

Notes in still

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I sit on wooden stairs leading down to our kitchen where my mother-in-law steals a glimpse of the turkey, its stuffing tumbling into juices running clear. We are in that mid-day holiday lull after gift-giving, clean-up and chocolate overload. We chit-chat about nothing. My husband lies on the floor in front of the loaded Christmas tree, and I gaze at an enormous paper snowflake my son made in preschool. It refuses to face outwards. My husband rises, pokes the charred logs to make room for another, then thumbs through the stereo iPod shuffle to *Celtic Christmas*.

Music fills the space around me. Still frames of my father-in-law's life flicker and freeze like an old motion picture. I see the first time we met. He takes his wife, son and me to watch fiddle players and step dancers at a local Cape Breton festival. We squeeze onto the small patches of green remaining on the grassy slope in front of the stage. Nearby, a curious child peers in my direction, two fists full of jade velvet and the *Book of Kells*. Sparkling dark eyes, sly twists side to side. As the crowd erupts, her tilted smile snaps to attention and she squeals, dropping her arms stiffly to the ready position. Her pint-sized partner leaps to his feet. Curly black hair bobs steadily with the light-footed stage duet. Amused, my father-in-law prances along with the tiny dancers until he collapses beside us panting, his face riant and glistening. Whoops, whistles, claps and, somewhere behind us, ocean waves. I feel them wash over me as a final soulful fiddle tune fades in the dusk. So many years ago.

As melancholy notes of *The Snowman Song* begin, my daydream dissolves. I notice my father-in-law sits, studying the pages of a gold-embossed missal, tiny rosary beads entwined in his fist. He lowers his pencil, and the book flips itself closed. The music finds him.

*Standing there, I'm aware
She is alone
Carrot nose, crooked stare
Her eyes meet my own*

He stands up and meanders playfully toward his wife. His twinkly black button eyes meet with her slow-melting smile. He closes in, slipping his hand silently into hers, raising and interlocking her fingers, the other hand finding its familiar place at the crook of her waist.

*Frozen still, iron will
Twinkles in black
Cherry lips share a kiss
I start to crack*

*Carry on
Years along
Nothing, I lack
Notes instil, love and thrill
Meet me in song*

They stand grinning, suspended by sound. Then, *swoosh*. A sweet spontaneous waltz around the timber frame kitchen. Bodies match one another step for step, and shift light-footed to and fro across stone auburn tiles, oblivious to us spectators. With the last few notes, they spin into a final embrace. Frozen, beaming. He dips smoothly into a formal gentleman's bow but stops short. With a comical grimace and holler, he clutches his back to feign a muscle spasm. Giggling, she reaches over and tousles his hair, her hand dropping to linger on his rosy cheek; a beautiful intimate scene I will not forget. How that song holds memory. It is the last I have of him dancing, walking, standing. It's 2006.

A short month later, my father-in-law suffers multiple embolic strokes, a delayed complication of coronary artery bypass surgery. In minutes, lives and relationships

change irrevocably. A loving partner becomes a full-time caregiver and decision-maker, crushed by a wave of new responsibilities, equipment, funding paperwork. Personal caregiving comes naturally to my mother-in-law, but she is exhausted. She is adamant. No one cares for him as she can. No one knows him like she does. No one sees how well they dance.

Over the better part of a year, the long hospital and rehabilitation journey is complicated by where they live, and requires stays in two distant academic centres before he can return home. He remains globally aphasic and hemiplegic, and requires total assistance. He can utter only a few well-used words and sounds. But he is home now.

He calls to her from the kitchen. "N-urse! Urse!" One leg kicks out to propel his wheelchair. Inching closer, he enters the narrow hall.

"What is it? You want your coffee? Just a minute, I need to get you your pills." My mother-in-law bustles past.

"Urse!!" he retorts.

Her tired eyes close. A pause. Patiently, she turns, exhales. "Now, now.... let's try that again together. Sing my name, just like in music therapy."

Tandem notes lilt back and forth between them, "Lu...cy... Lu...cy... Lu...cy." The reflected rhythm soothes, then synchronizes.

"There now. Much better." Her weary smile brightens. "The bathroom? Is that it?"

"Yeah. Lucy." He squeezes her hand, warms it on his cheek.

Years pass, and the season changes to summer. We fly across country and drive eight hours to arrive at the small, salmon-coloured brick bungalow, embellished with matching silk flowers and letterbox. It's late. My husband follows the moonlit path and unlocks the side door. We are assaulted by the smell of pungent mildew

from the basement. Quickly, we climb up the cluttered narrow stairway in the dim light of burnt-out bulbs. The kitchen wallpaper is peeling, its edges jagged, glue exposed. Nothing's changed.

"Eehh!"

"Eehh!"

Father and son exchange jovial sounds, each utterance louder than the last. Arms reach out to grab my husband in a handshake and bear hug. Twinkly black button eyes shine through a perfectly intoned exchange of nonverbal social queries, as if catching up on the latest.

"That's right! No joke."

"Oh-oh? No!" Incredulous.

My mother-in-law covers us with sloppy kisses and talks for hours about the cousins, the neighbours, the government. So and so who passed from cancer. The elementary teacher we don't remember who split up with her husband. It's been two years since our last visit.

Suddenly, I realize no one has included my father-in-law in the interaction. He is lost, adrift, seen and unseen, even as loving people surround him. My heart plunges; one of the most woeful things to endure as a human being must be the fracture of human connection. At the next break in the conversation, I make

a point to turn my body to fully face him and find his black eyes, distant.

"I think it's time for a song, don't you? There are birthdays coming up." Faint twinkles return.

"Oooh, yeh!"

Dah dah dee dah, Dee dah

Dah dah dee dah, Dee dah

He takes both my hands for the last line, stares back and does his best impression of a crooning Bing Crosby. He can't resist an accentuated waver of the voice to spice up a "Happy Birthday" ending. Then a kiss for each of my fists, *muah, muah*.

Even without language, my father-in-law sings. All the time. Clear recognizable melodies. He rhythmically slaps his knee and warbles boisterously along with an East Coast fiddler. Or finds tranquility in matching the solemnity of hymns at Mass.

It's 2022. Another Christmas approaches. Snow crystals swirl and tap on the frosted kitchen window. Lucy throws it open, breathing deeply. Plays a favourite song. Tiny roses peel from the wall. Marvellously, he is still home 16 years after severe stroke. His twinkly button eyes. Her slow-melting

smile. His hand slipping into hers, interlocking her fingers. They sing, together. And sometimes I think I see them dance.

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