

Gershwin's
Last Waltz
and Other Stories

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Preface

A few years ago I read an article about Stephen King in *The New Yorker*. The author had interviewed the humor writer Dave Barry, a friend of King's, and a colleague in a truly awful amateur rock band. Barry said about King that his talent is telling stories and that everyone in the world likes stories, except literature majors.

When I was growing up I loved the work of great story tellers like O. Henry, Roald Dahl, Jack London, Ring Lardner and others. I didn't want current fashions in literary criticism to get in the way of a rollicking good tale. I started writing stories when I got out of the Army in 1953 but soon put them aside for a career as a History professor and it was more than 40 years, with my first computer, that I once more tried my hand as a story teller.

I like strong plots, but I can't take all the credit for them. When I get an idea for a story I seldom know exactly how it's going to end., I like to create memorable characters and let them determine the direction the story is going. Often they just take over the action and even add surprising twists to the plot that I had never suspected when I started writing. This may sound odd, even surreal, but authors I respect admit to the same lack of control over their characters. Elmore Leonard said he gave a name to the main character in *Bandits* that didn't seem to motivate him, "but when I changed his name to Jack Delany, I couldn't shut him up." My characters—actually I think of them as friends—come from the same dimension. It's time to meet them.

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Gershwin's Last Waltz

Karabakh had been trying to sell a vintage poster to a couple who had wandered in off the street but didn't seem very involved. Now, to his annoyance, his concentration was broken by the sight of an old woman outside, a raggedy old woman, peering through the window, her hands framing her face and her nose almost against the glass. He had a sudden painful memory of people like that back in Russia, looking into a bakery, or a restaurant, freezing out there on the street. But this was New York in the springtime and there was nothing here but art, posters, old photos. The couple abruptly decided that not even that interested them, and they left. Karabakh was on his way to the front of the store to shoo the old woman away, but she had caught the door as the couple left and was now coming in, looking around with great interest.

Karabakh had an opportunity to study her more closely and the brisk dismissal he had been phrasing died on its way to his lips. Ragged she may have been, in shapeless clothes, her gray hair windblown, but now he could see that his visitor had been a beauty, maybe many years ago, but a beauty, even a great beauty.

"Can I help you, madame?" He had tried for a tone that would discourage his visitor, but her wide green eyes suddenly fastened on his, her full lips opened into a warm smile, and suddenly he couldn't help sounding as if he'd been waiting all day for her visit.

She paused, then looked around the store again, as if expecting to see a familiar object. She turned back.

“I’m sorry to bother you—”

“Not a bit, I—”

“But in your window it says, ah...”

“Yes, madame?”

“It says, ‘Gershwin memorabilia.’ What can that mean?”

Karabakh smiled back. Maybe there *was* a sale here, unlikely as it had seemed. “Yes, Gershwin memorabilia. Over the years I have made a specialty of collecting items: old sheet music, letters, but particularly photographic material having to do with George Gershwin. Are you familiar with his career?”

The lady inclined her head slowly to the left and laughed softly, a beautiful, gentle laugh.

“I knew George Gershwin.”

A shock ran through Karabakh and he calculated quickly. George Gershwin had died in 1937 at the age of 39. If this woman had been, say, twenty years younger than the composer, she would be, eighty, no, at least eighty-two years old right now. It was possible. But his store was right in the middle of the Village and the streets were thronged with frauds and loonies. He forced himself to concentrate, stay with the sale.

“Ah, of course. But you, madame, are far too young to have—”

She laughed again. “You are so kind. But yes. I am...I am almost eighty. You won’t tell a soul?”

“Of course, madame,” he said, savoring the little lie. “Would you...is there any particular sort of Gershwin memorabilia that you would like to see?”

The woman stopped smiling and shook her head.

“No. Actually...” she stuttered a bit. “Actually, I have some old photographs and I wondered if...if they had any value. You see—”

Karabakh quickly cut off any despairing claim of poverty and urgency that she might be about to make and held up his hands. His heart was racing, but he managed to keep his voice professional.

“I would be delighted to see your photographs, madame, but I have to assure you that the market for Gershwiniana at the moment is—”

His visitor pealed with laughter, real laughter this time. “Gershwiniana! How George would have loved that!” She grasped Karabakh’s arm suddenly, intensely.

“Yes. Yes! I’m so glad I found this store! It was completely by hazard. I’ll have to...have to find those old photos and I’ll come by tomorrow. Will that be all right?”

Karabakh agreed, trying to stay calm. He knew that the estate of the Gershwin family would pay top prices for any original Gershwin material and he was wondering if he would encounter a real treasure, at a bargain price.

“I’m afraid these are in an awful mess,” she was saying the next day, taking sheaves of old, mismatched black and white glossies out of a large grocery bag. She had changed into a long dark blue dress that could have come directly from the racks of the “formerly owned” clothing store down the block. But her silvery gray hair was neatly tucked back into a bun and she was wearing tiny earrings that, if Karabakh was not mistaken, were sapphires.

But he was disappointed at the pictures that shuffled out of the bag, sending a cloud of dust into his shop: edges worn,

some quite browned by age, most of them amateurish, none of them novelties. George Gershwin had been the most outgoing of men and had been photographed tens of thousands of times. And the value of a photograph depended on the venue and the provenance. A professional photo of Gershwin at a famous club, sitting in for the pianist, a blond bombshell beside him on the bench, all correctly credited with names and dates, would be worth thousands. But all these poor prints were anonymous. One couldn't tell where they'd been taken, or by whom; they were of mediocre quality, and some of the 8 x 10s had actually been folded. The one he was looking at now showed Gershwin seated on a piano bench, pointing to a piece of music on the piano, a big smile on his face, across which, unfortunately, the photo had been folded.

"I took this one," said the lady, sadly. "I wish it was in better condition, but I've...I've not been well for a long time and my things—"

"You can see my problem," said Karabakh. "There is no way that I can authenticate the background. There are so many photos of George exactly like this, pointing to 'I've got Rhythm,' or 'The Man I Love.' It was one of his favorite poses."

"Oh, but this was different. You see, George and I were... close. And he had just written a little waltz for me. He played it, and then I insisted that he write it out, you know, so I could keep the music, but I forgot to take it with me and all I had was my photograph. And then he was always so busy after..." She fell silent, her face in shadow betraying an ancient sadness. "And then I read in the papers that he died out on the coast. It was so sudden."

It took Karabakh several moments to completely comprehend what she had just said. If she was actually telling the truth, he had here a worthless picture of George Gershwin—but an image of that rarest of objects, an unpublished Gershwin tune, worth well into the millions, at auction. He struggled to keep his voice neutral, his heart pounding.

“Madame...I’m sorry, I never got your name?”

“It’s Gisele. Gisele Morgan. It was, ah, Gisele Bernheimer in those days.”

“Yes. Mrs Bern— Mrs Morgan. You will understand that there may be a certain value for the piece of music.” He stood up abruptly. “May I keep this overnight? I will write you a receipt, of course, but I wish a colleague of mine, a distinguished composer, to look at the music, to see if it actually can be read.” He leaned down peering at it closely through his thick glasses.

“It goes, ‘tah da dee dah, dada tah da dee dah...,” sang Mrs Morgan in a not unmusical voice. “But I’m afraid that’s all I remember of it.”

“Yes, yes, of course. A beautiful melody. But you see—”

“Oh, of course you may keep it. And have it looked at. Oh, this is so exciting! I’ve been waiting forever for something like this to happen!”

She had barely disappeared around the corner when Karabakh quickly stepped out, carrying the photo, locked his store and rang a bell in the next doorway. The name card was scrawled in pencil: ARTHUR HERSH. COMPOSER-ARRANGER-ACCOMPANIST. PIANO LESSONS. PIANO TUNING. He was buzzed in and he ascended a flight of stairs to a large airy studio, a tiny kitchen in one corner and a bed in another, where a young man

with wild dark hair was busy scribbling music on the stand of an old Knabe grand piano strewn with sheet music.

“Arthur! I’m so glad I found you in! I have a favor to ask... in fact, a commission. I’ll be glad to pay you by the hour if you’ll look at this picture and see if you can read the piece of music in the background.”

The young man did not look excited by the offer. He gave Karabakh a long look, then took the old folded photo and inspected it carefully.

“It’s Gershwin, of course.”

“Yes, of course. But the photo is virtually worthless. You see the crease goes directly across his nose, of all things, and he had a big nose. If I can identify which one of his tunes is in the background, it could be worth maybe a hundred...in fact I’ll give you ten percent of the sale, whatever it is.”

Arthur turned and looked at the photo again. Now he got up and looked through a jumble of papers on his kitchen table, finding a magnifying glass. He leaned down.

“Hum, hum, de dum. Yes, I can make out just a few notes. It’s just the melody line, with a few chord symbols overhead. And I can see the three-four time signature. It’s a waltz, of course.”

Karabakh’s heart nearly stopped. He counted to ten, then said, as if he had lost interest, “Yes, of course. Anything else?”

“Let’s see. A waltz. You know, just thinking about it, I can’t remember any Gershwin waltzes. I play his popular songs all the time. A waltz? I don’t know. From *Porgy and Bess*, naturally—’My Man’s gone now,’ for instance. Three-four time...not really a waltz. I’ll have to look through my references. The man had an enormous oeuvre, you know. A lot of it pure junk, just

Tin Pan Alley stuff ground out day after day, never played anymore.” He went back to inspecting the photo.

“You know, I can’t make out most of this.” Karabakh’s heart fell.

“But... Can I keep this for a bit? I think I’ll scan it into my computer and then try to grow it a bit.” He looked at his watch. “But I’m running late. I have a lesson in five minutes and then I have to rehearse for a job tonight.”

As soon as he was back in his shop Karabakh was on the phone, punching in numbers furiously, remembering to keep his voice as calm as possible.

“Leonard...? Morris here. I have an interesting offer from a customer who says she has an original Gershwin tune.... Ha, ha, yes, I know. ‘I-like-a-Gershwin-tune..., da-dada-*Dah*.’ Anyway she claims he wrote this little waltz just for her. I know you knew the family well, all the old stories. Did you ever hear of something like this?”

The old man on the other end of the line finally stopped laughing.

“Morris, my old friend. This is ancient history. First you have to know that George was a first-class lover boy. A real cocksman, you know what I mean? He never married, but he had some beauty in bed every night, or after lunch, even before. We all heard the story about George’s waltz. If he found a girl who was reluctant—if you could believe it—he would *patz* around on the keys and then play some romantic little melody, looking at her with those soulful eyes, and say ‘Darling, I don’t know what you did to me this never happened before but just looking in your eyes this song suddenly came to me...,’ some nonsense like that, and next thing

they're in the sack. You could check it out, it's in all the books, that story. Bennett Cerf told me, ages ago."

"But could it be possible? That she actually had the music?"

"Morris, if she has the music, actually a piece of music in her hand, and it's a waltz, even a good tune, still, how do you authenticate? Does it have his signature? Hah! Impossible to prove. Does it sound like Gershwin? So what! Everybody stole from Gershwin, just like George stole from everybody else, when he was coming up. So, good luck, my friend!"

They exchanged cordialities. Karabakh had neglected to mention that he had an unquestioned photograph of George Gershwin sitting at his piano and pointing to a piece of music that might or might not be legible. He could hardly sleep that night.

Bearing in mind that Arthur had worked in a club the night before, Karabakh managed to restrain himself from calling his neighbor until 10:30 in the morning. An irritated voice came on the phone.

"Yes?"

"Arthur, this is Morris Karabakh. I'm sorry if this is too early, but..."

"No, Mr. Karabakh, it's okay. It's just that I haven't finished yet. Maybe after lunch we could get together?"

An hour later, Arthur was still peering at his computer, jotting down notes on manuscript paper at his side. He straightened up suddenly, muttering to himself, "Ah, of course! It's a repeat. That's the bridge coming in again, and in a minor key! Brilliant! And then finishing in D-flat. Beautiful!" His doorbell rang.

"Who is it?" he blurted into the intercom, abrupt, thinking it was Karabakh again.

“Oh...I'm sorry, Arthur! It's Claire. Maybe I'm too early. I thought—”

“No, no, Claire! Please come up! Early is fine! I thought my neighbor...” and he buzzed her in.

Claire was a gorgeous but virtuous piano student. She had little talent but because of her spectacular good looks Arthur kept her on, hoping some day to get past her reservations about dating her teacher. She burst into his studio, a fresh, outdoorsy girl with a guileless smile and boundless energy, seemingly unaware of the amazing body that was obvious even under heavy layers of winter clothes and now on a warm spring day, in a flimsy cotton dress... Arthur had difficulty swallowing.

“Hi, teach!” she cried. “I finally got the fingering on that Chopin. You were right! I just had to keep doing it over and over.” She spotted the computer and the hasty notes Arthur had been writing.

“What's that you're working on?”

“Oh. That. Actually, it's a nice little tune. I've just about figured it out. See here?” And he showed her the old photo and the music on the piano and how he had blown the page up on his computer. “It's supposed to be by George Gershwin, the guy here in the picture.”

“Gershwin? Oh, I love him. Didn't he write ‘Summertime’?”

Arthur cringed inwardly, thinking of all the women who came to clubs and wanted to sit in and sing ‘Summertime.’

“Well. Yeah. And some of the most beautiful songs in the whole world, too. The music is really hard to make out, but I think I got it now. It's a little waltz. Would you like to hear it?”

“Oh gee! I'd love to! I hardly ever get to hear you *really* play, Arthur.”

Karabakh was about to call Arthur again when his door jingled open and Gisele Morgan came in. She had made an effort to dress up a bit more today, although her suit was completely wrong for the season and at least three decades out of date. She had a hopeful look on her face.

“Mr. Karabakh? Have you heard anything about—”

He shrugged, managing to convey the greatest resignation.

“My dear, what can I say? My friend next door, an eminent musicologist, says the notes are virtually illegible, and that what can be read seems to be a waltz from...” he thought hard, “*Porgy and Bess*? Yes. I’m sure that’s what he said.” He was about to go on but suddenly they were surprised to hear some tentative notes from a piano and then music flooded the street outside. Arthur was playing his grand piano and all the windows in his studio were open to the spring morning. Dappled sunlight falling through the mulberry trees found a tableau of suddenly still figures on what had been a busy pedestrian byway. Couples had stopped to listen, their arms around each other. Shopkeepers were coming out of their doors, smiling and looking up, mystified at the swelling melody that filled the block. A taxi driver picking up a fare heard the song and quickly got out of his cab to help the elderly passenger with heavy packages. And now all traffic had halted. Strangers looked at each other and laughed with wonder, hearing a captivating melody of pure happiness and love. An old man and his wife turned to each other and embraced; onlookers smiled and hugged each other. Even the birds in the trees began a counterpoint chorus as the first refrain ended. Then the bridge repeated in a minor key, sending an anxious tremor through the crowd below. But now it modulated magically into the majestic finale in the key

of D-flat and their spirits rose and rose to hear the haunting lilt of the waltz at its climax.

Mrs. Morgan had tears streaming down her face. Karabakh was standing there with his mouth open, speechless, desperately thinking of something to say.

After another half chorus the music stopped abruptly.

She was now smiling through the tears, smiling in a rather calculating way.

“Yes, that’s my little waltz. I’m sorry to be so...to lose control like this. But I told you, didn’t I?”

“Uh...Mrs Morgan, he must...my neighbor must be playing something for his girlfriend. He often does. I’ll go over there—”

“No, Mr. Karabakh. I know my waltz. And if he was playing for his girlfriend just now I wouldn’t go over there for a little while. In the meantime, let’s talk business, shall we?”