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Ralph: a love story

by Donald Justice

In what had been a failing music store
A man named Flowers opened the first cinema
In Moultrie. Ralph was the projectionist,
At seventeen the first projectionist.
And there was a piano from the store
On which the wife accompanied the action
With little bursts of von Suppé and Wagner.

Ralph liked the dark of the projection booth;
He liked the flickering images of the screen.
And yet because he liked it all so well,
He feared expulsion from this Eden,
Not so much feared as knew the day must come,
Given his luck, when it would all run out,
Which made the days more paradisaic still.

Margot, the daughter, twenty and unmarried —
To tell it all quickly — seduced Ralph.
She let him think he was seducing her.
They used to meet in the projection booth,
Embracing wordlessly but laughing too,
Unable to suppress their self-delight.
Time after time they had almost been caught.
Then, as in novels, Margot became pregnant.

The cinema closed on Sundays. What Ralph did
Was slip off to the depot about dusk
To wait among the shadows for the train;
That night he watched with a sudden hurt nostalgia

The sparse pale farmlights passing from his life—
And he understood nothing, only that he was young.
Within a week or two he joined the navy.

Not that he could have guessed it at the time,
But those quick laughing grapplings in the dark
Would be the great romance his life would know,
Though there would be more women, more than he wanted
Really, before it was all finished for him.
And even in the last few years, working

His final job, night watchman at a warehouse,
He might be resting on a stack of lumber
Toward morning, say, and there would come to him
The faces of the stars before the stars
Had names, only dark-painted eyes, and hands
That spoke the sign-language of the secret heart.
(Oh, not that he remembered. He did not.)

She wrote him over the first months two letters
In care of his parents in another town.
The envelopes were decorated boldly
With home-drawn hearts, some broken, pierced by arrows,
From which the mother understood enough
To save the letters but not forward them.
And when his tour of duty ended finally
He opened them and read them and was sorry.
It had been the happiness of his life.
But he could not go back to it. He could not.

So it was gone, the way a thing does go
Yet keep a sort of phantom presence always.
He would be drinking with some woman, lying
Beside her on a tourist cabin bed,
When something would come ghosting back to him,
Some little thing. Such paradise it had been!

And when it *was* all finished for him, at the end,
In the small bedroom of his sister's house,
Surrounded by his shelves of paperbacks—
Westerns mostly, and a few private-eyes—
Lying there on the single bed, half gone
On Echo Springs, he could not call it back.

Or if it came back it was in the form
Of images in the dark, shifting and flashing,
Badly projected, spooling out crazily
In darkness, in a little room, and he
Could not control it. It was like dying.
No, it *was* dying, and he let it go.

Donald Justice is the author of *Collected Poems* (Knopf).

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