

The background of the entire cover is a photograph of a sunset over the ocean. The sun is a bright, glowing orb positioned slightly below the center of the frame, partially obscured by a layer of clouds. A person is silhouetted against the sun, appearing to stand on a beach or pier. The sky transitions from a pale blue at the top to a warm yellow and orange near the horizon. The ocean in the foreground is dark with visible ripples.

Conversation >< Contemplation

A Collection of Short Stories

Quick reads for busy people

WILLIAM COLLINS



*William Collins worked many years in corporate settings where the written word was vital for success. Letters, memos, and email messages became his forte. When communicating with coworkers both subordinate and superior to produce results, it was essential that messages be succinct, accurate, courteous, and indisputable. Now retired, Collins uses those skills to write short stories. **Conversation >< Contemplation** is an eclectic collection of fictionalized retellings and introspective ponderings.*

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William Collins

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First Edition

Cherry Vanilla

When she was very young all the troubles of her little world were easily assuaged with a simple act. Her father, who somehow always knew the right time to do so, would take her by the hand and walk with her to the corner service station for an ice cream cone. A service station with a soda fountain was rare, even in those days. But, it was there, only a half block from the bungalow where she was raised. In her recollection, that soda fountain was the oasis of good things yummy and memorable.

In all the years since, ice cream cones would always revive visions of those walks – the pathway, the neighborhood, and that rustic service station with the soda fountain. On special occasions such as her birthday, her father would let her opt for a milkshake, ice cream soda, or perhaps a two-scoop sundae with a sweet topping, chocolate syrup, whipped cream, and a maraschino cherry on top.

It was that vision that had interrupted her current fit of depression. Her job was okay but frustrating. She wondered if she should look for another; in another town perhaps. Her long-time live-in was starting to do the predictable things men do when relationships wane. Her friends were all married and were now raising families of their own. They never seemed to have time for the things they used to do together.

And, worst of all, her father was gone.

But today, she thought if she were to buy cherry-vanilla ice cream in a sugar cone from the mobile vendor who had stopped on the street in front of her apartment, it would make her feel better – maybe even make her feel *his* hand holding hers once again.

As she turned to return up the path to her apartment she tripped only slightly, but enough to dislodge the chilly pink and white gem from its fragile setting.

She studied the mound of sweetness now on the ground in front of her. One of the folds left by its scooping from the firm but not frozen tub of cherry-vanilla looked back at her as if with a wry, apologetic smile. The remedy she'd sought, if it had existed at all, quickly disappeared with the lump's faux grin as it softened and merged into itself.

"What does or can one do with the ice cream now irretrievably deposited on the gravel pathway and an empty cone unresplendent without its crown of anticipation; anticipation which spans expectancy of first lick to the final oozy sweetness of saturated sugar cone tip?" That was her disgruntled thought. Then she answered her own question, "Nothing, nothing at all."

Yet she realized that an ice cream cone could never solve her problems. Soon after, decisions she'd struggled to make came in fleeting bursts. She would end the relationship with "What's-his-name." She would investigate the other job opportunity in that other town. She would seek new friends and new venues. Perhaps she would join a fitness club. "I need to get into better shape anyway," she mused.

Curiously, and in spite of the gloomy expressionless glob on the ground in front of her, now looking up as if to mock, she felt better. She was, at last, of a mind to change things. And so she would.

Piano Blue

When he gets home he winds down by playing the piano before retiring for the night. It relaxes him. He rarely plays anything recognizable, at least not recognizable to anyone who might hear. But, no one will hear – he lives alone.

She always invades his melody lines. Those fleeting phrases that bring a brief smile of satisfaction to his face, and then they're gone; as is the smile.

He improvises everything he plays. He rarely remembers any of it. He doesn't even remember what he'd played a few seconds after the notes had been struck. What he plays are just on-the-fly compositions that represent a combination of his limited technique, musical styles, and his moods.

Still, the memory of her comes and goes through it all. Yet, no matter what he plays, his emotional state joins in to provide its own counterpoint disharmony. The piano is an unwitting outlet for his thoughts and feelings. There are momentary and comforting reminders of her repeatedly and compellingly weaving her essence through his fingertips – from time to time overruling his unhappiness.

He plays until the homogenized sadness of her absence and the recollected joy of having had her exhausts his amateurish repertoire. Oh, very rarely an air of conclusion will manifest itself during these late night one-on-none sessions. But they are so rare that he has long since stopped hoping for those nascent melody/personifications to materialize. He's forced to be satisfied with the dirge of the moment.

Eventually it's time to put himself and the piano to bed. The piano wishes he'd find someone new.



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