

An Ordinary Day with and Extraordinary Friend

Irene Amherst sat in the waiting room with her gaze fixed out the window. In her lap, was a glass tray that held a small porcelain cup filled with a warm reddish liquid, which emitted a sweet aroma that filled the room. She was slowly rocking on an old wooden rocking chair that was painted a light green with small white daisies, which ran across the maple runners. The waiting room was elaborate, with a large stained glass window leading to the large dining room.

Irene was already waiting for me. Every Wednesday morning, I would ride my bike to the retirement home to visit her. I met her after being assigned a Pay It Forward project in school. The idea of the assignment was to perform an act of kindness to a perfect stranger without getting anything in return. I started out by paying her a visit once a week, every Wednesday. I would read to her from her favourite book, “Northanger Abbey” and then she would tell me some stories of her own.

All along the window sill, on top of the book case and on her little bureau in her room, Irene proudly displayed her snow globe collection. She had big ones with complicated 3D figures and little miniature ones with small and simple designs. The snow globes were what I loved most about her room. I would walk around, inspecting each and every one, taking them in my hands and shaking them, making the small parcels of snow dance, creating an organized mini blizzard, before finally settling and creating a blanket of snow.

She used to tell me how when first moved into the retirement home, the snow globes were some of the only possessions she kept.

“I had boxes upon boxes, filled with them,” she would say. “Each one symbolizes something very important. That one over there, reminds me of one of the most important day of my life,” she said, pointing to one of the simpler ones, a snow globe about the size of a billiard ball, on the coffee table. It had a lavender pink base decorated with little sea shells. A bride and a groom stood on top of a big white wedding cake. Behind them, was a large banner that read ‘Florida’ in big bold letters. “My grandmother gave me that on my wedding day. She knew how much I loved collecting them,” Irene explained.

After I would leave the retirement home, I would ride my bike down to the dance studio. I had ballet practice four times a week and taught younger ballet classes in my spare time. I had been dancing since I could walk and it was what I most loved doing. I would practice my routines for hours on end, perfecting my triple runs and the waltz.

One day, while I was waiting for Irene in her room, I looked over to the bookcase and noticed a globe that I had never seen before. It was small, with a pink base and a miniature ballerina doing a pirouette. It must have been very special because it was in a clear plastic box, tied around with a red ribbon.

“Ah, the famous ballerina,” Irene explained as she walked over to the bookcase. “She was my favourite dance teacher, back when I used to dance at the Royal Danish Theatre. She was very strict. She would make sure every step was perfect, only then would she move onto the next routine.”

“I didn’t know that you used to dance. You never mentioned anything about it.” She knew that I loved to dance, and it surprised me that she had never mentioned this before.

“I stopped dancing when I turned twenty. I got into a car crash on my way to Paris, just days after one of our biggest performances. I broke both my legs and while I was able to walk again, I could never get back to dancing. I couldn’t get my steps right, my pirouettes were sloppy and I wasn’t nearly as flexible as I was before the accident.”

I had never realized just how easy something could be taken away. In the blink of an eye, years upon years of practice, determination and hard work could all be undone. Irene had worked so hard to get to the level she had been at and, one instant was able to put her right back where she had started.

One of the most surprising things I learned about Irene was that she used to own a honey bee farm. “It wasn’t the most ordinary job,” she explained. “After I graduated with a literature degree, I got into teacher’s collage. I had always wanted to be a teacher and I figured that I could teach during the year and write during the summers,” she explained. “However, that was when I met Howard. We had gotten married and decided to move into the little town where he lived and worked on a honey bee farm. It had been passed down to him from his father, who previously owned the farm. It is kind of a family tradition.”

“Who owns it now?” I asked, wondering if the family tradition had continued.

“My son now lives on the farm with his wife and children. There was no way that I would ever sell it. I loved that place. During the year, we had children who came on field trips to the farm. They were just as fascinated by it as I was. We made everything from honey to wax candles and wax lip balm. Gibbons Bee Farm, made the best honey in the country,” she explained with a wide smile on her face.

That year, for Irene's birthday, I knew just what to get her. I ordered a special made, Gibbons Bee Farm, snow globe for Irene. It was big, with a base that was painted a brilliant yellow with black stripes that ran all the way around the bottom of the globe. The sphere contained the Gibbons Bee Farm logo with an accurate model of the farm. The snow particles were made up of tiny little bee confetti. I wrapped it up in a yellow box with a big yellow bow stuck on top and attached a birthday card to go long with the gift.

Irene loved her bee farm snow globe. She proudly displayed it on her fireplace mantle, beside the huge bouquet of yellow roses which she had received from her son.

It had been about four years since I met Irene and our time together continued every Wednesday at the retirement home. She came to see me perform at my first show, after I had gotten into the National Ballet of Canada. After the show ended, she met me backstage to tell me how wonderful she thought the show had been. She gave me a big hug before presenting me with a red box that was wrapped with a red velvet ribbon.

"Go on, open it," she said.

I couldn't believe what was inside the box. Held inside, the same clear protective box with the same red ribbon was the famous ballerina.

"I just thought it was so fitting," Irene said in the same soft tone she always used when she was speaking to me. "I know how much dancing means to you, and I just thought this would be the perfect gift to always remind you of your biggest performance yet."

Many years, and many more performances later, the famous ballerina globe still sits on my window sill, reminding me of the one person who truly understands dancing and who has always been there for me. My visits with Irene had become more than just a school project. I found out that I had more in common with her than I would have ever thought, and she quickly became one of my best friends who have been there for me throughout the years. I will never forget the project that not only helped a perfect stranger, but had turned out to also change my life in so many ways.