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THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS

Thomas McGrath

WALTER WAS working in an advertising firm in Washington, D. C., and Mary was a clerk in New York, so that winter they got to know Baltimore, at least some of the cheaper night clubs and the movie theatres and the section around the Clark Street Hotel pretty thoroughly.

"It's a treat to be able to come south in the winter," Mary would twitter. She didn't like the cold of New York or the gale that blew out of Jersey. "It's sure a treat," she would say, as they walked through the streets.

"Yeah," Walter would say. "Sure." He wasn't sure at all, because although he had worked in Washington for a couple of years now, he had never thought of it as the South, and some instinct told him it wasn't. But he had a habit of agreeing with Mary; it was difficult not to. Not that Mary was given to argument, but her mind had the characteristic of the food-hunting amoeba, and blindly ignoring all logical obstacles simply rolled over and engulfed them with the singleness of purpose of the primitive protoplasm.

Coming north to Baltimore by train, Walter hoped that she wouldn't be as difficult as she had been the time before.

"Marriage is all right," he told himself. "It's a fine institution. As Roosevelt or somebody says, it's the foundation of American life. But there's a time for everything." He was a staunch believer in the doctrine of there being a time for everything.

He sincerely hoped it wouldn't be a time for one of their quarrels. They had been getting more and more frequent.

"What's the use of going to Baltimore if we only fight?" he asked himself. "There's no use going if we just quarrel."

He remembered the last time. It had begun with the soup, he guessed. After she had insulted the waiter several times, she had managed through some kind of metaphysics to transfer the blame to him, and they had gone round and round. She had insisted upon taking a taxi to the hotel (although ordinarily she would admit she needed exercise) and once in the room she had really unloaded on him. Not that he was completely surprised; it had happened before, but never quite so completely. Finally she had demanded that he get another room because she refused to stay with him. God! It had taken him an hour to talk her out of it, insisting that she would lose face with the hotel staff, and doubly anxious to convince her because he had been afraid of it himself.

"Well, there's a time for everything," he assured himself. "When I get the next raise we can be married. A man can't let himself be dominated by a woman." The quack psychology of the advertising man was thinking for him.

When the train got in she was not there to meet him. He felt a bit ruffled by it, but went to the Clark Street Hotel and got a room for them as he had done at other times, had a bottle of Scotch sent up and took two fast ones, removed his trousers to keep them from being wrinkled, and lay down on the bed. He had a few more drinks and was beginning to glow pleasantly when Mary arrived.

"Put on your pants," she said. "You look funny that way."

It was a bad beginning.

"Aren't you glad to see me?" he asked.

"Of course I am," she said, kissing him. "No. Stop it. I've got to unpack."

She did. Very efficiently.

"Maybe they teach them that now," he thought. He wasn't feeling the pleasant glow any longer. He put his trousers on and had another drink.

"You'll have wrinkles in them if you lie down," she told him.

"Have you been thinking about it?" she asked after a moment.

"About what?"

"About our getting married. I thought last time we decided—"

"You decided," he said. "You decided it. I said we can't get married on what I make now."

"I could work," she said.

It was the old argument.

"A man should support his wife," he said. It was axiomatic.

"Well," she said, "I just thought. And anyway they're having sales in New York—after the holidays, you know—and it's a good time to buy clothes—but we'll talk of it later. Let's eat."

He didn't want to talk of it later, but it was easier to go to eat than to say so.

"It's swell to be able to come south for a vacation," she said when they were in the streets. "Don't you like the South? You're lucky to work in Washington. What's it like? It'll be swell to live there. How's your work?"

"We got a new chewing gum," he said. "Absolutely new. It's noiseless. It'll drive the others off the market when we get through running our advertisements. The social evil kind, you know: 'Do you offend? Change to Dooley's Noiseless. It will help your business.'"

"Will you get a raise?" Mary asked.

There it was again.

* * *

They were in the restaurant.

"I don't see why we came here," Mary said. "How you can eat spaghetti when you can get good Southern food—"

"You can't," he said. "I've eaten enough candied yams to—" He couldn't complete it.

"But spaghetti!" she said. "It's nasty! Nasty old food Italians eat. Mussolini eats it."

"I like it!" he said. He didn't want a quarrel. "Should we go to see Chaplin?"

"It's an old picture," she said. "I don't want to see an old picture, do you?"

"Chaplin's an artist," he said. "All the critics say so."

"You and your books," she said. "I like to see something new once in a while."

But they went to see Chaplin. It was a definite victory, Walter felt. Later they went to the Colonial Bar for a drink and it started again.

"Walter," Mary said.

He recognized the tone.

"Have another drink," he said.

"No," she said. "You've had enough. Walter, when are we going to get married?"

"I've got to get a raise first."

"But you're making enough now."

"A man's got to provide for a future," he said. "He can't ask a woman to marry him if it's not safe."

"Why not?" Mary asked.

"A man's got to support his wife decently," he said.

"You can," she said.

"We can't live like pigs," he said. "We can't live like a taxi driver's family." The alcohol made him take a definite attitude toward the lower classes.

"Rubbish!" Mary said.

He was glad that she was still being sensible. She wasn't putting on the pressure.

"Let's dance," he said.

They did. But it didn't seem to help. Others on the floor seemed to have attained a mindless nirvana, meditation on the flower in the heart of the lotus, while the music of the clarinet went through the air like little blue worms, and the trumpets cut the night to ribbons and hung the ribbons on the wall.

Walter remembered a time when he was a boy and he had been given a new wagon. It had raised him to a position of some importance with the gang, but in order to maintain his position, he had had to allow himself to be harnessed to the wagon, and, bit in teeth, snorting and pawing the air, all through the long summer day he had pulled groups of his playmates around until he had been exhausted. It had been fun. This wasn't.

The orchestra was playing "Mene Mene Tekel."

"God damn it," he said, "can't they sing anything but nursery rhymes anymore? Can't they play anything new?"

"I wish you wouldn't swear, Walter," Mary said.

"Let's get a drink," he said.

"I don't want a drink."

"I do," said Walter.

When he had had the drink, he started on a new line.

"Look," he said. "You love me, don't you?"

"Of course I do, Walter," Mary said. Her eyes got a kind of glazed

look and for a moment Walter felt uncomfortable under his pride.

"Well, let's not talk about it any more. About marriage, I mean. After all, a man's got to support his wife. That's the way I see it. And I can't see us getting married for a while yet. So let's not talk about it now."

"Walter, don't you want to marry me?"

"Damn it," he thought. "It's not that."

"Sure I do, darling," he said. "But it's like this. On my salary I can't. Maybe in a little while I'll get a raise. Because the boss said, just last week, he said, 'Walter,' he said, 'you've been doing good work. You're in line for a raise, Walter,' he said, 'as soon as things pick up. When the war boom really gets going, Walter, and things pick up, you'll get a raise,' he said. 'When we get going on these new jobs and things get better.' That's what he said."

"'When things pick up,'" said Mary. "That's what they always say: 'When things pick up.'"

"There's been a depression," Walter said. "It's not all over. Now we got this war boom on, we'll return to normalcy and things will pick up."

"There's always a depression," Mary said.

"That economist fellow, what's his name? Babbitt. He says we're finished with depressions for good. 'Every change must inevitably be followed by a change.' That's what he says."

"I don't care what he says," said Mary. "I think we should get married now."

He could see that she was preparing to cry. It made him frightened and his fear made him angry.

"Have another drink," he said.

"I don't want a drink," she said. She really was going to cry. It made her furious. She didn't mind waiting to marry him. She knew that in a year or so he would ask her. And secretly she liked him for not wanting to endanger their happiness. But his obstinacy chilled her, made her feel momentarily unwanted. She returned to the attack.

"You *don't* want to," she said, "or you wouldn't talk that way."

"God damn it, Mary, I'm only trying to explain."

"And you don't have to swear at me. I don't like to have you swear, so don't swear at me," she said.

"Jesus," he said, "it's getting so nothing I say suits you."

"And you don't have to be angry at me, Walter. After all, I don't have to be here. I don't have to come south to see you. I didn't come down here just so you could get mad at me and swear at me and get drunk and humiliate me."

"I'm not drunk," he said. "And don't shout so everybody will hear—I humiliate you, do I?"

"Yes, you do," she said. "And you are drunk, too. You drink too much. How can we ever get married if you drink so much? We can't afford it, you say. How can we ever afford it if you drink all the time?"

"Look," he said. "I come down here for a rest. I work hard for a whole month. I don't even go to the movies so I can save money. A man's got a right to relax sometimes. Sometimes, God damn it, Mary, a man's got a right to take it easy. I've got a right to relax and have a drink once in a while," he said. "Why God damn it, Mary, I work like a dog down there. I work like a dog, Mary, and I come up here and what do I get? Abuse. Now you know, Mary, I deserve something better than that."

"Walter, you're drunk."

"Abuse," he said bitterly. "It's all I get. And, God damn it, I work like a dog down there."

"I suppose you think I spend all my time going to teas?"

"And all I get is abuse," he said. "Nothing but abuse. And it's just so we can get married."

"But we never do," Mary said.

"There you go," he said. "Can't you leave me alone for a while? Can't you be still for a while?"

"Walter, you can't talk like that. I won't stand for it."

"Oh, you won't?" It was the only retort he could think of.

"I wouldn't have come if I knew you'd talk like this."

"I suppose your mother warned you against men like me."

"You leave my mother out of this, Walter. I didn't come here to hear you talk like that. You talk like that and I'm going to leave."

"Go ahead," he said.

That stopped them momentarily.

"Do you mean that?" asked Mary. "Do you mean that? You've insulted me; you've used me; now you don't want me. Do you mean that?"

He didn't. He tried to explain.

"No," she said. She was using the scene for all it was worth. "You did mean it. You did mean all those nasty things you said, didn't you?"

"Jesus," said Walter, "I don't give a damn. Let's go back to the hotel, for God's sake. Let's quit fighting. I'll marry you—Jesus, yes—but not now. Not this minute. But let's for God's sake quit fighting and let's get out of here. Now."

"All right," she said. "If that's the way you feel about it." It was final. "If you don't want me, you don't."

"It's not that," he said. "I do. Only I can't marry you now. And I'm not going to be run into this with a shotgun."

"All right," she said again, "but I'm going back to New York. I'm through. I'm not going to be your bitch."

"That's not what I meant."

"I don't care what you meant, can you understand that? I'm through for good."

And that was about all there was. They went to the hotel and packed their bags. They didn't say anything, and Walter was on the 1:45 train to Washington before he began to believe her. But he had finished the bottle of Scotch by then, and his ego was hurt and he was angry and had a terrific headache.

"Well," he told himself, "the hell with it. The hell with her." He felt a pleasure in saying it. "The hell with her. Washed up and finished. Hell with her; hell with it. That's ended for good."

But it wasn't, of course. Three months later they were married and went to live in a three-room apartment in Brooklyn; breakfast at 7:15; work at 8; home at 6; snug in bed at 10; drinking a little less; quarreling a little more; reading the economist Babbitt; hoping things would pick up so they could have three dolicho-blond children; live in a six-room apartment in Queens; live happily ever after.