

Memories of a Waltz

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She had recognized her music playing on the radio after hearing a few measures of it. The *Blue Danube* it was, unmistakably. Not everyone could, she thought, recognize this piece from its introductory notes. They always stood there on the dance floor, the men wondering how to start, when to catch the downbeat; the women patiently waiting, and hoping nobody noticed. Mrs. Brown knew her Strauss and marked the tempo by tapping her fingers on the counter of the pharmacy.

“ONE, two, three, ONE, two, three,” she counted in her head as the fingers danced. The radio was now playing the universally recognizable section, the one that makes people feel like they are floating on the river.

“Here it is, Mrs. Brown,” said Mr. Fong, putting the amber plastic bottle on the counter. “You like that music, eh?” he added, noticing the precise movement of her fingers.

He started humming along, which annoyed her because he was off-key.

“Yes,” she said. “It reminds me of times long gone, dancing to the *Blue Danube* by Strauss.”

She wanted to emphasize that she knew what it was. Mr. Fong was the kind who would tell you about “that waltz” and hum it – off-key – for you to recognize.

“I wonder if it is the Vienna Philharmonic playing?” she said.

Mr. Fong certainly did not know, but being a practical man, he said the radio announcer would tell them as soon as it finished playing.

“Anything else?” he asked. “Same as usual, ten dollars co-pay,” he added, taking the ten-dollar bill Mrs. Brown had already unfolded on the counter.

The radio played the well-known refrain once more.

“It’s coming to the end,” said Mrs. Brown, to remind him to listen for the announcer’s voice.

They waited in silence. Mrs. Brown had her hand up in the air as if directing the orchestra. She smiled when the concluding notes played.

There was a commercial for a mattress store.

“Ah,” she said. “I guess we’ll never know who was playing. There weren’t so many commercials before, were there?”

“I’m not sure,” said Mr. Fong. “They’ve played the shoe store commercial for as long as I’ve listened to this station.”

Mr. Fong gave her the receipt that had just come out of his cash register.

“Thank you,” he said. “See you next month.”

She quickly walked away. She did not like that he implied she would be back again. People could overhear him and conclude that she had a habit of some kind, or even some addiction that people on television said they had, as if it would attract the public’s sympathy. No, her medicine was for a legitimate illness, and the prescription had been written by her doctor of thirty years with a solid reputation.

The bright daylight coming through the front door made it difficult for her to see and maneuver around a stack of toilet paper, on sale at \$6.99 for twenty-four rolls. She was almost sure she did not

need toilet paper. She was not sure it was a good sale. She wanted to get out of the store.

The sound of the *Blue Danube* came back to her, soothing her busy mind. It covered the street noise as she pushed the door to get out. She hummed along, discreetly and in tune. She did not want others to hear her and think she had become eccentric. She enjoyed knowing that she could still sing and hold the rhythm, but she really missed the pleasure of dancing. She saw a bench on her left facing the street, and sat on it. She gazed at the oak tree defining the center of town.

It was the New Year's Ball in, in... Now she could not remember the year. That's what the pills were for, to improve her memory. She had gone to the Ball with her parents, and her friend Alice had brought her cousin Daniel Humphries from Philadelphia with her. He was a tall, handsome man who wore an elegant blue double-breasted suit. He had asked her for a dance, a waltz – now she could not recall what that first one was. A fine dancer, she remembered thinking, leading her but not directing like so many awkward men did. She knew where the music would take them next, and there she went. Their feet glided in unison, and never seemed to suffer from an inadvertent push or pull by the other. Without a pause, the orchestra started playing the *Blue Danube*, and she smiled, and their eyes locked into each other. Until that moment, she had been looking at his shoulder, a trick to avoid getting dizzy. The color of his eyes had changed from their first encounter only a few minutes before, as if reflecting the blue from her dress.

But he was a confirmed bachelor as they used to say, not a woman's man, she had soon learned from her friend Alice. *That* she could remember, because that had been the only moment in her life she understood what it was like to fall in love, and have it taken away suddenly, as when waking up from a beautiful dream. In all the years since that night she had never met a man who could dance so well, or recognize the *Blue Danube* from its first five notes. The other men, even Mr. Brown, made it a matter of engineered competition, as if they were on *Jeopardy*. It never occurred to them, she had thought several times, that a woman disliked being the coveted prize of a contest.

She could have made him happy, she had thought every time she recollected the sights and sounds of that night. Of course, they would have been the subject of innumerable gossips, which sooner or later would have eroded their happiness. She felt guilty for having these thoughts when Mr. Brown, bless his soul, had been such a generous man to marry her, only a year after his first wife died in a car accident.

"Thank you for a most enjoyable evening, Miss Garfield," Daniel Humphries had said when they parted. "You are a superb dancer."

She looked at her name on the medicine: Mrs. Brown. Would she consider, she asked herself perhaps a bit formally, as if a very important matter had just come to her attention; would she consider using her maiden name again? Much trouble to give oneself, she thought, but it seemed to her that as time passed the only souvenir kept vivid in her

mind was of that voice calling her Miss Garfield, a superb dancer.

“Mrs. Brown?” said a voice coming from her right side.

It was the pharmacist in his white shirt. What did he want? Why was he here?

“Your husband called,” he said. “He was worried that you did not come back.”

“I must have fallen asleep,” she said.

A bus stopped and its door opened. Was that her bus?

“No, no,” said the Asian man to the bus driver. “She’s not taking the bus.” He turned to Mrs. Brown and sat on the edge of the bench to talk to her. “I will take you home,” he said, offering his arm as if he had asked her for a dance.

How polite he was, she thought. That was a quality she appreciated in men. She rose and followed him.

“I’m a good dancer,” she said. “Do you waltz?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t. I could see that you liked that music on the radio.”

He started humming the *Blue Danube*, and she noticed immediately he was off-key. Suddenly realizing he was Mr. Fong, the pharmacist, she let go of his arm, hoping that people had not seen her. She liked him; she liked his spontaneity, something she always lacked, but, alas, it came with tone deafness and clumsy dancing.

“It’s a beautiful day,” she said.

“Yes,” he said, “not too hot, not too cold. Here we are,” he said, when they had reached her

building, only one block away. “Don’t forget to take your pills, once a day.”

“Thank you, Mr. Fong,” she said, happy to have remembered his name. It struck her that it was as common a name as Brown.

“Next time, you can call, and I will send someone to bring you the pills, or I will come myself if I have time,” he said, starting to walk away.

She smiled at him in response, as if he had said he would bring her flowers.

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