

The Daintiest Dumpling

“A middle-aged woman like you, wobbling around in a leotard?”

Denise didn't know which she objected to more, the 'middle-aged' or the 'wobbling'.

“I'll be getting fit and firm in a leotard,” she told her husband in a hurt tone. “That's the whole point of going.”

And at forty eight, Denise supposed she could technically be called middle-aged. Still, she set off for her first rehearsal with the Dainty Dumplings dance troupe with a spring in her step. Len watched her walk down the road and slowly shook his head.

It was her fellow dinner lady, Shirley, who had suggested Denise come and join them. They'd been chatting over the mashed potato and gravy one day, and Denise happened to mention that she'd done tap dancing as a child and had always wanted to take it up again.

“We'd love to have you,” Shirley said warmly, “and it's such fun.”

She was waiting at the door of the old town hall when Denise walked in. All around the room, ladies were stripping off their cardigans and strapping on their tap shoes. Denise was surprised to see them sharing round packets of biscuits and crisps before the dance class.

“Got to keep our strength up,” said a large lady, offering Denise a 'wotsit'.

“Oh, no thanks,” she shook her head, “maybe afterwards.”

“Won't be any left then,” said the lady, with ginger curls and matching leotard and tights, stuffing the last crisp in her mouth.

“This is Madge, our leader,” Shirley made the introductions. “She trained in America.”

“Glad you could come.” Madge did a high kick instead of a handshake. “Okay Dainty Dumplings,” she shouted dramatically, “places please.”

For the next hour, Denise tapped high and low. With the last timestep, the line of ladies took a bow, and when she stood up again, flushed and breathless, Denise knew she had found her reason for living.

She tried to convey her enthusiasm to Len.

“Whatever you say, love,” he nodded, and turned his attention back to the football or racing on TV.

Sometimes she caught him looking her up and down with a worried frown, and once his eyes flicked to the photograph on the mantelpiece of their daughter Lauren when she was fifteen, dressed in a tutu for a dancing display. Lauren had been thin as a stick, with long blonde hair; and it was hard to imagine a similar photo of his wife standing there.

Len sighed, and tucked into the scones Denise brought him with a cup of tea; noticing that she ate rather more than her share.

In the school canteen the ladies excitedly discussed their forthcoming performance.

“The big number before the interval will have a Spanish theme,” said Shirley, “like a flamenco dance. Tap-tappity-tap!” She clattered her silver serving spoons like castanets, to the surprise of the Year nine boys waiting for their roly-poly pudding.

“Let’s have roses between our teeth,” said Denise, and licked some of the jam off her own spoon.

There was a rehearsal that night, and the ladies worked harder than ever.

“Shuffle ball-change, shuffle ball-change!” shouted Madge, as she put them through their paces. A small tape recorder in the corner of the hall pumped out the tune of their opening number.

“And relax!” Madge added, as the music came to an end.

Denise and Shirley sat on a bench and shared a bar of chocolate as some important announcements were made.

“Tickets are now available,” said Madge. “I want you to sell as many as you can.”

“My Ted will bring half the ex-servicemen’s club as usual,” called Shirley. “They all love it!”

“What about your Bill?” one of the other ladies asked Madge. “Will he be coming this time?”

“No, dear, he’s too busy with his bowls,” said Madge swiftly. “And the second thing to remember is the costume-making session, at Cynthia’s on Saturday.”

Cynthia was Denise’s partner in the grand finale; a woman of seventy, whose tiny feet carried her enormous frame with grace. It would be fun to sit round her dining table and sew, and chat, and snack.

“What do you think of this?” Denise pulled yards of polka-dot material out of a carrier bag and held it up in front of Len.

“Making curtains are you?” he said, looking up briefly from the newspaper.

“No, it’s for my costume,” said Denise, gathering the fabric into flounces, and holding it against her hips. “Spanish style. For the show.”

Len looked up again, with a hard expression on his face.

“Show will be the word for it, I’m sure,” he said.

Denise didn’t know what he meant for a moment, then her own face went red, and she buried it in the soft folds of material as she bundled her bags out of the room.

Len was ashamed of her. Old and fat, that’s what he thought.

At the costume-making session, Denise broke down in tears.

“I don’t think I can go on,” she blurted out to the other girls. “He’s so against me doing it.”

Madge took her foot off the sewing-machine pedal.

“My husband doesn’t care whether I’m doing it or not,” she said. “At least you’ve still got a spark there. When I’m on stage, I dance for myself.”

Denise didn’t ask Len to come and see the concert, but their daughter Lauren, now twenty-five and plump with pregnancy, made him go with her. Denise was dimly aware of them sitting in the third row, as she danced under the bright lights with the Dainty Dumplings.

Len seemed to laugh with the rest of the audience at the comedy ballet routine, and gasp with admiration at the show-stopping tap. She saw him

stand up at the end, clapping and cheering the line-up of elderly, overweight ladies who had put on such a wonderful evening of entertainment.

“My wife?” she heard Len say to somebody proudly, as she joined the crowd in the foyer afterwards. “Yes, she was the youngest, slimmest one!”

By Alison Habens