

Corneigh Hoff

Groundhog Day

(a musmem)



Musmem ['mʌsmɛm]; -s

n. story or essay relating to the memory of a specific musical piece.

December 1959. I was 9. I ran upstairs to the attic, where a temporary bed was made. I was happy, looking forward to tomorrow, which was a Sunday. And my mother's birthday. The attic was spacious, dark, with a bright, eye-blinding bulb in the middle. The ladder to the floor below was narrow and steep.

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It was dark when I woke up. I heard the muffled sound of a voice in another room. I recognized it was a radio news program. I didn't know where I was.

There was the soft click of a door being opened and I saw a large shadow moving by. At the end of the room, curtains were opened only to give the room a dusky atmosphere.

A huge face loomed over me. "Ah, you're awake!" a deep voice said. It sounded familiar.

"The doctor's here." I recognized my mother's voice. Of course, doctor Cooper. But why was he here?

"Here, try to squeeze," doctor Cooper said as he placed his enormous hand on my chest. I tried my best.

"That's not squeezing, that's tickling!" he laughed. I laughed too.

"You'll be fine," the doctor said. "Just rest, and don't get out of bed."

“There was an accident,” my mother said. “You fell down the stairs and hurt your head.”

I heard the doctor say to my mother: “It’s going to be ok, just make sure he stays as flat as possible. No pillow.” My mother nodded.

“But I must go to school,” I said.

“No school,” my mother answered. “Not for some time.”

The doctor got up. “I’ll drop by as often as I can,” he said, “but I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

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Eight weeks it would last until I was allowed up. Eight weeks of boredom.

I was in the front room, separated from the rest of the house by sliding doors, with the curtains closed, kept away from any stimuli. Apart from the doctor, who visited every other day, only my mother came in a couple of times a day, to feed me, or to help me struggle with the bedpan.

My father and my two sisters were not allowed in because that would mean too much stress for my head. I could hear their voices in the other room during dinner times, or when they just got back from school.

During the day, there was only the radio from the adjacent room, muffled voices I did not understand.

In our house, music was out of the question: my father hated it, and I think my mother did too, so they made sure there was always a news station.

But one day, after about a month I think, my mother by mistake tuned in to a different station. After a few minutes of talking, suddenly there was music, a wonderful, delicate melody that was immediately engraved in my brain.

Since that moment, this melody has been the first thing on my mind every morning I wake up. My personal Groundhog Day experience.

Much later, when I learned about Groundhog Day, I decided that this must have been on the 2nd of February 1960, but to be honest, I can't be sure.

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After about two months, I was allowed to stay up during the day, but didn't go to school until after the Easter holidays.

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Every morning, the melody joined me when I woke up. I had no idea what it was, just that it was endlessly beautiful.

When I was 15, I made it my mission to find out more about it.

One of my classmates' dads owned a record store, so I was convinced that they would know.

I recall I stood there at the counter, doing my best to hum "my" melody as recognizably as I could, but all I met were blank eyes.

“Sounds like Elvis,” one shop assistant said.

“No, more like Dean Martin,” said the other.

Then their fingers tripped diligently through piles of records, only to find out it was not the same.

At about the same time, I took my first guitar lessons, but my teacher couldn’t help me either, not even after I whistled the tune for him.

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Then, when I was 20, I met Johann Sebastian Bach. Violin Concerto in A minor (BWV 1041). That’s what the record sleeve said.

I was visiting a friend who lived in a cottage just outside the city. When I entered the door, I was engulfed by this concerto, played very loud from his record player, so he could hear it from upstairs where he was working.

I fell in love with Bach immediately and started to build up a collection of his music.

It was primarily his instrumental music that captured me, I was not particularly interested in the vast legacy of vocal music. That was until I was given a record for my 21st birthday, with some of Bach’s cantatas. I felt slightly disappointed, but I didn’t show it.

“Play it,” the giver encouraged me. “Ok,” I said, with some hesitation,” but not too loud”, realizing that not all of my guests were into classical music.

Just as I realized that this choral music was nicer than I thought, I froze. My mouth fell open, and my guests must have been rather surprised to see tears in my eyes. The room, the people had all disappeared. I was back in the dark front room of my childhood, flat on my bed (no pillow). All I heard, as brittle and beautiful as when I woke up that morning in, was it February? 1960, was my daily companion for the last twelve years, *my* melody: *Sinfonia*, from Cantata 156.

Now, many years later, I still wake up every morning with this same melody.

Groundhog Day, for more than half a century.

Boring? Never.

But I leave it to you, dear reader, to agree or disagree.