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I SAW MY PARENTS DANCE

Jeanne Chase

A parrot perched in a silver cage
in front of Egan's Nautical Bar
squawked at me as I peered
through the glass to see
if my father was inside.

He waved for me to come in.
I sat on the stool beside his
mesmerized by a jug of pickled eggs
while the bartender polished glass
and old Mrs. Egan smoked in the dim
at the end of the bar.

Mr. Muldoon on the stool
next to mine wore gold-wire
spectacles and a red bow tie.
Alice wore clips on the pockets
of her pink beautician's smock.
Big Al had skin like brown leather.
I was twelve with freckles.

* * *

When I was twenty
Dad invited my mother and me
to join him at Egan's
to bring the New Year in.

It surprised me that he asked -
he always went alone -
and that my mother said yes
and wore a red dress
belted with a rhinestone clasp.
I put on new black pumps.

Dad led us like a host
past the backs of boisterous patrons
to greet his friends and Mrs. Egan
at the bar. Mother smiled
when Mrs. Egan took her hand.

We went into a side room
strung with streamers,
put on pointed cardboard hats
and unfurled snail-like paper horns
with laughing breath.

Dad sent me to the jukebox
to play a Wayne King waltz.
They smiled at each other
as I left.

When I came back
they were dancing.

* * *

It's been ten years since
my father died. The parrot
and nautical bar are gone.
I asked my mother if she remembered
dancing with Dad at Egan's.
"Your father was in great form
that night. . ." Her voice trilled
like a girl's.