

ninepatch: A Creative Journal for Women and Gender Studies

Volume 1
Issue 1 *Awakening*

Article 11

2012

Reverie at the Big Y

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Recommended Citation

Koscher, Adeline Carrie (2012) "Reverie at the Big Y," *ninepatch: A Creative Journal for Women and Gender Studies*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://encompass.eku.edu/ninepatch/vol1/iss1/11>

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Reverie at the Big Y

We have fallen into the place
where everything is music. ...
Stop the words now.
Open the window in the center of your chest,
and let the spirits fly in and out.
~Jelaluddin Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks

Bridie wondered why her mechanic, Joe, was snapping his fingers in front of the display of baked beans “on sale this week.” He was lively and friendly every time she brought her Mercury Sable in for an oil change, but in front of the baked beans? When he was a boy, he was always over this fence or under that one. He didn’t cause any real trouble, but he ruffled the feathers of the old hens in town, for sure. Bridie called to mind the morning Lenore almost shot Joe, thinking he was a fox in her hen house – her real hen house. Bridie could see the scar where the shotgun spray grazed Joe’s left arm, the arm of the hand that was presently snapping away in front of the baked beans.

Joe’s snapping was strange enough, but just as Bridie was thinking this through, her eye was drawn to Eliza who had washed and set Bridie’s hair that very morning. She noticed Eliza put down the bonus package of extra-absorbent paper towels, and then she watched that girl twirl around. Eliza, twirling in the Big Y for all to see, the same girl that Bridie had to ask to “please speak up” when getting her weekly wash. Eliza was happy enough to tell Bridie the news of the week, a regular human tabloid, but Bridie missed half of it because Eliza’s little voice was lost in the sound of the spray nozzle rinsing shampoo. Here she was now, twirling, twirling in the dry goods aisle. It gave Bridie a little thrill. Unexpected delight from the twirl swished through Bridie. Why shouldn’t Eliza twirl? She must have so much pent up twirl inside her just busting at her seams.

And so, it was with a delighted countenance that Bridie turned her carriage to head for the peaches and almost ran over the Reverend Baxter dipping Louisa Boltz. Bridie’s sense of propriety was challenged by this development. Leland Baxter was a married man. It’s true, he always danced with one of the First Church widows to the Tennessee Waltz each Fourth of July picnic, but dipping Sunday-pianist Louisa Boltz that close to a pyramid of honeydew melon was immodest, just plain bad taste. Waltzing with long-gray widows was a compassionate duty to his congregation. This, this was whimsy; this was fun; this was dipping in front of the honeydew! As with most immodest acts, it held Bridie’s rapt attention until she thought she could hear a snatch of the Tennessee Waltz warbling through the loudspeaker.

She turned her carriage toward the sound and found Fran Hatch beaming from the balcony next to one of the store’s speakers. On any other day it would be announcing deli order number 267 or this week’s special on roast chicken. Today, Fran Hatch was piping the Tennessee Waltz through the Big Y. Bridie had her suspicions when Fran got the job as store manager. She figured the power would go to his head, and he’d manage some sort of shenanigans. Fran was wearing the same satisfied grin he wore that day at the Busy Bee when Bridie and Sam ran the place. Her only full-time

waitress, Donna, was rushed off her feet with the lunch crowd – in the weeds, dogs barking. She was practically balancing plates on her head to get the burgers out when Fran breezed in with three of his buddies, jumped up on a table, and belted out an a cappella rendition of “Oh Donna.” Fran was no Richie Valens, but when he belted out “all my love for you-o-o,” even Bridie softened. She forgot the burgers and caught sight of a true blush in Donna’s already flushed cheeks.

Bridie held Donna’s shy smile like a bird for a moment until she was jostled and pulled from her reverie. Bridie discovered chaos swelling around her. Unnerved, she held tight to her carriage. They were dancing – not just Reverend Baxter and Louisa Boltz, not just Eliza twirling with paper towels and Joe snapping with baked beans – they were all dancing and singing! Annabelle, Bridie’s aqua aerobics instructor, Paulo Nascimento, the town selectman, Maria from the bank, Bev from the library. There was Mrs. Kelly Montinhio, the kindergarten teacher. Bridie remembered when Kelly was only five years old herself, wearing patchwork corduroys and listening to Bridie tell stories to the kindergarteners. And Pamela Swisnewski, who taught tap to all the little girls and some of the boys – maybe Pamela inspired this spontaneous dance recital. Even Kurt – Bridie’s right-hand neighbor, the silent boy who dressed in buckles and black – was belting it out. Their mouths were open, chests puffed with song, arms flung to the heavens.

Bridie spotted George; she hadn’t seen George in sixty years. What was he doing here? Well, she could see *what* he was doing. He was playing that enormous drum that he insisted on bringing everywhere the gang of them went – camping at Partridge Hollow, Star meetings. He brought it to spaghetti dinners and pancake breakfasts. He said, “You start a little music, and people can’t resist. They have to join in. Doesn’t matter if it’s a drum. The melody will follow.” He was right, then, and he was right, today. Maybe he was behind this musical number.

Bridie could feel the reverberations of George’s drum pounding in her own chest. She could feel her limbs twitching, eager to dance almost as if she were a marionette, as if there were some external force compelling her into movement. Coercing her limbs to move, when she wanted them to, had long been a process. They took considerable coaxing and cajoling. But right now, they felt limber, young, like the last time she danced with the Reverend – three years ago, Fourth of July. She remembered how he swept her across the lawn between the church and the cemetery; Leland really was a fine dancer. “I was dancin’ with my darlin’, mmm hmm hmm hmm mmm hmm hmm hmm hmm.” That Fourth, she felt as if her feet barely touched the grass. And she laughed. Oh! She laughed the entire dance. That laugh had stayed with her. But today, the memory of it – the last dance, all the dances – the memory wasn’t enough. It was good; it was delightful, but she wanted to dance with all these people, *today*. She knew her limbs would do it, could do it. They’d done it before.

She peered over at Leland and Louisa. The honey of the melons infused the air, and the music grew louder. She could feel the July sun poking through the clouds and the freshly trimmed grass under her toes – Bob Lake always mowed right before the picnic. She felt the tightness in her back release. She felt her hair tickle the tops of her bare shoulders. This was her favorite summer dress; the pale yellow complemented her auburn hair. Everyone was at this year’s picnic: Hazel and Cecil, Barbara, Susie, Dot.

They were all here, and they were dancing and singing in one elaborately choreographed number right out of an Exit 7 Players musical. For a moment they paused, turned to her, thrust their jazz hands at her, and lifted their voices. This was her cue. She pinched her skirt, revealing bare feet and spun into the swirl of honey, sunshine, and faces – released into the crescendo. There was no pain; the world burst open into irresistible, glorious song.