

Just a Song at Twilight

Marcia Savin



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Just a Song at Twilight

by

Marcia Savin

CAST

HE

SHE

A park bench. Winter. A bare-branched tree. A man in his sixties sits on the bench. He wears overcoat, muffler, is bare-headed, most of his hair gone. A thermos bottle beside him, unopened. A woman enters, also in her sixties. She is unfamiliar with her surroundings. She carries a mover's inventory, which she reads.

He: Did you get all moved in?

She: Oh, you were watching! You wouldn't believe what they wanted to come a few miles.

He: On behalf of the Tenants Organization, let me welcome you to subsidized housing. It's the only good thing about growing old. That, and the bus passes.

She: You're telling me. I don't know how long I could have held out, if the vacancy hadn't come up. Either pay rent, or have heat! Of course, I couldn't help feeling bad, too. I mean, on the one hand, being so relieved to hear that a place had come up here, and on the other, knowing that the only reason one would —

He: I'm sure that Mr. Feldman, wherever he is, would be happy to know that such an attractive person has taken his place.

She: I'm only taking the gentleman's apartment — not his place.

He: Unless you know everything there is to know about the wildlife along the Hudson River Valley, and unless you impart this information at the drop of a "good morning," you couldn't possibly take Joe Feldman's place.
(*pause*) Have a seat.

She: (*hesitant*) Oh, I should —

He: Unless this air is too sharp for you. I like it myself.

She: Are you kidding? You are looking at someone who loves winter. Whenever there's fresh snow on the ground, I go out for a long walk. Then come back and make a fire. And later, maybe some hot buttered rum ... I'm going to miss that fireplace.

He: I happen to have a hot drink here.

She: Thank you. I'd love it — but I was just stopping for a minute. I've all those boxes to unpack.

He: Do you like hot toddies?

She: Oh, I do. I definitely do.

He: It's one of the things I make really well.

She: And I would love one. Another time. Thanks.

He: Look, I know you think I'm an old souse sitting out here in the park sneaking hot toddies—

She: (*uncertain*) Oh, not for a minute!

He: For the past five years, I've been meeting a friend here in the afternoons. And sometimes I'd bring a thermos of coffee. Today I felt like something stronger. Look. I made too much. How can I drink all that myself? And make it back upstairs?

She: Um ... smell that lemon.

He: After all, how often does an attractive woman move into our building? We have to toast your arrival.

She: Oh, listen to the man. Well ... a small one. (*Sits.*) Moving does take a lot out of you.

He: This will put something back in. (*Hands her a drink in thermos lid.*)

She: Isn't your friend coming back down?

He: He died last week.

She: Oh, I'm sorry —

He: Hey, look at that jay. How blue he is. Reminds me of cardinals you see down south. In the middle of winter. This bright red bird would be sitting in a bare bush, with snow all around him. Bright red, bright red against the snow.

She: A gentleman friend of mine died this year. Very sweet man. We used to go dancing. (*pause*) It's terrible. You no sooner die than they're taking your place — (*She's deliberately changing the original "my" to "your".*)

“Somebody else is taking your place/
Somebody else now shares your embrace . . .”
(*can't remember rest*)

He: “Two hearts are crying/
Two lips are sighing/
'cause . . .”

Together: “Somebody's tak-ing your pla-a-ce . . .”

She: (*laughs*) Oh, aren't we terrible!

He: I thought the harmony was pretty good.

She: I mean about Mr. Feld — OHHH — he must be the friend —

He: Reluctant as I am to leave this green earth — even this muddy brown one — I know the day will come. And I only hope that I go like Joe Feldman: a swimmer moving peacefully along in the water who suddenly takes a whim to glide down beneath the surface. And that's it.

She: *(toasting; click cups)* May we all go like that. I have friends who can't talk about death.

He: I met a woman in the hall the other day. She said, "We lost Al." I almost said, "Have you looked in the park?" They lost Al! They knew damn well where he was. *(Takes out pipe.)* I always have my first of the day around the cocktail hour. *(Squints at sun.)* I'd say it's the cocktail hour, wouldn't you? Do you mind if I smoke?

She: No, I love the smell of a pipe. Somebody I used to know smoked them.

He: You know, I think you lied about your age to get in here. You can't be old enough.

She: Oh, I'm old enough. I retired a few months ago. And that lousy company I worked for, tried to keep my pension!

He: You'll be the kid of the building.

She: Are all the other men terrible flatterers, too?

He: How can I answer that and win? If I were a flatterer, I'd have a rich wife. And smoke cigars all day.

She: She might not let you! The dear friend of mine who died wanted me to marry him. Oh, for years! I was very fond of him. But after living alone so long, I don't think I could get used to sharing an apartment again. I had a garden, a fireplace . . .

He: Regret leaving it?

She: Me? I never regret anything! It's a waste of time.

He: I have no regrets either. Because I make it a point to forget everything.

She: I remember everything. I may be over sixty, but my head is absolutely clear. I remember everything! I even remember — in spite of your delicious hot toddy — that I must be toddling on up to that apartment. There's no room to walk in there. *(Hands cup back; he won't take it.)*

He: There won't be after you unpack, either. I only go up to sleep.

She: Well, if you get to our age and you haven't learned to adjust, they give you a keeper. Thank you again for the wonderful drink. *(Rises.)*

He: You remember everything and you regret nothing! You must have led a great life!

She: Oh, I had bad times. Who hasn't? But I don't bother remembering them. I just remember the wonderful times.

He: I thought you said you remembered everything.

She: I remember the bad times. I just don't think about them. *(Takes a last swallow.)* Nutmeg. There's nutmeg in here.

He: *(Proudly displaying it.)* Cut my thumb on the grater. Tell me about the wonderful old times.

She: I will. Another day.

He: Do you have any idea how many times I've listened to arguments about the fastest way to get to Times Square?

She: Do you have any idea how much stuff is up there waiting for me? And I threw out almost everything I owned.

He: I see. Your past is too wicked to discuss with strangers.

She: You're not a stranger.

He: Then you've forgotten it.

She: I remember everything that mattered. Everything that mattered.

He: And all the beaux whose hearts you broke?

She: I didn't break any hearts. If I did, they all recovered.

He: That's because they were young. But will I recover? An old man alone in the park with a thermos half full of warmish toddies . . . left to mourn old Joe, his last friend?

She: Listen to the man. You were making fun of him and his wildlife talks.

He: I may kid about old Joe but I would give anything to have him tell me how the cardinal and the blue jay keep their colors when everything else is drab and gray. Joe would have liked you and he would have been sorely disappointed to think that you'd rather unpack than share my last drop of toddy. On this beautiful bright day. Joe would have let his boxes stay packed for a week in weather like this.

She: Oh, you must have been the youngest in your family!

He: (*Pouring them another drink.*) If you read minds, I'm leaving while I'm still safe.

She: No . . .

He: If you read fortunes, I don't want to know mine.

She: There's no trick. The baby always grows up to be a charmer. Boys and girls. But boys are worse. They practice on their mothers and their older sisters —

(He laughs in acknowledgement.)

She: When you see a fellow talking his way out of something — he'll turn out to be the youngest in the family, every time. And I'll tell you something else: the older you men get, the more you turn on that old charm.

He: What else have we left?

She: Oh, I'm not complaining. You notice I'm not unpacking boxes.

He: Now I'll do some fortune-telling. I think that once upon a time you fell for a youngest son —

She: (*Sitting*) That I did. That I did.

He: . . . who broke your heart and you've been blaming the rest of us innocent, well-meaning, but unfortunately last-born, fellows, ever since.

She: Oh, no. Because for one, he didn't break my heart. So, I have nothing to blame him for. Or any of you "innocents" either.

He: I've heard, that somewhere West of Burma — and this has been documented — there lives a woman who doesn't blame any man for anything. But I've never seen her myself.

She: Well, you're looking at another one. And we were talking about one particular man who made all the difference between being alive and just waiting around for the Christmas bonus.

He: A lucky man.

She: It was me who was lucky. I think everyone has one special love that they remember all their life.

He: I remember a dog who bit me. It was in Tucson.

She: I think you're covering up —

He: No. See . . . (*raises pant leg*) . . . the scar above the ankle?

She: Never "one great love"?

He: Oh, several started out to be —

She: You're a cynical man.

He: At least you didn't say "a cynical old man."

She: I think I would have felt I missed something . . . if there hadn't been that one man who just charmed me to pieces.

He: It happens to me all the time. Men, women, dogs. I still remember that cardinal against the snow. Must have been seventeen years ago. So red you couldn't believe it. Just standing in this bush. No leaves left. Snow all around him. In the middle of winter. Just when everything was dying. I

wanted to hug him. *(pause)* I'm not cynical. I just think that great loves are probably nice affairs which get great in someone's imagination afterwards. That's all right. I just don't have that kind of imagination.

She: It's not imagination! I remember it all — just as it was.

He: Those wonderful old times? They're always so damn short.

She: Well, the thing itself didn't last very long. But the memory . . . It's not that I didn't care for others. But not like that. Oh, not like that.

He: I think there's a little more in here.

She: You know, if I don't unpack, I won't have a place to sleep —

He: But . . .

She: *(Keeps walking; suddenly stops and turns.)* This morning, waiting for the movers, I stood and looked at everything I owned in the world, packed up. And it didn't fill a corner of the room. But I thought — the memories are invisible. That's why I wouldn't part with mine for any money.

He: How much have you been offered?

She: You! What happened to you to make you such a cynic?

He: If you'd stop being so eager to leave, and wait a minute, I'll help you. You already packed up all that damn stuff this morning. Finish your drink and then I'll help you. I know all about packing.

She: Thanks, but it's a big job —

He: I have nothing else to do. I want to hear about this great love. Having never had one myself, I'm curious. I'll bet you only really appreciated this fellow after he was gone.

She: Appreciate him! The very first time I laid eyes on the man — No! . . . not the very first. The first time he was with some friends and they were all clowning around. I thought he was immature. I was eighteen and wore my hair up and wore high heels. And I thought I liked serious men. With

moustaches. (*Amused.*) Back in those days, you remember — serious men who got ahead wore moustaches. But this fellow had no moustache and wasn't serious. The second time — it was the second time I saw him. It was summer. And his shirt was open at the throat. I don't know what it was. I just kept looking at his neck.

He: Was there something unusual about it?

She: Yes, but I couldn't tell you now what it was. When I met him — someone introduced us — he thought he was meeting me for the first time. But I had been watching him for I don't know how long. Him and that neck. The Adam's apple. The back of it. I could never get mad at the man just after he'd had a haircut. With that raw and helpless look around the ears. Well, it didn't take us long. There was never anyone like him.

He: I never knew a neck could be so interesting.

She: I guess that sounds silly. It wasn't just his neck. There was a way his arms swung away from his body when he walked. Like he belonged in the world. I've stopped on the street a hundred times since then thinking I saw him. But it was just someone with that walk. With almost that walk. But there was that neck. Oh, when the man pulled his necktie off . . . and loosened his collar . . . Oh, I tell you. I shivered.

He: I've heard that some women like a man's chest.

She: What chest? He was all bones. I'm talking about the man's neck. His throat. Collarbones . . .

He: And I used to stand in front of the mirror flexing my biceps.

She: You really got me started. But I just want you to understand that I didn't start to appreciate the man after he was gone. No, sir. I appreciated this man the second time I saw him. And after that I appreciated him when he was awake . . . asleep . . . with me . . . away from me. I appreciated the morning because he was alive in it.

He: I thought feelings like that were just in books.

She: Sometimes he worked nights and in the afternoons I'd watch him

sleep. There was this fellow next door who played the sax and I remember listening to the music and watching that man sleep, just drinking him in.

He: (*The mention of "sax" triggers a memory.*) How could you leave him?

She: Oh, I didn't. He left.

He: How could he leave you?

She: Well, the man was a perfectionist. If you know anything about perfectionists —

He: (*Thinks ruefully of himself.*) They're impossible to live with.

She: They're never satisfied. I don't mean about us — I mean the rest of his life. He couldn't find what he wanted. Some people are too talented. They can't decide. Anyway, he left. We shook hands and said goodbye.

He: You might get me to believe in the great love. Or in the shaking hands and saying goodbye. But not both. I spent the last fifteen years of my working life in the brewery. And there's nothing but talk: of fights, and cheating and beatings — but I've never heard of a love affair that ended with two people shaking hands and saying goodbye.

She: I remember everything. I have a perfect memory. You can ask my daughter about my memory. Except she's out in California. We shookhands and said goodbye. What else was there to do? I could see the man was miserable. I knew he didn't want to hurt me. When someone wants to go, that's the time to put out your hand and say goodbye.

He: When someone wants to go, in my experience, is the time when everyone starts hanging on for dear life.

She: I don't know about your experience. I'm not everyone. (*Starts to leave.*)

He: (*following*) My dear lady, I'm only too aware of that. You think I'd share my hot toddy with just any woman who happens to appear in the park? I think you're amazing, in fact.

She: (*Suddenly turning to him*) Listen — I've always wanted a garden. Finally, I found this little garden apartment. And the first thing I did, before I even put up curtains, was to start planting —

He: I've got a fern. But it hasn't been doing too well lately.

She: — no matter how tired I was when I came home from work, I'd go out and get those weeds. Because if I'm going to have a garden, I'm going to have a garden. I'm going to have peppers and lettuce. And three different kinds of tomatoes. And I've going to have cucumbers and onions and carrots —

He: I thought we were talking about people saying goodbye.

She: We are. Just wait. And not just vegetables. My mother used to grow sweet peas on our fire escape and I never forgot the smell of them in August. So, I had sweet peas growing on the fences, the walls . . . all colors. From white to purple. And oh, I had a cherry tree. The day the blossoms come out you can't even hate the company that's trying to swindle you out of your pension. The blossoms could break your heart — they last so short a time.

He: Like great love?

She: No, that lasts forever. That's what I'm explaining. That was my garden. But the rent kept going up and so now I'm here. Where the subsidy allows for two small rooms and maybe two tomato plants and three petunias on your window sill. But that's all right. That's all right with me. I won't have anything. Because if I'm going to have a garden, I'm —

He: — going to have a garden.

She: And if I'm going to have a marriage, I'm not going to hang onto a corpse.

He: You married this man — this man you felt that way about? You married him — and still you just shook hands and said goodbye? You're amazing.

She: I'm not amazing. I'm fussy. Is there any more in there?

He: A few drops. No. You're amazing. Married, and you look at it like that!

(Saxophone in the distance plays "Blueberry Hill," "Sweet Lorraine," and "Honeysuckle Rose.")

She: Isn't that music? Or am I just back in the past?

He: That's old Ben. Usually starts when the sun goes down. He's damn good. Especially after a bottle. Always stands on the corner in front of the burger place.

She: Oh, that music takes me back! Do you dance?

He: Oh, I haven't for years! Now, why didn't I ever meet a sensible lady like you?

She: Sensible? If I was sensible, I'd be upstairs unpacking. Instead of sitting out here getting drunk with you. And old Ben.

He: *(Rises)* Come on.

She: *(Rises)* Oh, we're finally going?

He: We're going to dance. I can't dance, but I'll show you no one's drunk.

She: The people in the building will think I'm crazy.

He: They're all huddled by their radiators waiting for spring.

(They do the fox trot.)

She: What do you mean you "can't dance"?

He: Oh, sometimes I'm lucky enough to find a partner whose irresistible force can overcome my immovable body.

She: You don't talk like someone in a brewery.

He: Sometimes you need a job. You wouldn't have let him go so easily, I'll bet, if there had been a child.

She: Who said there wasn't?

He: You couldn't have felt that way about a man who left you with a child!

She: And I'm saying that's exactly how I felt. I had a baby and I was crazy about her. In fact, it would have been much worse without her.

He: You didn't think the man owed you something?

She: Mike never owed me anything.

He: (*Knows her now but is afraid to tell her.*) Not even money?

She: Money? I didn't know we were talking about money. Sure, he sent money. When he had it. I'd get money orders from all over. Los Angeles. Chicago. Even Paris.

He: And you didn't expect anything else from him?

She: When a man is hundreds of miles away, there isn't anything he can do for you. And I didn't want anything from him. It was over.

He: But he left you with all the problems while he went off to be a great — whatever.

She: Musician. But he didn't go off to be one. He was one.

(Guilty and uncomfortable, he turns away.)

Mike could sit down to that little white upright and pick out any tune. Anything. All by ear. In fact, he even had a little band. They played all around the neighborhoods. The others wanted to try and make it big, but Mike was scared.

He: Scared?

She: The man was a perfectionist. Said they weren't good enough.

He: He was probably right.

She: He didn't try to find out! They could have been famous, I know it. Because he was brilliant. And music was just one of his talents. He read books all the time. But he was a very restless man.

He: *(Takes her hand to dance again.)* I think it's you who is not like anyone else.

End of FreeRead

You can tell that the show is quite wonderful! Order your copy to read the complete script.