

## 2024 ADULT SHORT STORY WINNER

### **They Did(n't) Dance**

By Bari Lynn Hein

#### 1. They Didn't Dance

This is Neil's bliss: this restaurant, these people—his hardworking staff who fill the kitchen with the aromas of garlic and tarragon and thyme, his guests who fill Beaumont's with the sounds of clinking and laughter and cheers.

He walks past inverted glasses glistening beneath candle chandeliers, past four tables covered in white linen and fine silverware, past a serving tray from which his headwaiter, André, is extracting steaming plates of coq au vin and boeuf bourguignon.

Nine times out of 10, when a guest has asked to speak with Neil Beaumont, it's to pay the restaurant owner a compliment; Neil has no reason to think this time will be any different. He approaches table seven expecting to find it occupied by smiling strangers sipping after-dinner aperitifs; instead, he sees his closest friends, Will and Julia.

Will stands and extends a hand. "Dude!" The men are 48, but when brought together they become schoolmates again. They grasp one another's hands and clap each other's backs. Julia rises and reaches for a hug.

Eighteen years is a long time for Neil to be in love with his best friend's wife.

Her eyes are two shades of brown, like cloves. She lowers her lids as she always does when her gaze meets Neil's. Recently, since reading Julia's latest novel—*Pendulum*, about a woman who becomes obsessed with her husband's brother—Neil has wondered if perhaps his feelings are reciprocated.

"We're celebrating tonight, dude," Will says. "Guess who made the bestseller list this week."

"*Pendulum*?" Neil says.

Julia smiles. Her cheeks flush.

"This is huge!" Neil turns around and calls over to André. "Let's get my friends a bottle of Champagne. On the house." He holds out a hand like a game show host. "We have a bestselling author here."

A few other patrons look over and make approving sounds. Neil didn't mean to embarrass Julia. He knows how much her writing means to her. He knows more about her than just about anyone else, perhaps more than Will.

André arrives with two glasses and a bucket housing a bottle of Champagne. Will says, “Would you mind bringing a third glass?” He turns to Neil. “You have time to join us in a toast?”

“Of course.” While he waits on a glass, he wraps a napkin around the bottle and removes the foil seal. “So, any Hollywood buzz?”

Julia laughs. “No talk of a movie yet. I’m No. 16 in hardcover fiction.”

Neil twists off the bottle’s cage and releases a satisfying pop. “I read a review last week: ‘Manus has given us the word mastery we’ve come to expect from her, along with some raw honesty we did not know about.’ ”

Julia is beaming. “Good job memorizing that.”

“Way to go, Manus. You’ve got the whole package: word mastery and raw honesty. Do you have any idea how proud I am of you?”

“Hear! Hear!” Will raises his glass. “To No. 16!”

The threesome tap glasses.

They talk about the book, Will dominating the conversation, as usual, but showing no real understanding of the characters Julia created. Neil wonders if Will has even read *Pendulum*. He

once confessed he hadn't read any of Julia's first four published novels. Maybe he will now that a bestseller list has validated his wife's work.

"Tell me about Violet," Julia says after she and Will have placed dinner orders with André.

"What's she been up to?"

Neil pulls out his phone, finds a recent photo that Siobhan sent of their 7-year-old and passes it to Julia.

"Oh, Neil, she's gorgeous."

"Gotta agree with you on that," Neil says. Violet's first sentence was: "Pick me up, Daddy." The last thing she said, before he boarded a recent flight back east, was: "Do you have to go, Daddy?"

Julia has shared with Neil her regrets at never having had children. He sensed her longing whenever she was around Violet, during those two brief years his daughter lived under his roof, senses her sorrow now as she gazes at the little beauty on his cellphone screen.

When André arrives with dinner, Neil excuses himself. Later, he walks his friends out and lights a cigarette. Watching smoke curl toward the stars, his mind is consumed by a litany of what-ifs. What if Siobhan had never walked into his restaurant? Violet would not exist, so it's hard to

wrap his mind around that. What if Will hadn't smiled at Julia first, hadn't made the first move? What if, 18 years ago, when Neil Beaumont first laid eyes on Julia Manus, they had danced?

## 2. They Danced

Julia has always known she would end up here, on this section of sidewalk, standing in front of one of the biggest publishing houses in New York City, a tower so tall that the high-rises reflecting off its windows barely reach its midsection. She's always imagined she would be preparing for an event like the one that awaits her tomorrow at noon, a reception honoring those who've received literary distinction in a national writing competition. What never occurred to her—at least not during the years of her youth, which seemed endless at the time but in retrospect passed far too quickly—was that the recipient of first prize in the category of original fiction would be someone who once fit into the crook of her arm. Julia is overwhelmingly proud of Katrina, who can put words together in ways that Julia has never been able to. She places an arm across her 16-year-old daughter's shoulders.

Katrina wears a furtive smile; she already knows she's headed for great things. So does Ansel, who is by now a block ahead with Neil, waiting to cross Broadway. Yesterday, outside the five-story brownstone that houses one of the country's leading acting schools, Ansel stood with his head held high, his shoulders back, his eyes closed for a meditative moment.

When the family has cleared the crosswalk, Neil says to the kids, "You know where this pizza place is?"

They point down Broadway.

“And the theater?”

“We’ll be fine,” Ansel says, with ill-concealed impatience.

Neil kisses them on both cheeks, the way his own father used to kiss him. Julia hugs her kids and reminds them to send a text message when they’ve reached the theater.

Now it’s just the two of them. As Neil has reminded Julia recently, in a couple of years, both kids will be off at college and they’ll be alone all the time.

“So, what’re you hungry for?” Neil says.

“I’m not really hungry yet. Can we just walk a bit?”

They start to backtrack along Broadway. This time, as they walk in the shadow of the publishing behemoth, Julia is overcome by sadness. She sees her downturned lips reflected off the oversized sunglasses of a woman walking past. Car horns and a distant police siren play a suitable accompaniment to her melancholia.

“What’s on your mind?” Neil asks.

Julia tells him she's fine and picks up her pace. Self-pity has no place here. She has no right to feel this way.

She and Neil are still in love, after 18 years. Their children are making imprints on the world. Their house is almost paid off. The music store that Neil inherited from his father still stands, and groceries will always be in demand, so Julia's job as a supermarket cashier is secure. She and Neil can afford to provide for their children's dreams, can even spend a few nights in New York City to celebrate their children's accomplishments.

They've reached Rockefeller Plaza. Traffic sounds are now muffled by flags flapping overhead and by the trickle of a fountain down below. Julia leans against the wall overlooking dozens of pink umbrellas and thousands of pink flowers.

She sat at one of those tables in the plaza with Neil 18 years ago, shortly after they met, to celebrate her 30th birthday. They'd allowed themselves to imagine what it would be like to live in New York City. Neil would soon start training at L'Ecole des Arts Culinaires and pick out a prime location for his restaurant. Julia would get her foot in the door of the publishing industry as an assistant to an acquiring editor, a position her grad school adviser had helped her to land. At night, she would write novels and eat gourmet meals that Neil had prepared. The last time they were here, 18 years ago, Neil's father was still alive. They had no idea a child had been conceived.

Neil stands beside her now, stares at her, waits for an honest answer to his question. The sun makes his brown eyes look almost as golden as the statue of Prometheus just beyond Julia's reach.

"You'll think I'm the most selfish person in the world," she finally says.

"Try me."

The flags continue to flap. The fountain continues to cascade. Prometheus continues to shine. Julia cannot speak. Instead, she cries.

"Hey." Neil wraps his arms around her and brings her head to his chest.

"In a year, Ansel will probably be going to school here," she sputters.

"Right. I hope so."

"And Katrina will be applying to colleges. She'll probably be published by then, knowing her."

Neil strokes Julia's back. "I expect she will be."

"And I'll still be asking, 'Paper or plastic?'"



A long pause follows, a long flag-flapping, fountain-trickling pause.

“And I’ll still be telling kids not to smack the cymbals with their bare hands,” Neil says.

“So where did we go wrong?”

“I’m not sure that we did go wrong.”

“I had dreams, Neil. I mean—I didn’t necessarily think I’d be a bestselling author, but I thought people might enjoy my books, and maybe be affected by them for a little while. And you thought people would be flocking into your restaurant, in this very city.” The sky has turned from cerulean to indigo and long shadows stretch from the skyscrapers across the cab-dotted, bus-blocked street. The flags overhead whack the air with intensified energy from a gust. “I feel like we wasted a lot of years.”

Neil’s been staring at her for several seconds, waiting for her eyes to meet his. “But we had fun.”

“Yeah, but—”

“No. Think about it. We had fun. Camping out on the bed right after Ansel was born? Taking the kids out on my Radio Flyer? Those backyard barbecues when Will and Pat would bring their kids over and they’d all splash around in the wading pool?”

“You made the best burgers,” Julia says, drifting for a moment.

“How ’bout reading to the children at bedtime?” Neil takes Julia’s hands into his. “How about the bike rides? And fishing and flying kites by the lake? Seems we were always detangling fishing lines and kite strings from trees.”

She gazes at the pink umbrellas surrounding the fountain and remembers 10-year-old Ansel as Oliver Twist singing “I’d Do Anything” with the little girl who played Nancy. They’d spun a pair of umbrellas across the elementary school stage, and for the duration of the song, had made the audience believe they were riding in a carriage. “I keep coming back to the elementary school plays, for some reason. Reliving those years.”

“We still have another year of school plays. And then who knows what lies ahead for all of us once Ansel comes here.”

For a moment, Julia envisions her son performing on Broadway.

“It was all so much fun and it went by so unbelievably fast,” Neil says. “Last September, at Back-to-School Night, when I introduced myself to Katrina’s English teacher, you know what she said? She said, ‘Aren’t you lucky.’ ”

“We are lucky.”

On the corner, a musician has unpacked a saxophone from its case. He raises his instrument to his lips and plays the first few strains of “What a Wonderful World.”

“It wasn’t just the kids who made the last 18 years fun, you know,” Neil says when the song is finished. “It was you, too. Whenever I’m with you, I feel—how should I put this?—I just feel right. Even when we’re mad at each other, I feel right. Does that make sense?”

“Yes.” Julia watches the water incessantly flow off the sides of the fountain. “We could’ve ended up with different people. We would’ve missed out on everything.”

“I think we would’ve ended up together, sooner or later. I think that’s just the way it was meant to be.”

She considers that possibility for a moment. Her sadness is dissipating. It’s hovering over her now, rather than pressing down on her. “Maybe burgers.”

“Burgers?”

“You asked me what I’m hungry for. Ever since you brought up those backyard barbecues—”

“Burgers it is.” Neil drops a few bills into the musician’s case and reaches into his pocket. Julia knows what he’s going for: the app that found them their hotel rooms, directions to the acting

school, the perfect place for breakfast this morning, the show the kids are about to see. She doesn't want an app to pick the restaurant where she and Neil will eat their dinner tonight.

"Put it away," she says.

Neil slips his phone away, and wordlessly, they head toward the intersection of 51st and Fifth Avenue. Prometheus is illuminated now, as are the streetlights. The traffic signal turns green. Hand in hand, Julia and Neil cross over.