

JENNIFER ANNE ROBINSON
FACING THE MUSIC

EACH NIGHT, AT EXACTLY MIDNIGHT, I fell under a hypnotic spell. In one sense it went on for about a week, but in another it never ended.

I was ten years old, and my father was home from the hospital after a stroke rendered him a frightening simulacrum of his former self. He now moved as if surrounded by a sea of water, set in slow motion and only vaguely reachable by my mother and me, who cut through the air at normal speed. My father had played baseball in the hot summer sun, and I could still recall his tanned, muscular body swiftly rounding the bases. He also tickle-fought, wrestled, and carried my groggy little body down the stairs for breakfast every morning. But after the stroke his voice became drunken, his mouth refused to smile, and the vitality was siphoned out of the left half of his body, turning him into a strange, hobbling, partial person. As he lost his hair and his job, his identity was further broken up into pieces that floated irretrievably away on some current of grief.

The Japanese art of *kintsugi* (“golden joinery”) repairs broken ceramics with a golden lacquer that traces the exact path of the object’s cracks and breakages. Sometimes the pieces of other broken objects are used when the originals can’t be found. The repairs make the objects more valuable, in some cases even more beautiful, though they are never again what they once were.

This was a time of shattering, but while my parents took the *kintsugi* approach I maintained my delusional, unflinching belief that my father would fully recover—that the vase could return to its pre-shattered state. My biggest frustration was the insurmountable difficulty of convincing my parents of this eventual, obvious certainty.

The Christmas holiday was a blissful two weeks without school, but it also left me without a reprieve from my splintered life. My father’s main floor bed (two couches pushed together) was still set up in the living room, even though he had learned how to climb the stairs to his bedroom at night, right

foot first, left dragging behind. Night after night I found myself ensconced on the couch-bed under a thick afghan, tin of cookies nearby, ineluctably drawn into the shiny, unbreakable world of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

Fred was often single-minded in his pursuit of Ginger, falling hopelessly in love the minute he saw her. In *Shall We Dance* (1937), he fell in love after seeing a picture of her in a flip book, as she danced along the speeding pages in a way that made him feel he should probably marry her. There were always problems (he was already engaged to be married, or she was, or she thought he was, or everyone else thought they were, etc.), but he never gave up hope:

Nothing's impossible I have found,
For when my chin is on the ground,
I pick myself up,
Dust myself off,
Start all over again.

These lyrics are from Jerome Kern and Dorothy Fields' song "Pick Yourself Up," which was written for George Stevens' film *Swing Time* (1936), in which Ginger played a dance instructor and Fred played a gambler who fell in love with her despite the fact that he was engaged to someone else. I fell in love right along with him, as her beauty was mesmerizing and she was always sharp, sassy, and shrewd. Female assertiveness was new to me, and it was exhilarating to watch this slim, diaphanous woman work her face into a fit of rage and yell, "You better get out of here!" But no matter how angry she became, she never lost her poise, grace, or compassion. I thought she was the most fascinating woman who ever existed.

Was there something about the blithe, graceful movements of Fred as he swept the pale, delicate Ginger into his arms that I especially craved now that my father's athletic body had suddenly become ossified? I don't know. All I know is that watching those films made me feel like someone was speaking to me in a foreign language that, to my surprise, I could understand. The characters were strange and unfamiliar, like mannequins come to life. They lived in constant luxury, visited fancy public rooms to read newspapers in total silence, needed cuffs sewn into their trousers in order to get married, and were allergic to speaking openly in ways that could have

resolved their conflicts. Of course, these misunderstandings were the silk of the shimmering webs in which they became entangled, but the process of extricating themselves always left them stronger, more certain, and ready to spin afresh.

I was busy weaving my own webs of misunderstanding at the time. I remember one evening, for example, when I told my mother about a plan that involved buying matching baseball outfits when my father got better and then driving to the park, playing catch, and having a picnic. “Won’t that be fun?” I said. She just covered her face with her hands and wept. The next morning my father fell in the hallway, causing a loud, terrifying crash. My mother yelled, “Call 911!” Instead, I leapt onto the couch-bed and buried my head under the blanket.

Twenty-seven years later, a gold resin seeps out of Herbert Ross’ film *Pennies from Heaven* (1981) and glues together these fragments of my youth. “There’s gotta be a world where all those songs are true,” says the main character Arthur (played by Steve Martin)—a sheet music salesman in the early 1930s who fervently believes in the importance (and maybe even the reality) of the music he’s selling. He’s also a cad, humiliating his wife Joan (played by Jessica Harper) in various ways, impregnating and then abandoning another woman named Eileen (played by Bernadette Peters), and behaving in such a threatening way toward a young, blind girl trying to make her way home that for a few moments we are actually afraid for her safety. Nevertheless, he has the gift of seeing the “music” in life, and as he watches the world before him pass through a filter that both elevates and avoids its crummy reality. The sublime and the degenerate are well-matched dancing partners in the film, and the musical numbers are of a strange sort, as they both relieve and cause the characters’ suffering, redeeming and condemning them simultaneously.

Toward the end of the film, after catastrophically messing up their lives as only humans are able, Arthur and Eileen find themselves in a plush movie theatre with the light of the projector flickering on the wall behind them. Arthur’s attentive face is upturned, bathed in the dark red glow of the screen, while Eileen’s melancholy one is not: he’s immersed in the world of the film, while she’s still in the “real” one.

“I’d like to have that baby and then . . .” She trails off as Fred and Ginger appear on the screen, singing Irving Berlin’s song “Let’s Face the Music and Dance,” which was written for Mark Sandrich’s film *Follow the Fleet* (1936).

As the music accents and colours Arthur and Eileen's conversation, the real world and the filmic world gradually become enmeshed.

"Hey, you're not gonna cry are ya?" Arthur says to Eileen. "Listen, there's gotta be something on the other side of the rainbow." His naive cajoling in the face of life's pain seems both comforting and frighteningly empty.

"There always is," Eileen replies, game.

On the screen, Fred is singing to Ginger, attempting to coax her out of an inner retreat:

There may be trouble ahead,
But while there's moonlight and music and love and romance,
Let's face the music and dance.

Arthur turns and lip-syncs to Eileen in pursuit of a remarkably similar goal:

Soon we'll be without the moon,
Humming a different tune,
And then there may be teardrops to shed,
So while there's moonlight and music and love and romance,
Let's face the music and dance.

Arthur and Eileen are becoming increasingly entangled in this scene, losing and finding themselves within it, first as their minds are swept up, then as Arthur performs the lyrics and reveals their immediate relevance, then as they dance alongside the larger-than-life Fred and Ginger, shadowing their movements and gestures until finally, magically, they enter the film itself. It now stars Arthur (dressed as Fred), whose task is to convince Eileen (dressed as Ginger) to "face the music and dance." They are accompanied by a series of grave-looking men in black tuxedos and top hats, who dance in a stoic line, tapping their canes along the floor as they gradually surround and converge on the hapless couple.

In the real world, Arthur and Eileen's chances of either escape or redemption from their impoverished, self-inflicted abasement are rapidly dwindling. Police will soon charge Arthur with murder, and he will be executed, while Eileen will fall into prostitution in such a way that her future is unavoidably grim. Yet they are able to face their problems by allowing Fred

and Ginger's shining world to guide the steps of their dance. It is an imprisoned dance, in which they lament the impenetrable bars around them, but it is a dance nonetheless.

Muted questions drift through this scene. What happens when we import Fred and Ginger's world into ours? Can our world be the one in which "all those songs are true"? Can we allow our own crushing circumstances to score the music of our dance? "The antidote to stuckness is called style," psychoanalyst Adam Phillips reports. Arthur is the only character in the film who understands this, but once upon a time, for a flickering moment, I understood it too.

Sitting at the breakfast table on Christmas morning, I told my father about the late night movies I'd discovered. In his new voice he said, "sounds like Fred and Ginger," and their names burst through my mind. These were *my* Fred and Ginger, and he knew them too! I remember the patient, listening nod of his head and his attentive blue eyes widening and narrowing as we tried to sort out which film was best. I remember the absence of our usual breakfast games—no more peeking out from behind cereal boxes, giggling madly as we tried to avoid each other's gaze. Now we just looked at one another, creatures tentatively emerging from a shelter after a storm, trying to find their way home. We were inventing a new choreography.

When everything was threatening to fall apart, Fred and Ginger welcomed me into their world, demanded nothing, and offered respite, comfort, and an important lesson. No matter how angry, disappointed, or heartbroken they were, they always allowed these emotions to energize their bodies, forever swept up in their safe, eternal, sparkling world. They're still waiting there to welcome you too.