

## **A Sad and Beautiful Dance**

**By Gerald Trites**

Alexander brings to the table two shot glasses and a bottle of Polish vodka and sits down with a huge sigh. He is grey and balding and walks with a stoop in his shoulders. Freda, his round, rosy wife, follows with some heavy whole-wheat bread on a cutting board and a roll of kolbassa. Alexander cuts thick slices of meat and begins breaking the bread with his hands, stuffing small chunks into his mouth and rinsing with the vodka. All the while, he is talking.

We are sitting at the dining room table of a large house in the Humber area of Toronto. There is an ornate walnut dining room suite in the room and on the wall above the hutch there are several old black and white photos of family members. Two large leaded windows on the opposite side of the room overlook a flower garden.

"Last night I heard the knock again. There was no one. It was in my head, you understand? But it was real, too."

"It will always be real to him," says Freda.

I chew the meat and bread and drink the strong vodka and listen. The meat is fresh and firm and tasty. The garlic assaults the taste buds on my tongue. It is tangy and strong.

I come here once every month to pay my rent. Alexander and Freda own several fine houses in Toronto, something they started when they immigrated after the Second World War. They scraped up the money to buy a duplex. He worked two jobs for several years, sixteen hours a day, while she cleaned floors and did washing for people in the affluent areas of Forest Hills and Rosedale. They rented the other half of the duplex and used the money to pay the mortgage. Eventually, they extended this holding into several houses. Now they are retired.

Each time I come to pay the rent, he invites me in. We have a couple of shot glasses of his good Polish vodka and talk. It was mostly small talk at first, but gradually the talk became more personal and we both began to look forward to the visits. "He likes you," said Freda.

He has seldom talked about the old country. It is only recently that he has talked about the dreams.

"The knock is three hard raps in a row, then a pause, then three more. They go on until I am fully awake. The knocks are very insistent, sharp, but hard enough to rattle the door. Then I see my brother standing there staring at me."

"My brother was very strong. He was taller than you, more than six feet, and thicker. But you look like Jorge. Don't you think so, Freda? Doesn't he look like Jorge?" Alexander has been saying this since I first met him.

Freda nods as she always does. "Blue eyes, curly hair. Yes, just like Jorge". She points to one of the pictures on the wall. The resemblance is startling. I wonder if it would be better if I stopped coming here - stopped raising these painful memories for my friend.

Alexander continues, "He was the most powerful man I have ever seen. And he liked to show off his strength. Sometimes, he would walk to the front of the car if you were sitting in it and grab it by the bumper and pick it up and then rock it up and down and laugh. Yes, that's right, by the front bumper. He could lift it quite high, even with people in it.

"He didn't fight with people, but he liked to show off. Sometimes he would grab people who were acting up in the bar and hold them against the wall and they wouldn't be able to move. He was like a lot of big men - a peacemaker.

"One night, he was in the bar when two SS soldiers burst through the door and began to rough up some of the people who were there. When they hit his friend, he grabbed the soldiers and pinned them against the bar. Of course, they were armed, but when they tried to reach for a pistol, Jorge just tightened his grip and they could not move.

"He held them like that for what seemed like a long time because he knew he had acted impulsively and that when he let them go, they would probably kill him. Even if he managed to get away, they would hunt him down. They always killed people who showed too much resistance, especially if it was done in public. Then two more soldiers walked into the bar and pulled out their pistols and put them against his head. He let go and they took him away.

"It was later that night that I heard the knock. Freda and I were in our bed and Henri, he was just a baby then, was sleeping beside us. I went to the door and when I opened it, four soldiers swarmed in. They had a madness in their eyes and they were rowdy and they said I had five minutes to dress and go with them. I had no choice. I didn't know what they wanted with me. But it wasn't me. They said my brother had asked to see me. Then they all laughed. I will never forget that night.

Alexander stops talking and stares at the floor. In the silence, I begin to talk about my guitar playing and how it started with my brother-in-law, Harold. I tell them that he came to visit Julie and me. He wanted to start a career in the restaurant business. First, he was going to stay a long time. Then he found out he needed some formal training and so he gave up and went back home. He left his guitar behind to cover his board. It was a classical guitar but it was cheap and battered and had a dull, flat sound. It just sat in a corner of the family room for months.

"You should play for us sometime. I think you would play very well." says Freda.

I tell them how I began.

"Every day on the way to the subway station I walk by Harvey's Music Store."

Alexander nods and manages a small smile.

"I saw a sign in the window. It said 'Guitar Lessons,' and I thought of the old guitar and how I wanted to play it. So I went inside."

"I found Harvey sitting at the back of the store behind a glass counter filled with items like guitar picks, tuning forks and drumsticks. He was a neat little man with round rim glasses and a little white fringe of hair. I later learned that he played and taught most of the instruments in the shop. When I walked in, he was playing a classical guitar, holding it in the classical style with its body resting on his knee, and the long fingernails of his right hand plucking the strings in a slow tune I later learned was a Spanish dance. I was captivated by the clear, mournful tones and stopped and listened inside the door. I had never heard a classical guitar played in person before. It was the most beautiful sound I had ever heard."

I select another slice of Kolbassa and chew it slowly. Alexander and Freda wait silently for me to continue.

"After a few moments, the old man paused and looked up and I said I had noticed the sign in the window and wanted to ask about guitar lessons."

"So he says 'And what kind of music would you like to play?' and I say 'classical, I guess. I have a classical guitar and I always liked classical music' and he says 'Have you had any musical training?' and I say 'No.' and he says 'We can start with the basics and I say 'That's cool'. We set the time for Thursday evenings from seven to eight. Five dollars a session.

"So I started that week and while I was there, I bought an elementary guitar book which began with individual notes and scales and simple tunes and finally worked up to a few Chopin melodies. When I arrived home that night, I started working on the book right away."

Alexander gets a far-away look in his eyes as he listens and pours another glass of vodka.

"Jorge used to play the harmonica. He never took lessons, but he made good music for us. He used to play and dance and stamp his big feet so hard the house shook. The children would laugh and dance around him in circles."

As I leave, Freda says "The dreams will stop after a while. Next time you come, bring Julie. Say hello to her for us."

"OK," I lie.

Julie and I were married about five years ago. We rent a floor of their biggest house, close to High Park and backing on a wooded ravine. It has three stories and its own driveway, as well as a big sunporch stretching across the entire back of the house and overlooking the ravine. The old guitar leans in a corner of the sunporch.

I love the sunporch and often spend time there. I sit there alone with my coffee after dinner and gaze out into the ravine. The sunporch has polished maple floors covered with rag scatter rugs and filled with wicker furniture we bought at a flea market. The woods are deep and green

with maples and poplars along the edge, and far down I can see tall willows beside the stream that runs through the ravine on its course to the flat land, under the Gardiner Expressway and into the murky waters of Lake Ontario. When the evenings become warm in the early summer, I open the windows and feel a breeze coming up from the lake and smell the musty freshness of the woods. It is quiet and peaceful.

I go to pay the rent on the first of every month. Sometimes I find a reason to visit between rent days. This time it is for permission to paint the windows in the sunporch.

"You can paint them," says Alexander, "but you must pay for the paint. And don't get any of it on the windows. If you do, scrape it all off with a razor blade."

I sip the vodka and smile. I know he will pay for the paint when the job is done.

When I go back to the house, Julie is out somewhere as always. I start to move the furniture around in the sunporch and then notice the old guitar in the corner. I haven't played it since I bought my new hand-made one, so I pick it up, sit down and let my mind wander back through the twists and turns of the forest of memories.

I made a lot of progress taking lessons from Harvey. No question about that. I started with the book I had bought and before long, I was picking out tunes. I especially liked some of the Beatles tunes. Of course I didn't sound anything like the Beatles, but eventually you could recognize the tunes. And gradually, they became smoother and I could play them without looking at the music.

The first winter with Harvey, I kept up the lessons, and worked through some introductory books, as well as several music sheets that he gave me. By spring, Harvey was saying that I was making good progress - better than most of his other students. He taught me the slow, beautiful dance I had heard him play that first day. It became my favourite and I played it over and over.

I buried myself more and more in the guitar, playing virtually all the time I was home, and even taking the guitar to work and playing it at noon and sometimes during breaks. I also got a job playing at a restaurant in the evenings. This gave me lots of practice, and I could even earn some extra money. That's where I got the money to buy the new guitar. A hand-made one that Harvey had to order in from Spain.

The sunporch became a music studio. It contained a mahogany music stand, a special foot rest to keep my knee at just the right height for resting the guitar as I played and a stool designed especially for classical guitar players. Scattered around the room was a variety of tuning equipment and sheet music and music books.

In addition to my regular practice sessions, I often played for hours at a time. I was now into Bach, trying just about everything of his that was available for the guitar. I mastered the Cello Suites, adapted for the guitar and I would sit in the porch and play their sharp bouncy melodies. Sometimes Julie would be working in the garden hearing the music and recognizing its beauty but probably trying to block it out.

As I progressed well with my guitar I began to feel that I needed a better teacher, with a more advanced program. I had been talking to other students and friends who said that I should study at the Conservatory to learn the guitar properly.

I visited the Conservatory and looked through their calendars and the brochures. Later, while trying to decide which program to follow, I noticed an ad in the Star saying that a Conservatory teacher was giving lessons in her home in the evenings. I phoned her as soon as I got back to the office. That was how I met Anna.

She was a few years older than me and told me that she needed the money from the lessons because she had been recently divorced. Although she grew up in Philadelphia, she had studied guitar for many years, both in Toronto and in Granada. Her dream was to return to Spain to study. Anna was quiet spoken and intelligent and played for me when I first went to her house. Her delicate, finely-shaped fingers could fly over the strings, and she made the guitar sound like an orchestra. The first day I met her, I thought she was beautiful when she leaned over her guitar, with her long brown hair draped over her shoulder. I signed up for weekly lessons. Before long, Anna told me that if I kept improving, I could soon give concerts.

Each week I was the last student of the day. Anna held the lessons in her living room by the fireplace. She made a crackling fire before I arrived and after the half hour lesson was complete, we played duets together. Then we had coffee by the fire and talked, sometimes for hours.

As I think about these things I am playing the Spanish dance in the sunporch with my eyes closed and gently swaying on my stool and my thoughts return to Julie. Who knows what came first? Did I replace her with the guitar or did she find her new friend first? It's hard for me to put an order to it now. Maybe it all happened together. It's true I fell in love with the music. At first I didn't know it would take so much time, but it did and then I was in love all over again. I gained a love and lost a lover.

Alexander stiffens when I tell him that Julie is gone. Mercifully, Freda is not there at the time. "How could this happen?" he says.

"It happens a lot nowadays," I say.

"I see these things happen, but I don't understand. You young people have so much and yet you seem to be so unhappy."

"Money doesn't buy happiness," I reply. I can't believe I have uttered this platitude. But I can't think of anything else to say. I am waiting for his response to work its way out. I hope we will stay friends. But he waits for more.

"I suppose it was the guitar. When I started playing, it was half an hour a day. Then as I got into it more, it became two hours a day and then three. She began to say it was like she was living alone. I guess that was when we separated."

Alexander is silent.

I continue, "In the past year or so, when I play my favorite pieces, they play themselves. It's as though the guitar is being played by someone else and I am the audience. I watch my hands playing and they seem to have a life of their own. The music becomes a part of me. I float and drift and sometimes, I play on and on after supper and then I realize that the sun is coming up."

Alexander sits silently for a long moment, then says "Maybe a person is only allowed so much beauty in a life."

We sit there together silently looking out into the garden.

Freda enters the room and asks, "How is Julie?"

I look at the table and say, "Julie's gone."

"Oh, did she go to visit her family? It's nice to visit your family. So many families live so far apart these days. Families should stay close. Is she staying for long?"

"I'm afraid you don't understand. She's gone for good. She's not coming back." I can feel my voice cracking, a tightness in my chest. I've had enough of this.

Freda and Alexander say nothing for a few moments. They glance at each other. I take a long drink of vodka.

Freda says "You young people have so much these days. Things we never even dreamed of in the old country. It's sad to see so much unhappiness. It's hard to understand."

Alexander continues wistfully. "There is so much opportunity here. I wish my son Henri would have taken advantage. All he did was to buy a motorcycle and then drive it, drive it all the time. We came to this country so our children and grandchildren could have opportunity that we never had. Now they have it and don't take advantage of it. I don't understand them.

"We knew about good things, you understand. But we knew we couldn't have them. They were beyond reach. If you had a few books to put on a shelf in your living room, you were considered a rich man.

"But we were happy in our way. On Sundays we would all gather together - my mother and father and aunts and uncles and sisters and brothers and after dinner Jorge would play with the children and the men would sit and talk in the living room. Our life was hard, but we found - - -"

I shuffle my feet, wanting to stand up.

Freda says "He doesn't want to listen to this, Alex. She turns to me with a sad but sympathetic look. "Would you like some coffee, John?"

"No thanks", I manage to say. I pour some more vodka and pass the bottle to Alexander."

Later, I have some coffee on the sunporch. It is quiet and peaceful, as usual, but the house is big and lonely. The skies are gray and the woods seem as desolate as my life. I call Anna and go to her place.

She is sitting beside the fire, pushing around bits of wood with a poker to raise up the flames.

"I'm going back to Spain next month", she announces. "To Granada. I can learn so much more there, and the atmosphere is more agreeable, not to mention the climate. Why don't you come with me?"

We had talked about it during our long nights together, but it had seemed improbable and far away. Now she has decided.

"I'm not sure. I need to think. A lot has happened lately."

We talk about it long into the night. I stay at her place and by the next day we have made our plans. That night I go to give my notice to Alexander. I take my guitar with me.

Freda lets me in. "Alex is in the study", she says. She looks subdued.

When I walk into the study, Alexander is sitting brooding by a window overlooking the garden.

He looks up at me, "I saw my brother again last night. Standing by the door, facing me. After the knocks. Looking as he did when I last saw him alive. There was terrible sadness in his face. Beyond grief."

I watch him sitting there facing the window. "Perhaps it is your own sadness you see in him."

Alexander turns towards me, "There was such a terrible sadness. How is it possible?"

I have no answer, so I take out my guitar and begin to play the slow Spanish dance. The plaintive notes fill the air and carry within them all the sadness in the room, the sadness of the world. Alexander sits with his back towards me silently looking out into the garden. Freda comes to the door and listens and looks at him for a long time. Then she turns her loving gaze to me and puts a rosy-cheeked smile on her face and very slowly nods her head up and down. Her eyes are soft and moist.