

To Live It Again

by J.A. Pak

Dulcey often talked about a children's play she had once done called *Tales of Scheherazade*, a two-hour extravaganza she'd written based on *A Thousand and One Nights*. She'd play bits and pieces from the score, twenty-odd songs of delightful, haunting beauty, songs she was most proud of having written. People went home humming the music, remembering certain lines like forgotten yearnings recaptured. They insisted she do the play.

Dulcey hesitated—she wasn't sure how she'd pulled it off the first time around. The basic text was written, the songs complete. All she'd have to do was consolidate her many versions, add enough lines for all the children. Penny could play the piano—but that would mean she'd have to create an arrangement, which was always so much work. Dulcey generally ad libbed the arrangements, using only a sketch of notes as a bible. For her, it had always been much more easier to create spontaneously than play what was already written.

No one took notice of Dulcey's reservations. She'd done too good a job conjuring up the *Tales*. The play was growing chaotically around her and she didn't understand. For the first time, she was afraid.

It was a good time to be working on the *Tales*, that quiet time in summer when everyone was away and boredom steeped in the heat. Maybe it was the heat. Maybe she *was* tired. She couldn't concentrate, staring at the odd pieces of paper, the scribbled notes that seemed to float in and out of her consciousness. It's just scribbles, she thought, scribbles. Somehow, when she imagined things, it was so much more. There was nothing here—just scribbled nonsense.

“All these little plays, these little songs I've written—they don't mean anything to me,” she suddenly confided to Penny. “I haven't done anything, not really. Haven't accomplished a damn thing worthwhile. I've just thrown my life away. But it's not too late. I've

been working on something, something I've been thinking about for a while now. Look—I want you to see.”

She put her iced tea down and dug through a pile of papers until she found the manila folder she was looking for. Inside were three flimsy pieces of onionskin paper.

“I'm writing a book,” she said, almost whispering. “It's the story of my family. My mother's family. They go all the way back to Jamestown. Royalists to the bone; after the Revolutionary War they went straight up to Canada. I bet you didn't know there were colonists loyal to England. They don't teach *that* at school. It's just like my family—to stick to the losing side. Anyway, sometime in the 1800s they came back down to America and somehow settled in California. I want to write about that—a big family epic about California. Now you mustn't tell anyone. I don't want anyone to know until it's all finished. I haven't gotten very far—I'm just doing the research now. I've written away for some documents—birth records and property deeds. You know, we can trace the family back to Alfred the Great. I just want to accomplish something for once in my life. I had so much talent—but I just took it all for granted. Like my MGM contract—I just wasted it. I never tried seriously at anything—and I had so much. I could just kick myself.”

She snapped the folder shut.

“Don't tell anyone now. Promise. I'm only telling you because—Penny, I want you to promise me that if I die before it's all finished, you'll finish it for me. You carry on for me.”

Penny slowly nodded, too frightened not to promise.

“You promise?” Dulcey asked again, wanting to be sure Penny really understood. Penny nodded again, feeling dizzy. Dulcey scrutinized her face, then relaxed, judging the promise to be good and knowing. There was no one else except Penny.

“Also—there's something else. Come to my room.”

Penny nervously followed. Dulcey motioned for her to sit on the bed. She took a large cardboard box from out of the closet and rested it between herself and Penny.

“Most of this ain't worth a thing. Just things I've collected over the years.”

From the box came smaller boxes containing costume jewelry, old greeting cards, programs, trinkets. The last thing to come out of the box was a large velvet cloth that was tied like a sausage.

“This is the only thing I have left that's worth anything now,” Dulcey said, carefully unrolling the sausage. Leaved in between the velvet were a dozen pieces of antique jewelry, the whole collection not worth more than a few thousand dollars.

“These are all family heirlooms. I want them to be passed on to my nieces. The garnet pieces should go to my niece Christine and this aquamarine set I want Elizabeth to have. They're beautiful, aren't they?” Dulcey picked up the aquamarine bracelet and held it against her wrist. The dangling jewels swayed, releasing a reverie bound in cycles of light. Dulcey surveyed her treasures. She touched each piece and then patiently rerolled the bundle, being careful to lay each earring, bracelet, necklace flat against the velvet.

“I can't believe it's all I have left. How the mighty have fallen. There was a time when Ronny and I'd spend a couple hundred dollars at lunch and not even think twice. We had a magnificent home, entertained all the time. We never even thought about money. And then things happened so fast. Ronny retired and then the cancer—we didn't think he'd even survive. Six months the doctors said. We had to trade the pension in for the operation. I used to teach music just for fun. God, it's awful not having any money. I couldn't even get a decent dress for Elizabeth's wedding. Everyone thought I looked awful and I knew it. After the reception I was helping my sister to her room—she was really plastered—and she turned to me and said why did you even come? I know she was drunk, but, god, it was like she'd kicked me in the stomach.” They'd been so close—Dulcey had helped raise Christine and Elizabeth.

“I used to be very sophisticated, oh, so chic—Ronny was so proud of me. Now I'm just a buffoon. Where are those earrings I was telling Carol about? Here they are. What do you think? Just perfect,

aren't they? Here, you hold on to those. God, I haven't looked through all this stuff in ages. Oh—you have to look at this!”

Dulcey gave Penny an old vinyl 78 single. The cover had swaying palm trees and the label read *Cole Porter's Begin the Beguine! Sung by that new sensation Diane Beverley!*

“Diane Beverley! That's me! I made that when I was with MGM. *Begin the Beguine!* And, oh! Here's my dress—the dress I used to perform in.”

Dulcey pulled away the fragile tissue paper. She carefully unfolded a black silk gown.

“I bet you can't believe I was ever this small!” She held the dress to her chest and spread it across her hips. “There should be a pair of shoes—right at the bottom, Penny.”

Penny found matching black silk sandals in a plastic bag. She took them out of the plastic. The shoes were so delicate, silk fraying at the edges.

“There's no way I'll ever fit into those sandals again. I bet they'd fit you though. Try them on.”

Penny took off her tennis shoes and slowly fitted the sandals to her feet. She stood up, suddenly three inches taller, her body, the world, unbalanced.

Dulcey looked at the dress again, examining its details without seeing them. With sorrow she said, “Here. Try it on.”

Penny began to undress.

“Careful,” Dulcey warned. “Watch the shoes.”

Guiding Penny, Dulcey gently pulled the dress up around her, zipping it carefully up the back. She straightened the skirt, brushing the wrinkles and smoothing the fabric over Penny's hips. The gown fell just an inch above the heels, Penny's toes peeking out.

“Turn around. My god. I can't believe it. It really is me. Only I was a bit more busty than you. But there are tricks to take care of that.” Dulcey stuffed tissue into the bosom of the dress. “What would we women do without tissue? There—you look a picture. Just some work on your hair and you'll be ready for Hollywood. Oh, Mr. Mayer—”

She fingered Penny's hair, brushing the thick curtain away from her face.

"Let's do something with your hair," she said, pulling Penny into the bathroom. With large scissors, Dulcey began ruthlessly cutting away at Penny's waist-length hair. Stunned, Penny sat watching as leaves of her hair fell all around her. Dulcey liked the way Penny's new hair bounced around her shoulders. She decided to put it up in hot curlers for that Hollywood glamour look. Penny needed makeup, too. Lots of it.

"Close your eyes for some pancake," she said, buffing Penny's face with cream foundation. "I wish I still had some false eyelashes. There was a time when I never left home without them. But this will do, this will do. I think we're finally ready." Dulcey threw off the towel that had been protecting the gown and had Penny stand up for inspection. "My god—you look like a young Ava Gardner. Take a look."

Penny didn't understand what she was seeing in the mirror, the creamy paleness of her décolletage against the silky blackness of the dress, her narrowed waist, the blossoming of her hips. Her face was like a mask of someone she could almost recognize.

"What do you think? The dress is a bit loose, but you'll grow into it. 'Begin the Beguine'." Dulcey seemed sad, wistful. And then, with a roaring voice, she cried, "Come on!"

She grabbed her record and marched Penny into the front sitting room where the stereo was. Dulcey turned the record player on. For a moment there was nothing but static, the needle skipping over scratches. Then the orchestra began, followed by the voice, clear and rich, and very young.

Dulcey stood behind Penny. She began guiding Penny's arms, whispering movements through her body. Memory and experience sang through every fiber of their being. The song had become her life.

