

Could I Have This Dance?

Short Story

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Rushing down the corridor past room after room filled with patients, Emma clasped the CD in her hands. Always tenderhearted, her heart broke for both the residents and their families. Nursing homes were necessary for those who needed round the clock care but tearing a woman from the home she'd tended for the majority of her life, or a man from the farm he'd inherited from his father, and his father before him, his soul fed by the rich soil of the earth, seemed heartless, even if necessary. Surely the loss of all that was familiar exacerbated their decline. She prayed a quick prayer for each room she passed, asking for each to be at peace. She grieved for them all, but of the many ailments, both physical and intellectual, that resulted in a nursing home placement, Emma thought the worst had to be the multiple forms of dementia. She sincerely hoped the patients who suffered with that affliction didn't know they were mentally deteriorating.

She'd wondered about that many times. Did dementia patients realize their minds were going? Did they fight for each piece of their memory, hanging on to the edge of the cliff until they lost their grip and scraped down the rocky embankment, the debris of lost memories surrounding them at the bottom? Or was the decline more peaceful? Did they slide into their new reality gently, as if they were diving into the warm waters of the Caribbean? Did their memories drift and swim around them like colorful fish, curious dolphins, and clinging sea anemones? Emma fervently hoped the later was the case. After all, wasn't it bad enough that the patients' families had to watch the decline? Surely that was enough suffering. Emma hoped that those residents with dementia went through their days happily, innocent as children, oblivious to their mental deterioration. So, all she could do was pray for peace, for both the patients and their families, and be thankful for her own mental acuity.

Emma reached the end of the corridor, where the hall opened into an open floor, large enough for the twelve dancers, as long as they didn't swing their arms too much. Holding back a chuckle, she remembered when Adele, spinning in a rolling vine, took out Rosie. Fortunately, nobody was hurt,

and everyone got a good laugh, Rosie included. And then there was the time Grace had gotten too close to one of the men in the audience. Good thing he was a big man, Emma thought. When Grace tripped over his foot and landed in his lap, nobody was injured – except maybe Grace’s pride. But the man, complete with white beard, just looked at Grace and asked, “So, what do you want for Christmas, little girl?” They’d laughed till they cried over that one.

What a great group of ladies, Emma thought, then she smiled to herself. Of course, it hasn’t always been all ladies, she thought. I can’t forget Sean. Who could forget Sean? Big, tall, and still handsome, he’d made some ladies hearts flutter a bit. When he had been part of the group, he would arrive early to have time speak with each of the residents. His compassion and caring came from within. He’d watched his wife decline to the point he’d had to admit her into a care facility. It had all but broken his heart. Still, he’d never missed a day of visiting with her, even when the thief, dementia had stolen all her memories. As he’d told anyone who asked why he visited her every day when she didn’t even know him anymore, he’d reply, “True, but I know. She’s my wife, in sickness and in health. I will care for her till her last breath.” And so, he had.

Then, widowed, Sean had joined their group and danced with them for several years. With a laugh, Emma remembered how the single ladies adored him. Sean had a way about him, that old-time courtesy, but it was more than that. Sean managed to make everyone he met feel like he or she had the focus of his attention. Any woman would have been lucky to be Sean’s beau. And then it had happened. He met Willa, and she’d stolen his heart. As he told Emma, “Few people are lucky enough to find a special someone, and I’ve been blessed twice. Willa makes me want to live. I will dedicate myself to making her happy. Emma smiled fondly at the memory, happy for her friend. Now Sean and Willa were married and living the good life on the west coast of Florida. She missed him, but she was glad he’d found love. Sean was one of those people who needed to have a partner.

Realizing she’d been woolgathering, Emma stepped into the room to set up the music right as the others arrived. She was excited to do the day’s program, one of her favorites. Some of her

group's top picks were on this playlist. Motown never gets old, she thought. "Respect," "Heard it Through the Grapevine," and "My Girl" to name a few, were always crowd pleasers. As her friends came in the room, Emma noticed the others were wearing black and red, and she was in all black. For a moment she blanked out, confused and lost, and then she thought, of course, she was the leader, that's why her outfit was different. And her years of dance training ensured she'd be in all black. It just seemed more, professional. Emma remembered when her dance instructor, Ms. Natalie, had taught class. One of Emma's friends, Elizabeth, had come to class in a pink tutu. She'd gotten it for her birthday. It was just lovely, and, of course, she wanted to show it off. Miss Natalie took one look at poor Elizabeth and spent the next five minutes lecturing her about proper dance protocol. Emma had never forgotten that lesson and always felt more comfortable in Ms. Natalie's acceptable black. Suddenly Emma laughed at herself, my goodness, but I've spent a lot of this morning in my memories. Back to business now, she told herself, we have an audience to entertain.

As she lined up, front, center, Emma threw a quick smile to her ladies, her friends. "Welcome, everyone," she said to the residents, "We're the Swinging Seniors, or the SS as we like to say, and we're thrilled to be here dancing for you. Today, we're going back in time to dance to the smooth notes of Motown. I hope you enjoy the show." With that, "Uptown Funk" came through the speakers. Without hesitation, Emma's feet moved to the music; doing the steps that required no thought. She moved automatically across the floor as the familiar notes drifted across the room.

She remembered learning "Uptown Funk." It had been one of the first dances she'd been taught, and she'd had so much trouble with that dance because of all the turns. She never knew where to look. Now, maybe because it had taken extra time to learn it, her feet did what they were supposed to without any direction from her brain. Muscle memory, they called it. Emma loved to dance. She'd wanted an exercise that was fun, and this certainly qualified. She'd grown to love line dancing, but even more than the dances, it was the friendships, the camaraderie she loved the best. The group of ladies was wonderful. They supported and encouraged each other. There was no room for petty

jealousies. Thank goodness, she thought, we've finally moved past middle school drama. It took long enough, she smiled, considering most of them left the teen years behind at least forty years ago, many more than a decade or two beyond that.

Beside and behind her, Emma didn't see the confused looks, the raised eyebrows, the nonverbal glances that all but shouted, "What's going on?" and other shrugs that said, "Oh well, let's just do it." And so they did. The dancers ran through the first half of the program without a hitch. No bloody noses, nobody knocked down, no lap dances, as they laughingly liked to call the incident with Grace, and everyone knew the steps. It's a good day, Emma thought.

At the break, Emma rushed to the pitcher of ice water, pouring cups for herself and the others. Dancing, especially in overheated rehab centers, was thirsty work. Looking fondly at her crew, she realized she was now one of the oldest in the group, maybe even *the* oldest. How had that happened? When she'd started, she'd been the youngest. And now, she thought, looking around, there are a couple of younger ladies I really don't know at all. I'll have to remedy that. I don't want them to think I'm not open to new members. It's important to keep evolving. After a certain point, anyway, it doesn't matter how old you are; what matters is what you do with your days. Like everyone her age, she wished time would slow down, but just like her dad had told her when she was a little girl, the older you get the faster time flies by. How true, she agreed.

But now, the ladies' compassion for each other went far beyond the dance room. Story after story flew through Emma's mind. It hadn't been that long since Janie had lost her husband. Many of the ladies, widows themselves, had stepped up to stay with her, had offered advice on everything from funeral homes to insurance issues. Then later, they'd helped her navigate the turbulent waters of car maintenance, lawn care, and cooking for one. They'd talked her through her first tax season as a single woman how and when to plant tomatoes. And finally, when Janie was ready, Martha had helped her fill out a dating profile on one of those singles websites, but that was a story for another day.

And then there was Jen. Jen who had been single for several years and found herself in the position of needing a hip replacement. Childless, she put off the surgery because she didn't want to inconvenience any of her friends. When the SS had heard that, they'd immediately staged an intervention. "There are plenty of us," they'd told a startled Jen when they'd shown up at her house one Saturday morning. Then waving a stack of papers at her, they'd added, "We've already made a schedule. We have drivers, cooks, housecleaners, and company all lined up. We'll take you to the hospital and bring you home. We'll drive you to your physical therapy appointments. We'll stock your freezer before you go and bring you hot meals when you get home. We're starting a book club so we'll have something to talk about while you're recovering, and Sarah has even agreed to learn how to play bridge so you can have a foursome. We've done everything but set up your appointment, and we'd do that if we could. Now, Jen, get the surgery!" And she had, and now she was back, good as new, dancing on, as she called it, her bionic hip.

So many stories, Emma thought as she brushed a tear from her eye. She loved these ladies. My goodness she thought, how long have I been standing here? We need to do the second half.

While Emma had been lost in memories, she hadn't heard the chatter of the others. "What's she doing here?" Addie had whispered to Brenda when they'd first seen Emma.

Equally perplexed, Brenda had shrugged. "No idea." Then she added, "Do you think it's safe?"

Terri had joined the conversation. "Well, there's nothing wrong with her physically, right?" Then she continued, "These aren't the dances we practiced, but so far, at least, we know them. But what's going on? What should we do?"

Just then, Diane, their liaison at the Rehab Center, walked across to them. It was easy to see the concern on her face. "Did you know this was going to happen?" she asked. "Is this something you planned?"

Assuring Diane that was not the case, and they were just as surprised as she was, they asked, “Is it okay? Are there any rules against this?”

Dianne shrugged, “I’m not sure anything like this has ever happened before. But she sure looks happy, so let’s give her a chance. It’s worked out okay so far.”

The rest of the ladies joined in, adding their questions and concerns. Finally, they decided, “Let’s just see what happens. We’ll help her if we need to.” With that, and with Emma calling out it was time to do the second half, they took their places, starting with the Stevie Wonder hit, “I Just Called to Say I love You.”

The performance continued to go well. The Motown songs were a hit with the audience, and the dancers, maybe not flawlessly, but certainly adequately, performed the dances they’d done so many times. Sometimes the reward was just a smile or a tapping foot, but they could see the music and dancing were reaching some of their audience. This was exactly why they came. There was no telling when a certain song would trigger a memory and bring a smile to someone’s face.

Emma’s feet continued to do the steps she’d done so many times before. Her long legs, still strong and supple, covered the ground, and her kicks remained higher than anyone else’s. And then came the last dance. The ladies formed two lines for a contra dance, and Emma found herself facing two ladies she didn’t remember. How could that be? She’d been leading this class for years; she knew everyone.

But she didn’t. Suddenly the red shirts as opposed to her black took on a new significance. The music started, but she didn’t. She just stood there, perplexed. Looking around with a vacant smile, she patted the shoulder of the lady beside her. “Thank you so much for coming,” she quavered. “It’s so kind of you to take time to come entertain us.” Then, looking into the lady’s eyes, she asked, “Do I know you? I feel like I should know you. I’m Emmaline, but my friends call me Emma. Who are you?”

With tears in her eyes, Addie answered. "I'm Addie, and I'm pleased to meet you. I hope you're enjoying our dancing." She wanted to cry, to rage. She wanted to say, I'm Addie, your best friend. Don't you remember? But she knew trying to remind Alzheimer's patients of their past was hurtful and could cause them to get agitated, so she settled for giving her friend a gentle hug.

Seeing Addie's tears, Emma patted her hand. "Oh, my dear, I'm so sorry you're having a rough day. I don't know what's made you so sad, but I wish I could help you. I'll be glad to listen if you want to talk. If I haven't learned anything else in my life, I know this: People are more important than anything else. We need to love and nurture each other. I don't know you, but I'd be glad to be your friend."

Emma's kind words almost broke Addie's heart. "I don't know you..." How can it be, she grieved. Addie and Emma had been friends since kindergarten, since Billy Benton had pulled Addie's pigtails and Emma, tiny little Emma, had defended her and not only told Billy to be nice to the new girl, but if he weren't, she'd tell his mother. Emma had been fierce in her defense of Addie that day, and every day since then. They'd double dated in high school and stood up for each other at their weddings. Emma had grieved with her when Addie had a miscarriage, and rejoiced with her a year later when her first baby was born. They had been together through every phase of their lives, and though Emma now wandered through lonely, dark tunnels in her mind, Addie vowed to remain a friend, even if Emma didn't know her. Signaling to Diane, she thanked Emma for her kind words, then added, "We've got one more dance to do. Would you mind if we dedicated it to you, Miss Emma? It's one of our favorites."

"Oh, that would be so sweet," Emma answered. "I'd be touched. Now, let me go find my seat." Just then Diane arrived and offered to help. Cupping Emma's elbow, she led her to an empty seat.

"You just sit here, Miss Emma," Diane said, "in the seat of honor, and let these fine ladies dance for you."

The dancers re-formed their lines as the music started. “We’ll be moving away from Motown for our last dance and wish to dedicate this one to Miss Emma, our leader for many years. Thanks for your many years of leadership,” she continued. “We love you,” Addie announced as “Could I Have This Dance?” came through the speakers. As the ladies danced, they could hear Emma singing along, just like she always had during their practices. “Could I have this dance for the rest of my life...” The words drifted lazily through the chambers of the nursing home as the dancers stepped and twirled.

“I hope,” Addie murmured, “We hope Emma will dance every day, for the rest of her life.” When the song ended and the dancers packed up to leave, Dianne and the dancers walked Emma back down the corridor to her room, chatting about the performance. Emma asked them to take a picture of her with the group, which they gladly did, promising to give her a copy. She asked them to please come back and visit. Addie, who visited weekly, promised, as did several of the other ladies. Then, seeing that Emma was getting tired, they hugged her and headed out the door.

Right before the door swung shut behind them, Addie, the last to leave, could hear Emma asking Dianne, “I wonder when the dancers are coming to perform. I do so enjoy watching them. I used to dance, you know...”