

The Encore

by Erica Schaefer

I closed the lid abruptly . . .

THEY TRACED CIRCLES IN varying patterns across a varnished rosewood floor. Glazed in a lustrous polish, the women were gauzy bursts of pastel watercolor, pristinely choreographed with necks held as erectly as swans. About them, full skirts billowed out in layers like springtime daffodils, butter yellow and cherry blossom pink. A beguiling rhythm kept their pace, ebbing and flowing with the clever design of experienced conduction. Their partners were shadows.

The evening sun had settled its waning light across my childhood bedroom, filling the open box on my dresser with a deep orange hue. I looked in at the dancers again; I hadn't thought of them in years. A tender smile played upon my lips, then hastened to mold itself into a frown.

There were delicate cracks that I could see now, imperfections in the minuscule brushstrokes

that colored the porcelain. Dust had accumulated in the swirling tracks, and when I turned the knob at the box's side, the music it produced was shrill and off-key.

After a moment's hesitation, the figurines grinded back into motion, displaying a half-hearted, ingenuous replica of the enchanting performance I remembered from long ago. The women wore faded colors, their wilted skirts were tattered at the seams. Bits of mildew had settled into the grooves and contours that shaped their neglected bodices, lending a sun-drenched staleness to the room. Their partners were plain-faced men with black hair and black suits; they wore expressions of indifference as they lulled to and fro, pulling their companions with them.

I closed the lid abruptly, wishing in earnest that I hadn't looked in on them after all. ❖



Pierre Carrier-Belleuse, *A Whisper of Love*, 1894