

BIRTHDAY STORIES (2002)
(ed. Haruki Murakami)

The Moor

BY RUSSELL BANKS

It's about 10:00 P.M., and I'm one of three, face it, middle-aged guys crossing South Main Street in light snow, headed for a quick drink at the Greek's. We've just finished a thirty-second-degree induction ceremony at the Masonic hall in the old Capitol Theater building and need a blow. I'm the tall figure in the middle, Warren Low, and I guess it's my story I'm telling, although you could say it was Gail Fortunata's story, since meeting her that night after half a lifetime is what got me started.

I'm wearing remnants of makeup from the ceremony, in which I portrayed an Arab prince – red lips, streaks of black on my face here and there, not quite washed off because of no cold cream at the Hall. The guys tease me about what a terrific nigger I make, that's the way they talk, and I try to deflect their teasing by ignoring it, because I'm not as prejudiced as they are, even though I'm pleased nonetheless. It's an acting job, the thirty-second, and not many guys are good at it. We are friends and businessmen, colleagues – I sell plumbing and heating supplies, my friend Sammy Gibson is in real estate, and the other, Rick Buckingham, is a Chevy dealer.

We enter the Greek's, a small restaurant and fern bar, pass through the dining room into the bar in back like

regulars, because we are regulars and like making a point of it, greeting the Greek and his help. Small comforts. Sammy and Rick hit uselessly on one of the waitresses, the pretty little blond kid, and make a crack or two about the new gay waiter who's in the far corner by the kitchen door and can't hear them. Wise guys.

The Greek says to me, What's with the greasepaint? Theater group, I tell him. He's not a Mason, I think he's Orthodox Catholic or something, but he knows what we do. As we pass one table in particular, this elderly lady in the group looks me straight in the eyes, which gets my attention, because otherwise she's just some old lady. Then for a split second I think I know her, but decide not and keep going. She's a large, baggy, bright-eyed woman in her late seventies, possibly early eighties. Old.

Sammy, Rick, and I belly up to the bar, order drinks, the usuals, comment on the snow outside, and feel safe and contented in each other's company. We reflect on our wives and ex-wives and our grown kids, all elsewhere. We're out late and guilt-free.

I peek around the divider at her – thin, silver-blue hair, dewlaps at her throat, liver spots on her long flat cheeks. What the hell, an old lady. She's with family, some kind of celebration – two sons, they look like, in their forties, with their wives and a bored teenage girl, all five of them overweight, dull, dutiful, in contrast to the old woman, who despite her age looks smart, aware, all dressed up in a maroon knit wool suit. Clearly an attractive woman once.

I drift from Sammy and Rick, ask the Greek, "Who's the old lady, what's the occasion?"

The Greek knows her sons' name, Italian – Fortunata, he thinks. "Doesn't register," I say. "No comprendo."

"The old lady's eightieth," says the Greek. "We should live so long, right? You know her?"

"No, I guess not." The waitresses and the gay waiter sing "Happy Birthday", making a scene, but the place is almost empty anyhow, from the snow, and everybody seems to like it, and the old lady smiles serenely.

I say to Sammy and Rick, "I think I know the old gal from someplace, but can't remember where."

"Customer," says Sammy, munching peanuts.

Rick says the same, "Customer," and they go on as before.

"Probably an old girlfriend," Sammy adds.

"Ha-ha," I say back.

A Celtics-Knicks game on TV has their attention, double overtime. Finally the Knicks win, and it's time to go home, guys. Snow's piling up. We pull on our coats, pay the bartender, and, as we leave, the old lady's party is also getting ready to go, and when I pass their table, she catches my sleeve, says my name. Says it with a question mark. "Warren? Warren Low?"

I say, "Yeah, hi," and smile, but still I don't remember her.

Then she says, "I'm Gail Fortunata. Warren, I knew you years ago," she says, and she smiles fondly. And then everything comes back, or almost everything. "Do you remember me?" she asks.

"Sure, sure I do, of course I do. Gail. How've you been? Jeeze, it's sure been a while."

She nods, still smiling. "What's that on your face? Makeup?"

"Yeah. Been doing a little theater. Didn't have any cold cream to get it all off," I say lamely.

She says, "I'm glad you're still acting." And then she introduces me to her family, like that, "This is my family."

"Howdy," I say, and start to introduce my friends Sammy and Rick, but they're already at the door.

Sammy says, "S'long, Warren, don't do anything I wouldn't do," and Rick gives a wave, and they're out.

"So, it's your birthday, Gail. Happy birthday."

She says, "Why, thank you." The others are all standing now, pulling on their coats, except for Gail, who still hasn't let go of my sleeve, which she tugs and then says to me, "Sit down a minute, Warren. I haven't seen you in what, thirty years. Imagine."

"Ma," the son says. "It's late. The snow."

I draw up a chair next to Gail, and, letting go of the dumb pretenses, I suddenly find myself struggling to see in her eyes the woman I knew for a few months when I was a kid, barely twenty-one, and she was almost fifty and married and these two fat guys were her skinny teenage sons. But I can't see through the old lady's face to the woman she was then. If that woman is gone, then so is the boy, this boy.

She looks up at one of her sons and says, "Dickie, you go without me. Warren will give me a ride, won't you, Warren?" she says, turning to me. "I'm staying at Dickie's house up on the Heights. That's not out of your way, is it?"

"Nope. I'm up on the Heights, too. Alton Woods. Just moved into a condo there."

Dickie says, "Fine," a little worried. He looks like he's used to losing arguments with his mother. They all give her a kiss on the cheek, wish her a happy birthday again, and file out into the snow. A plow scrapes past on the street. Otherwise, no traffic.

The Greek and his crew start cleaning up, while Gail and I talk a few minutes more. Although her eyes are wet and red-rimmed, she's not teary, she's smiling. It's as if there are translucent shells over her bright blue eyes. Even so, now when I look hard I can glimpse her the way she was, slipping around back there in the shadows. She had heavy, dark red hair, clear white skin smooth as porcelain, broad shoulders, and she was tall for a woman, almost as tall as I was, I remember exactly, from when she and her husband once took me along with them to a VFW party, and she and I danced while he played cards.

"You have turned into a handsome man, Warren," she says. Then she gives a little laugh. "Still a handsome man, I mean."

"Naw. Gone to seed. You're only young once, I guess."

"When we knew each other, Warren, I was the age you are now."

"Yeah. I guess that's so. Strange to think about, isn't it?"

"Are you divorced? You look like it."

"Yeah, divorced. Couple of years now. Kids, three girls, all grown up. I'm even a grandpa. It was not one of your happy marriages. Not by a long shot."

"I don't think I want to hear about all that."

"Okay. What do you want to hear about?"

"Let's have one drink and one short talk. For old times' sake. Then you may drive me to my son's home."

I say fine and ask the Greek, who's at the register tapping out, if it's too late for a nightcap. He shrugs why not, and Gail asks for a sherry and I order the usual, vodka and tonic. The Greek scoots back to the bar, pours the drinks himself because the bartender is wiping down the cooler, and returns and sets them down before us. "On the house," he says, and goes back to counting the night's take.

"It's odd, isn't it, that we never ran into each other before this," she says. "All these years. You came up here to Concord, and I stayed there in Portsmouth, even after the boys left. Frank's job was there."

"Yeah, well, I guess fifty miles is a long ways sometimes. How is Frank?" I ask, realizing as soon as I say it that he was at least ten years older than she.

"He died. Frank died in nineteen eighty-two."

"Oh, jeez. I'm sorry to hear that."

"I want to ask you something, Warren. I hope you won't mind if I speak personally with you."

"No. Shoot." I take a belt from my drink.

"I never dared to ask you then. It would have embarrassed you then, I thought, because you were so scared of what we were doing together, so unsure of yourself."

"Yeah, no kidding. I was what, twenty-one? And you were, well not scary, but let's say impressive. Married with kids, a sophisticated woman of the world, you seemed to

me. And I was this apprentice plumber working on my first job away from home, a kid."

"You were more than that, Warren. That's why I took to you so easily. You were very sensitive. I thought someday you'd become a famous actor. I wanted to encourage you."

"You did." I laugh nervously because I don't know where this conversation is going and take another pull from my drink and say, "I've done lots of acting over the years, you know, all local stuff, some of it pretty serious. No big deal. But I kept it up. I don't do much nowadays, of course. But you did encourage me, Gail, you did, and I'm truly grateful for that."

She sips her sherry with pursed lips, like a bird. "Good," she says. "Warren, were you a virgin then, when you met me?"

"Oh, jeez. Well, that's quite a question, isn't it?" I laugh. "Is that what you've been wondering all these years? Were you the first woman I ever made love with? Wow. That's . . . Hey, Gail, I don't think anybody's ever asked me that before. And here we are, thirty years later." I'm smiling at her, but the air is rushing out of me.

"I just want to know, dear. You never said it one way or the other. We shared a big secret, but we never really talked about our own secrets. We talked about the theater, and we had our little love affair, and then you went on, and I stayed with Frank and grew old. Older."

"You weren't old."

"As old as you are now, Warren."

"Yes. But I'm not old."

"Well, were you?"

"What? A virgin?"

"You don't have to answer, if it embarrasses you."

I hold off a few seconds. The waitress and the new kid and the bartender have all left, and only the Greek is here, perched on a stool in the bar watching *Nightline*. I could tell her the truth, or I could lie, or I could beg off the question altogether. It's hard to know what's right. Finally, I say, "Yes, I was. I was a virgin when I met you. It was the first time for me," I tell her, and she sits back in her chair and looks me full in the face and smiles as if I've just given her the perfect birthday gift, the one no one else thought she wanted, the gift she never dared to ask for. It's a beautiful smile, grateful and proud and seems to go all the way back to the day we first met.

She reaches over and places her small, crackled hand on mine. She says, "I never knew for sure. But whenever I think back on those days and remember how we used to meet in your room, I always pretend that for you it was the first time. I even pretended it back then, when it was happening. It means something to me."

For a few moments neither of us speaks. Then I break the spell. "What do you say we shove off? They need to close this place up, and the snow's coming down hard." She agrees, and I help her slide into her coat. My car is parked only halfway down the block, but it's a slow walk to it, because the sidewalk is a little slippery and she's very careful.

When we're in the car and moving north on Main Street, we remain silent for a while, and finally I say to her,

"You know, Gail, there's something I've wondered all these years myself."

"Is there?"

"Yeah. But you don't have to tell me, if it embarrasses you."

"Warren, dear, you reach a certain age, nothing embarrasses you."

"Yeah, well. I guess that's true."

"What is it?"

"Okay, I wondered if, except for me, you stayed faithful to Frank. And before me."

No hesitation. She says, "Yes. I was faithful to Frank, before you and after. Except for my husband, you were the only man I loved."

I don't believe her, but I know why she has lied to me. This time it's my turn to smile and reach over and place my hand on hers.

The rest of the way we don't talk, except for her giving me directions to her son's house, which is a plain brick ranch on a curving side street by the old armory. The porch light is on, but the rest of the house is dark. "It's late," I say to her.

"So it is."

I get out and come around and help her from the car and then walk her up the path to the door. She gets her key from her purse and unlocks the door and turns around and looks up at me. She's not as tall as she used to be.

"I'm very happy that we saw each other tonight," she says. "We probably won't see each other again."

"Well, we can. If you want to."

"You're still a very sweet man, Warren. I'm glad of that. I wasn't wrong about you."

I don't know what to say. I want to kiss her, though, and I do, I lean down and put my arms around her and kiss her on the lips, very gently, then a little more, and she kisses me back, with just enough pressure against me to let me know that she is remembering everything, too. We hold each other like that for a long time.

Then I step away, and she turns, opens the door, and takes one last look back at me. She smiles. "You've still got makeup on," she says. "What's the play? I forgot to ask."

"Oh," I say, thinking fast, because I'm remembering that she's Catholic and probably doesn't think much of the Masons. "*Othello*," I say.

"That's nice, and you're the Moor?"

"Yes."

Still smiling, she gives me a slow pushing wave with her hand, as if dismissing me, and goes inside. When the door has closed behind her, I want to stand there alone on the steps all night with the snow falling around my head in clouds and watch it fill our tracks on the path. But it actually is late, and I have to work tomorrow, so I leave.

Driving home, it's all I can do to keep from crying. Time's come, time's gone, time's never returning, I say to myself. What's here in front of me is all I've got, I decide, and as I drive my car through the blowing snow it doesn't seem like much, except for the kindness that I've just exchanged with an old lady, so I concentrate on that.