

Prom

We double-dated at the prom, Will and Sonia, Dustin and me. Against my mother's recommendation, I insisted on wearing heels, so on this night I topped Dustin by two inches. This seemed to bother his mother, too. She insisted that I take my shoes off for the photos we posed for in their living room. She also kept eyeing my cleavage, as if she were wrestling with an urge to offer me a sweater.

I was wearing a shiny blue strapless dress, which, my mother and the saleswoman had assured me in the formalwear shop, made me look like a movie star. I had liked my reflection in the shop's three-paneled mirror, lined with dressing-room light bulbs. I had turned from side to side to admire the cleavage created by the strapless bra.

On prom night, the movie star feeling began the moment I put on the dress, and lasted through the photo-taking sessions at my house and Sonia's. It started to dissipate at Dustin's house, in the face of his mother's disapproval, and disappeared entirely in the restaurant we went to before the dance. The adults in the restaurant, who looked comfortable in their nice clothes, looked up as we came in and watched us walk to our table. "More prom couples," I heard a man say.

"They're so cute," his companion exclaimed. Suddenly I felt like a child playing dress-up in her mother's clothes.

And then I couldn't stop looking at the curve of my breasts, white and visible above the bodice of my dress. This was the first time I had ever gone into public with cleavage, and in the air-conditioned restaurant I got goosebumps. Will was sitting across from me, and when I looked at him I saw him jerk his eyes up from my breasts to my face. I was so embarrassed. I felt like I was eleven again and everyone was laughing, the fact that I was the punchline somehow my own fault. I wished I could lay the white cloth napkin over my cleavage. I settled for spending most of dinner hiding it, elbows on the table, wrists crossed, one hand resting on the opposite shoulder in what I hoped was a casual way.

The prom theme was "Time of My Life." For some reason the decorating committee had chosen a cityscape theme. Big silver outlines of buildings on black backgrounds surrounded us. There was confetti on the table. Over the dance floor in the center of the gym they had constructed rafters out of balloons.

The four of us had been sitting in near silence at a table by the wall for at least twenty minutes. We'd been at the prom for two hours, and my feet, which

had already hurt when we arrived, were killing me. I kept having to hike up my strapless bra, a maneuver I tried to perform when neither Will nor Dustin was looking. Dustin had his arms folded on the table, his chin resting on them. Any minute now I expected him to lay down his cheek and go to sleep like a second grader. Will was sitting up perfectly straight, methodically eating ice out of a plastic cup. Sonia was looking around the room like a speed freak forced to sit still.

“I want to walk around outside,” Sonia said. Outside the gym, in the entryway, the music was quieter, the talking more exuberant. “Do y’all want to walk around?” She looked from one to the other of us, eyes bright, cheeks flushed. At a party Sonia always seemed like she was hooked up to a generator. She had been quiet in the car on the way over from the restaurant, but as soon as she saw the crowd waiting in line for photos she had been bursting with energy. She was like a celebrity on the red carpet, braced for the photographers and the questions. Me, I had wanted to lie down as soon as we got inside. The din of talk and music, the body heat, had fallen on me like a heavy blanket.

“I want to dance again,” I said, because that sounded better than walking around. I loved to dance, especially at the center of a large crowd, where so many moving bodies hid my own.

Dustin made a worried face. He had promised to dance with me at prom, after his refusal to do so at Homecoming led to me dancing all night with other guys, and a fight. So far he had fulfilled this duty, moving his lanky body with an awkwardness I found endearing, but now he looked as though he had hoped my expectations were at an end.

“Come on, y’all,” Sonia said. “This is boring. Let’s walk around.”

“I’ll walk around,” Dustin said. He glanced at me as if for permission.

“You don’t want to dance?” I asked.

“Will, you dance with her,” Sonia said. “Then Dustin and I can walk around.”

We all looked at Will, who had had no discernible reaction to this request. “All right,” he said. He stood, then looked at me. Let’s get this over with, he seemed to say. I jumped to my feet, banged my knee into the table, and tried to turn my wince into a smile.

He led the way out to the dance floor, where everyone was gyrating to “Delirious,” and pulled me through the crowd to a place near the center of the floor. I wondered if he shared my dislike of being visible. The spot chosen, he immediately began to dance. He was a good dancer. He didn’t move much, but he knew how to use his hips. I started to move, looking everywhere but at him. I

caught the eye of a girl I knew and we smiled at each other, just as her boyfriend thrust his pelvis into hers. Then the song ended. I cocked my head, making a show of listening for the next song, still not wanting to look at Will. I heard the first notes of “Crazy for You” and felt the fluttering in my stomach increase. Around us boys and girls drew each other close and began to sway.

Will and I looked at each other. I noticed at that moment that we were eye to eye. I saw, in the way he broke our gaze, his reluctance to take me in his arms. “We don’t have to...” I started, and then he stepped forward and pulled me closer. Nerves and surprise made me awkward. I rested my hands on his shoulders as though they might burn me, my arms bunched up in ungainly fashion between us. But this meant we were staring at each other, our faces mere inches apart. I turned my head to stare over his shoulder. My heart was beating so fast I was sure he could feel it against his chest. I tried to take a deep breath.

“What’s wrong?” he said in my ear.

“Nothing.” I laughed nervously. “Why?”

“You’re sighing.”

“Oh,” I said. I could think of nothing to add, so I let my arms slip down his back, let my chin rest lightly on his shoulder. He tightened his grip around my waist. I could feel one of his strong hands laid flat against the small of my back, his palm radiating heat to my entire body. I had never danced with a boy so exactly the right height. We seemed to fit together, in a way that suggested nothing had ever quite fit before.

I forgot myself, there in Will’s arms, with him holding me as if it were me he wanted. I moved closer. I pressed my body against his and heard his breathing quicken. Still I didn’t look at him. His hand on my back tensed and relaxed. His breath warmed my cheek. I wanted to press myself into him until I disappeared. I didn’t think at all of what was right or wrong, only of what I felt as he held me. I surrendered myself to it so fully there was nothing left of what I was used to calling me. It felt wonderful, that surrender.

The song ended. Songs always do. And no matter what the movies tell you, no one keeps dancing when the music stops.

When Sonia and Dustin came back to our table, I was nursing a coke topped off with a little whiskey from a senior boy’s flask. Sonia was laughing up at Dustin, who was smiling at her in a pleased way. “We just saw Heather with Keith Whitford,” Sonia said, sliding into the chair next to mine. “Did you know they were coming together?”

I shook my head. Dustin took the chair on the other side of me. He laid a hand on my thigh and I flinched. He lifted his hand and looked at me with puzzlement. "I'm jumpy," I said. I took his hand, squeezed it, and laid it back on my thigh.

Sonia looked around. "Where's Will?"

"Bathroom," I said. This was just a guess. When the song ended, Will and I had come apart like wood snapping. I had looked at him, his guilty eyes, and had an urge to apologize. "I'll see you," I said instead, and then I walked away. At the edge of the dance floor I realized what that guilty expression meant. Whatever I had felt, he felt it too. I stopped to look for him in time to see him disappear through the gym doors.

"He's a good dancer, isn't he," Sonia said with satisfaction. "Did he twirl you? I like it when he twirls me."

"Uh-huh," I said. I was close to disappearing into guilt, like a scarf into a vacuum cleaner.

"I'm kinda sorry we came back," Sonia said to Dustin. "She's not very talkative."

"She's tired," Dustin said, rubbing my leg. "Her feet hurt. She doesn't want to dance anymore, I bet."

"No, I do," I said. I could see Will approaching our table. Panic threatened to send me fleeing from the room. "Let's dance right now."

"Oh, honey," Dustin said. "I know I promised but haven't I danced enough?"

I stood, tugging on his hand, but he wouldn't budge, and now Will was back, standing behind his chair. His face was calm enough, but I could see his anxiety in the way he gripped the back of the chair.

"Will, Cameron wants to dance again," Sonia said. "I guess you didn't twirl her enough."

Will released the chair. He straightened up and looked at me with grim determination. He held out his hand, the picture of Mr. Darcy pressed into service at the ball. "Oh, that's okay," I said. "I don't want to make you dance."

"Oh, go on," Sonia said. "Dustin and I will mingle some more. We were having fun, weren't we Dustin?"

"Yup," Dustin said. He grinned at me, glad to be relieved of duty.

Helpless, I put my hand in Will's. He held it loosely, leading me out to the floor. Once there, I started to pull my hand away, but to my surprise he didn't relinquish it. He put his other hand gingerly on my waist, and then, holding me with dance lesson stiffness, he moved me around the floor in a box step. Other

dancers noticed us and laughed and clapped. I smiled and nodded like we were kidding around, but Will's face remained set, his gaze inward. When the song was over, he released me and let out a sigh. He nodded at me. "Thank you for the dance," he said formally.

"Thank you," I said. I was bewildered. When he turned to go back to our table, I didn't follow, and then the music for a country line dance started. I got swept up into the cotton-eyed joe.

It was weeks before I could look Will in the eye, although after that dance he was as reserved but pleasant with me as he always had been. Perhaps he had meant the second dance to erase whatever had passed between us. As time went on I became less and less sure about what that had been, until I had myself convinced that he had felt nothing, that whatever I had felt had been a product of alcohol, and the romance of prom, and my imagination. Still, I was as awkward and guilty around him as if we had slept together, his presence an unpleasant reminder of my misdirected desire, the shock of discovering that I was capable of that kind of betrayal. That I could love Dustin, and Sonia, and still long for Will, that those feelings didn't cancel each other out the way they were supposed to. I had known for a long time that the world was various and complicated, how much there still was to explore. But I hadn't realized before that night just how thoroughly I had failed to map the regions of my heart.