

Notes of a Flute

The cream-coloured train of her exquisite silk gown flows over the ruby-red carpet as she walks up Hotel Merihovi's grand staircase. Her emerald-green velvet wrap hangs from one shoulder and her chestnut-coloured hair is pulled back from her face; a wave of curls rest on the nape of her neck.

Tall and elegant, she is commanding in her presence. She radiates a glow of someone who is confident and approachable, yet there is an air around her that requests: approach with caution. Her hand rests on the arm of her date, a suave and refined gentleman.

She follows other women up the staircase, women decorated in jewels, silks and furs. But she is not like them. Beneath her radiant smile, sadness lurks and behind her blue eyes, tears are hidden. She travelled from abroad to be at this ball because underneath everything, she just knows he is here.

It is the first snowfall of the season and outside the hotel's imposing windows, snowflakes hug each other. A leafless tree branch layered in snow and twinkling white lights, create an optical illusion of a string of pearls. Snowflakes resting on windowsills have crystallized into images of clustered snow-diamonds.

Inside Merihovi Room, there is chatter, laughter and clinking of glasses while toasts are made. White linen tablecloths drape the long tables, and silver cutlery has been polished and placed at each setting.

A luster from candles and dimmed chandeliers set an ambience of romance, and the winter-wonderland viewed outside the window provides a composition only Mother Nature could draw.

To the side of the room, a bar serving apéritifs and champagne is in full swing as pre-dinner drinks flow. Canapés are passed around.

It is Hotel Merihovi's Winter Ball; a night to forget sunless days and shed drab winter woollies. It is a night for women to put on red lipstick and men to slick-back their hair. It is a night to put the recent war and difficult times behind, and to drink cocktails, dance to the rhythm of big band music, and be festive.

After dinner, tables are ushered out and chairs pushed to the side. A grand dance floor is created and the orchestra strikes its first chord. Couples clutch hands and rush to the dance floor. Dresses swish, feet twist and hips sway back-and-forth. Those sitting on the sideline, tap their toes. The room is full of merriment.

Outside in the hall, a handful of men puff cigars, drink brandy and talk of how the war changed Europe. A few women emerge from the powder room giggling. The ball is in full swing and the hotel is alive with music and jubilation.

She, however, sits alone in the corner of the room. Her velvet wrap crosses her shoulders because her sadness creates a chill. She travelled far-and-wide to be with him, her one true love, but he has not appeared.

She feels foolish. She knows he perished in the war, yet a voice inside her told her to come to Kemi. The voice told her he was here, poetically playing the flute each day with the hope that she would hear his call and come. Perhaps she needs to wait a little longer.

The waitress in the Merihovi Room asks me if I would like another coffee. Her voice seems distant until I am jolted back to reality. I have been a million miles away in a daydream of what once was. Yet, the beautiful historic and storied vibe throughout Hotel Merihovi is not so distant. There is a presence here, a presence of love, laughter and parties.

Alone in the room, I sip the last mouthful of coffee and prepare to leave. I walk towards the door and hear the soft notes of a flute. A shiver runs through me and for a brief moment, I know she is now with him.