

No Evil Angel But Love

By Patrick Feeney

A ghost dance, haunting notes holding the air, like fragile crystal bubbles floating on the softest breeze, like snowflakes falling through a black winter sky, even in the fall being lifted to dance that part again, up again to fall again, together and apart again, parting again and again and always together, forever bidding adieu, this dance, a white snowflake ghost dance, that had begun with a holding back and a going on, a drawing together and a pulling apart, open arms waiting for the end, the to and fro of it all catching them unawares, heel and toe to the end, the snow ghosts spiralling to their settling place, the white sheet pulled up over the corpse, that was how it would end even as it began, this ghost dance, this play of memories, and silent echoes half whispered on the night, and dreams that lasered hologram shapes in the darkness somewhere back of the brain, so there never could be any sleep, not really, once the dance had begun, never anything still again, once it had started, though started suggests it was stopped once, and it began from its stop, but that was never the case, for it was always in motion, ghosts gathering and drifting away, in poems and songs and hopes, ghosts gathering, in letters and unsaid words, and no way to lay them, no way to lay them all, ghosts drifting away and gathering, too many all around, like snowflakes in the storm, like some slow silent blizzard, so ordered and still in its turmoil, and the blackness of the winter night speckled with this white gem dust raining pouring down, and no stop to it, this dance, no chance to lay these ghosts

dancing.

Let love be the last word, the last word be love.

I was aware of notes, perched on the stave like crows along the lines, pole upon pole to the end of the line, over the hill and far away, out of sight, carrying the messages, the lies, the promises we all die for, except this was music, this was song, and beyond music and song this was dance, and she was keeping the beat, counting the time, and trying to perform, perfect her art, trying to catch the movement, express the dance through the positions she had learned, those five feeble, impossible positions, as if she were cheated of any real chance even before she began, to achieve flight through standing still, to dance through five wooden puppet positions, to be fire in a cold grate, to be alive in the tight confine of the coffin bed, to be all movement through an infinite number of poses, stretching five into innumerable, to feed the crowd with this miracle, to satisfy their need, but she would do it, she would dance, dance and dance, finding the climbing and the falling, the twisting and the turning, the delicacy and the grace, alive with the thrill of it all, the release, the holding on, the leap into space, the freefall into poise and control, consummate control, for it was all movement around and upon and into and within a fixed point, a still point, flowing around and through it, sensing the lines of energy, like the spiderweb lines surrounding a magnet, secret and invisible until sprinkled by some grey-haired teacher, smelling of chalk and too many cares, iron filings weighing them down, weighting the lines of force like a magic sadly trapped, currents revealed, brought up to the light for all to see from the ocean of invisibility that is our imagination, so we can peep at them, like we tiptoe

crane our eyes at the fairground, lift our necks at the circus, wanting to believe, so desperately wanting to believe what we know is deceit, is just a trick, a sleight of hand, just so much make-up, so much fake, but wanting to know it is something else, a miracle, magic, and so we see it as such, we try to believe it as such, we call it such and we have witnessed it, hallelujah, and we dance for joy, and it is all deceit, but we dance just the same, or rather we stumble, and we stub our toes, and we dream we dance, and dream the music is ours, our delusion, our deceiving ourself, but not so with her, with her it was different, with her it was a flowing with the music, real and alive and true, a counting the beat, a holding to the time, a taking the current and floating off within it, for she could dance the music, dance the emotion, dance the ideas held in there, like water is held in channels in underground caverns black and silent as death, snaking beneath the sterile desert sands, surfacing at an oasis, coming up as life, or like streets and alleys try to define the place, and do so in a way, for the spirit of the place has its form, or like the shape is in the stone awaiting the sculptor and the chisel to release itself, for she knew the idea was there in the music, living deep within it but struggling free of the music, trapped but at large, riding it, living upon it, like an ocean current will swell to the surface, a wave finding its shore, like unknown strength welling from within, for that is where the dance lies, lurks, lingers, deep deep within, parasite that it is, curse and affliction, and blessing too, safe and sick and untouchable, the dance is there awaiting the dancer, and another step is freed, and another step is snagged, and free again, for even in the dancing of it, the catching of it, the step slips away, is gone, even in the spending of the wave on the beach, the strength is gathering again, for ever new, forever renewed, for ever free.

Like you would find in any stationery shop, an ordinary yellow envelope file, her letters and his, together, kept in a drawer in the bedroom, because every secret has to be held, every secret has its place in a system, and every hiding place is locked in a

ritual, whether a Kremlin or not, the more elaborate hiding places stretch forever, high-rise blocks with hollow endless corridors, blinded windows and blank office doors, numberplated, though beyond number, teasing the mind, like only some giant labyrinth can, or long forgotten love letters tied with ribbon, safe in a shoe box, safe in the attic, safe all the same, whatever the box, wherever, a box and a key Pandora knew, for secrets, hers wonderfully wrought with serpent spirals and sparkling stars, for the secrets held there were the secrets of the skies, and their beyond, and the secrets of the depths of the earth, caverns and soundless hollows in the rocks, the darkest places imaginable, the unreachable, unfathomable places below and within, held and locked deep inside, trapped and terrible and sealed inside this box, this beautiful box, bejewelled and bright because it had darkness inside, and therefore it shone with brilliant light on its six square surfaces, against the blackness within, blackness wrapped in light, but pressing for release, forcing itself against the sides and the lid and the base, the pressure intolerable, the build up immense to bursting, as if those shapeless and countless demon secrets were screaming for their freedom, banging the doors and pressing the bars of their cell, demanding to be free, like a soul from its body, like smoke from its flame, all the secrets of the universe, space and time and the black black void, all of that, all the secrets ever whispered, all the hate ever scolded in the spiderweb fibrews of veins, all the love ever, all the desires and deceits, all the lies and the fakes, all of this, fermenting like a must, and the pressure building, the pressure building unbearably.

She shied away from the danger, from the edge of the precipice, but that movement took away her breath and left her spinning ever so slightly, as if unsure if it were her or the rock beneath her feet that had moved, like a drunk caught in an earth-tremor, aware of the motion but too fuddled to work it out, and aware too that alarm bells were clattering inside her head, for she knew danger, had tasted it before, but this was

so sour as to be sweet, this was honey, this was maple syrup, and she was reminded of the wasp traps she made, when she was nine or ten, the jam jars with a spoonful left in them, and she would punch a hole in the lid and make a short funnel of paper to fit the hole, and then watch the wasps attracted, driven to the sweet and deadly trap, down the one-way funnel, easy at first but harder and harder, fitting so snug, it squeezed their wings tight to their backs, and they popped through, mad for the jam, headlong to their sticky end, one on the other, pushing, clambering, as busy as bees to greet their death, but what a way to go, gorged, gagged, then gone, and not a whiff of danger till too late, the same with ants and lakes of golden syrup in a saucer, and she would sit and watch the surface turn black with death, as if satisfaction was what mattered, at whatever cost, satisfy your need even if it kills you, especially if it kills you, no thought of safety, no careful circling, keeping to the edge, just out of harm's reach, no caution, but chaos pressing, and she had watched this, in fascination and in fear, being so close to that black nothingness that gnaws at the edges of life, that lemming leap into death, that knot that slips itself tighter and tighter about your heart, and she remembered she had shuddered at coming so close to it, and backed away, and chosen to be safe, and alive and in control, for she was schooled in the discipline of the dance, had given her life to the dance, and was convinced that any movement across stage is best choreographed, and that any costume is a pattern held together by the tiniest footsteps of silken thread, else it tears, and comes apart at each stitch, as if the heavier the hand, the weaker the garment, the more clumsy and awkward the steps, and she was afraid of falling, more than anything else, terrified of spilling untidily on stage, failing, at the moment when she would be watched, the audience hidden in the folds of the darkness, but she was in the spotlight, and she was so scared of letting go, letting herself down, knowing how fine a line between, sometimes no line at all, so she was slave to the dance, fearing the freedom the dance promised her, like the inmate afraid to step out from the asylum, though the door is open wide, because she knew, even in the freedom of the dance, when you can hold it to its promise, and when all seems breathless and dizzy, when the music takes you or you

lose yourself or whatever or however it goes, when the dance becomes you, even there, or perhaps especially there, there is control, there is holding on, there is a clinging to something outside and beyond you, like a pillar, like a root, though it seems you are beyond holding anything, and you have relaxed into the current that is taking you down and out, she knew, she held to the something within the dance, like the stillness that is in all motion, like the fire that is in all flint, like the curve that holds the most mighty wave, so that, when she saw how love would so wreck her life, how love would so destroy all the dance she knew, and so destroy her, and free her, and let her soar as high and light as air, where dance could only dream, could only mimic the wind or suggest the flame, then she drew back from love, back from the edge, afraid to spread herself wide like the condor, lean on the pale blue sky and step out, leave behind the rockface and the thorns, and fly without effort.

Life was days sometimes, weeks sometimes, not seeing her, not holding her, not kissing her, not, until and when, and always a matter of time, always and ever, and never, weeks on end without end, and never enough time, and then too much, seconds running, falling and sliding and slipping away, slip-sliding, like an almighty river rolling over a fall, a current taking it all so fast, out of reach, wool spilling from tiny fingers, beads losing their thread, cascading to the polished tiles to bounce and dance like crazy hailstones, with a sound like the patter of rain on the glass, the grandfather clock in the corner of my granny's front room, heavy with the scent of polish and dust and being closed, the pendulum swinging its slow, slow swing, that big brass pendulum in its coffin, each tick separate and precise and weighty, knapping the silence in the room, like a flake of flint struck from the stone makes a sweet tut smack slap, like a match slowly struck with a rasp, the tinder set to flame, those ticks, those deathwatch ticks kept time itself, and I recalled my grandmother, big and fat and hard of breath, always a wheeze struggling in her throat, taking the brass key from the

mantelpiece and winding the clock every Sunday, turning it click by click to tighten the spring, like the bomb primed, Sunday upon Sunday, never a miss, each solitary tick as hollow as the blackest night, filling the room and her life and slipping away, one more tick being one tick less, to the last syllable, tick-tocking and hickory dock, the trap sprung and the mouse did run and the dish ran away with the spoon, and it was for ever running away, sliding away, fading away for the next, like flour through her fingers, baking her bread for the week, and her currant cakes, the egg timer turned and turned again and nothing no way to stop it, self-winding, like the watch I bought myself on my eighteenth birthday, my coming of age, the spring wound and unwound, tightened and untightened and tightening and untightening and never ending, self-winding and always, cogs and wheels and orbits and electrons, a macrocosm of microcosms all on the turn, everything turning and turning, in a great giant millstone of sky, black and polished as granite, seconds and ages doing their turn by turns, passing and past and yet to pass, nothing ever still, nothing ever at rest, nothing, for it was always a matter of time, always going to be a matter of, simply because it was denied, like air to a fish grounded, like the life water they gagged and gasped dry lipped and prickly hot in the desert oasis, always together as they were, but never alone together as they wished, close as close could be, but at a safe distance, at a safe keeping, no time that was ours, no privacy, no left to our love, and so we were trapped by it all in the emptiness of the sea of dunes that swept out and beyond all their horizons every way they turned, surrounded by the time we were given, like an unwanted gift, too much by far, but not the time we wanted, we needed, flooded by time, sometimes, like a flashflood turns the wadis to a river, washing out the nutrients, leaving those muddied gullies more desert than ever, swamped by time, but useless, sterile, time only for frustration, for straining against the bars of our cell, time together that was our separateness, days together, moments together, weeks apart, too much and none at all, unless we stole it, hungry beggars living off the market waste, outlaws for love, for love makes outlaws of us all, which is the thrill, which is the danger, which is the madness, riding the risks to lose it all, no time at all except to feel

the fun and the pain and know that they are the same, knowing the pain fully, the sweet joy completely, the loss and the losing to come, the giving up already done and the letting go to come, losing it all, everything, for the next together brings the time we must part, no time together except stolen, a moment here there and here and nowhere fast, a squeeze of the hand, where it began so long ago, though even that beginning seemed a farewell shake, a touch, finger lingering on finger, a kiss, a glance, a moment held too long and the universe disturbed, a drop of sweat in the desert sun, running from the tip of the nose and caught in the channel of the upper lip, rolling down to drink, so salty, so tangy on the arrow of the tongue, this thirst for love ebbing away, like the cactus needles denying the water, wounded, stung and envenomed, but alive and wide open to every nerve ending, each nerve raw, as if each day is the last torment and the last delight, the moment of final surrender, giving in to the rack, that moment of cannot take any more, enough being enough for anyone, as if each moment stolen was the end rather than another beginning, the posse tracking us down, the ricochet shots ringing off the canyon rocks, fleshwounded and bloodied we will live to fight another day, always another day, always another time to, and even stepping up the steps to the gallows, our time up, there is the trapdoor hidden and waiting to give way beneath us, opening a way down and out, because we were prisoners doing a different time, counting the hours in scratches on the walls, locked in our cell of hopeless love, so much time to kill, time, one way or another, one time and the next, this was our love, forever bidding adieu, each separation part of each coming together part of each separation, and so the millstone turned, the wheel of the rack tightened the ropes, sustaining and destroying, and we knew, we realised, this was how love is renewed and relived, forever tasted anew, condemned and damned and facing a death each awaiting that was endless and without let, except the one instant that made up for the age, like a heavy black curtain that is swept aside to let in light, let in the glorious sunlight blinding the eye, so that blackness is forgotten forever and there only ever was and is this brilliance, for the being together was like some miracle healing, like salvation, like a new start, like life was just beginning, or

beginning again, like resurrection.

Love could do that, could take us to the very most edge where everything became nothing, darkness and cold and void and silence, take us right to it so we were in the midst of it and it was upon us and within us, and then free us, exalt us, give us wings to stretch out upon, lean upon the wind and take us up and away in soaring flight, this love could do that, did it again and again, this love tested and tried so often, proven so often, never let us down, no matter what, because it was outside of time, it was inside of time, it held to its own time, and its own power, making everything summer, everything spring, like the five fairytale days spent together that August, the nights of love, naked under the blue silk cream moonlight, time out of season, the world on flower and in colour as they walked, five days of never being so close, dancing, on fire with it, this incredible force, in love in a green time, for the rhythm of our love was the very rhythm of time, its life breath like the ebbing and flowing of the tides, like the turning of the seasons, like the beat of the heart, having its own beat, its own pulse in every cell of its being, this love, greedy, must have its own time, must have its own having, its own have and its own had, and its own will have, must, must, no denying it at all, it was greedy for it, desperate for its own time, and defiant to the last, being denied its nothing to lose, demanding its time to be, insistent and shrieking like an anguished screaming starving babe in arms, for it knows nothing but itself, its own appetite and its own needs, itself, and it will lie and cheat and steal and dance and murder for its self.

I needed to examine, and try to understand, by going into myself, to the very heart of my beliefs, and it was a going back as well, into the child I had been and the child I

still was, the man I had been as the child, old before my time, mature in my childishness, but I had grown up askance of love, there like a threat, there like a comfort, an alarm bell to ring, a pull-cord to pull, an insurance policy locked away in a biscuit tin, waiting for the time it is needed, aware of love there but not part of my life, not directly, aware not because it was evident, except as a kind of faith, a system of beliefs, but it was something I could fall into, a fireman's sheet stretched out and waiting below, while the bedroom behind me was ablaze, and the crowd down below were shouting me to jump, because it was a leap into danger and a leap into safety, like all religions, for I could remember my granddad telling me we all have to believe in something, and it doesn't matter what, as long as it's something bigger and out there, something that puts everything else into perspective, into proportion, believe in it, and I already knew by then, even before he told me, I had worked it out for myself, that I believed in love.

Because love is and was and will be everything, and I had lived through the beginning and the end of an explosion of love, the flower-power days of dancing happy hippy love, love is everywhere, love is all you need, the festivals and the love-ins and the parties that never ended, and the music in the air and the joss-stick smell of every breath, and light shows amoebaed across my teenage days, when the world changed gender, and brazen femininity blossomed all around, like the whole world gone queer, and I was part of it all, caught up in it, lifted by it, borne along on this tide and then dumped, and staggered to my feet unsteady on a strange beach, like some lonely lost sailor, stranded on a distant shore, and I had to stand by and witness the decline, watch the flower girls deflowered, napalm raining down on countless Charlie villages, the screaming pain searing into flesh, for the flower had become the bomb, and the bomb the flower, bursting into bloom with the power of the sun, and the bomb was everywhere, growing tall, beautiful and poisonous, casting a huge shadow across the land, and in the gloom, in the shade, went on the terrifying tumble into drugs and sex and violence and the crossing of that thin thin line between love and hate, and the

times were a-changing, for sure, all of which was a kind of backlash, and the world turned back once more to its old ways, comfortable in its cruelty, cosy in its crudity, with a bitter vengeance, but I was thirteen, determined to hold on, determined to cling to love, so I clenched my fists till the knuckles were white, like my life depended on it, believing it did, because god is love and love is god, equal on the scales, the one the other, and so I hung on, while my heart grieved for the loss I could see and feel, that beautiful and simple innocence that dared to try, that tenderness that touched everyone, now gone, like a flash flood brings green shoots of life to a desert, a brief flourish, like the flash of a grenade brings a brutal light that ends in darkness, blaze then gone, blinding to the eye. Except I held to it, because I knew it for what it was, a flowering of love, and I saw the light and the colours add a magic to the world, colour me a rainbow, and flowers in their hair, like a gigantic Gauguin canvas come to life, because that was what it was, a coming to life, and I came to life and to love too, and her name was Mary and she was my first love, and I was eleven nearly twelve, and she bought me a bracelet engraved with her initials, and while the other boys chased and the other girls screamed and pretended to run from love, because it meant nips and nail marks and arms twisted and hair pulled, bruises, swipes and slaps, as if in memory of the primitive hunt that it was, I went into love quietly and calmly, like a going to church, and she too, met at Sunday school, where sitting beside her was something new, even though I could sit next to her any day at school, but didn't, and Mary and I learned the words together, chapter and verse of love, recited and practised for the scripture exams, as if learning the words was enough, as if that were love, saying it and reading it means you are in it, believing it, which was perhaps the first thing we believed, because it was a way into the adult world, where love was talked about and sung about, but it didn't feel like my love, any part of me, no, didn't feel the same, and I wondered if it were me, if it were different for me because I was different, but it was like I wasn't really loving her, like there was a gap that I knew should not be there, but I could not close it no matter what, had nothing to close it with, and I had no words for it either, stood dumbstruck when she left me for my

friend, and felt the hurt of love lost, of that special kind of turning away so slow it is almost imperceptible, fading from me, fading until she was gone.

Just like the day my grandmother died, and I hadn't noticed her slipping away, had just been fascinated by her skin, yellow as ancient parchment, smooth though, as if she were being renewed, her youth restored, and as well, her eyes blazed bright as an eagle's, seeing their heaven, and she would talk to friends gathered round her bed, friends who had died years before, who were waiting to greet her, and that had frightened me, shitless because it meant there were ghosts all around, the spirit world, all the time, shoulder to shoulder with this other world, cheek and jowl with ours, and we must be walking through them all the time, or they through us, so that even playing in open empty fields, you were pushing through crowds of dead, and that horrified me, that vision of no privacy, no personal space, so that everything you did was seen and heard by them, that was too horrible a nightmare, and so I shook it from his mind, shut it from my thoughts, and preferred instead to believe she had opened a window on their world, or she had unlocked a door, or had it unlocked for her, in preparation, because I had a sense that things were never as they seemed, were never as they were seamed, for there were always tears and ways through, to allow passage, and I appreciated that all things were in flux, coming into life or going from it, like some cosmic mill grinding out a million souls, our daily bread, and so I knew what I had to do, from that moment on, I had to begin the game in earnest, throw myself in to the dance and go for it all the way.

So I went on, from first love to the next, Mary to Anne, Susan to Jane, and to the next, and the next, like it was some endless game of rounders, from stop to stop, from girl to girl, and it was all sex, a struggle for sex, and even as I sweated for it, I knew it wasn't love, like a tackle isn't football, but the sidestep, the dancing silken shimmy, that is, or the heavyweights grunting on the ropes, that isn't boxing, like the butterfly float is, but this was nothing but a crude reaching for tits, a fumbling in the dark, it

was fingers in knickers coming out smelling of her juice, it was all so restless and meaningless, it was fidgeting, like a writer waiting for inspiration might fiddle with the pen, or drum to a restless rhythm, and it was scoring, getting a bit, getting whatever you could, going as far as you could, claiming the points, counting the beat, but no sweet music, no sweet music, because this was just a game, just a way to fill your time, a boyfriend girlfriend game, and if and when it touched an emotion, you were out, when it got serious it became a joke, and the rules were that simple everyone could play, and the bottom line was ridicule, what others thought or said, so you never had a chance at love, because the bells would ring and their laughter and a thousand fingers would point you out, and so there was always this enormous chasm, this canyon, this precipice, between the real thing, love, and this, between the game being played and the love of book and film and song, real and fantasy, which was which, and there was no way over, no way across, except there was supposed to be this promised land of love, there in the distance, flowing with milk and honey, spunk when you wanked, juice when you fingered her, and no orchestra playing, but disco noise so loud it spiked your ears, this journey to love, this Jordan to cross, forty years in the wilderness and stumbling, as if you were to come to love old and broken and weary, not young, for it was only the audacity of youth, thinking it could find true love, in those comics and those photostrips, happily ever after, ding dong wedding bells and all that, what nonsense, for I knew love was a distant land, and the way was hard, and if you got there, before you got lost, you counted your blessings, and you raised your voice to god, to love itself, in praise and in prayer at reaching your goal, and having found it, having reached there, and it having taken you in its arms, at the end of the marathon, when you have nothing left, and there is someone there to take you, wrap you in that blanket as if you could be cold, there is someone there to greet you on the other side, so that the parallel with death was clear, and there was no getting away from that, and love was the god I would live for and would die for.
