

A Minor Mood · *Stuart Dybek*

THE CONCERTINA, sleeping beside Joey, has started to wheeze. It's the middle of the night, even the streetlights have their misty blinders on, and the concertina can't seem to catch her breath. In the dark, Joey listens to her ragged sighs. He can't sleep to the concertina's labored breathing. He's worried. He can't help thinking about what happened with the glockenspiel, how he would wake to find her place beside him on the bed empty, and then, from the locked bathroom, he'd hear her heart hammering arhythmically and flat, a dissonant rise and fall of scales. Once it began, it went on like that night after night. The neighbors complained; finally, he lost his lease. And, one day at dusk, he found himself standing on a street of pawn shops and tattoo parlors, with nowhere to go, and only a pawn ticket to show for what had been his life. He'd wandered then into a tattoo parlor, and wandered out with a tattoo—not a rose or an anchor or a snake or a heart, but a single note of indelible blue, a nameless note without a staff, only an eighth note, really—stung onto his shoulder.

Afterwards, he spent a long and, in retrospect, mournful time alone before becoming entangled with the tuba. He met her at a Tuba Fest, and for a while it seemed as if they were destined for each other, until the dreams started—disturbing dreams in which he ran lost and breathless through twisting corridors, dreams he'd wake from in the dark to her low, gurgled moans, blats, grunts, drones which seemed drawn out longer each night like the vowels of whales—melancholy whales. At first, he tried to tell himself that it was only gas. But the signs and symptoms were undeniably clear and this time he didn't wait for landlords or court orders to tell him it was over. He'd already been evicted from sleep. One afternoon, while the tuba was away for a valve job, Joey, groggy with insomnia, packed what he could fit into a suitcase and left the rest behind.

In the years that followed, home was wherever he set that suitcase down—a sad succession of flophouses and transient hotels, dumps that seemed tenanted by fugitives from the collective unconscious: lobbies styled in Depression Deco; ill-lit corridors lined with doors emitting smells like whispers and whispers like smells; restless, rheumatic rooms that creaked and groaned under their own dingy weight, rooms that came furnished with desperation, and wallpapered with worn, fitful dreams. Sometimes, in

a fog, down by the docks, he'd hear sounds echoing the warnings that lights could not convey—bouys dinging their bells, the moody moans of foghorns—and he'd think about the glockenspiel, recalling the sensitive touch of her mallets, and the patterns her delicate, glittering vertebrae left along his skin, and he'd feel the blue tattoo ache like a bruise from bite marks on his shoulder. He'd think about the tuba until he could feel again a ghostly impression of her hard, cool mouthpiece and taste the brass against his lips, and then he'd recall the way his breath flowed into her, as if there was no filling her up, as if she was sucking it from the deepest center of his body, leaving him hollow. He had carried that hollowness within him for years; he didn't want to feel hollow any longer. Whatever came after the tuba would have to arrive on a breath of its own.

Now, he listens to the concertina wheeze, and, perhaps to find a little respite from his worries, Joey remembers nights as a child when his lungs sounded like wind blowing past a tattered shade, and his bronchial tubes gave recitals of the croup. While his father was god-knows-where, and his mother was at work, his grandmother would come to nurse him. It was a large family on his father's side, and his grandmother managed to love them all and yet to show such special affection towards Joey—maybe because his father was always god-knows-where—that everyone called her Joey's Gran, even if she was their grandmother, too.

Joey's Gran would show up carrying her green mesh shopping bag whenever he was sick. She always carried that shopping bag just in case she suddenly had to do some shopping, or in case she stumbled upon something valuable lying in the street. Even if it served no other purpose, the shopping bag was good for carrying her purse around in. When she would arrive toting the shopping bag, besides her purse it would also contain the chartreuse protrusions of a half dozen lemons and the blue-green bulge of an economy-size jar of Vicks VapoRub against which other, lesser bottles clinked.

The sight of her would set Joey coughing.

“So, Joey,” his Gran would say, “I hear you got the Krupa again.”

The lemons and Vicks were part of her cure for the Krupa. But before unloading the shopping bag—before doing anything else—Joey's Gran would fill the apartment with steam. She'd go from room to room, balancing pie pans and cookie trays on the tops of radiators, and as she set them up they'd bang like cymbals punctuating her stream of muttering:

“Kid’s got the Krupa (BANG!) the Gene (BAM!) the drummer man (BOOM!) Krupa (CRASH!).”

“Hey, Joey (WHAM!) whatayou got?”

“The Gene Krupa.”

“You can say that again (BLAM!).”

“The Gene Krupa.”

HA! Joey’s Gran would expel a laugh resounding like a cymbal clap as if he’d just said something surprisingly hilarious even though she had taught him the you-can-say-that again routine. “You can bet your *dupa* (BING!) you got the Krupa (BONG!).”

She’d fill the pie pans and cookie trays to the brim with water; she’d set kettles and pots on every burner of the stove and let them boil; she’d turn the shower on hot in the bathroom and let it pour down clouds of steam; she’d hook the vaporizer up beside Joey’s bed, fuel it with a glob of Vicks, and aim its snorky exhalations in his direction. Once Joey’s Gran arrived it seemed as if the entire flat began to heave with breath.

While the steam gradually rose like genies easing out of bottles, Joey’s Gran would rub camphor oil on his chest and on his neck where his glands were swollen; she’d dab a streak of Vicks along his upper lip as if she was drawing a mustache. Then, she’d undo the babushka that she always wore whether she was outside or in. When she whisked it off with a flourish, like a magician doing a trick, years disappeared. Blurred in steam, minus her babushka, suddenly Joey could imagine her when she was a girl. He wondered if she kept her head covered because her hair looked so much younger than the rest of her. It was a lustrous ash blond, so springy with curls that it looked fake, as if she might be wearing a wig. This girlishness that she kept hidden was like a secret between them.

She’d twine her satiny babushka around his throat, and over the babushka she would wrap a rough woolen scarf that was reserved for these occasions and known as the croup scarf. The scarf, a clashing maroon and pea green plaid anchored at one end by a big safety pin, retained past smells of camphor and Vicks. Its scratchy wool chapped his chin where his skin wasn’t protected by the babushka.

By then, the flat was expanding with steam. Mirrors disappeared in the mist they reflected. Through the mist, the wallpaper, a pattern of vines and flowers, opened into three dimensions and came alive like flora in a rain forest. The background noise of outside traffic transformed into screeches

of monkeys and tropical birds. Steam smoldered along the insides of windows and made them sweat; it condensed on the ceiling into beads that hung like rain above Joey's bed. He was sweating, too, sweating out the fever; germs were fleeing his body through the portholes of his pores.

In the kitchen, lost in steam, Joey's Gran was squeezing lemons. He could hear the vigorous, musical rattle of her spoon as she stirred honey and a splash of boiling water into syrup, then added lemon juice, and last, but not least, a dash of whiskey—Jim Beam—which was the brand of choice for all his relatives and, as a family tradition, was referred to simply as Beam—Beam, as in a ray of light.

Even stuffed up, Joey could smell its fiery perfume.

The apartment was filling with aromas: pie tins and cookie trays baking on top of merrily knocking radiators; menthol, eucalyptus, camphor, lemon; and, through the steam, like a searchlight glancing through fog: Beam. Joey's Gran stirred the lemon and honey concoction together in a coffee mug, but served it in jigger-sized portions, although in Joey's family they referred to a jigger as a shot glass—another tradition. It seemed an apt name, as far as Joey was concerned, for a glass that had the shape, density, and sometimes the wallop of a slug.

He'd sip his medicinal drink until it was cool enough, then belt it down as if drinking a toast: *na zdrowie*, germs, take this! When his shot glass was empty, his Gran would bring a refill on the theory that he needed fluids. She'd have a couple belts herself on the theory that she needed fluids, too.

"*Na zdrowie*," she'd say—bottoms up!

"*Na zdrowie*," he'd answer—down the hatch!

On such white winter mornings—white steam on one side of the pane, white snow on the other—propped on a throne of pillows, with the babushka like a rajah's turban wound around his swollen glands; with menthol, eucalyptus, camphor, lemon, and, through the steam, his Gran materializing—a mug in one hand and a bottle of Beam in the other; on white mornings like that, how could a boy not conclude that being sick might almost be worth the joy of getting well? Those were mornings to be tucked away at the heart of life, so that later, whenever one needed to draw upon the recollection of joy in order to get through troubled times it would be there; whenever the assurance was needed that once one was happy, in order to believe that one could be happy again, the memory would serve as confirmation.

Sometimes, on those mornings, Joey would wonder how his room, with its window clouded as if the atmosphere of Venus was pressed against the pane, looked from the street. He wondered how it sounded to strangers passing by. Could they hear the vaporizer gurgling like a reed instrument missing a reed? Could they hear his Gran, who was now sipping Beam straight from the bottle, singing “You Are My Sunshine,” in her Polish patois? She loved that song. “Not to be morbid,” she’d say, “but sing ‘Sunshine’ at my funeral.”

She taught Joey to play the measuring spoons like castanets in accompaniment to her gypsy-like singing. She was playing the radiators with a ladle as if they were marimbas. Joey was up, out of bed, flushed, but feeling great, and in steam that was fading to wisps, he was dancing with his Gran. Her girlish curls tossed, as around and around the room they whirled, both of them singing, and one or the other dizzily breaking off the dance in order to beat or plunk or blow some instrument they’d just invented: Joey strumming the egg-slicer; Joey’s Gran oompahing an empty half-gallon of Dad’s Old Fashioned Root Beer; Joey bugling “Sunshine” through the cardboard cylinder at the center of a roll of toilet paper; Joey’s Gran chiming a closet of empty coat hangers; Joey shake, rattle, and rolling the silverware drawer; Joey’s Gran Spike Jones-ing the vacuum cleaner; Joey, surrounded by pots and lids, drum-soloing with wooden spoons, while Joey’s Gran, conducting with a potato masher, yelled, “Go, Krupa, Go!”

How would it look to some stranger who had crept to the window and, peering inside through the last wisps of steam, saw a boy and his Gran carrying on as if they’d *both* been cured of the croup, doing the hokey-pokey face to face with the babushka between their teeth?

It would have looked, Joey realizes, the way it appears to him now: he’s peering in at the memory, like a stranger through a blurred window, straining to hear the beat of pots and the faint, off-key rendition of a vaguely familiar song.

And then, Joey wonders how it would look to the boy and his Gran if they were peering in on him now, watching at the window while an unshaven stranger with a blue note on his shoulder worriedly paces in his dirty underwear, in the dead of the night, to the sickly wheeze of a concertina. For a moment, he almost expects to see their faces at the window, even though the window is four stories up. He almost feels more like the boy staring in, than the unshaven man who is pacing the floor. The

boy and his Gran seem more real to him than this room in the present. And suddenly, it's clear to him that the purpose of memory isn't simply confirmation or consolation. Memory is the channel by which the past continues to love; it's how the past conducts its powerful energy; it isn't thought, slipping backwards; it's a current of action.

He moves directly to the suitcase buried in the back of the closet and rummages through it until he finds a scarf. It's not the old scarf of maroon and pea green plaid anchored with a safety pin; this scarf is navy blue. Nor is it redolent of camphor and Vicks; this scarf smells of mothballs. But it's woolly and warm and will have to do. He gently wraps the scarf about the concertina and immediately her labored wheezing becomes softer, muffled.

He doesn't own enough pots to comprise a drum set, or to occupy all four burners, but he fills the single pot he has and with the fanfare of a cymbal crash he sets it on to boil.

He doesn't know about the concertina, but as the water rumbles into steam, *he's* feeling a little better already—less anxious. He's been so worried about the concertina, and his worries have made him feel helpless. He should at least have recognized that something was wrong before it came to this. The concertina has been in a decidedly minor mood lately, a mood that Joey's found contagious—wistful, pensive, melancholy, heartsick by turns—a minor mood that words can't exactly convey for lack of perfect pitch. A mood that even music can only approximate—a G minor from a Chopin nocturne, perhaps; or the D minor of a Schubert quartet, the one called "Death and the Maiden"—or, at times, an airy, disorganized noodling like an orchestra tuning up in no discernable key at all; or a squeal like a bagpipe with a stomachache; or a drone as if the concertina was dreaming in a scale that only a sitar would find familiar. She's been in a minor mood, a mood that turns a polka into the blues, a jig into a dirge, a tarantella into a requiem. And a tango—how long has it been since he's heard her slink into the stylized passion of a tango?

Polka, jig, tarantella, tango . . . wistful, pensive, melancholy, heartsick . . . *menthol, eucalyptus, camphor, lemon*. He's found a mantra on which to meditate, a talismanic spell to chant.

He rifles through the cupboard, but he's out of honey. Not *out*, exactly; the fact is that he's never owned a jar of honey in his life. He opens the arctically austere cell of his refrigerator: a bottle of catsup, a jar of pickles,

a couple containers of Chinese take-out that need to be pitched, but not even a plastic citrus fruit hibernating in there.

Fortunately, he does possess a shot glass and a bottle of whiskey—not Beam—but memory is, at best, approximate, and he bets Old Guckenhaimer will do the trick. In honor of Joey’s Gran before him, he belts down a couple quick doses to test its efficacy, and a couple more for the sake of fluids.

There’s that fiery perfume!

Now it’s the concertina’s turn. Even distressed, the concertina looks lovely in the navy blue scarf. It heightens her complexion of mother-of-pearl. Oh, he thinks, little beauty, sweet companion, the one I didn’t realize that I was searching for, who almost came to me too late; little squeeze box, who taught my fingers how to sing, who taught me how to close my eyes and let the music flow.

He loves her pliant fit between his palms, and the way her body stretches as she yawns rhapsodically. He loves to feel the pumping of her breath; it’s like a summer breeze warmed by the bellows of her heart—although *bellows* has never seemed to him a proper word for her. There’s nothing bellowy about her, no puffed up sentiments, no martial clamor that might accompany the lockstep or goosetstep of a march, no anthems for football half times, or for saluting flags while windbags inflate with their own rhetoric; and though, a few times in her company, he’s heard angelic whispers—an echo of some great medieval organ—no hymns. Hers has always been a song of earth, of olive trees, vineyards, blossoming orchards melodic with bees.

Na zdrowie, little squeeze box.

He watches as delicately she inhales the fumes of whiskey—tiny sips starting at *do* and slowly ascending through *re*, *mi*, *fa*, *so*, to a tremulous *la-ti*. And after the shot glass has been drained repeatedly, he lifts her gently from the bed and they begin to dance to a tune they play together, a tune whose see-saw rhythm is like the panting of lovers. Not a polka, jig, tarentella, or even a tango. They dance to a dance they’ve just invented, an ancient dance they’ve just recalled.

If there are strangers on the street at this late hour, they’ve stopped and listen as if they can cock their ears like dogs. They listen with their heads thrown back against the night, breathing in the cool, night air, their breaths pluming, their eyes locked on the faint wisps of dissolving constellations.

And though it's a dark, American street on which they've stopped, they know there isn't need to feel afraid because instead of danger, tonight the air is full of music.

Na zdrowie, strangers.

Na zdrowie, music.

Then, in the long diminuendo of a sigh, the concertina folds up quietly, peacefully, exhaling a sweet, whiskey breath, and Joey lies down on the pillow beside her, covers them both with a sheet, and closes his eyes.

Sleep, like a barcarolle, carries him away.