

VESPERS

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short stories

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Needles and Pins

As soon as they heard Mike Pender, Wayne Fontana, Dave Berry and Brian Poole were coming to Malta for a mega concert of 60s music, they got tickets. Couldn't possibly miss a chance like this. Their youth called to them through the fog of the past.

The marquee was packed solid. Four rows away she saw someone waving to them.

"Look — Carmen and Frankie. Wow, I didn't even recognise them," she said as they flopped into their seats. "Il-Madonna! look at the size of her!"

"Are you sure it's them?"

"Who else? You see Frankie? He's lost all his hair!"

"Like me!"

"Well, at least you've got a few strands left."

The tent was heavy with the weight of half a century. A large clock ticked away, marking time as they all moved towards arthritis. Packed with cotton-white

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heads, size 58 trousers and uselessly overstretched girdles, the marquee managed to both shelter and hide at the same time. Suddenly the music started, loud, the lights began to flicker, the stage filled with smoke, and from it emerged a man dressed in black, white hair down to his shoulders. His tummy, hanging over his belt.

“Hi there, folks. I’m Wayne Fontana!”

She snatched the programme from her husband’s hands and opened it quickly. Wayne Fontana’s face smiled there in black and white from an abyss fifty years deep. Mike Pender and the rest were there too. But why, she wondered, had they put these pictures in? What were they trying to prove? The glory of the past or the destruction wrought by time? With a caricature on stage, why show us the original version in the programme? She slammed the book shut and thrust it back into her husband’s hands. But just then, she heard the first notes of “Love Potion No. 9” and felt her eyes open wide and her heart begin to beat fast. Yes, it’s him, the same Wayne Fontana of her younger days. The same catch in the voice. The same sigh. The clock suddenly flew back and the marquee melted away. She found herself sitting in the back row of the Savoy Upper Circle tasting a rough kiss

given with a mixture of passion and panic, when he'd grabbed her breast through her dress and she felt terror that he'd notice the cotton wool tucked into her bra. Again, she sucked in the air dense with cigarette smoke and heard the noise of the projector crunching above their heads. Before the film — which she didn't watch — they'd played "Love Potion No. 9". And later he'd stood on the pavement in Strada Rjali, close to the Coliseum Cinema, along with Freddie Sammut and Mike il-Landa watching the girls pass up and down the street in front of them, and Freddie'd burst out swearing under his breath just because Jane didn't glance at him.

The marquee was vibrating now. As soon as they heard Brian Poole sing "Twist and Shout" they all stood up and the front rows started dancing. When they danced years ago, they'd been breathless with excitement. He'd danced this song gasping for breath in the hope she'd notice the crushed velvet jacket as he moved. He'd just bought it — and a ruffled shirt just like Brian Jones's of the Rolling Stones. She'd made a bet with Kitty that she'd dance with Lino, who'd just had his hair cut like Ringo Starr's. She could hear the rustle of the Italian pink mini-skirt

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she'd hidden from her mother, the one she wore with the psychedelic patterned tights when her waist was slimmer than her thigh today. They dance to it again now, again breathless because he forgot to take his blood pressure meds this morning and it was getting time for her to rub some Fastum gel on her thigh. It wouldn't be a bad thing if they sang a slow one now. Like "Someone" maybe.

When it was finally time for the interval and they could rest, the marquee practically emptied out. There was a never-ending queue for the toilets and the second part was delayed half an hour.

On the way home they kept telling each other, now that was music that would never die. Real music. Today's music was nothing but cacophony, sound with no idea of lyrics. He suddenly started to sing.

*When I'm feeling blue, all I have to do
Is take a look at you, then I'm not so blue*

And she answered.

*When you're close to me, I can feel your heart beat
I can hear you breathing near my ear ...*

And in chorus.

*Wouldn't you agree, baby you and me,
We got a groovy kind of love!*

They were tired by the time they got home and by the time she'd rubbed the Fastum in and put the net on to keep her hair in place for the next day. And after he'd taken his forgotten blood pressure meds and placed his dentures in a glass of tepid water with a Fizz-It, they got into bed. She wrapped her arms around his waist and whispered, "We had a great time tonight."

"It was fun," he replied. And kissed her on the forehead.

Don't throw your love away ... Despite the sagging breasts and the dentures on the bedside table. Despite the mere ember from the bonfire of the past that remains ... *don't throw your love away!* He tried to fall asleep by thinking about having lunch at their daughter's house the next day. It was the little one's lucky birthday. Should he wear a crushed velvet jacket and the ruffled shirt and shake his head back and forth so that his long hair would fall over his eyes? "Needles and Pins", ah, needles and pins.