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Love and Other
Consolation Prizes

A Novel

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Overture

(1962)

Ernest Young stood outside the gates on opening day of the new world's fair, loitering in the shadow of the future. From his lonely vantage point in the VIP parking lot, he could see hundreds of happy people inside, virtually every name in Seattle's *Social Blue Book*, wearing their Sunday best on a cool Saturday afternoon. The gaily dressed men and women barely filled half of Memorial Stadium's raked seating, but they sat together, a waterfall of wool suits and polyester neckties, cut-out dresses and ruffled pillbox hats, cascading down toward a bulwark of patriotic bunting. Ernest saw that the infield had been converted to a speedway for motorboats – an elevated moat, surrounding a dry spot of land where the All-City High School Band had assembled, along with dozens of reporters who milled about smoking cigarettes like lost sailors, marooned on an island of generators and television cameras. As the wind picked up, Ernest could smell gasoline, drying paint, and a hint of sawdust. He could almost hear carpenters tapping finishing nails as the musicians warmed up.

Saying that Ernest wished he could go inside and partake of the celebration was like saying he wished he could dine alone at Canlis restaurant on Valentine's Day, cross the Atlantic by himself aboard the *Queen Mary*, or fly first class on an empty Boeing 707. The scenery

and the festive occasion were tempting, but the endeavor itself only highlighted the absence of someone with whom to share those moments.

For Ernest, that person was Gracie, his beloved wife of forty-plus years. They'd known each other since childhood, long before they'd bought a house, joined a church, and raised a family. But now their memories had been scattered like bits of broken glass on wet pavement. Reflections of first kisses, anniversaries, the smiles of toddlers, had become images of a Christmas tree left up past Easter, a package of unlit birthday candles, recollections of doctors and cold hospital waiting rooms.

The truth of the matter was that these days Gracie barely remembered him. Her mind had become a one-way mirror. Ernest could see her clearly, but to Gracie he'd been lost behind her troubled, distorted reflection.

Ernest chewed his lip as he leaned against the vacant Cadillac De Ville that he'd spent the better part of the morning polishing. He felt a sigh of vertigo as he stared up at the newly built Space Needle – the showpiece of the Century 21 Expo – the talk of the town, if not the country, and perhaps the entire world. He was supposed to deliver foreign dignitaries to the opening of the Spanish Village Fiesta, but the visitors had been held up – some kind of dispute with the Department of Immigration and Naturalization Services. So he came anyway, to try to remember the happier times.

Ernest smiled as he listened to Danny Kaye take the microphone and read a credo of some kind. The Official World's Fair Band followed the famous actor as they took over the musical duties for the day and began to play a gliding waltz. Ernest counted the time, *one-two-three*, *one-two-three*, as he popped his knuckles and massaged the joints where arthritis reminded him of his age – sixty-four, sixty-five, sixty-something, no one knew for sure. The birth date listed on his chauffeur's permit had been made up decades earlier, as had the one

on his old license with the Gray Top Taxi company. He'd left China as a boy – during a time of war and famine, not record keeping.

Ernest blinked as the waltz ended and a bank of howitzers blasted a twenty-one-gun salute somewhere beyond the main entrance, startling him from his nostalgic debridement. The thundering cannons signaled that President Kennedy had officially opened the world's fair with the closing of a telegraph circuit sent all the way from his desk at the White House. Ernest had read that the signal would be bounced off a distant sun, Cassiopeia, ten thousand light years away. He looked up at the blanket of mush that passed for a north-western sky, and made a wish on an unseen star as people cheered and the orchestra began playing the first brassy strains of 'Bow Down to Washington' while balloons were released, rising like champagne bubbles. Some of the nearby drivers honked their horns as the Space Needle's carillon bells began ringing, heralding the space age, a clarion call that was drowned out by the deafening, crackling roar of a squadron of fighter jets that boomed overhead. Ernest felt the vibration in his bones.

When Mayor Clinton and the City Council had broken ground on the fairgrounds three years ago – when a gathering of reporters had watched those men ceremoniously till the nearby soil with gold-plated shovels – that's also when Gracie began to cry in her sleep. She'd wake and forget where she was. She'd grow fearful and panic.

Dr Luke had told Ernest and their daughters, with tears in his eyes, 'It's a rare type of viral meningitis.' Dr Luke always had a certain sense of decorum, and Ernest knew he was lying for the sake of the girls. Especially since he'd treated Gracie when she was young.

'These things sometimes stay hidden and then come back, decades later,' the doctor had said as the two of them stood on Ernest's front step. 'It's uncommon, but it happens. I've seen it before in other patients. It's not contagious now. It's just—'

‘A ghost of red-light districts past,’ Ernest had interrupted. ‘A ripple from the water trade.’ He shook Dr Luke’s hand and thanked him profusely for the late-night house call and the doctor’s ample discretion regarding Gracie’s past.

Ernest remembered how shortly after his wife’s diagnosis her condition had worsened. How she’d pulled out her hair and torn at her clothing. How Gracie had been hospitalized and nearly institutionalized a month later, when she’d lost her wits so completely that Ernest had had to fight the specialists who recommended she be given electroshock therapy, or worse – a medieval frontal-lobe castration at Western State Hospital, the asylum famous for its ‘ice pick’ lobotomies.

Ernest hung on as Dr Luke quietly administered larger doses of penicillin until the madness subsided and Gracie returned to a new version of normal. But the damage had been done. Part of his wife – her memory – was a blackboard that had been scrubbed clean. She still fell asleep while listening to old records by Josephine Baker and Édith Piaf. She still smiled at the sound of rain on the roof, and enjoyed the fragrance of fresh roses from the Cherry Land flower shop. But on most days, Ernest’s presence was like fingernails on that blackboard as Gracie recoiled in fits of either hysteria or anger.

I didn’t know the month of the world’s fair groundbreaking would be our last good month together, Ernest thought as he watched scores of wide-eyed fairgoers – couples, families, busloads of students – pouring through the nearby turnstiles, all smiles and awe, tickets in hand. He heard the stadium crowd cheer as a pyramid of water-skiers whipped around the Aquadrome.

To make matters worse, when Gracie had been in the hospital, agents from the Washington State Highway Department had showed up on Ernest’s doorstep. ‘Hello, Mr Young,’ they’d said. ‘We have some difficult news to share. May we come in?’

The officials were kind and respectful – apologetic even. As they informed him that his three-bedroom craftsman home overlooking Chinatown, along with his garden and a row of freshly trimmed lilacs in full bloom – the only home he’d ever owned and the place where his daughters took their first steps – all of it was in the twenty-mile urban construction zone of the Everett–Seattle–Tacoma Freeway. The new interstate highway was a ligature of concrete designed to bind Washington with Oregon and California. In less than a week, he and his neighbors had been awarded fair-market value for their properties, along with ninety days to move out, and the right-of-way auctions began.

The government had wanted the land, Ernest remembered, and our homes were a nuisance. So he’d moved his ailing wife in with his older daughter, Juju, and watched from the sidewalk as entire city blocks were sold. Homes were scooped off their foundations and strapped to flatbed trucks to be moved or demolished. But not before vandals and thieves stripped out the oak paneling that Ernest had installed years ago, along with the light fixtures, the crystalline doorknobs, and even the old hot-water heater that leaked in wintertime. The only thing left standing was a blur of cherry trees that lined the avenue. Ernest recalled watching as a crew arrived with a fleet of roaring diesel trucks and a steam shovel. Blossoms swirled on the breeze as he’d turned and walked away.

As a young man, Ernest had carved his initials onto one of those trees along with Gracie’s – and those of another girl too. He hadn’t seen her in forever.

As an aerialist rode a motorcycle on a taut cable stretched from the stadium to the Space Needle, Ernest listened to the whooshing and mechanical thrumming of carnival rides. He caught the aroma of freshly spun cotton candy, still warm, and remembered the sticky-sweet magic of candied apples. He felt a pressing wave of *déjà vu*.

The present is merely the past reassembled, Ernest mused as he pictured the two girls and how he'd once strolled with them, arm in arm, on the finely manicured grounds of Seattle's *first* world's fair, the great Alaska–Yukon–Pacific Exposition, back in 1909. When the city first dressed up and turned its best side to the cameras of the world. He remembered a perfect day, when he fell in love with both girls.

But as Ernest walked to the gate and leaned on the cold metal bars, he also smelled smoke. He heard fussy children crying. And his ears were still ringing with the echoes of the celebratory cannons that had scared the birds away.

He drew a deep breath. Memories are narcotic, he thought. Like the array of pill bottles that sit cluttered on my nightstand. Each dose, carefully administered, use as directed. Too much and they become dangerous. Too much and they'll stop your heart.