

SONGS FOR NOBODIES

JOANNA MURRAY-SMITH



CURRENCY PRESS
SYDNEY



MELBOURNE
THEATRE
COMPANY

CHARACTERS

JUDY GARLAND / BEATRICE ETHEL APPLETON

PATSY CLINE / PEARL AVALON

EDITH PIAF / EDIE DELAMOTTE

BILLIE HOLIDAY / TOO JUNIOR JONES

MARIA CALLAS / ORLA MCDONAGH

JUDY GARLAND / BEATRICE ETHEL APPLETON

The Plaza Athenee New York, 23 April 1961.

BEATRICE: [*a New York accent with or without traces of the mid-West*]
Pretty much everyone has it wrong about happiness. Everyone's always talking about happiness like it's something complete and whole and distinct, like you'd notice it if it happened to come by. But it's not like that. Happiness is ordinary misery without extraordinary fear. Or in a nutshell: Happiness is the temporary illusion that nothing is about to change for the *worse*. That's happiness. And while you have it, all's you can think is: *This ain't happiness*. And then the moment it's over, you think: *That was it. That was happiness*.

This was what I was thinking as I was crying, sitting in the ladies lavatory of the *Plaza Athenee* on Sixty-Third Street on April twenty-third 1961 when Frances Ethel Gumm happened to come in for a pee. George had told me that very night that it was over. He was going and he took the keys to the Rambler and the door closed after him and I didn't see it coming. All that time with George, I thought I wasn't happy because things didn't *zing*. And then he left. And I realised that that was what happiness looked like: something small and reliable and ordinary. Maybe that's the point of happiness. It only exists as memory.

We had our rituals and I thought that was what marriage was about: creating rituals and fitting into them, but he didn't like that. Wasn't happy enough of the time. Or maybe it was just that he was happier somewhere else, *with* someone else who possibly was a red-headed waitress at Sam Chinita's on Eighth and Nineteenth.

Evening in Paris. Diorella. Apple Blossom, all the bottles lined up, along with hair maintenance products and small quick-fix items: bobby pins, safety pins, sewing kit, nail varnish for stocking ladders, sanitary items and face powder for those who were glowing with unsightly fervour.

April twenty-third 1961 started out a dull night. There were some Park Avenue matrons out for dinner and dancing, most of them too fat for their dresses and too lousy to tip. As they came in and out of the ladies room, I was caught up in the thought of how fast things changed. A couple of nights back I thought I had a pretty good job in a pretty good life and now it seemed pathetic to be sitting there with some perfume atomisers and hair lacquer and handtowels at thirty-six years of age, no children and a husband moving into the shadows of the future without me.

And that's when Frances Ethel entered in a black shift dress with a stiff silk evening coat with mink collar. Not even five foot, that's what gave it away. A little doll in kitten heels and theatrical make-up and then I remembered. Carnegie Hall. Judy was singing a few blocks away and it was 11.30 p.m. and now she was here, having a pee. And that's the first time I ever saw Judy Garland.

Many people subsequently called that concert 'the greatest single night in show business', but nobody knew that yet. It was just the night that followed the night before.

Technically, the first time I really saw Judy Garland was in 1940 when Granny Louisa Appleton took me to a Saturday matinee to see *Andy Hardy Meets a Debutante*. Because what remains a little known fact is that Frances Ethel Gumm was born in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, and so was Beatrice Ethel Appleton, being me. Only, when I was born, Frances Ethel was three years older, but we were both baptised in the Episcopal Church on the corner of Cody and Willowbank right next to what is now the Kentucky Fried franchise. So being a Grand Rapids girl, everyone was interested in Judy Garland in Grand Rapids, from the get-go. Apart from anything else, she was living proof you could get the hell out of there.

I thought to myself, I thought: *This is Judy Garland*. She was looking at herself in the mirror, checking out her lipstick and I noticed that her hem had snagged on something and was down at the back. That might

seem strange to have Judy Garland two feet away and to notice that little detail, but that little detail was my job.

‘Miss Garland, your hem is coming down at the back.’

She said: ‘Oh, gosh, oh—’

‘I have a needle and thread and I’d be—’

‘I couldn’t—oh—’

‘It would only take me a couple of minutes.’

And she smiled.

She sat on my stool. I knelt on the floor.

Hello, I said to myself. Hello? I am holding the edge of Judy Garland’s dress! I am brushing her leg with my hand, feeling her breath on my neck as I sew.

‘I had a short guy in a wig sobbing in the front row. Short guy, fat, expensively dressed but that didn’t help any, next to this itty-bitty little beauty, couldn’t be more than nineteen years old in chartreuse chiffon, and I could barely concentrate for thinking what kind of world it was where those two were the perfect halves of a whole?’

She was light and funny and alive like nothing I’d ever seen.

‘You’ve been crying,’ she said.

I said nothing to that. I had a live, living, one hundred per cent movie star in my midst and Bea Appleton’s husband problems belonged to another universe.

‘What happened?’

‘Oh, Miss Garland, really it’s—’

‘No, no, come on, let it out—’

‘Miss Garland, it’s just nothing, it’s just—’

Nothing? *Nothing!* It was my *life* that was vanishing before me. It was everything George and me had made. It was Christmases and long weekends. It was fireside suppers and skating in winter. It was anniversary dinners and shared jokes that nobody else could get. It was a strange little world, our world, but when you get down it, what world isn't that revolves around two people within four walls?

So I knotted the thread and used my teeth to break it and then I told her. And I cried. And finally I said:

'Miss Garland, here is the thing. I think happiness is not something good in itself so much as the absence of something bad. Happiness is just two flawed human beings who don't allow what they despise in the other to overwhelm what they admire.'

And Judy looked at me intently and she smudged away a tear from my face. Judy Garland. Smudged. Yep. My face.

'What's your name, honey?'

'Beatrice Ethel Appleton, but I go by Bea.'

'Bea Appleton, you see more than what most people see.'

I see more than what most people see. Yes, I do. *Yes, I do.* Bea Appleton is not a loser! Despite George. Despite George driving away from me: one block, two, three, four, before disappearing, taking a right by Filene's.

And I looked at her, into those dark velvet eyes and she looked at me. At me. Bea Appleton, philosopher.

JUDY *sings tentatively, softly, the first line of 'Come Rain or Come Shine'.*

Judy Garland. Judy Garland. Singing for *me*.

JUDY *sings the rest of the song.*