

Dancing in the Darkness

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Joan Watson wandered aimlessly in the deserted hallway outside the Westbury High School gymnasium, ostensibly headed to the drinking fountain at the far end of the corridor. In truth, she simply needed to get away from the blaring rock music and the sea of bodies gyrating on the dance floor.

When Ron Delgado had asked her to be his date for the homecoming dance two weeks earlier, she was thrilled. And surprised. He was a popular senior and captain of the football team; she was a studious junior. Even though they sat near each other in seventh period study hall, until he slipped her the note inviting her to the dance, she didn't think he knew she existed.

Joan smoothed the velvet skirt of the claret-colored dress she and her mother had worked on every night for the past week, finishing the hem only that morning. Her aunt carved out an opening in her busy Saturday schedule at the salon and piled Joan's long black hair into a sophisticated chignon. When she slowly descended the stairs to her living room to wait for Ron, her father dragged his eyes away from the television set and let out a low whistle.

"Don't you look beautiful," he said, getting stiffly to his feet. "You're all grown up. I'm not letting you go without a chaperone, looking like that."

Her mother quickly broke in. "Honey, you'll have the prettiest dress there. You did a wonderful job on it. You should be very proud. And your hair is perfect." She eyed her daughter knowingly. "Are you nervous about anything? You shouldn't be; you look lovely. The boys will be fighting over your dance card."

Joan didn't know about that, but she did feel like Cinderella going to the ball. She regarded herself in the full-length mirror in the vestibule and her confidence surged; she was every bit as glamorous as the cadre of popular girls Ron kept company with.

She gingerly took a seat on an ottoman. The minutes ticked by and she knew her parents were becoming anxious about the unthinkable possibility that she might be stood up. When the doorbell finally rang, all three of them audibly exhaled. Ron Delgado made a splashy entrance, shaking her father's hand and politely greeting her relieved mother. He hastily presented Joan with a wrist corsage of white roses and baby's breath.

"You look very pretty," he told her.

He hasn't even looked at me, she realized.

She gathered her coat from the hall closet and stuffed down her unease as they walked to his car. At least he held her door open for her.

When they arrived at the high school, music spilled into the parking lot from the already packed gymnasium.

"Do you like to dance?" she tried to ask Ron as they made their way toward the entrance, but he was walking fast and slightly ahead of her. Either he hadn't heard her or he hadn't bothered to answer.

She stumbled in the unaccustomed high heels as she attempted to keep pace with him.

It didn't matter, she told herself.

She might not be in Ron's social circle, but she was a good dancer. He'd find out soon enough. And she was looking forward to doing a lot of dancing tonight.

“Let me take that coat for you. And I’ll get us something to drink,” he said as he abandoned her along the sidelines and headed briskly into the crowd with her coat over his arm.

“I’m not thirsty,” she called after him, but he was too far away to hear.

Joan scanned the throng for a friendly face, but found none. She retreated into the shadows and pretended to study a sign on the wall, waiting for Ron to return.

After what seemed like an eternity, he emerged from the sea of dancers with no drinks in hand. He pulled her unceremoniously onto the dance floor. Half-heartedly following the beat, he scanned the crowd behind her. She might as well be dancing by herself. He was leading them off the floor when he abruptly stopped. The disc jockey began playing “Never My Love”. He clinched her into a too-tight embrace, pressing his body along hers, and swayed to the music.

Joan stole glances over his shoulder at the couples surrounding them. Everyone was glued together. As the song drew to a close, Ron lunged and kissed her long and hard—a savage, one-sided affair.

“Hey. That’s not okay,” she cried. As she pushed him away, she saw that he was focused on a group of his friends standing not more than ten feet away.

“Be right back,” he stated, stalking off and leaving her alone on the dance floor. The crowd surged around him and the next song began.

Fighting back tears, Joan bolted to the nearest exit and into the deserted hallway. She paced slowly, considering what to do. She longed to go home, but didn’t want to call her father to pick her up. Her parents had been so excited for her; this would break their hearts. The thought of their disappointment was worse than her own. She was summoning the courage to go back into the gymnasium when she heard muffled moans from the passageway at the end of the hall.

She noiselessly crept in their direction and froze when she heard Ron’s husky voice. “Baby, baby. It’s only you. I was just tryin’ to get your attention. Her old man’ll come get her. That kiss was nothin’ to me.”

The girl’s smug laugh struck like a slap across the face. Joan spun on her heel and silently retraced her steps. Her eyes stung and her head pounded. The pay phone was located on the other side of the gymnasium. There was no way she was going back in there; she’d take the long way around, past the kitchens and the janitor’s closet. She rummaged in her fancy evening purse for change to place the call, but found none. And her coat was who-knows-where. She sank against the wall in the shadows and began to cry.

“It can’t be as bad as all that,” said a calm, steady voice behind her.

Joan whipped around and faced an older boy she recognized from school who wasn’t exactly dressed for the dance. Instead, he was wearing dungarees and work boots.

She straightened and attempted to collect herself.

“Sam Torres,” he said simply. “I recognize you, but I don’t know your name.”

“Joan Watson,” she managed to croak.

“Joan Watson, you are the prettiest girl here tonight.”

She smiled feebly. “What are you doing back here?”

“I do maintenance part time. I’m working now,” he said. “My turn. Why are you back here?”

“I need to use the pay phone. But I don’t have any change.”

“Is that why you’re crying?”

Joan nodded.

“I’ve got some change,” he said, reaching into his pocket. “Doesn’t your boyfriend have any?”

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” she said quietly before starting to cry again.

He nodded and leaned against the wall next to her.

“I came with Ron Delgado but he brought me just to make his girlfriend jealous. Now he’s gone back to her. I won’t go in there again,” she said, gesturing toward the gymnasium. “I need to call my dad to come get me. And I can’t find my coat,” she finished miserably.

“Here,” he said, offering her a small handful of coins. “I’ll get your coat for you. Forget about that first-class creep Ron Delgado. Good riddance.”

“Thank you,” she replied.

“Will you do me a favor?” he asked.

Joan turned to face him. He was a head taller than she was, with an open face and a genuine smile. She nodded.

“Will you dance with me? One dance?” he asked.

As the muffled strains of “Unchained Melody” filtered out to them, he took her confidently into his arms. Tentative at first, she quickly relaxed and followed his lead as they glided across the slick floor under the warm red glow from the exit sign.

“You’re good,” Joan murmured. “Where did you learn this?”

“My whole family loves to dance. Mostly Latin-style, partnered numbers like cha-chas and sambas. Stuff that isn’t in style right now, but that’s a lot of fun. I’ve been practicing with my cousins for years.”

“I’m not very good at this kind of dancing,” she replied.

“You’re doing fine. Catching on quick. Do you come to these school dances?”

“This is my first one and probably my last. But I’ve been dancing in my bedroom with girlfriends for ages.”

“I think we should keep on, don’t you?” he asked.

The next song started and he swept her along. They were amazed when the disc jockey announced that he was playing the final number.

“I should go find Ron, I guess,” Joan stated without enthusiasm.

“No. I’ll get your coat for you. I have to stay late to clean up or I’d drive you home.” He took her hand and led her to the pay phone. “Tell your dad to come through the back way. He can pick you up on the north side of the building. You’ll avoid all the traffic from the parking lot.”

Joan knew he really meant that she wouldn’t have to suffer the embarrassment of being picked up by her father in front of all of the other kids leaving the dance. She nodded, took a deep breath, and placed the coins in the slot. Sam went in search of her coat and returned with it as she was hanging up.

“All set?” he asked as he helped her on with her coat and they headed outside to wait.

“Yeah. My dad sounded surprised but didn’t ask any questions—just said he’d be right here.” She eyed Sam closely. “You look smug. What’s up?”

Sam’s grin spread from ear to ear. “I just found out that your date and his friends got caught drinking in the parking lot. They’ve been escorted to the principal’s office and their parents have been called. They’ll be suspended from school. Looks like the dance didn’t turn out to be much fun for them after all.”

“No kidding. Serves them right. I’m glad I walked off.” She looked up at him but his face was hidden in darkness. “I had a great time with you tonight. Thank you for rescuing me.”

Sam placed his hand in the small of her back and leaned toward her as the headlights from her father’s Buick swung onto the driveway and made their steady approach toward them.

Darn it, she thought. Why couldn't Dad have been a few minutes later?

“See you at school,” she said, hoping she sounded encouraging.

“Can I call you?” he asked as the car pulled to a stop and he opened her door for her.

“Of course,” she gushed before she could curb her obvious enthusiasm.

Sam crossed in front of the car as her father rolled down his window. “Sam Torres,” he said, reaching in and shaking his hand. “I wanted to make sure Joan got home safely. Ron Delgado got busted for drinking, but Joan wasn’t involved.”

Mr. Watson nodded and shot a quizzical look at his daughter, as she gazed wistfully at Sam. “Thank you, much appreciated. Good night,” he said as he put the car in gear and pulled slowly away.

Joan watched Sam in the side view mirror until he was out of sight. Little did she realize then that sometimes life delivers the best surprises from inauspicious beginnings.