

THE SUMMER FESTIVAL

The man with the walking stick is here again. He's always drunk and always making a spectacle of himself, dancing around in front of the stage and carrying on. And then people look at me as though I should do something about him, as though one old man is responsible for the actions of another. Because I, too, use a walking stick, and I, too, am always here, their looks blame me. I'd wish him away as soon as anyone. Just because this is a free concert doesn't mean they have to let the crazies in.

It wasn't this way when the festival started. The people who attended then were connoisseurs, respectful. I was at the very first performance ever held out of doors here, and every one since. Even the rained-out ones. Sometimes I'm the only one out there, but until I see the workers take all the equipment away, I stay.

About this festival, I could tell you anything you want to know; the entire history or the current schedule. I may be old, but I'm still sharp. People who come to see the performances are always asking questions of the workers who set up the equipment: What group is performing. Where the programs are. Where they can find another chair. What time the plaza will be in the shade. The workers are either too busy or too rude to answer. I know anything these people want to know. And the performances; I can tell you everything that happened in any one of them, and what it all meant; my interpretation, of course. It's what I did for my wife for two years.

We went to the very first performance together, a concert by the New York Philharmonic. She hadn't been feeling well before then, since the early Spring. She would tire easily. Sometimes walking left her short of breath. Standing up quickly she'd get dizzy. But she wanted to go. We took a picnic supper and sat in those flimsy white seats near the front of the stage and ate while the sun set. It was a lovely, mild evening. When the music began she took my hand. Married sixty years and we held hands like new lovers. The orchestra played Bernstein and Copland. My wife closed her eyes as she listened, smiling softly, lost in the music and the night.

The next day she was so tired I had to help her out of bed. Still, she made me go to the performance that evening. I didn't want to leave her alone, but she said if she couldn't go herself she would see it through my eyes. I'd never paid such close attention to a dance concert. It was The Mexican Folklore Ballet. Their costumes were so elaborate it took half an hour just to describe them.

All summer we did this. I couldn't think about my wife during the performances because I had to concentrate so hard in order to remember everything. For the last concert of the summer she came with me. She was still tired much of the time, but she insisted. I never could argue with her. I packed a picnic dinner just like the first time, and we sat in the same chairs. I don't remember that show as well as the others. I kept watching my wife watching the stage, smiling that same soft smile. Music and dance brought her such joy.

The next summer my wife was in the hospital, but she made me go to the performances. I told her everything I could about each one. Sometimes they sold recordings of the music, and I would buy them for her. If I couldn't describe a dance move I'd try to mimic it, and she'd laugh so hard that I'd think she was well again, but then she'd start gasping for breath and I'd have to call a nurse.

Every day she seemed to get weaker, and by the last few days of that festival she was sleeping a lot of the time. Still, she insisted I go to every show. I didn't want to leave her, but she promised she'd be waiting for me to tell her about it.

She died a week after the festival ended. We were discussing our favorite performances. She talked about them as if she'd seen them herself. When she started to hum some of the music I joined in. She smiled and closed her eyes, and then I was humming alone. I kept on, humming louder and louder, knowing she'd start up again. But she didn't. I had them play it at her funeral. I hope it was her favorite. She never got to say.

The first performance of the festival the next year, I was there, and every one after. In the last few years I've started to use a walking stick. I tire more easily than I used to. Sometimes I get dizzy. Young people look at me with pity as they rush by to get a good seat. Old friends tell me I'm crazy to see every performance. But my wife would want me to go. I like to think she can see them from where she is, now. I talk to her about them. We choose our favorites, compare the years.

My nephew wants me to come stay with his family in the mountains over the summer. They've got a house near a lake that he says is very peaceful. He thinks summer in the city is bad. He doesn't understand why I stay. I tried to tell him about the last performance I'd seen, but he didn't have the patience to listen. Dance theatre, they called it; abstract, but disturbing. It began in darkness with a loud cymbal crash, then a long low drum roll, then silence. A pale blue circle of light faded up on a man crouched at the edge of the stage. The cymbals crashed again and he jumped up and ran off but the light remained. Then bright white light flooded the stage, and then ...