

Bellowing

Sub-category: Short Story

By Donna Davis

She's high gloss candy apple red. No...hers is the Gypsy Red of a 1955 Corvette. Pearlized keys channel the hot rod's white vinyl interior and the neutral suitcase lined with red velvet its tan carpeting and top. And that makes her name choice obvious. She'll be known from henceforth as *Gypsy*. Or maybe even *Gypsy Rose* like the 1973 Tony Orlando and Dawn hit. After all, in the south a middle name is a well-known requirement, even if it's only used on the first day of school or when Mama is mad: "Gypsy *Rose*, did you hear me?"

Apparently "gypsy jazz" is an accordion playing style, so that only adds to the moniker mystique. The fact that a 1957 musical and a famous stripper bear the same name perchance adds color and dimension. Gypsy doesn't just play one note.

On first sight it was apparent she had fallen on hard times since sailing from Castelfidardo, full of oompah and new smell, destined for Chicago. She's a baby boomer, and like the rest of her class, had little idea how the conspiracy of circumstance would alter her future.

Gypsy was born into privileged popularity. Everyone who was anyone wanted an accordion, the instrument that could be heard without amplification. It provided lively dance music or the melodic strains of wistful desire, conjuring images of gondolas and exotic locales.

Blame Elvis for the first nail in her accordion case, but The Beatles surely drove in the second one a few years later. Ironic, too, since both Elvis Presley and John Lennon played accordion before laying it down in favor of the instrument perceived to be cooler and more modern: the guitar.

But how did she find herself here, in Washington, North Carolina...a small town on the banks of the Pamlico River, hugging the right side of a wide, lacy edged southern state? Locals know the place as "Little Washington," and the particularly proud call it "The Original

Washington.” How did she make the adjustment from her homeland muses playing the likes of "Tarantella Napoletana," a ditty that pedestrian Americans recognize from *The Godfather*? It's a question that burned in the bellows.

A local advertisement had offered an accordion for sale, implying some interest in a transaction involving an exchange of goods. Yet the yawn of silence after responding by email made that seem like a preposterous assumption.

One might ask what motivates a non-playing heathen to pursue a glorified squeeze box when it's the instrument that many love to hate? The instrument that inspires as many jokes as dumb blondes used to before the world became a more sensitive place...to humans.

What's the difference between an onion and an accordion?

People cry when they chop up onions.

Let's face it, even a bevy of youthful piano lessons doesn't adequately lay a foundation for 120 baffling bass buttons. Nor does growing up watching Lawrence Welk, the Man of Champagne Music. His rags-to-famous-accordion-player story, however, is compelling. Apparently he dropped out of school in the fourth grade and convinced his father to buy him a mail order accordion in return for working on the farm until he was twenty-one. His show also featured Myron Floren, the "Happy Norwegian" with a boyish grin who played his 30 pound accordion with the illusion of ease.

But several days after the inquiry, a response comes, "Yes, it's still available." Regarding condition, however, the faceless accordion owner responds, "It is playable but cosmetically challenged." Judge not that ye be not judged.

Attempts to schedule a time to see the instrument yield the intriguing response, "Shalom. Saturday is our sabbath. After dark would be okay."

Not only does the accordion owner reveal herself as a better Jew than the average Christian, but offers a titillating piece of contextual information. Images conjure of Gypsy playing Yiddish songs for Yom Kippur, a holy day far removed from the Free Will Bible thumping Baptists and mild mannered Methodists of the region. How well will she adjust to “Amazing Grace” and “Mansion Over the Hilltop”?

But eastern North Carolina weather, known for being more accurately predicted by a wooly worm than any meteorologist’s model, is uncharacteristically harsh. Grocery stores are selling out of bread and milk...and, more importantly, sweetened condensed milk. Southerners know it as the nectar of the gods and key ingredient of snow cream, a southerner’s delight, by virtue of its scarcity.

The thirty or so mile trek on silver Subaru steed is like a polar expedition. Northern transplants, that is, accordion players, would consider the roads perfectly suitable for the season, but eastern North Carolinians view them with slip-sliding skepticism. The directions lead to a part of town less traveled by, the proverbial “other side of the tracks.” What would have been called a “row house,” back in the day, comes into view.

Would criminals use a vintage accordion as bait to lure naive victims to entrap them for their nefarious purposes? Thoughts swirl, unbidden.

“Shalom.” Again, the greeting is proffered like a hand shake with less exchange of who-knows-where-those-hands-have-been bacteria. Any sort of usual counter-greeting freezes on the lips of folks raised in the cloistered Christian bible-belt. A mumbled, indeterminable response seems safer than the rote Methodist, “and peace be with you.”

The trappings of sickness and a recent hospital stay are in evidence in the shot-gun style house, as is an elderly man who seems oblivious to strangers in his midst. A lady of

indeterminable age leads the way to a cramped kitchen. She's likely younger than her tightly wound coiffure and attire reminiscent of *Fiddler on the Roof* would suggest. She opens a tan suitcase on a small table that is hardly large enough to serve two.

The suitcase would have been the perfect cover for counterfeit cash, stolen crown jewels, or possibly these days, pharmaceuticals. It is gloriously unassuming and nondescript. But the contents are not.

Despite the incongruity of the plain case and humble surroundings, her beauty stuns. It's the slack-jaw-and-trickle-of-drool sort, but also intimidating, like answering the door on a first date. To touch or remove her from the case feels invasive.

The piano keys aren't so unfamiliar and scary....it's like a short keyboard. But those buttons! They're arranged in an intriguing design, like the front of Charlie Brown's shirt. A white zigzag surrounded by red, they're reminiscent of chinese checkers, with twenty columns of six buttons per row on the slant.

With confidence waning, is it wrong to take her home? Wouldn't that be like adopting a dog from the animal shelter but then neglecting it, never taking him out for walks or to play with a ball? Instruments needed to be loved, to be played.

Hesitation is interpreted by the owner as reluctance to purchase and she starts lowering the price.

What is the instrument's story? That's the question that burns like a menorah in the window.

"My daughter got it from someone at our synagogue ...but she really didn't do much with it. It's just sitting here not being used, and we really need the money."

The latter part of her spiel is in evidence. As is a long strip of silver duct tape on the bottom of the instrument, explaining the “cosmetically challenged” descriptor.

But when no further elaboration is forthcoming, to linger feels like imposing on a stranger’s kitchen, and life. So the deal is consummated with cash.

Carrying the substantial suitcase home feels like channeling Cary Grant in *North by Northwest*, walking straight onto the tarmac gripping his hard-back luggage. But with a trembling sort of euphoria not unlike a sixteen year old getting the keys to the car.

With the precision of a surgeon, or maybe just an obsessive-compulsive accordion aficionado, cleaning commences in earnest, including swabbing crevices and crud with alcohol and carefully removing the wide silver tape. Who put it there? The girl, the person from the synagogue she got it from, or someone before that?

A mental image manifests of a poor Jewish girl trying to make her way in eastern North Carolina with an accordion strapped to her like an enormous set of braces on the teeth. No wonder she “didn’t do much with it.” But rumors that the accordion is making a comeback persist tantalizingly. Not just Weird Al Yankovitz plays one, but also cool groups like Mumford and Sons as well as The Lumineers. Of course anyone who has seen a mustached Dennis DeYoung stroll onto the stage playing an accordion in the 1979 video of the Styx song, “Boat on the River,” while Tommy Shaw plays the mandolin knows. Knows that an accordion is not merely “cool,” but exudes a sort of animal magnetism with its sheer in-and-out physicality. But that newsflash may not have made it to the high school popularity caste system yet.

After removing the tape and tacky sludge left in its wake, the purpose of the offending fixative is apparent: there are two tiny screws missing that held a bottom panel in place. So now feeble attempts to play require strategically stretching the already overtaxed left, button-pressing

hand to make sure the panel doesn't slip out of place. What's one more thing when you're already patting your head and rubbing your belly?

Studying the Stradella bass chart that clarifies the columns of buttons, arranged in a circle of fifths, becomes a way of life. The first "Aha!" moment comes upon discovery that the C chord is smack dab in the center, with a tiny indentation so it can be found by feel, with G and D right beside it. If the blind are leading the blind, that is, a non-accordion player trying to self-teach, then the dimpled key is a welcome tactile north star in a vast cosmos. The three chords feel like family. They should be called the Tennessee Three more so than Johnny Cash's backing band, considering he practically made a career out of them. Nevermind that Johnny Cash didn't play the accordion. Plenty of accordionists are making up for it by playing Johnny Cash.

But in between reading helpful advice on how to play the accordion, including such spoilers as "you can't see what you're doing!" the inner sleuth can't help but noodle about with recreating a bread crumb trail from Gypsy's present back to her past. Fact: she ended up in Washington, North Carolina. Her bellows took their first gasp of breath in Italy, per the unmistakable, round "Made in Italy" insignia that also includes ostensibly a serial number: 3249. Her case is embossed with "Nobility Accordions, Chicago, IL," suggesting at least one place she resided in between. Her age is a reasonable deduction based on other models of similar ilk and reading the impressive history of the Soprani dynasty. She likely made it to a Chicago accordion store in the late 1950's.

It doesn't take Columbo's wrinkled trench coat to discover that the Romagnoli family has owned one such accordion shop, once a factory, in Chicago for 100 years. The matriarch, Anne, is in her 80's, as of a 2015 Chicago Tribune article. Hope springs eternal. Dare one expect that records would be kept with the serial numbers of all accordions sold since the 1950's?

Images of yellowed, hand-written ledger books become fantasy fodder. Anne Romagnoli will provide the missing link. Maybe she'll be one of those remarkable types with a memory like a computer. She'll blow the dust from an old ledger book, the pages brittle, and open it with the familiarity of an old friend. The books would have been incinerated years ago in the name of progress and decluttering if the will of younger family members had prevailed. She'll trace her gnarled finger down the page of an old account book, flip a page or two, searching for the serial number, and then her eyes will light up, her face creasing with a knowing smile.

Will she read out a Yiddish name, something like Zelig, that means "blessed" or "happy"? She'd remember he bought it for his wife, Freyde, a Yiddish word meaning "joy." She'd be brimming with details of storied lives, the sort that old people are often so eager to share and younger people are too busy to hear....until there is no one left to tell them. She'd explain that she remembered the couple so well because Freyde was a celebrity in an eight block radius, bringing the box to life with klezmer music, dance tunes, adding a splatter of color to workday drudgery. Zelig would watch and listen adoringly, beaming with pride, helping her pack up the instrument at the end of the night, carrying it for her as they walked home, hand in hand.

It doesn't stretch the imagination any further than the accordion bellows (which are limited mostly by the length of the player's left arm) to fill in what happens next. Perhaps a relative, a grown child, finds job opportunities and warmer climes in North Carolina, and as age sets in, Freyde and Zelig follow. Zelig always figured he'd go first...he can't imagine life without his joy. But he didn't count on his wife's joy being taken from her before the breath in her bellows. Who ever does?

When he can't care for her at home anymore...he is feeble himself...she enters a memory care facility nearby, where he visits her regularly. But Gypsy squats in the corner like a deflated

balloon. And while he can't bear to part with her, he knows Freyde would want her to be played, not letting her lungs stiffen so that she's unable to take a deep breath. So when an awkward teenage girl in the synagogue tentatively asks him about his wife's instrument, he sees in her a young Freyde, and impulsively gifts it to her, smiling, even as a tear escapes.

Well....it's entirely plausible. And inquiries have been made. Is Anne Romagnoli of Chicago even still alive? Perhaps time will tell. Or the familiar yawn of silence may whisper that we'll never know Gypsy's story.

But somehow, every stretch or contraction of the bellows feels like rhythmic restoration of the breath of life. Not only to the ghost of players before, but to the current one, who may remain faceless and nameless to those who come after.

In and out, instrumental yoga. And as the bellows move with the spirit, sound emanates. Sometimes droning, like mournful bagpipes on the moors, but other times with a light-hearted oompah gusto of a rich man. *Daidle deedle daidle Daidle daidle deedle daidle dumb.*

Maybe discovering everyday music that resonates with each deep breath, in and out, and not letting bellows stiffen from lack of play, is the real story Gypsy longs to tell.