An Innocent Heart

Catherine Harris

I lived in a share house then, with embossed gold paisley wallpaper in the living room and rising damp in the hall. One Saturday my housemate, Miguel, rented Dead Poets Society and watched it eight times in a row. When he finally returned it, it would have been cheaper to buy the video than pay the fine. He took to wearing green ribbed tights around the house. I took to calling him Puck. He was 37 and worked as a Process Officer for the Victorian Public Service. Some weekends his friends would come over (Jason, Clive, Benny & Jim) and they'd shut themselves in his bedroom where they'd dress up in berets and cravats and white knee-high socks and take turns reciting Walt Whitman, just like in the movie.

The rent was so cheap neither of us was going to move. I was a student earning a hundred dollars a week dressing salads at Taco Bills. The cooks would set the meals onto heated steel shelves, and it was my job to finish them off with a splash of vinaigrette or a spoonful of tinned mandarin segments, depending on the order. Sometimes a cockroach would find its way onto a plate and I'd have to extract it from its sticky burrow before the waitress bussed it from the kitchen. If I missed one and an infested Hacienda Special ended up out on the restaurant floor, the boss would have a fit. “How could this have happened? We'll get the fumigators in first thing,” he'd yell, pitched just loud enough for everyone in the restaurant to hear, and then Simon, the bartender, would fix a tray of complimentary pink Margaritas.
poured into oversized glasses rimmed with kosher salt, as though free
drinks could persuade the customers to forget there were bugs in their
enchiladas. Still, I kept my job.

This was before I met my husband. Mostly Miguel and I didn’t
see each other, and if we did it was rarely more than a minute here or
there as we passed each other in the hall. Very occasionally I might
leave him a note, some scrap of paper on the kitchen bench with the
words, either Rent! or Electricity! or Phone! But basically we kept to
ourselves.

In life one passes through stages where different things seem
possible, and this stage seemed possible for the longest time. It was
like I was there and I was happy, and then Emily came and I was
gone. Not that Emily's the point. She was unbearably boring, with
thin brown hair and thin brown eyes and no self-esteem so that her
posture was terrible and she came across like a complete caricature
of herself, but her presence upset the balance at Ferry Road.

"Miguel's got a girlfriend," I told Sunil, my cousin, on the phone.
"Fuck's got a fuck?"
"Please."
"What are you going to do?" he said.

I thought I'd probably move out. That Sunday at 10, after my
shift was done, I went out the back to the employees' bathroom and
took off my clothes. My skin smelled of cheese and beef fat. I washed
my hands in the cracked rust-stained basin, wiped out my armpits
with the damp towel hanging on the nail by the sink, and applied a
thick line of black kajal, which I smudged into the lashes at the outer
corners of my eyes. Then I slipped on the dress I had folded in my bag.
and took off down the alley behind the shops so I wouldn't have to explain my business to everyone inside.

Now we come to the part where I meet my husband, because he is sitting at the table with my cousin, Sunil, at the pub that I go into. It is a bar really, more than a pub, with a few sad ferns in large plastic beige planters stuck around the edges of the dance floor where nobody is dancing. The table is one of those long, rectangular folding ones topped with chipped timber-patterned Laminex, intended to be lined up with other such tables at hastily assembled wedding parties and assorted conference functions.

My husband is primarily fleshy. I notice this before Sunil has a chance to introduce us. He is fleshy and white looking with what I guess is a tendency to male-pattern baldness. He shakes my hand as he says hello, and it is a pudgy little hand which seems quite out of practice with the daily grind of hand-shaking that goes on in the business world. Yet this is what he does, day in and out, in a successful family-run enterprise that offers some protection from the rough and tumble, I surmise, and a salary generous enough to afford regular manucures, balustrades against the chapping.

I lean forward, long enough for him to take thorough inventory of my cleavage. At the wedding the dress is also low-cut and he beams proudly at my bosoms, touching them whenever he gets the chance. I have no proclivity for children but I don't mention this right away (nor do I like dogs, but they don't seem to come up). Instead I eschew beer for Summer Wine, a fruity special of muselle and lime cordial served in a tall glass over crushed ice with a cocktail umbrella balanced on the rim, and smile and say, how do you do?
The way he tells it, it happened just like love. We met, we
courted, we married, and here we are, in our three bedroom, 4000
square faded-salmon Victorian terrace home with its rose garden,
iron-trimmed balcony and spectacular view of the ocean. I don’t
know how the gardener maintains the roses, notoriously difficult to
grow in such sandy soil, but I don’t need to know. They bloom, I am
happy. On Thursdays, Sunil comes for tea – either on his own or with
his paramour – and the three of us (or four) will have aperitifs on the
balcony as the sun sets, watching it close in on us, slowly, like a great
eyelid caught winking on the world.

Sunil has two children, Ravi (10) and Mel (8), and he calls me
the devil for encouraging him away from them. I say you are just like
television and it’s not up to me to get you started because you were
already on, but he says maybe if I didn’t enjoy watching so much he
would stop with the girlfriends and the racketeering and go home to
his wife and family.

“That’s not fair,” I tell him. “You make your bed. I don’t instruct
you where to sleep.” But Sunil says ‘fair’ is hardly the point. “Were it
not for our relatedness, who knows what might have become?” And
then he stares at me, and stares at me and stares at me some more.

Before I was married and had even met my husband – not so long
after my mother had taken off with our accountant, leaving my father
to bankrupt his end of the business, then escape penniless back to the
home country with his disgrace (thereby abandoning me at the age of
17 to completely fend for myself) – these overtures might have held
some sway. Sunil’s mannered intensity was less tutored then, and his
exuberance played across my horizon like real possibility. Now, of
course, I know better than to be taken in by such sophistry, seeing this device for what it is, an old and tired trick; Sunil would no sooner be married to me than he would willingly give me up.

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In winter my husband gets sick and becomes a giant tubby baby wanting to stay home from work and loll around in bed and have me bring him hot soup and rolls and rub his back with eucalyptus-smelling liniment. He pulls my hand under the covers where it is damp and warm and his erection paws at the sheets like a blind hairy mole.

Sunil is a craftier lover, but I feel loyalty to my husband. He provides for me and keeps regular hours and because of this I allow my hand to be drawn under, where I stroke his penis until he comes, noticing the easy way it rides over my gold wedding band with each motion.

This is how his illness passes, through quiet sets of small bedside rotations: breakfast, television, lunch, hand-job, nap, snack, television, sleep. I fend off his mother via telephone. She calls daily in various states of distress, desperate to be summoned to deliver tubs of homemade chick-pea stew and steaming pots of ginger tea, favorites from his childhood. But it is only the flu, not much more than a cold, I say, and besides, he is always sleeping.

When he is well again he proposes a vacation. He says let’s head out of town and get some sun. It’s not like my husband to be particularly forthright, but because he is enthusiastic I agree. We book a fortnight at The Capricorn Hotel, an old-style north coast resort with full cabin service and color TV, where he sleeps all day under a listless palm while I sunbathe and browse magazines and have my nails done.
Our bungalow fronts right on to the beach. At five they bring Tequila Sunrises on a matted bamboo tray. I shower and slip on a batik wrap, then head outside where I join my spouse to drink and take in the view.

Sunil is jealous. Although I send him a postcard of a topless blonde in a yellow bikini holding a bunch of bananas in front of her breasts that says Greetings from Surfer's Paradise above her head in matching yellow banana-like text, he can't tolerate me being away for so long. He is like a three year old, the way he frets over two weeks, telephoning far more frequently than is politic.

"I'll be back before you know it," I tell him. "Click your fingers and I'll be home." But Sunil won't relent.

"I think the bastard's going to try to knock you up."

"That's lovely," I say. "And ridiculous. You can't think I'd go along with such a plan? Besides, he's about as interested in breeding as he is in losing weight."

To punish me Sunil falls in love. She has thin brown hair and thin brown eyes and is unbearably boring and sulks in my kitchen.

"You should call her Emily," I say, though I know her name is Ruth.

Ruth hovers at my table like a maid. She eats small mouthfuls which she assembles first in tiny segments on her fork. Chicken, potato, bean. "You are very disciplined," I say, watching the way she layers my dinner like a trifle. Sunil tells me she screams when they make love.

"How loud?" I ask, not because I am especially curious, but because I know he is trying to taunt me with images of their passion and I refuse to be drawn in.

"Loud," he says. "Very loud. When she orgasms it sounds like she's in pain."
It is hard to imagine so slight a person capable of generating that much noise. "If you were free of attachments, I'd urge you to marry this girl," I whisper as they're on their way out the door. Sunil bristles and comments on my tan.

That night I regale my husband with the tale. We are in bed, and I am careful to speak breathily into his ear and to stroke his hairless chest as I bring up the topic of the screaming. What would it be like, I say, to sleep with someone so readily carried away? I carefully describe what Sunil has told to me, about the way her body moves once she's aroused. She is skinny, but dexterous, I tell him. She pants a little and she moans. He says her belly becomes hot and slick against his skin. By the time I turn off the light we are both turned on. I fuck him like I mean it, the first time in years.

And so Ruth comes to tea. She brings daisies and petit fours. We sit outside on the terrace, where I encourage my husband to flirt with her between mouthfuls of crumbs he's herded up with his finger from the plate. It is difficult at first – she is just as slight in the daylight – but I've an army of reasons why I must continually step inside, and with me out of the picture they begin to take to it, at first quietly puffing and preening, then happily chirping away like the birds.

Sunil is beside himself with rage. "He's your fucking husband," he yells at me.

"Calm down. It's only an affair."

"But I think I love her," he wails.

I picture my husband and Ruth threshing about cheap hotel sheets, going at each other like woodpeckers at soft oak. Unlike Sunil's efforts, I don't envision my husband taking the trouble to
acquire ear plugs to better tolerate the volume of the screaming (heading off to the chemist with some silly story about cochlea infections and the pool). In the long run, easier just to end it, I suspect. Bye-bye Ruth.

The waiting is not difficult. I become more involved with the Women's Guild, hosting several lunches and afternoon teas. I take up bridge three times a week. I acquire more shoes than are apropos for the season. And eventually, my husband returns from work early one evening with an enormous bunch of tiger lilies and an avid desire to hear of my well-being.

As far as I’m concerned, this is what marriage is all about. The sense of stability that comes from knowing ultimately we all return to where we started. Like family. And to notions of origin and home, which are constantly present no matter how far we think we’ve come. One minute you might be standing in your kitchen contemplating what to prepare for dinner, then a scratch on one of your favorite Catalan plates distracts you and without being aware of exactly how it happens or why you might find yourself, like no time has passed at all, back in that musty bedroom trying to study for your exam on the Spanish Civil War as the sounds of O Captain! my Captain! reverberate through the wall, or sticking your fingers into a mass of warm sour cream and browning guacamole when you’ve got cramps and wish you could afford to take the night off and be at home in a hot bath instead of here on your feet for hours feeling in strangers’ food for bugs. Or even crying for your mother in the middle of some useless sleepless night, who probably never loved you anyway and left without an explanation, much less a goodbye. And so the cycle goes.
April is the month for hyacinths. The gardener has set numerous vases about the house, their fragrance as evocative as memories of my grandmother's cooking. Even this morning there is every chance I will leave my husband. I might rise and breakfast, pack a small bag and go. But then again I reserve the right to change my mind. There are so many factors to consider - all the whys and wherefores of late departures - like no longer being very young but being a woman again out on her own, and not having someone around in the evenings to bump into in the living room or to go to if I find a spider in the house. Because what would happen if that happened say, in the bedroom, for instance, late at night? I'd get no sleep. I'd be worried sick, watching it, making sure it didn't go off and hide somewhere else only to sneak up on me as soon as I'd forgotten about it. And who would care? Not Sunil, at home in bed with his wife, and Ravi and Mel safely tucked in their beds too, the whole family all soundly asleep. Sunil loves me, but he is not committed. Not in a steady way like a spouse. And we are way beyond that. We are way beyond a lot of things.

Last time I saw him he was still huffy with me about Ruth. "Are you ever going to get over this?" I asked, because it was getting so tiresome, the reviewing, every single time, and I was trying to encourage him once and for all to draw a line under it.

"I don't know," he replied. "I'd prefer you didn't ask."

Which makes me think maybe he really did love her, all due respect and flaccid mousiness aside. He continually says things about her being a good person, how at the end of the day she had an innocent heart.

"You know, if you don't want to be here you can leave," I told
him. "No one's making you stay." I slipped my bra over my shoulders and reached around for the hooks and eyes.


Outside the sky was milky blue, its wan light globbed across the scratchy motel carpeting like paint spilled through the Venetian blinds. I lay on the bright quilted bedspread and let him climb on top of me.

"Just don't call out her name," I cautioned him. "Don't be that cruel."

Sunil vowed to comply as he fiddled with my underpants, negotiating the elastic down the backs of my thighs. Which was comforting, I suppose, such easy concession, given recent circumstances, though in a macabre way I wish he hadn't been so agreeable. Nobody wants that kind of power. More remarkable I think were he to have refused me, were he to have refused then to have screamed for her and yelled her name and declared his wild allegiance: O Ruth! my Ruth! For it would have been dramatic and real, something completely new about him. And I could have found that interesting, that kind of leaping forward into the unknown, a grand leap of stupid faith on his behalf. It might even have carried me along for a while – the heat of all that optimism – like a touring exhibition chugging from town to different town. I have a sense it would be fun to visit like that, being the one with the collateral for a change, not the audience but the source of the entertainment, the kind people would gladly pay to see.