

A Balcony Story

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I give 'em a Tampa or two, go into an Indian Two-Step. Once in a while, feeling good, I throw in a Front Irish. Here's your basic Tampa: Scuff, Hop, Toe, Heel, Toe-Step, Brush-Step, Ball-Change. Say them like they're separate words. Say them fast, "Brush-Step, Ball-Change," and you get the rhythm of the Tampa. So if I'm a broken-down biddy with spider veins on her legs, who cares . . . I can dance! Watch me Shim-Sham! Watch me Wind the Clock! There's sixty years talking in them shoes, Mister.

"So you Wind the Clock," Eddie says. "Now work on your Tea for Two a little."

"I am already. Patience," I tell him. "Rome wasn't built in a day."

"We ain't in Rome, and we haven't practiced much, so come on."

I give him a Tea for Two. It's three brush-step, brush toe-steps in a circle. You automatically get the beat of the song in your head, just like you do this one: "It had to be you" (scuff, hop, toe, heel . . . back-step, brush-step, ball-change) "It had to be you" (scuff, hop, toe, heel . . .).

We've been at it fifty years. Oh, Jeezus, are we out of it, half-a-century behind. Even our stage name. There was something seemed left out when he suggested "Eddie and Ethel, The Dancing Couple" back in '37 in Duluth-Superior. "You gotta be crazy," I said that time. "That's it? Our name? 'Eddie and Ethel, The Dancing Couple?' Who's gonna hire anyone with monikers like that?"

"Work on your Back Irish and trust me," he said.

We've never had top billing. Clowns, magicians, comedians, animal acts—they came first in Houma and Willmar. In Blooming Prairie we were once upstaged by a flea circus. That was it as far as Eddie was concerned. He tried sales. He worked two weeks selling carbon paper door to door. That was in the sixties when offices were getting Xerox machines and nobody was using carbon paper. They thought the old guy, Eduardo The Carbon Paper Man, was a riot. They wished they could duplicate *him*. He'd stand all alone in the middle of the office and bow, thinking he was on stage at The Gaie-

ty. What a scene with them laughing, him doing a Back Irish out the door and telling me "No Sale" in the alley.

He got arrested a few weeks later—in "east Someplace" across a bridge from a molasses works, I remember. We never talked much about it. It's been years that it made the paper. He'd been walking along on the levee at midnight, sick about the carbon paper he'd spent a double sawbuck on. He started talking to people—men. The cops find out quick in east Someplace when someone new's working the levee. They hauled him in. When we left, the paper said, "Eddie Johnson, co-partner in 'Eddie and Ethel, The Dancing Couple,' lewd vagrancy, suspended sentence, ordered to leave town." The judge applauded when Eddie did a "wings," which is one of your hardest moves and usually saved for the grand finale. Both feet jumping, knees bent, arms, or "wings" going in a circle; this was Eddie in his prime. You shoulda seen!

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," he says from behind the curtain that separates our kitchen from the living-bedroom. "Here he is . . . dee-rect from the Pilgrim in Boston, the Lido in Vegas . . . world-renowned Septuagenarian of Tap . . . Ed-die John-s-s-on!"

He throws back the curtain and, shimmying, hits me with a Tampa, clicking out the beat on the linoleum of the bed-living room floor.

"Ready now? Watch your Eddie," he says.

I nod. He gives me a few more steps, backs up.

"Whew, I gotta sit a minute." He tries to hold himself in. He winks, out of breath. His hands are trembling. He falls back on the foldaway. He's still got hair or I don't know my Eddie, and he's still got teeth, but his face and belly sag like years of blue plate specials, years of rotten comics, plate spinners, and unicyclists have taken it out of him. When we're working a room, he wears his waist cinch under the shirt to tuck him up good. But how do you tuck up the face of a disappointed, bitter man who went nowhere in the business? His face is a reflection of our career, it looks to me. The wrinkles and the loose skin of seventy-four years collapse around his mouth and chin, drain downward. If his hatband reads Size 6 3/4, his lower face around the cheeks and jaw must be 7 1/2. Everything, his chin, his chest, settles toward those dancing feet. His hands got a beat, too. The doc called it "the trembles, a harmless embarrassment, benign hereditary tremor."

"Stop that tremulousness," I sometimes tell him before we go on stage, "they'll think we're drinking."

He wears a canary-colored jacket, works with it off on "Little Brown Jug" or "The Sunny Side of the Street." Hands trembling,

belly pinched so's he can hardly breathe, he never misses a brush-step, never denies himself a ball-change or two. His dancing shirt's yellow around collar and cuffs, maybe it's missing a button, maybe the pants with the black velvet stripes down the side are frayed, maybe lewd vagrancy. . . .

Way back in Kansas City it was like that—pain and disappointment forty years ago. I know what made his face and belly drain down. I was with him. I was part of it. The ads read,

See the Special 3-Unit Full-Length,
Big-Time Burlesque Show. Featuring Sunra,
Sun Bathed Nature Girl . . . Texas Rae,
Sweetheart of Texas . . . Rickey Rich,
New Orleans Fashion Plate Woman Impersonator.

Plus

8 ace funsters, 20 sassy lassies, 8 beautiful
dancers . . . You'll laugh a lot . . . you may
blush a little . . . but you won't be bored.
We dare not tell you more.

Plus

Eddie and Ethel, The Dancing Couple

I mean, every day we'd put on the makeup, shoes, and smile. Did we get a mention in *Variety*? Did we at least get a line in *The Star*? Every day was work. K.C. was hot all that summer. We'd eat at the diner we liked on Prospect, then hurry back to the dressing room for continuous matinee and evening performances with a "Red Hot Rambler Show" Saturday midnights where, for a second before the houselights died, the dancers—. Well did they or didn't they? "We dare not tell you more."

A sign in the lobby read the place was "Refrigeration Cooled."

"Stay in the theater, honey. Don't go back to the room tonight," he'd say after the show. "You'll bake. I can take heat. I'll run over, check on things, maybe grab a sandwich to bring you. Be gone a minute."

"Sure, Ed. I'm bushed."

Sometimes if I was real bored I'd go to Union Station or walk down The Paseo, trying to get a breeze off the Missouri. The room was on 18th Street. He didn't want me coming up. I'd bake, too hot, he'd say . . . said he was "on retreat," needed to be alone to work on steps. He had the wood suitcase in the room. It's a block of wood with a handle for when you're traveling and want to practice. On wood

you get the real sounds of tap better than you do on tile or linoleum.

I found out later he was dancing on the suitcase. He was whispering insinuations, whispering brush steps when I knocked. A woman's voice said, "Don't open!" I guess I knew about Eddie by then. "Don't open," the woman's voice said. The hall stunk of cabbage.

"Who you got in there?" I said.

"Don't be dumb," he said. "I'm changing clothes. I been practicing. You know the 'Shim-Sham' we do—?"

"It's me," Rickey Rich said. "We're having a cigarette together, talking." (Rickey Rich, female impersonator, would "die" one day when she hung up her gowns and went back to being Cloyd Follner of Metairie.)

Even back in K.C. when I caught him with her/him, Eddie's face was red and sinking and he had what the doc called "a mild-to-coarse shaking of the hands." I had walked in. He was naked. She had on a blue skirt and a pink veil. As his partner I wasn't giving him what he needed. The thing in "east Someplace" when the carbon paper business went under was for money. I could understand that. But what business could he have been talking about with Rickey Rich two blocks off The Paseo past midnight? It was all part of his disappointments.

So this was Eddie, I thought, a double threat. This was my partner and husband—blond hair which he touched up from time to time to get the highlights, green eyes which weren't gonna be fulfilled in this business no matter what, raspberry mouth which whispered "brush-step, ball-change" to me in bed at night as though he had his tap shoes on. And all of this eventually sagging toward the ground.

I see his kind from our room every day now, from our balcony. We have two rooms on a fourth floor, a long walk up from the city street. In the alley in back I've seen people crawl out of garbage cans, guys practicing what the "septuagenarian of tap" himself once did on the levee, seems like a century ago. Whenever I see myself in a window—thinning hair, rouge deep within the crevice of my cheeks—I'm reminded of Eddie entertaining the judge that time when I still didn't look half bad in the window of the bar across the street. On the balcony of the fourth floor fire escape, I now watch and listen for dancing feet. From up here I watch my life go by. When it's hot and Eddie's asleep, I sit out thinking of the fellow Jean Harlowe married, of how when she saw him undressed, he didn't have anything to show for himself . . . was real little and had to strap on this thing which she laughed at. Where we're going we couldn't afford to get in to live, but they give you lunch if you're with the show.

"I'm ready. Fully recovered," Eddie says. "Musta practiced a little too hard."

The Tampa's stationary, the Indian Two-Step a traveling step. "Watch me," he says. He gets up from the foldaway, puts on his canary jacket. "Watch me travel. I'm stepping over in front, see . . . hopping on the right, stepping back, sliding, gliding, hopping. I'm stepping together, brush-step, ball-change. How you like me this way?" he says.

He dances down the fire escape, does a Shim-Sham at the bottom, does a Break, Winds and Unwinds the Clock. I love his style—excuses, regrets, lies. He left me with a broken heart in Conneaut when he had a job in Sandusky. Sounds lousy, but you don't know my dancing Eddie, his hips, his knees. No one does a scuff, hop like Eddie. At the Roxy with an orchestra, me in blue chiffon with pink feather headdress, him in his canary coat; it's me for him and him for me. Lewd vagrancy or not, it's official. You can tell *that* to the judge!

We practice out on the street. Waiting for the bus, I do a Double Seven, then jump on the sidewalk as cars pass by, Eddie giving me his velvet, raspberry sound, "Ta-cha . . . ta-cha-cha . . ." he's saying.

I say, "You look great for being in your eight—"

A line of cars zips past.

"Seventies!" he says. "Oh, watch the feet of fire!" He hits me with a Cabriole, insinuates me, syncopates me, travels sideways, taps out. "Be careful," he says. When I think he's gonna step into the path of an oncoming truck, he shimmies at the driver and breaks into a "Front Essence."

"You goofy old son-of-a-bitch, watch out!" the man yells. Raising his finger, he speeds by. It's good to get a job in the business. We read *Variety* every night in the library. Eddie's even practicing a stand-up routine for when our legs give out.

"Ethel Johnson, Two drunks walkin' down the railroad tracks, one says, 'Oh, my achin' head,' Other one says, 'Head nothin', these stairs are killin' me.' Ta-cha . . . Ta-cha," goes his voice as he breaks into a "Flap Step and Turn."

"Eddie Johnson," I say, "heard about the two Irish quee—." As soon as I get to the word, I realize I shouldn't of brought up the subject.

"No, tell me what, Ethel Johnson."

"—two Irish queens? Hugh Fits Patrick and Patrick Fits Hugh."

I shouldn't of told it. Don't know why I did. "You loved me, Eddie,

didn't you, in K.C., Davenport, Mason City? You know, all over? Didn't you love me, Eddie? Wasn't it true between us?" Some of the pink feathers of my headdress mat together. Over my costume I wear a coat from the Next to New Shop. He gives me a Nelson Eddy stare. I shouldn't of started the joke.

"I liked you not in Grand Forks," he says. "I'm a poet, too."

"Did you have a girlfriend I didn't know about? Is that why you didn't love me in Grand Forks?"

"What do you think Rickey Rich wasn't? I liked you not in Grand Forks."

"You don't make sense."

"Your 'scissors' were lousy, your 'paddle step' a disgrace, dear."

"Well how about you and Rickey Rich, who was really Cloyd Fol—?"

"Clever conundr—condom. Lemme explain, Ethel. You might've forgot it in old age. Our aim with the 'Wings' and other steps is to create sounds that, when you think about them, are impossible. How can I move this foot twice, see, and get four sounds outta two?"

"You loved me in Scott's Bluff, I know that much, Eddie."

"Maybe I was making two sounds outta one. How would you know? Maybe I was discreet," he says. "How would you know? Was it magic?" He laughs, claps his hands, taps his feet. "Ethel Johnson, two guys and a gal in an elevator when the lights go out. Gal says, 'Now you two behave yourselves in the presence of a lady!' Half-hour later, 'You two? You two?'"

Cars speed by. "Look-it the old bastards!" someone yells.

We need tokens for the 10th Avenue bus. If Harold's driving, we do the "Cuban Pete." He knows we're light and lets us on if there's no one else getting on behind.

"Face me quick!" Eddie says. As the bus rolls up, we step-across, ball-change, reverse. Before we finish doing a shimmy-up, we see Harold opening the door.

"Where to, Eddie and Ethel? Lemme guess. Paramount? Windsor?"

"Rose Room at The Towers," Eddie says. "Matinee. Looks like we still got it. The feet don't stop."

"Pretty swank, the Rose Room. What's a guy to do though, hey?" Harold says.

"How're you these days?" we ask.

"Bound up from drivin' all day. Some dancin's what I need to move around, get out of this seat. I don't know."

We go from 9th Street to 28th where the Rose Room is. Eddie

could never make it on foot, has to save what he can for today's matinee show.

"Big, crowded city, but if you're gonna work, I guess, hey," Harold says. We hop, step, and turn out the door, give him a Front Essence for good measure.

"You gonna do 'Limehouse'?" he asks, leaves us dancing in a cloud of exhaust fumes.

In the Rose Room they're lined up. There must be eighty-ninety waiting for the show, all dressed up, rich, expensive, show-going people. Some of the finest in town.

"It's our meal ticket," says Eddie. "No worse than Duluth-Superior."

"A start, Eddie," I say.

"Ladies and gents," the emcee says from the stage, "The Towers is proud to welcome two of your favorites, Eddie and Elea—no Ethel. Remember them now with a big round of applause."

"It's us," he says as we wait three bars, then travel out. They smile when they see us and clap. And old guy hollers nobody cares for him, his kids don't come to see him.

It's "Limehouse Blues" time, "Cuban Pete" time. They like us in the Rose Room, *love* us here. Nurses push them out onto the floor. Nurses swing the wheelchairs back and forth, dancing along behind. Some of the audience have come with walkers and canes. Some sleep with mouths open. Snores syncopate "Sleepy Time Gal." The half-dead old folks stare at the floor. They always enjoy a Cabriole. Thank God, it's "Refrigeration Cooled." Thank God there's lewd vagrancy. I heard a joke once. "Eddie Johnson—Two guys and a gal in an elevator when the lights went out—"

"Shimmy for me, honey," Eddie whispers. "Front Irish like your life depended on it."

"I am, Eddie," I whisper back.

Jeezus are we traveling now. Jeezus are we going places. □