

THE LAST PERFORMANCE OF
UNDER MILK WOOD

by

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After all this time, I should have learned that most basic of parental lessons: that the child, regardless of age, is always capable of surprising the parent. But no; even though I knew that nothing my eldest son, David, said should cause me surprise, still I started and spilt most of my beer on the table when he looked me in the eye and asked, “Dad, have you ever been unfaithful to Mom?”

I suppose that I had asked for it. After all, I had just asked him if he had any questions about married life. I thought it was a safe offer to extend — even though it was the eve of his wedding, he had already lived with the bride for the past couple of years (and, for all I know, they had been having it off for years before that). He was twenty eight, and probably much more experienced in relating to women than I shall ever be. I had assumed that his response to my offer would be an embarrassed shake of his head and an offer to buy another round. So what the hell made him ask whether I had ever been unfaithful? I mean, what kind of a question is that to ask of your own father?

We mopped up the beer and I took refuge in downing what little remained in the glass while I tried to gather my wits.

He offered to buy a replacement for the lost drink, and I gratefully accepted. Anything to give me a couple of minutes to think. He headed for the bar.

I don't suppose I had thought about the *Under Milk Wood* fiasco in a decade or more; but David's question brought it to mind as if the whole thing had happened only last week.

In 1955 one did not admit that one was seeing a psychiatrist. Psychiatrists, in those dim and distant days, were colloquially termed “loony doctors,” and the admission that one was under the care of such a person was tantamount to stating to the world at large that one was not quite sane.

Perhaps after three months of experiencing more or less the same dream every night my sanity really was questionable. Anyway, I remember even today how I lolled around at work that day with a determinedly downcast expression, my eyes half closed, reacting only slowly to events around me, so that no one would

think much of it when, at half past three, I announced that I was feeling sick and was leaving the office early.

Everyone admonished me to be better by tomorrow and, without a moment's guilt, I slid out of the office an hour and a half early.

The appointment was for four o'clock. I remember standing on the wide steps of the brownstone, looking at the door and wondering if I really needed to go inside. There was a discreet brass plate beside the door: R. V. Philpott, M.D. He could have been any kind of doctor; but I knew the truth — he was a loony doctor. *Philpott*: I remember thinking, *What a safe, honest, homely name. Not threatening like Freud or Jung. The kind of name that would belong to a member of the Rotary, or someone who sang the bass part in a church choir.* It was, I concluded, stupid to be scared of anyone named Philpott. With this razor-sharp reasoning, I opened the door and went inside.

R. V. Philpott the person proved to be just as staid and comforting as R. V. Philpott the name. Psychiatry as a profession was still in the innocent world of the pre-sixties and had yet to discover that the world paid it more attention when its practitioners made outlandish claims. Philpott was, as he told me once I had settled myself in his comfortable office whose very ordinariness seemed designed to assuage any idea that my sanity was being questioned, "here simply to help."

We chatted for perhaps a minute or two before he got down to business and asked about my symptoms.

Well, what could I say? I could have lied, taken the rough edges off the dream, but to what purpose? I had no intention of ever seeing Dr. Philpott again. I had given him a false name and address, and had paid cash in advance for the one hour session. Having come this far, I might as well be honest with the man.

I told him everything: how I had been happily married for nearly five years; how the dreams had started three months before, on the night of December 28, a date that was easy to remember since it was our anniversary. I tried to explain that our marriage was basically happy and undemanding; that Mary and I were more complementary than similar; that we had a good

“love life” (as it was called in those days); that although I still looked at other women, it was simply because some women are good to look at, and the thought of doing anything further had never seriously entered my head.

“This dream, it comes every night?” the doctor asked when I had finished.

“Every night,” I confirmed.

“And it is always the same woman?”

“Yes.”

“And does the dream vary at all? or is it always exactly the same?”

“It varies. At least, the circumstances vary. But it always ends up the same.”

“With the two of you making love?”

I nodded.

“You say that you have never seen this woman?” He sounded dubious.

“Right.” I was sure of it. I had ransacked my memory countless times but there was no one of whom she reminded me, and I would hardly have forgotten it if I had ever met someone who looked like the girl in my dream.

“More likely,” the doctor opined, “it is simply that your unconscious will not permit you to remember the meeting. The unconscious, you know, is far more powerful than the conscious portion of our minds. The unconscious rules us in ways that we are only just beginning to understand.”

I nodded, not particularly interested in explanations or theories. I had come to be cured, not lectured.

But I was disappointed. At the end of the hour, Dr. Philpott tried to persuade me that my case was “very interesting” and he was certain that with only a few more sessions he would be able to discover the root cause of my dissatisfaction with my wife. He was completely uninterested in my repeated protestations that I was perfectly satisfied with my wife. He said, “If that were true, then why do you have these dreams?” as if it were inconceivable that the two facts might not be inextricably linked.

I left the brownstone shortly after five, telling the doctor and his receptionist that I would schedule another appointment as soon as I had another afternoon hour free. It was, of course, a lie, and I am sure that they recognized it as such.

The doctor's office was some distance from my workplace, so in order to get home I had to take a different bus than usual. I thought nothing of it as I climbed aboard and began looking around for a seat. The bus was full to capacity and I was reduced to strap hanging while trying to avoid the pokes of an umbrella thoughtlessly wielded by a middle-aged dragon.

I almost missed seeing her. If I had not turned in response to a jab from the dragon's umbrella I would have been looking the wrong way as she made her way to the rear of the bus to get off.

I recognized her immediately. After all, even though I did not know her name, I had spent a goodly part of the past three months with her.

I watched as she got off the bus and it was only as the vehicle began to pull away that I shook myself out of my reverie and began shouting for the bus to stop. "Sorry, I missed my stop," I apologized, pushing past the umbrella-wielding dragon and whoever else was standing between me and the exit.

By the time I descended from the platform, she had disappeared into the milling throng on the sidewalk.

Knowing how stupid I must look, but not caring in the slightest, I jumped up into the air, looking wildly around. I had almost given up when I caught sight of her, maybe fifty yards away, turning into a side street. I began to hurry after her.

By the time I entered the street, she had disappeared. There were no crowds here, and if she had still been in the street, it was impossible that I would have missed seeing her. I scanned the street several times, looking for that telltale mass of golden curls; but it was nowhere to be seen. The only people in the street were the usual nondescripts: middle-aged women wearing dark coats and grim faces pushing shopping carts and carrying shopping bags, and young men in cheap suits trying to look as if they were not in a hurry as they took a short cut from one

thoroughfare to another. There was no sign of the woman I knew so intimately.

For just a moment, a vision came to me of her in bed, naked and looking up at me expectantly. I closed my eyes tightly, ridding myself of the image.

Perhaps it was all just my imagination, I told myself. After all, I had just spent an hour thinking and talking about her. What then could be more natural than that I should paste her face on to the head of someone who happened to look not unlike her? But even if I had imagined the face, I doubted that I could have imagined those curls. So where had she gone?

I walked a short distance down the street, looking for likely hiding places. I almost passed the door on which the hand lettered poster was plastered. *Under Milk Wood*, the poster proclaimed, *Adapted for the Stage*. Underneath, in smaller print, *Monday through Friday — one week only*. Then, in smaller print yet, the name of the group that was putting on the play, *The Cymru Players*, followed by the names: *Megan Thomas, Ogden Williams, Dai Morgan, Enwys Beynon, Helen Price*.

She was the last one. Helen Price. Don't ask me how I knew, because until this moment she had always been nameless; but now she had a name. "Helen Price." I said it out loud, and the knowledge that *she*, Helen Price, was nearby transformed my surroundings from a gray, slightly disreputable, hangdog, little-more-than-an-alley road to a grand, pomp-and-circumstance processional. Such is the power of love — and lust.

I recognized the name of the play. Mary had made me listen to a broadcast of *Under Milk Wood* on the radio a year or so earlier, she having been enraptured by it a year before that, when she had been present at its first public performance. I stood in the doorway, looking at the poster and trying to remember whether I had agreed with my wife's assessment of the play's brilliance; but I could recollect nothing at all about my reaction to the broadcast.

The poster stated that performances began nightly at seven thirty, excepting tonight, Tuesday, when the show would begin

at six o'clock.

I was not conscious of making a decision. I simply opened the door and walked inside.

I was in a large room. The windows were painted over and the only light came from half a dozen bare bulbs scattered here and there about the ceiling. Roughly a third of the room, at the opposite end from the door in which I was standing, was given over to a raised stage. Most of the remaining area was occupied by several rows of empty metal and canvas chairs.

I settled myself into a chair near the center of the second row and waited for the performance to begin.

A surprising number of people came to see the show, and by six o'clock the room was three quarters full and already beginning to become stuffy with the haze of smoke that enveloped the audience. A young man walked on to the stage, announced that the performance was about to begin, and informed us that someone would be stationed at the exit at the end of the play with a bowl into which we could place whatever we thought the evening's entertainment had been worth. Then he announced with a flourish: "So come with me to Wales and let the play begin."

She took the part of First Voice. Into the hushed darkness that had descended on the house, she spoke, barely audibly at first, drawing us with her voice across the ocean, to the wee hours of a spring night in a Welsh village.

"To begin at the beginning," she said. Then, her voice gathering strength as the lights over the stage began to glow, she continued, "It is Spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black." She stepped out on to the stage, looking more radiant than ever she had even in my dreams, as if she and not the bare bulbs were the source of the stage's light.

For the next hour and a half I was spellbound, enraptured by Helen Price. My eyes never left her, even when she moved to one side of the stage so that others could declaim their parts. Whether it was my infatuation with Helen or simply that the small troupe really was exatrordinarily good I cannot say; but when the play ended I, along with most of the audience, jumped

to my feet, clapping so hard that even now I can imagine that my palms are tingling with the enthusiastic pain of my applause.

The players took a final bow and then walked, single file, off the stage. Helen Price brought up the rear, and it was only in the last moment before she disappeared that I suddenly knew that I could not leave without speaking to her. It was in that moment that she turned, just for a fraction of a second, and looked unerringly in my direction. Throughout the performance the audience had been wrapped in bible-black. This was the first time the players had had a chance to look on us as we had been looking on them all evening. She turned and her eyes met mine, as if she had known all along that I was there, in that particular seat.

Then she looked away and disappeared into the wings.

There was a noisy exodus. I hung back until there was no one left except myself and a young, spotty man by the door, guarding a bowl liberally filled with donations.

I approached the youth, suddenly embarrassed. Adding a dollar bill to the pile, I asked, "Excuse me; do you think it would be possible for me to meet one of the players? I just wanted to tell the lady who played the part of First Voice how magnificent I thought she was."

"Why, thank you."

I turned, and there she was, not ten feet away, wearing a mackintosh with the collar turned up in readiness for the drizzle that had begun to fall. A scarf covered her head, hiding those magnificent golden curls. She came closer, until I could smell the minty odor of her breath. "I'm leaving now," she said to the spotty youth. "I'll see you again tomorrow, Simon."

"Good night, Helen," he replied. She linked her arm with mine and together we left the scene of the evening's triumph.

I was trying to think of some intelligent way to begin the conversation, but she spoke first. "I knew you'd come tonight," she said.

"Did you?" I asked.

I felt stupid, perhaps slightly crazed. How could any of this be happening? I asked myself. What was I doing walking in the

drizzle with this gorgeous creature on my arm, for all the world as if we were lovers, or at least good friends. I began to wonder if perhaps she had mistaken me for someone else.

"I'm sorry," I said. "But are you sure you haven't made a mistake? Have we ever met before?"

She halted, forcing me to stop as well. Looking me straight in the eyes she said, "How can you ask that? I've dreamt of you every night for the last three months. Ever since December 28th. I knew you'd come tonight. Come again on Friday. I have to get up early tomorrow to go to work, but I don't work on Saturdays. Look, here's my bus stop. Don't stay with me. She'll wonder what's become of you. Go on home. I'll see you on Friday."

She threw me a smile of the kind that men die for. "W... what'll I tell her?" I stammered.

"You'll think of something," she said.

"And Friday?" I asked. "Will I be able to see you afterwards?"

She looked surprised. "But of course. We can go back to my place. No one will bother us there."

"You're not... you're not married?"

"Does it matter?"

I shook my head. No, it did not matter. Or, rather, it did matter and I just didn't want to know.

"No," I said.

"Go on. Go on home. Until Friday... darling." She blew me a kiss.

For three days I went through the motions of living an unchanged life. Somehow — I can't imagine how — no one else seemed to notice any difference in my behavior. Things were not so difficult at the office, where I could lose myself in my work, but at home I kept wondering when Mary would suddenly confront me with the knowledge that she knew what course I had embarked upon.

For there was no doubt in my mind about what would happen after the end of the performance on Friday evening. I had

already told Mary that I had been forced to work late on Tuesday, and that I might have to stay late at the office again on Friday. Amazingly she accepted these — to me — transparent lies without question. Part of me desperately wanted her to tell me to stop working so hard, thus giving me an excuse not to meet Helen on Friday, but instead she just nodded and said that she understood, and did I want her to leave a stew in the oven or would I try to get something to eat on the way home?

On Wednesday, I stopped by a drug store to buy a package of prophylactics. We had some at home, of course, but somehow it didn't seem right to use those with Helen. I even purchased a different brand from usual, as if by doing so I could pretend that they did not belong to me, and left them in the pocket of my mackintosh, underneath my gloves.

I was sure that with every glance, every word, I was giving away the fact that I was hiding something, but Mary never noticed anything. For three days we carried on as if nothing was different. We even made love, in our usual passionately unpassionate way. The only real difference about those three days was that thoughts of Helen filled only my waking hours, not those when I was asleep. For three nights I slept fitfully, and such dreams as I had were poorly remembered, meaningless collages in which Helen Price played no part.

At last it was Friday. As I left home that morning, I reminded my wife that I would probably be very late home from the office. "Don't worry," she said. "I'll leave a stew in the oven for you and you can heat it up for yourself when you get home. Try not to wake me if I'm asleep." We kissed, and I left. My hand drifted down to my pocket just to be sure. I touched the packet, still carefully buried and undiscovered. Somehow I drew strength from it. I walked away down the sidewalk towards the bus stop as if this morning were no different from all the ones that had preceded it.

The day raced past. At five o'clock I left the office with my colleagues. We dispersed as usual, but instead of taking my usual route down Sixth Avenue, I headed westward towards the

dingy street in which was situated the rundown building that the Cymru Players had adopted as a theatre.

It was a fair distance, and in other circumstances I would have taken a bus, but that night I felt like I needed to have time to think, although in truth I was incapable of reasoning logically. I knew full well what I was doing, and I understood that before the evening was out I would have committed an act that, if ever discovered by my wife, might cause the end of our marriage. But I was powerless to stop myself. Even though I knew what the consequence of my actions might be, still I walked towards my doom; I felt as helpless as a small animal mesmerized by the gaze of a snake.

I stopped somewhere to get something to eat, but I discovered, too late, that I was not hungry, and I pushed the meal away barely touched.

Several times I halted next to garbage cans, fingering the packet in my pocket, knowing that I should toss it away and catch the next bus home. But I could not bring myself to do it. Helen was waiting, expecting me. I could not disappoint her.

I reached the entrance to the street and paused one last time, thinking that all I needed to do was to keep walking and I would free myself forever from her grip. But it was too much to ask. I turned into the dark, dingy street.

The little theatre was about fifty yards down the road on the right hand side. I walked with my hands in my pockets, my head bowed, not wanting to see the theatre until I reached it. But even here I was not my own master. After only a few steps, I lifted my head; and then I halted in shock.

The building was not there. I broke into a run, heading for the gap where the theatre had been. I halted, breathless, unable to believe what my eyes were telling me: that a fire had gutted the building, so that all that remained was a rickety, unsafe-looking shell of burnt wood and collapsed roof and walls. The only part of the building that was undamaged was the front doorway, to which was still pasted the poster advertising the play. Stupidly, I walked forward and tried the door, although

had I wanted to go inside I could have done so simply by stepping around the blackened wood of the frame. The door was locked.

"It burned down," someone said.

I turned and saw an old woman, stooped with age and greatly overweight, peering at me from behind thick glasses. She was dressed in black from head to foot: black headscarf; black coat under which I could just make out a black, floor length, shapeless dress; scuffed black shoes. She had the look of someone who had been in mourning for a long time.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't know. When did it happen?"

"On Monday," she said.

She was mistaken, of course. I had been there myself on Tuesday. She continued to talk, but I was no longer listening. What about Helen? I was wondering. How could I ever reestablish contact with her? Had I found her just to lose her again? Just moments earlier I would have given anything to have been able to walk on by without seeing her; now that I was faced with the possibility that I had lost her I knew that I would do anything to see her again.

The old woman had finished speaking. I tried to remember what she had said, but the only thing that had sunk in were her final words: "It was very sad."

"Yes, yes," I mumbled. "Thank you." I turned and hurried away, back the way I had come.

There was one place I could go for information: the fire must have been reported in the newspaper, and the offices of the *News* were not far away. I could get there in just a few minutes by cab.

A newspaper never sleeps, and although the receptionist clearly thought that there were other, more appropriate times when I could have chosen to make my request, she smiled at me forbearingly and told me to wait while she located the reporter who had covered the fire.

I paced nervously awaiting the reporter's arrival. My plan was simple: when he arrived, I would ask him how to get in contact with the Cymru Players. He would be sure to know. And they would lead me to Helen.

He arrived, and he must have seen my startled look, for the young, spotty face was exactly as I remembered the youth who had sat by the door collecting money after the play. Even his name was the same. "Simon Dale," he said, holding out a hand. "You wanted to know something about the fire I covered earlier in the week?"

"Yes, yes." I introduced myself quickly and said, "I'm sorry, I missed the report about the fire in the paper. I'm trying to contact the Cymru Players. It came as quite a shock when I went around to the theatre this evening and discovered that the place had burned down. Do you know if they are performing the play anywhere else?"

"No, I'm sorry, I don't. But I don't think it likely. After all, after what happened..." His voice trailed off. There was something in his eyes, a sympathy that told me that there was more to the fire than I yet knew, and it was, I think, at that moment that I began to feel the prickle of a premonition.

"What happened?" I asked, trying to keep a rapidly rising anxiety from my voice.

"One of the members of the cast was killed in the fire. Everyone else got out safely. It was only afterwards that someone noticed that one person was missing. They found the body the next day."

"Who was it?" I asked. But I already knew the answer.

He stopped to think for a moment, a frown of concentration on his face, and I wanted to prompt him with her name. But I did not. I waited. Eventually his face cleared. "Price," he said. "Helen Price."

I nodded wordlessly. He must have seen the look on my face, for he said, "I'm sorry. Did you know her?"

I turned to leave without answering, but I halted in the doorway and looked back at him. "One last thing," I said. "When did this happen?"

"On Monday evening, about nine o'clock, just after the performance had finished. Why?"

I walked out the building.

David lowered the glass of beer carefully to the table in front of me. As he regained his seat I said, "In answer to your question, David, No, I have never been unfaithful to your mother. The only time I ever seriously considered it, the price was too high."