

WALTZ WITH ME

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WALTZ WITH ME

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RENARD PRESS

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FOREWORD

Nuns of the order known as the Society of the Holy Child Jesus (SHCJ) were my teachers throughout my schooldays: I was a day girl at Cavendish Square School in London and then a boarder at St Leonards-Mayfield in rural Sussex. And so perhaps it was not so surprising that when I finally left this convent education behind for the freeing new world of Oxford University I buried it. Not as a conscious act, but it must have seemed to me a given that the person at the centre of this next bit of life would share little with the one from the confined and confining universe of Mayfield. I graduated, decided I wanted to become a primary-school teacher (much to the disgust of one of my French tutors, who judged this choice to be a waste of an Oxford education) and later went on to work in the Education Department of the National Gallery at a time of solid public funding, when we were able to make inventive and inclusive provision for our visitors. Along the way I also wrote, lectured, did – and still do – leadership training for the NHS and looked forward in the way that mid-career people do. I was probably being the ‘best self’ that Cornelia Connelly, nineteenth-century American-born founder of the schools and order, wrote

about a century before the phrase became current again. It was only decades later that a chance connection with a Holy Child sister led to an offer to write a script for a short film about the life of Cornelia and I found myself revisiting and reflecting on my own education.

As I read Cornelia's name in the email from one of the sisters, a single unwelcome image came into my mind: that of a woman cradling a terribly burned toddler in her arms. And then the rest of the story, or as much as I knew of it: Cornelia, a wife and mother of several children, before her life changed absolutely and she became a nun. By now a mother of four grown-up children myself, I began to wonder differently about her story, and accepted the job.

My research into Cornelia's life and work led me along many paths, but the one that to my surprise affected me most was not in the end the painful story of Cornelia's marriage to the ambitious and unpredictable pastor Pierce Connelly and her significantly tragic experiences of motherhood. Rather it was reading about the liberal, arts-rich education system that Cornelia developed after, for reasons apparently outside her control, she found herself obliged to become a nun, and then going on herself to found a teaching order in England. I realised that I was reading about the principles behind my school education, which, I now saw, had been exceptional. The Holy Child nuns who taught me, and their predecessors, were far from the grim tormentors of the Magdalene laundries. Those who taught me were independent, many of them highly educated women, who offered a humane, broad and creative curriculum: the school week was punctuated with jewelled moments of self-expression. At Cavendish Square it was music, eurythmics (movement to music), drama

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and the multi-sensory side of Catholicism as expressed in the statues of saints in every classroom who, to the eyes of a six-year-old, at least, were dressed in gorgeous fabrics, as well as candle-lit, hymn singing processions on high feast days. At Mayfield it was the drama of the Live Crib when we wound through the village streets performing the Christmas story, with Mary on a donkey, a real baby in her arms, Joseph knocking on the door of the local pub to ask for a bed for the night. I was mysteriously moved by the great arch of the fourteenth-century chapel, took out every art book in the well-stocked library and taught myself to identify artists' styles by covering up the captions. The art studio too was a haven where we drew from life and sometimes played guitar. To my surprise the nuns taught us to waltz, whirling us around the room to the sound of a crackly record.

It must have been this exposure to the world of the arts that so profoundly affected the way I approached my own career as an educator. At the primary school in Paddington where I first taught a year-three class consisting largely of refugee children with no English, I often used the arts as a way of reaching them, helping them to feel safe and confident in the way my own experience had done for me. These were the things I reflected on as I researched the Cornelia short-film script.

Shortly after delivering that script, another chance meeting, this time at a cinema, brought me back into contact with author and playwright Diane Samuels (we had previously been neighbours). This unexpected encounter was the catalyst for the development of the play that has emerged as *Waltz with Me*. At that first meeting, my head was still full of Cornelia, so I passed her story on to Diane, and when

we met again for a coffee I also mentioned by chance (but perhaps not?) a contemporary woman known to me whose situation, Diane later sensed, somehow mirrored Cornelia's. Diane asked me to join her in the research for the play and, thanks to the generosity of several supporters, we were able to follow Cornelia on some of her journeyings, from Philadelphia to Mayfield in Sussex, Derby and Alton Towers, Blackpool and Rome. We also got to know both Cornelia's spiritual descendants, the current Holy Child sisters, who always warmly welcomed and helped us, and the family of Cornelia's youngest son Frank, whose great-granddaughter Simonetta has the same gentle presence and fiery eyes as the ones we see in contemporary photographs of Cornelia.

Our period of research was punctuated with many more synchronistic, illuminating and delightful encounters of all kinds, so uncanny at times that we grew to put them down to Cornelia's intervention from wherever she is (there is, after all, a current application to the Vatican to make Cornelia Connelly a saint).

In the end it seems that I had unwittingly sparked Diane's talent for imaginative and empathetic invention, and in *Waltz with Me* she brings the stories of the two women together, giving them heightened life in an extraordinarily powerful way. Here Cornelia, previously in my mind little more than a victim of her circumstances, becomes the pragmatic, resolute and creative person that she must have been to achieve what she did – flawed, like the rest of us, but endlessly engaging.

With this publication we are hopeful that the women whose lives have inspired this story, separated by time but not circumstance, will find new life on the stage. Perhaps the play will also speak to many others who struggle to align

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personal lives and responsibilities with their heart's calling to play a role in the wider world, bearing losses incurred on the way by developing deeper understanding and generosity of action. At my Holy Child schools, I witnessed how Cornelia's curriculum demonstrated her belief in live performance as something that enhanced individual development and communal engagement, a notion that is definitely imbued in this script. I am grateful to Diane for many things, but especially for helping me re-evaluate my own education, a very rounding experience.

GHISLAINE KENYON

March 2023

CHARACTERS

Maggie Byrne	Modern day: lapsed Catholic, mother, educator, musician/composer
Cornelia Peacock Connelly	Nineteenth century: originally American, wife, mother, then nun/ Reverend Mother, educationalist, foundress of Society of the Holy Child Jesus order and schools (1809–79)
Pete/ Pierce Connelly	Modern day: Maggie’s husband Nineteenth century: Cornelia’s husband, originally American, Episcopalian (Protestant) vicar converting to Catholicism and then back to the Episcopalian Church
Mike/ John Henry	Modern day: Maggie’s lover/partner Nineteenth century: Cornelia’s toddler (second son)
Frank/ Bishop Wiseman/ Mr Harting	Cornelia’s youngest (third) son English Bishop Solicitor

CHARACTERS

Merty/ Luke/ (Violinist)	Nineteenth century: Cornelia's eldest son Modern day: Maggie's son
Adeline (Ady)/ Gwendaline/ Iris (Flautist)	Nineteenth century: Cornelia's daughter Cornelia's English friend Modern day: Maggie's daughter
Sister Theodora/ Sister Emily/ (Pianist)	Modern day: nun in her seventies Nineteenth century: young nun

Instead of actor/musicians, a pianist, violinist and/or flautist of any age or gender may play separately from the acting company.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFO

- Mercer (Merty): Cornelia and Pierce's eldest son (died at 20)
Adeline: Cornelia and Pierce's surviving daughter (died at 65)
John Henry: Cornelia and Pierce's second son (died at 3)
Mary Magdalen: Cornelia and Pierce's second daughter (died as a young baby)
Pierce Francis (Frank): Cornelia and Pierce's youngest son (died at 90)
Gwendaline: Daughter of the Earl of Shrewsbury, Catholic aristocrat, married to Prince Borghese in her early 20s

MUSIC

The following pieces have been selected to provide an example of the significant role music plays in the storytelling and drama.

For the reader, if you wish to be adventurous and add another dimension to your reading experience, you are invited to source the pieces that are publicly available and listen as you read. At the time of writing a streamable playlist has been created, containing the majority of the tunes below. You can find a link to this on the *Waltz With Me* page on the publisher's website (renardpress.com/books/waltz-with-me).

For those mounting a production, please see this list as a guide to the musical landscape and feel free, if preferred, to make your own choices.

'Musetta's Waltz' from *La bohème* by Puccini

'Waltz in F Major' by Verdi

'Waltz in A-Flat Major', Op. 69, No. 1 ('Adieu' waltz) by Chopin

'Little Maggie' by Old-Time bluegrass – travelling music

'Mary Had a Little Lamb', traditional children's song, 'Little Lamp' variations

'Cow and Dogs and Horses', a playful, improvised nursery ditty – original composition

'Veni Creator Spiritus', plain chant, variations

'Panis Angelicus' by César Franck

MUSIC

‘Oh My God, Trim Thy Vine’, spiritual ‘work song’ – original composition

‘Bells’, original composition

‘The Derby Ram’, traditional folk song

‘Sonata in E Major’, Op. 1, No. 15 by Handel

For license to use original compositions of ‘Cows and Dogs and Horses’, ‘Oh My God, Trim Thy Vine’ and ‘Bells’ by David Osmond, please contact:

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WALTZ WITH ME

The play is held across time and space
in a golden ballroom.

If a piano was playing when Mother Cornelia came into a room, she'd sweep up the nearest girl and waltz her off her feet.

'Cornelia was very fond, I think, of life, love, singing, all of that.'

SISTER JUDITH LANCASTER

'The remembrance of my children never leaves me.'

MOTHER CORNELIA CONNELLY

ACT I

BEST SELF

Golden light. A piano. Light shifts to grey day. Image of a tomb with memorial stone:

CORNELIA AUGUSTA CONNELLY 1809–1879
FOUNDRRESS OF THE SOCIETY OF THE HOLY CHILD JESUS
LOVE KNOWETH NO MEASURE, FEARETH NO
LABOUR, MAKETH SWEET ALL THAT IS BITTER,
FINDETH REST IN GOD ALONE.

SISTER THEODORA *is at the piano playing ‘Musetta’s Waltz’ from La bohème.* MAGGIE, *in her late thirties, appears in a nervous rush, heading for the piano.*

MAGGIE: Shit.

THEODORA: Back to the old chapel piano, Maggie?

MAGGIE: Oh God. Sorry, Sister Theodora.

THEODORA: Are you to play later?

MAGGIE: Not sure... Not ready... Sorry, seem to be falling short of... what was it... ‘Be your good self...’?

THEODORA: ‘Be your best self...’

MAGGIE: Right.

THEODORA: ‘The self God wants you to be.’

MAGGIE: You know, I don’t think I can play. Best not.

(MAGGIE moves away from the piano.)

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MAGGIE: Don't want to spoil your celebration.

THEODORA: Well, I'm most touched you've made it.

MAGGIE: Of course, for your send-off.

THEODORA: How is it to be here again?

MAGGIE: Weren't the corridors longer... and colder?

Everything seems... so... I dunno... familiar... yet different... like the new annexe out there... like those words that have appeared on the foundress's tomb.

THEODORA: You mean 'Love knoweth no measure...?'

Cornelia's words have been there as long as she has.

MAGGIE: Not when I was here.

THEODORA: Certainly.

MAGGIE: But in my last year at Live Crib I sat right there with the real baby that wouldn't stop crying.

THEODORA: You played Joseph as a very attentive father.

MAGGIE: Desperate as hell... the infant Jesus howling... me praying with all my might, 'Please, please make it quiet'... to Mother Cornelia... I could have sworn... behind her blank tombstone.

THEODORA: To notice what's always there we tend to need to be ready.

MAGGIE: How ready?

THEODORA: Did the baby quieten?

MAGGIE: I think so... at some point.

THEODORA: The crying stays more in the memory, perhaps.

MAGGIE: Was it really half a lifetime ago?

THEODORA: Not of my life, to be sure.

MAGGIE: Do you mind retiring?

THEODORA: It's time.

MAGGIE: You'll be missed.

ACT I

THEODORA: I'm glad to see so many of you again and provide the occasion for so much revisiting.

MAGGIE: Actually, I wanted the chance to say... Well, when I teach...

THEODORA: That's your work?

MAGGIE: Only part time. But it makes me realise how skilfully, invisibly, powerfully you enabled us to somehow come into our own when we had the barest sense of what that might be...

THEODORA: It works both ways, you know.

MAGGIE: Yes, yes, I learn incredibly from my students.

THEODORA: What do you teach?

MAGGIE: Music... playing... composition a bit... But the subject is merely the medium. It's really about whole person, isn't it?

THEODORA: Such is the Holy Child approach.

MAGGIE: 'Words not actions.'

THEODORA: 'Actions not words.'

MAGGIE: Sorry for being so out of touch. But your influence does prevail, I promise.

THEODORA: I should retire more often – it's rather gratifying.

MAGGIE: I wish I could play a piece you deserve.

THEODORA: Oh, since you've come all this way, why not play after all? I mean, what would you say to a student of yours?

MAGGIE: Well... I'd... I suppose... to... to just enjoy it...

THEODORA: How about a few turns to get you in the mood?

(THEODORA starts playing Verdi's 'Waltz in F Major'.)

MAGGIE: What, dance? Now? Beside the tomb?

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THEODORA: Why not if it helps brighten the spirit?

MAGGIE: I've not done a waltz since school...

THEODORA: Come, now, step in time for Mother Cornelia
in thanks for quieting the crying baby. Ready?

MAGGIE: Not at all.

THEODORA: Right foot back on One...

(As THEODORA plays, MAGGIE tentatively tries to waltz.)

MAGGIE: Left foot to the side on Two...

THEODORA: That's the way...

MAGGIE: Oh... I guess that after a couple of glasses of
wine... I guess I could brace myself... To hell with it...
I'll play.

THEODORA: Yes... the light fantastic toe.

(The tomb opens. A figure emerges, wearing a nineteenth-century nun's habit.)

CORNELIA: Oh, the light fantastic toe.

(CORNELIA is about to start dancing too. Suddenly the chapel, the dancing, the music break. PETE appears.)

PETE: Where did you stay?

MAGGIE: In a bed and breakfast.

PETE: On your own?

MAGGIE: Check it out if you like.

PETE: How was this school reunion, then?

MAGGIE: It was a retirement do.

PETE: Did you go to confession?

ACT I

MAGGIE: Hardly.

PETE: No remorse?

MAGGIE: I told you. It's over.

PETE: So are you ready to tell me who he is?

MAGGIE: It wouldn't help.

PETE: Is it really over?

MAGGIE: What else am I meant to say?

PETE: If you see him again...

MAGGIE: Do you mind if I practise now?

PETE: Practise?

MAGGIE: Chopin's 'Waltz in A-Flat Major', opus 69, number 1.

PETE: Why?

MAGGIE: Because sad music makes me feel better.

(MAGGIE starts playing Chopin's 'Adieu' waltz.)

PETE: Because you miss him?

MAGGIE: Please can I just play?

PETE: You didn't answer my question.

MAGGIE: I need to play.

PETE: Is that right?

MAGGIE: I'm trying my best.

PETE: Are you?

(PETE goes. MAGGIE continues playing, finding flow. Getting emotional, she stops. She finds her phone. She sends a text.)

MAGGIE: How is this... in any way... my best bloody self?!

(MAGGIE's phone rings.)

1

FIRST STEPS

The Liberty Bell rings. Golden light reveals the fullness of the shimmering ballroom space. Chopin's 'Adieu' waltz plays on piano. CORNELIA, early twenties, appears and starts to pace out a waltz.

CORNELIA: Right foot back on One. Left foot to the side on Two...

(Dappled sunlight through leaves. Birds sing. MAGGIE arrives in a wood.)

MAGGIE: Let me be sensible...

CORNELIA: Let me be at my very best...

MAGGIE: Let me do the right thing...

(MAGGIE glances warily behind her, then waits. CORNELIA finds some flow in the waltz, spinning around, in another world, yet somehow tuning into MAGGIE's.)

CORNELIA: Right foot back on One. Left foot to the side on Two... Close together on Three. Right foot down...

ACT I

(PIERCE *appears and surveys the space watchfully*. CORNELIA *swirls a swirl and bursts out laughing, bringing to life a soirée in a well-to-do house in Philadelphia in the early nineteenth century*.)

PIERCE: You seem to be enjoying yourself, Miss Peacock.

CORNELIA: I dare say I am, Mr Connelly.

PIERCE: Despite this music?

CORNELIA: Don't you like it?

PIERCE: Don't you find it rather melancholy?

CORNELIA: It ought to be – it's called 'Farewell'.

PIERCE: I'd rather listen to something happier.

CORNELIA: But the beauty of sad music is the happy thing.

(*The 'Adieu' waltz hangs in the air, then dissolves. Silence. MIKE appears.*)

MIKE: Hey.

MAGGIE: Hey.

(CORNELIA *laughs again*.)

PIERCE: My, you laugh a good deal.

CORNELIA: Do you mind it?

PIERCE: Such *joie de vivre* – dare I say passion – is hard to ignore.

CORNELIA: Is it, sir?

PIERCE: You certainly brighten the church when you sing.

CORNELIA: You can't possibly distinguish my voice from the rest of the choir.

PIERCE: The way your face blazes. Your song rises above them all. How could I not hear such fervour?

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(*Birds sing* MIKE *approaches* MAGGIE.)

MIKE: Are you sure you're OK with this?

MAGGIE: We can just... say hello... catch up, at least...

MIKE: Aren't we meant to be having no contact of any kind?

MAGGIE: We've been trying, haven't we... We have tried...

MIKE: Are you sure he still doesn't know it's me?

MAGGIE: Oh God, you know you'd know if he did.

MIKE: I have seen him... at a couple of law-society things...

MAGGIE: And?

MIKE: Perfectly civil... friendly...

MAGGIE: I'd better not stay long today.

MIKE: So... we're just saying hello...?

MAGGIE: Yes.

MIKE: That's all.

MAGGIE: Yes.

(CORNELIA *giggles*.)

PIERCE: You must notice me looking at you.

CORNELIA: Oughtn't you be attending to your duties?

PIERCE: Oh, the menial tasks of a curate are hardly taxing.

CORNELIA: Do you like to waltz, Mr Connelly?

PIERCE: Waltzing, Miss Peacock? Is that not rather... risqué?

CORNELIA: My sister and her reverend husband would not approve, I'm sure.

PIERCE: And is this because of the waltz or my meagre income?

CORNELIA: I do not care.

PIERCE: About their views or my standing?

CORNELIA: I see your qualities shine full of promise.