Dat's Love

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Dat's love, tra la, la, la, dat's love – remember that song? Well she won't be singing *that* at the funeral. In fact, although the crowds have gathered like moths around this candlelit church, just to hear her sing, Sarah Vaughan won't be singing at Dooley Wilson's funeral at all.

I will, for I am what's known as a 'godly' singer. I sing at funerals. Chapel or Church; Pentecostal or Congregational – I go where I'm asked. Though the Church of the Blessed Mary will always be my funeral-singing home, so to speak. 'Mrs Silva has never put red to her lips, she does not smoke, or blaspheme, or take strong drink. And when she lifts up her voice, it is to sing God's praises in his house.'

Father Farrell is a nice enough man. His face is moist and white as an unbaked loaf, risen and unwrapped for the oven. His face has that unwrapped look, though his eyes are very dark and sincere. When he says his little piece, I go along with it. Shake my head, pull down the corners of my mouth in a little smile. I worry about other things like: are my new shoes too tight for my feet? Did I remember to take the price labels from the backs? Today, especially, I'm worried that the creases will start to show in my costume, which is on the small side for my ampleness. Vanity is mine.

I take my seat about halfway down. 'His Eye Is on the Sparrow', I am hymn number three on the hymn board. A few rows in the front have been left empty for the family –

what family there is. Most of the people have packed themselves in at the back, with the crowds stretching out into the road. In the end, he was one of us; the local entertainer who paved the way for others – meaning Sarah Vaughan – to reach the heights.

I can feel the sway of bodies behind me, hear their breathing, sense the awful hush of excitement. It's the one thing I don't like about funerals today, this excitement over death, the leaning in on grief, and they won't hold back.

I'm getting too emotional; but I knew Dooley Wilson before he *was* Dooley Wilson, when he had a room in my father's boarding house just after the war. He was known as Archibald something or other then and he played piano, wonderful piano, in between features at the Bug-house or up at the young people's club – the Rainbow Club, on the bridge. All the popular tunes of the day, whatever you cared to ask for, he'd oblige. And he could imitate all the stars, with that wonderful singing voice of his. *'I'm the sheik, of Arooby!'* Wonderful voice, wonderful smile. We all admired him, especially us girls.

He was a smart-looking man. Big built, but smart-looking, with a beautiful razor moustache, and a fine blue suit which he always wore on Sundays, when he played piano in our front parlour, with the family gathered round. Old-fashioned songs like 'No, John, No' or quiet hymns and spirituals – 'Ezekiel Saw The Wheel'; 'There Is A Balm in Gilead' – songs which pleased my father and mother especially.

I sang along with the others, but I liked to watch him play. His wide dark hands had pretty fingernails that shone like pearly shells as they struck the keyboard. He used pomade on his hair too, which he kept in a green jar by his bedside, along with a flat-backed hairbrush and four or five lavender coloured tablets of toilet soap. His room had its own, specially-scented smell. We used to argue amongst ourselves, one girl and two boys, for the privilege of cleaning it out on a Saturday – as I've said, we all admired him, but from a

distance – I was only a young girl then, and he was a grown man, almost a god in my young, fifteen-year-old eyes.

It was enough for me to lean my mop and bucket upside the chest of drawers and run my fingers over the things that were left on top: the hairbrush, with its smooth wooden back; the green fluted jar; the leather manicure case that opened out to show all the silvery blades and things he kept inside, all inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and strange and beautiful to me, as I held them in my hands.

When he changed his name to Dooley Wilson it was a shock. We'd never heard of anyone changing their name before. Our silence around the supper table made him laugh; and my father, who was a member of the Abyssinian Brethren, said something about the leopard not changing his spots; the Ethiopian, his skin. But that just made him laugh all the more, pleasantly, because he was a same-island man, like my father. Still, he threw back his head and laughed, so that the shirt button came undone at his throat; and I remember how his collar opened up around his wide dark neck, like the white wings of a bird.

After that he became Dooley Wilson. You must remember him – the coloured fellow in the white suit. The one who rolls his eyes when he plays piano in that famous film and sings that famous song, so doleful! As if he already knew, even as he was singing it, poor dab, that he was destined to be forgotten. Except in our dockland part of the city.

You needed an American sounding name in those days, to help with the bookings. And I think it made him laugh, the man lying down there in the coffin; stepping into someone else's shoes and trying to make them fit. Especially as he was a different type of coloured man altogether really – our Dooley was broader, taller, darker – much darker than the light-skinned chap in the film; and with a much sweeter singing voice. Not that anyone seemed to notice; and after a while, I don't think he noticed himself. His act fell into more of a comic routine in the end, and that kept

him popular in all the local clubs, long after the days with Sarah Vaughan.

Close my eyes and I can see him now. I saw him once, on my birthday, a couple of years ago. A big fleshy man, decked out in a white, satiny suit. A real professional, flashing his teeth in a smile while his fingers plinked out tunes on the piano: 'You must remember this'. And this – then he'd go into his act, putting on all the voices, pulling faces:

'Dat boy over der, what's his name?'
'That boy? Why that's Sam, Miss Ilsa. Sam.'
'Dey sho' is goan be trouble, Mister Rick …'
'Play it, Sam! Sing it, Sam!'
'Please keep away from him Miss Ilsa; you bad luck to 'im!'

The voice was all honey and molasses as he rolled his eyes, and drooped his mouth to make us laugh. Under the spotlights, his black skin had a silky-looking sheen to it, still. Like black taffeta, cool, under the spotlights. Of course, I stayed at the back with the girls from work; I didn't come forward at the end, to introduce myself. From that distance his eyes looked dull and small, like two black dots on a pair of dice…

Though what I was remembering was the time he stopped playing the piano in our front parlour and told me I had a voice. 'Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes' I sang, staring at the flowers inside the glass dome on the sideboard, then at the black iron archway of the fireplace, with the blue piece of sugar paper folded inside, because it was Sunday. It was cold in the room, but the paper seemed to blaze blue when he said that: 'Gracie girl, you've gotta nice voice!'

He had tossed me that compliment like a flower, and I kept it for a long time, close to my heart.

Once I start remembering, I can't control things. The memories spin around in my head like a big roulette wheel. Black and red, blue and gold, and I can't control them. I

never know when the wheel is going to stop – it drives my old man Frank to distraction.

'Sweetness, don't you go sorrowing for that man. It will only upset you, and for what?'

I was standing in front of the old-fashioned mirror that hangs over our mantelpiece when Frank said that. I didn't say anything, just moved my hand along the mantel, searching for the tortoiseshell combs to put in my hair, as if I'd forgotten where I'd left them, or hadn't heard him right. But I could see his eyes, looking at me through the mirror. They've got the same sort of gleam as the television set he sits in front of, my Frank's eyes. That greenish-grey sort of gleam, when it hasn't been switched on yet.

After a minute or two, when he saw there wasn't going to be an argument, he picked up the newspaper on his lap, and turned to the horse-racing. Frank knows full well I cry at funerals, I always cry a little bit, no matter whose it is. But he's jealous, Frank. He's gotten jealous in his old age. I know how it is with him, that's why I never bother saying much. Except I remembered to ask him what he was having for his tea before I went through the door. He looked up and yawned like a baby, both cheeks bellied out, bright as a brass teapot. But the inside, I thought, corroded. Green.

'Oh don't you worry about me,' he said. 'I'll fry up the fish.'

I had taken the fish out of the fridge earlier. Cleaned them myself, because he says the market girls don't clean them properly. I don't like cleaning them, but I did it. I took the knife with the long shiny blade, and slit open the soft, silvery underbelly, scraping out the wraggle of guts. The blood spilled dark red, like wine, and the fish felt like something carved under my hand. I cut the head off, slicing behind the fins. I was concentrating on how pretty the fish scales looked towards the tail end; they had a pearly sheen on them where they caught the light. The fin opened out, shadowy like a bird-wing, when I picked it up between my fingers and threw the head to next door's cats.

'Are you sure now?' I had to ask, about the tea.

'Sure I'm sure. You go on and bury the dead.'

He looked at me then, and showed his teeth, brown between the ivory, in a smile. 'We've all got fish to fry, haven't we?'

'You come with me then,' I said, as nicely as I could. 'Just to show your face. Frank?'

But he wouldn't budge. So I left him there, sat in front of the television set, waiting for the two o'clock at Sandown. Yet something touched my heart to see him sat, upright, with a hand on each knee of his dark, pinstriped trousers. The trousers from what used to be his best suit, thirty years ago. And I noticed how the hair on his head was like cigarette ash; white and grey and soft as cigarette ash to the touch. Because I had to rest my hand on his head for a moment, before I went through the door.

My thoughts spin round. If the girls on my section could see my eyes fill up, they wouldn't know me.

At work I keep my head down and just get on with it. I'm a roller in the cigar factory. I cut tobacco leaf on the machines. I'm a skilled machinist, cutting the leaf on the metal die as the drum turns round. The drum is as big as a silver wheel, with twenty-four clefts cut into it. Each cleft is filled with tobacco that has been wrapped once by the girl at the other end. My leaf is the second wrapping, the one that shows.

The wheel of the drum turns round and round. The clamp picks up the cigars… *picks up the cigars* and places them in the clefts, on and on. The finished cigars roll down the belt, and I pick them up, five at a time; scoop them up with my free hand, and stack them, row upon row in the tins, without stopping… *without stopping*. None of that stopping and starting. Not for me. It's very rare for me to have to take my foot off the pedal. Very rare. Five hundred cigars per tin, ten tins to reach my target – that's five thousand cigars minimum – and then move on to bonus. And always cutting my leaf to get my number out.

I've been rolling cigars for years, though these days I'm on part-time. It's a well enough paid job, part-time. There's nothing romantic, or exotic, or *steamy* about it, except in other people's imaginations, other people's bad minds, as Frank would say. Sometimes, during the summer months, when it gets really hot – when the machines are roaring and the generator's going full blast – the girls will ask me to give them the lead in a song. 'Grace, give us a song,' they'll say. 'Please!' And I'll often come out with a Christmas carol. Christmas carols have a cooling effect when you're singing them in August… and you're stuck there, in a forest of palm-green overalls, trying to cut your leaf to get your number out.

When I was a young girl, I sang different songs – 'I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire!'; that was one of our favourites, I laugh when I think of it now. We formed a group; me, Baby Cleo and Sarah Vaughan. And practised singing in work-time. Our first and last performance was at the Rainbow Club, one Bonfire Night. Those two hoofing across the stage, doing the high stepping and the 'Whoo-ooh-whoo-oohs' behind me, while I stood still and sang, happy not to have to shake too much, because of my bulk. The three of us wore wrap-over pinnies, yellowy white, and brown berets. We called ourselves 'The Matchstick Girls'.

Dooley Wilson played piano for everyone who was performing. 'Bye-bye Blackbird': that was our encore! It was me and Baby who had the idea for it, then we had to have Sarah in to make the number up.

Hark at me, sat inside this darkened Church with my mind wandering. But that's always the way with funerals, I find. The emotion comes and goes, like God's grace, or the light falling in on us now, from the high windows. It comes and goes. Walking down the road towards the Church, the sun was shining where, a minute before, it had been raining. Warm spring rain. Standing by the kerb, waiting to cross, I saw white cloud and blue sky mirrored in the black water as

it ran into the gutter. So clear, it made me think – to see the sky beneath my feet as if the earth had gone.

There were quite a few mourners waiting outside the Church. I counted more women than men, standing under the trees in silent clumps of black. The wreaths had been propped against the funeral car windows. I saw two red hearts and a cross made up of curling, wax-white petals, and I wondered who had sent them, these tokens of love and tribulation, love and trouble.

Baby Cleo came over to talk to me. Old friends, we stood by the black-speared railings and talked a little bit. She said she'd heard a rumour that Sarah Vaughan had managed to telephone Dooley Wilson long distance, just the night before he died. Baby couldn't get over it. 'Imagine,' she kept saying, as we walked through the gate and into the Church yard. 'After all them years, oh God love 'em.' She dabbed her eyes with a hanky.

It's like a film, I thought. But I didn't say anything. People see life down here like a film.

But it's different for Baby. She was one of the girls who joined the dance troupe, the one Dooley Wilson got together and toured the Valleys with, in the early Fifties. 'Jolson's Jelly Babes' or some such nonsense they were called, and Sarah Vaughan made her name in it, blacking her face up and acting comical at the end of the line. If Al Jolson'd had an illegitimate daughter, the paper said, she'd have been it. Baby was one of the girls who came back on the charabanc, while Miss Sassy Vaughan ended up in a London show, swaying in front of a coconut tree, under a pale yellow moon. Sarah Vaughan, the coloured young lady with the Welsh name: 'The Sepia, Celtic Siren,' they billed her as. That was her gimmick: batting her eyelashes and telling reporters she was a native of Cardiff. They had thought she was American, but she didn't have that good a voice.

I was glad not to have been a part of the Valleys tour; the other girls were all a bit downcast when they got off the bus. Proud, but downcast.

I was surprised to see more people crowded around the side entrance as we approached. But Baby said they were waiting there just in case Sarah Vaughan were to turn up. It had said over the local radio that she wouldn't, couldn't; but people still hoped she might appear, unannounced, the way stars do.

He will always be remembered as the man who discovered Sarah Vaughan. That will be his epitaph, discovering her. Like finding something valuable and precious that no one else had ever realised was there before. Mr Columbus.

There's only a month between our birth signs, mine and Sarah Vaughan's. Not that I believe in that sort of thing, but it makes you wonder. We both started out over the cigar factory on the same day; bunching and rolling tobacco leaf on the same machine, getting our numbers out – and singing together, high over the noise of the machinery … all those years ago. We were friends, I suppose. But it wasn't all cosy and sentimental. Oh no, because I was the roller and she was only the buncher. And she didn't like that, because I got paid more. I did more too; but you could never reason with her.

> Stuff it, I wanna go home!
> Stuff it, I wanna go,
> But they woan let me go,
> Stuff it, I wanna go home!

Except that she used to mouth *f— it*, staring down the length of our machine, Number 28, with cheek and daring in her eyes, I used to think, as I scooped up the cigars and stacked them neatly. Always the calm and steady one. Steady and responsible, that was me. And I think it used to provoke her, Sarah, into behaving worse. She was a wild one, one of those girls who wouldn't take a telling, not from the foreman, the supervisor or anyone.

'Keep your eyes off Norman, he's mine!' she was always threatening people. Or, 'Think I'm gonna spend the rest of

my life in this place? Uh. Uh. Not me! So what if they pays better than the brush factory or the box factory, so what!' And that was to the foreman. She didn't care, Sarah. Most of the other girls admired her for the way she acted. But I could see it for the put on it was. She hadn't been brought up properly. Her father had left her mother with three small kids, and they were dragged up, not brought up like the rest of us. She wasn't sure about a lot of things: behind the loudness you could see. It was easy to get to her, if you put your mind to it.

Some things she had going for her – she had a good figure, with a jutting bosom and a narrow waist. And she wore her brownish gold hair swept over to one side, in imitation of some Hollywood film star or other – it used to curtain half her face, like the webbing on the mouth of a wireless, unravelled. Sometimes she tied it back, and I thought that looked much nicer, neater. Not that you could tell her anything, though. Sarah Vaughan. She took that name, Vaughan, from the man her mother was living with at the time. Her real name was more common: Jones. Everybody knew that. But; her eyes were brown like toffee, and her skin was bright like tin; and if she wanted to call herself after her mother's fancy man, then she would.

The name-change business came after the performance at the Rainbow Club. At first, she hadn't wanted to waste a Saturday night at home in the dockland. 'The Rainbow Club!' she said when I asked her to make up our number. She curled her lip. 'Run Off Young Girls, Boys In View – it's run by the friggin' missionaries, ain' it?' She wanted to go to the American Base in Brize Norton, where the GI soldiers were. But her mother said no, for a wonder. So she ended up with us, performing with me and Baby down the club, because it was some kind of a 'do' and she knew the songs, we'd sung them in work often enough, and the steps were easy.

It was raining that Bonfire Night. Everything was gleaming black with rain. And I can remember Sarah standing at the

end of the bridge just in front of the club, frightened to go inside on her own. The tweed coat she had on was waterlogged and rucked up at the back, and she'd straightened her hair too much in the front, greased it so that the drops of water stayed in her hair and glittered like small glass beads. That's what I remember: and the rain, the sound of it running into the gutters and flowing under the bridge as we walked up to her. And the child's voice, reciting through the club's open door, 'Tiger, tiger, burnin' bright, inna forest of the night…'

On the Monday morning she was late for work.

'A grown man, right? Wants to go out with me.'

All five of us sitting around the canteen table looked at her.

'What would he want with someone like you then, Sair, a grown man?'

But the women on the table were nudging one another and laughing. Sarah laughed along with them, then she pushed a scribble of hair away from her face and took a swig from a bottle of Tizer. 'She knows him.' She nodded in my direction, smiling. 'He's a big feller, ain' he?' She took another swig from the bottle and burped. 'An' he wears this awful blue suit I'd like to set alight to, with a match…'

The women around the table laughed, and someone said, 'Well madam, are you going to meet up with this one or not?' Sarah placed her elbows on the table and leaned forward. 'Oh, I'm definitely going! He wants to give me *breathing lessons*, doan he? Says it'll improve my singing voice, ahem!' She coughed.

They all thought that was funny, and they roared. Even Baby, though she had left the club with me, and must have been as surprised as I was. We did our encore, 'Bye-bye Blackbird', and we left. People were clapping us out, because we'd been a hit. Funny. We were supposed to be funny, but it was Sarah who had been the funny one, going cross-eyed in the background as I sang. She made them laugh, as I was

singing. I had to turn round to see what they were laughing at. The piano was slow and lilting. It wasn't him, he played it right. But she made it funny pulling her beret down over her eyes and acting gormless.

I watched her wipe her mouth with the back of her hand. She hadn't said anything nice about him, only nasty. She hadn't even mentioned his piano playing, or his smile, or his beautiful razor moustache. Nothing, only smut.

'An' who d'you think you're looking at?' she asked, still smiling.

'I'm looking at you,' I said in a steady voice. 'You've got no manners, have you? Sitting there with your elbows on the table, drinking out of a bottle!'

The others were embarrassed to hear me coming out with something like that, out of the blue. Everyone stared at the Tizer bottle, mesmerized by the sudden shame of it. And Sarah's mouth opened and closed a few times, before she leaned across the table with a little screech, and dragged her fingernails down the side of my face, once.

Then she clip-clopped through the canteen doors and was gone before I'd even got to my feet. But I remember holding my hands to my breast and screaming after her: 'You tart! You tart, you!'

A storm in a teacup. No one had any idea what it was all about, least of all Sarah Vaughan, who got the sack for it. One misdemeanour too many, or so they said. I was only given a warning, because I'd acted out of character, they said. I saw her later on that afternoon, at four o'clock. She was standing by the fire-bucket outside the foreman's office, waiting for her wages to be made up. I had to walk past her. She was wearing her old tweed coat, with the rucked-up hem. She muttered something horrible as I went past. When I got to the end of the corridor, I looked round; but she had taken her compact out of her bag, and was busy putting lipstick on, pulling her mouth over her teeth, and making her lips look like dark red wings.

If I felt guilty about her getting the sack, the feeling didn't last long, because only a couple of months later she was off with him, touring the Valleys as a Jelly Babe. And the rest, as they say, is history. But not for me, my mind keeps going back to it.

I remember having to go up to his room on an errand, after the fight with Sarah. I knocked at the door, my face still smarting. I was holding the blue suit over my arm. My mother had had it cleaned and ironed for him. I was hoping he'd be out. But he was only getting ready to go out. His hands were slick with pomade, so he left the door ajar and I walked inside and draped the suit carefully over the chair. He had turned back to the mirror. The contents of the manicure case were spread out on top of the chest of drawers, all silvery and pretty, with the mother of pearl inlay along each handle. He'd been trimming his moustache, I could see that; prettifying himself.

He said something about starting up a dance troupe. 'I want you to come with us,' he said, taking more pomade from the jar and smoothing it onto his head like green ice.

'A Jolson Jelly Babe!' He was laughing in front of the mirror. There was a white shirt on the bed, whiter that the one he had on. A tie had been placed alongside the shirt, ready for going out. The tie had a pattern of small red diamonds on it. Flashy, like a playing card, I thought.

'I'm Alabamy bound!' He waved his hands like a minstrel in front of the glass, laughing at his own reflection.

'OK, OK, Grace.' He could see that I wasn't smiling back. He turned away from the glass and faced me.

And I remember him putting his hand to my cheek and stroking it in surprise, when he saw the marks. 'You're a nice girl,' he said, over and over again. 'A nice girl, Grace. Did you know that?' He stopped stroking my face and glanced towards the open door. Then he put his arms around my body, and drew me close to him.

I felt his head against my neck.

'Ma-mmy…' he was crooning softly, singing against my neck, 'ma-ha-ha-mmee…' Leaning into my body, and singing like Al Jolson. I could see us in the mirror. His arms around the dark width of me, his head against my neck.

And I held him to me, young as I was. I put my arms around his white-shirted back and held him. His shoulder blades parted under the pressure of my hands. I felt them opening out and spreading under my hands, like the white wings of a bird. Then still holding him with one hand, I leaned towards the chest of drawers, and picked up one of the silvery blades. It was the one he used for trimming his moustache. When he tried to move away, I brought the blade up against his chest, and stepped back.

I let myself into his room after he'd left us. The blue suit was hanging up behind the door, on a wire coat hanger. I put my hand inside the pockets and drew out a card of matches. The pink had bled on the matches, so I threw them into the empty fire-grate. Looking down, I noticed his passport photo, wedged between a crack in the oilcloth and the clawed foot of the chest of drawers.

I eased the photo out with my thumb and looked at it for a long time, but I didn't see it. The wound was only a flesh wound, that made a small red diamond on his shirt, before it flowered into a buttonhole and had to be bandaged up. He had packed his bags himself, moving in with Sarah Vaughan that same night. But nothing came of it. Their love affair, so called. Which didn't survive her fame, how could it?

And now he was dead.

Love is a bird, that flies where it will, that's what it says in the song. But I think we travel in flocks; different flocks, cut into by our shadowy opposites always flying the other way. And not just for love, but for life.

I tucked the tiny photograph inside the wooden frame of the mirror. I remember doing that then stepping back, further and further into the darkness of the room, until it looked as

though his face had been imprinted on my forehead. His eyes were just gashes of black: with dots of light at the centres, like domino pieces. Then the photograph came unstuck and dropped to the floor.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Father Farrell bares his teeth in a pearly-gated smile. A signal, but when I get up to sing, I find that my heart isn't in it. My face is as dry as tobacco leaf, and my lungs feel shadowy and empty like the branches of a tree in wintertime. I picture my lungs like that; and yet. And yet… as soon as the organist pumps out those opening chords… I shift my bulk and sing.

'And I sing because I'm happ-ee, and I sing because I'm free!' Vanity, I think, as I sense the congregation perk up behind me. All is vanity. But Baby Cleo is smiling, smiling and crying at the same time; and myself?

I have hoarded my tears like a jewel thief, but one or two steal down my face now, as I look towards the coffin for the last time. Sing! I think, even as my voice veers out of control, and *cr-a-ck-s*…