaginary cigarette with a crooked little-finger . . . "or I can be a wide-eyed innocent" . . . she rolled her eyes at her roommate in unconvincing shyness.

"Which one do you use on Nicky?"

"Did I use on Nicky, you mean. When people get themselves into the marines, they are past tense." Mary Lou stood up to get her curlers. Her roommate was looking at her seriously. So were the two photographs of service men on their dresser. The blond one wore a marine uniform. Her roommate pulled on a sweater and when her face came out the top, she was still looking at Mary Lou.

"I don't mean it that way." Mary Lou forced a wave with her fingers and pinned it in. "But with Nicky . . ." Nick's face watched placidly from the dresser. " . . . it doesn't make any difference. Nicky's like that."

"But a date with Big-boy-on-campus is worth changing for, huh, M. L.?"

Mary clipped off a stubborn end of hair that refused to bend into a pin curl. "You'll have to admit that a blind date with Donovan Lee is something . . ."

Bzzzzzzz. The dinner buzzer blurted.

"If you think so, Honey." Jan shut the door on the sound of M. L.'s toneless singing.

M. L. had hated blind dates . . . How could so many boys
be so un-superior? She had written to Nick, "Have I told you lately that you are the most un-mediocre man I've ever loved?" . . . the letter she'd signed with a P. S.: "Do what you think best about the draft problem, Honey. You'd look handsomer in a marine uniform than a soldier's . . . but how could either be as fetching as the levis you're wearing now?"

Boys couldn't help it that most of them weren't as perfect as Nicky. "But this man Lee is such a wheel. The girl who pins him down for more than one weekend would be queen of the campus . . . And I, little old Mary Lou Hallett, have a date with him. If you don't have fun with this boy, you might as well be in a convent."

She pendulumed her arms violently. The tips of her fingers felt cool under the drying "Passion Plum" polish. But her thick silver bracelet looked dull swinging along with the ten vibrant finger nails . . .

She unhooked it and dropped it on the desk.

* * *

When Mary came dancing in from her evening with Donovan, Jan was hunched at the desk over a sheet of tender-blue stationery.

"Make a carbon copy for Nicky, will you. Poor boy hasn't had a letter for three days" . . . M. L.'s voice sounded dreamy . . . not connected with any thinking processes. "Oh, I know, my brain just isn't turned on." The dizziness of that insight sent her spinning onto the bed . . . letting out a gone little sigh . . . gusts of all the parties she'd been to that evening.

"Yah, I know . . . I put your bracelet on the dresser. You had a good time?"

"Oh, brother." Mary tried to sit up. "Those feet are getting too light for my head. Jan, he's such a dream!"

"Tell your motherly old roommate all."

Mary giggled. "He's got a convertible . . . red, Jan, and he knows simply everybody . . . We went to six different parties." She giggled again.

"Which self did he like?"

Mary Lou heard her roommate through the echoing noise of the parties, the purr of the red car, the buzz of the crickets on the back road, the coughing sound of Donovan's laugh.
“Didn’t get to use any of my selves; everybody looks at him, anyway . . . he’s wonderful.”

Mary saw two Jans lick an airmail stamp. “Hey, Jan, did I tell you? He asked me to the show tomorrow night! Two nights in a row! He says parties don’t start getting good until late anyway.”

Jan’s face was expressionless . . . but comfortable . . . like Nicky’s there on the dresser. Why couldn’t Nicky and Jan understand about this wonderful, floating thrill? Couldn’t they see how much it would mean to be “Don Lee’s girl?”

The radio was droning on about a war . . . a far away, dream-world war . . . Nicky’s war. Must they always keep bringing up practical old Nicky and his war?

“Janet, why don’t you turn off that radio. All they ever have any more is war news.”

* * *

When Mary Lou and Don left the dorm for the movie the next evening, Mother Nortbalm smiled warmly. That was strange because the girls in Kirk Hall had long ago formulated the theory that dear, sweet Mrs. Nortbalm approved only obnoxious fellows. Mary Lou wondered.

The movie made her forget her wondering.

The man on the screen looked like Don, she thought. She looked sideways up the arm that pressed against hers. Up at the perfect profile . . . “Sort of beautiful,” she thought. Funny word to use on a man. Well, red-head, Irish-nosed Nicky wouldn’t fit in that category . . . Nicky wouldn’t fit in a lot of categories.

“Nicky’s so . . . rugged . . . maybe crude. He doesn’t always remember to shave, and my face gets scratched. I wonder if Donovan even shaves . . . his face is so soft . . . but Nicky’s so serious . . . it’s nice to talk out problems and wonderings . . . I could just hear Don cough that laugh of his if I said some of the half-sentences that pop into my brain . . . the kind Nicky and I used to think were worth analyzing. Donovan just talks about obvious things—who’s a good Joe, who can hold how much, and what pin from which house has done what for some other house.

“Nicky used to explain things to me that I wouldn’t even let Donovan know I had doubts about. Funny, wonderful
old Nicky. Donovan'd curl up inside his spotless white bucks and die before he'd spend an evening teaching Sistie to play Chop-sticks . . . or talking politics and issues with Dad . . . like Nick did after I went to school and . . . before Nick enlisted."

The man in the show moved majestically around a gilded room. In his white wig and lace cuffs he was the same kind of beautiful that Donovan was . . . though Don wore bright argyles, grey flannels, and a suede vest under his one-button sport coat.

At the end of the movie, the hero lost his wife and wept. Mary cried. Don poked her and coughed a laugh.

Mary cried quietly into a wadded, red glove. "Unsympathetic pig. I should have known better than to cry in front of you." Sniff. "The least you could do is lend me your handkerchief. Nicky would have." Sniff. "Poor Nicky. Why didn't I take time to read his letter today?" Her ego had just checked to see that it still started, "Hi, Honey," and ended with all Nick's love. "The pages were stained with oil, or gun-grease . . . made them pretty hard to read anyway."

Then black and white news flashed into the theater. Soldiers fighting . . . soldiers, sweaty, muddy. Nicky's face . . . No, no, not Nicky! What was that gun Nicky said he used? A Browning automatic? . . . "Donovan (whisper low, try not to look at the fresh, prickly hair cut, the shiny, self-contented face . . . look instead at the padded, plaid-covered shoulder) . . . Don, is that one . . . the blond one . . . oh, he fell . . . did he have a Browning gun?"

"How should I know?" That awful laugh.

Mary crossed her arms . . . she wiped the hand that was sticky from being in Donovan's soft, damp one . . . on her sweater and shivered.

"What's the matter, Baby?" His voice was smooth as he helped her with her coat. "Best you perk up before we get to the Moonbeam." He slid a slow hand along her neck . . . to flip her long hair over her collar . . . "I want to show you off. How can I, if you don't smile?"

"Poor Don, you do have your troubles, don't you?" Her old indifferent self had come out and she smiled welcome to it . . . not at Donovan.
“That’s better, Baby. Let’s go.”

The lobby was bright after the gloomy other-world dimness of the theater. Left-over tears ran down damp paths from the corners of Mary Lou’s eyes. “Excuse me a minute, Donovan.” She didn’t look at anything but his white shoes, sniffed, and left.

* * *

“My, you look like you’re having a terrific time,” she said to the face in the mirror . . . “Well, I’m not; the whole idea of being out with this boy is ghastly. It’s only 9:30. I’ve got to stand him for three more hours. You can stand it, Mary Lou Hallett.

No, I don’t have to. I’ll say I have a headache—then go home and write a letter.

Now listen, don’t be so dramatic.

Who’s being dramatic? I hate him and his drunken brawls.

Be normal. You’re out with a fabulous wheel. This is your chance to try for more than a one-weekend stand. The thought of it makes me ill.”

She replaced the lipstick she’d swallowed during the death scene. “Deathly ill!”

Out the door, putting on her red gloves (over bare wrists), past the chained-with-a-velvet-chain balcony stairs, humming an unusually tuneless melody.

Up to the long, tweedy overcoat with the Adam’s apple at the top that jerked as it downed a quick coke. “Hot to go, Baby?”

“Sure am, Don. Only drop me off at Kirk Hall a minute, will you? I forgot to wear a bracelet.”

**Highway**

Twisting and turning recklessly
It staggers out of the mountains,
And, straightening, stretches out across the plain,
Rushes past fences, poles and rusty buildings
Pauses in the shadow of a prairie skyscraper
Then leaps out, racing a railed cousin
Till, out of breath, it loses itself in the maze of a city.