



A Season of Happiness

nothing too serious

Popcorn



P02-3

MUSOS MUSES

INTERMISSION

This is the break the audience has been anticipating, an opportunity to stretch the legs and partake of some light refreshment in the foyer. The band members, ever mindful that their performance must continue to be top-shelf in the theatre, all head to the Stage Door, not just the exit from the building, but the pub of the same name set conveniently in the side street right next to their place of work. Here, an important ritual is performed with practised exactitude. It has been well-rehearsed, and needs to be, for all they have is fifteen minutes to lubricate and recharge before returning to finish the show.

As a child, my father had often taken me to meet the boys in the band room and even sit in the pit during the performance, but at my tender age, their "watering hole" was taboo. Later in life, I did join some of them for a drink or two on odd social occasions and, knowing of their lifestyle, was only mildly surprised at the copious amounts they could drink and still remain coherent and upstanding. Not until I was required to visit them during their work-break did it become clear that instrumental proficiency was not the only talent in which they excelled.

It was one of those times when the plans of mice and ordinary men, but not musos, went awry. My Grandmother had a fall and was seriously ill in hospital. Dad needed to be with her and this meant a mercy dash up to Nottingham with the prospect of an extended stay. He was playing for the Victoria Palace Orchestra then and simply had to put a deputy in to cover his absence, so there was no drama there. Unfortunately, while he was on his way north to see his mother, his sister and niece were heading south to visit us in London. It had been pre-arranged that Dad would get tickets for them to see the show but, of course, he wasn't there, so someone had to pick them up from the theatre. I was the obvious choice and didn't mind because it all seemed pretty straight forward. I was to take the train to Victoria, meet the bandleader during the intermission, collect the tickets and return home. Simple. At least it would have been, had Murphy not been lurking in the wings.

The train journey was a piece of cake. I'd used the same line every day when I was at school and could do it blindfolded. Maybe I should have. Arriving a little early, the boys weren't there yet, so I ordered a scotch and sat down to enjoy it and the relaxed, casual atmosphere. That soon changed when they eventually made their entrance. It was less of a stampede than it was a determined, purposeful surge towards the bar. I went to join them, taking my glass which wasn't yet empty. The first one to notice me beamed over the rim of his first drink and reached out with his free hand to take my glass. "Teachers okay?" he asked. Not waiting for a reply, he placed it on the bar, downed what was left in his own glass and put it next to mine. I gathered there was an understanding between the staff and the band boys, because no words were exchanged. The bottle was automatically tipped, twice into each glass - doubles! It was just as well the intermission was only a short one.

Had I been a relative outsider, I could have completed my business and bowed out politely; but I was the son of one of their own and already knew most of them. The fact that I was neither an accomplished musician or drinker never seemed to cross their minds. I was simply a member of the family with a glass that needed topping up; and, apparently, my money was no good there. When they finally departed, I felt suddenly alone, abandoned. One minute there was merriment and the heady confusion of ad lib chit-chat, the next a return to the peaceful ambience of the moment I had first arrived. Had I been dreaming? Sliding a hand into my jacket pocket, I withdrew some pieces of paper - they appeared a little blurry, but they were the tickets I had come to collect. So, the boys must have been there and, I guessed, the intermission was over. They were back in the pit, and I had to complete one last movement and get home.

The station was just over the road from the theatre, so I made it without getting lost. In those days they had no monitor screens outside the platforms, just large boards displaying the destinations of the various trains in big white letters - easy enough to read, except for one who had just met friends who happened to be musos on a break. I was sure I'd gone to the correct platform, right up to the time I was there in the carriage, rising from my seat as the train came into my station. Only it didn't slow down, it didn't even stop! Flustered and frowning, all I could do was sit and wait until it eventually did. Disembarking in a stumbling rush, I found myself staring in dismay at a sign - Mitcham Junction - and my heart sank. This was one of those places no-one visited. Maybe nobody lived there at all, so only the odd train ever stopped!

I don't know how long I waited for one to take me back, but I eventually got home - some time before midnight, I think. I tried excusing my tardiness to my wife, but smelling like a distillery didn't help my case. The fact that I hadn't forgotten to pick up the tickets was irrelevant - they weren't for her anyway. As for explaining about the generosity and garrulous nature of musos, what was the point? She just didn't know them like I did.

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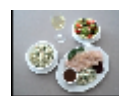
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