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Donohoe: Dance With Her

DANCE WITH HER

Kathleen Donohoe

Byron needs a rollicking bout with disease, not fatal. Double pneumonia, avian flu, viral meningitis. He will emerge from illness skinny, heroic and interesting, if handsome is not possible and it probably isn't. He is not so fat that his features only look like those of other fat people. Slim Byron is still visible. His nose is centered and his chin is beneath his lips, of which he has the proper two, one on top of the other. But now, after fifteen years, it's become clear that his face will never live up to the hype of the adorable early years.

Recovered Byron will be moody, not placid. His hair will darken from brown to black and be always unkempt. Though a daily shave will now be a necessity, he won't. The shadows circling his eyes will never quite go away. On the small streets of their town, he will be mistaken for a poet. A girl will fall in love.



Byron is hallways. This is why, though he has three steps further to travel, he pauses. The noise of the house is down the stairs. Dinner is being prepared and pots rattle, dishes clatter. Byron can hear his sisters' voices, all three indistinguishable from here, sometimes raised in irritation, but then it's warm for a May afternoon and only the bedrooms are air conditioned. The other rooms are cooled by ceiling fans to keep the 'integrity' of the old farmhouse. Their mother loves the place, which their father named for her: *Carolyn's Haven*. Once he'd gone, Carolyn took down the calligraphed sign he'd had woodworked for her and posted beside the mailbox. Byron watched her wrestle it out of the January ground and stood by as she tucked it in a corner of the garage where it remains, five years later, sticky with cobwebs, because it's bad luck to throw away one's name.

Hallways are how Byron imagines Purgatory, which has always held more appeal than heaven for him. Heaven is probably

carpeted in white and requires graceful feet.

Purgatory, though, has got to be one long corridor with an echo, excellent for all the loitering souls full of sins worse than the one he dreams of.

But that's for later. He's on earth and alive and here, a hallway keeps you in transit. Whether you are going to or going away, you are going. There's the one at Onohedo High School, where he tramps, head down, though sometimes he swerves to tap his shoulder against another's for that day's proof: I am not invisible.

There's the hallway that led from his maternal grandmother's front door to the kitchen. It carried the scent of the sea and had the whole family history laid out in tarnishing silver frames. His eyes come from her and Ireland.

But this hallway, in their own house, is best. Unlit and uncarpeted, the floorboards speak beneath your feet. Byron leans his forehead against one white wall, and it's cool and somehow soft, like the palm of a hand checking for fever.

Yes, Byron is hallways the way Alyce is kitchens, with their delineated purpose and humming appliances. She sets her mixing bowls on the countertop, bows her head above them and lets her brisk hands work. Ginny is living rooms. There she haunts, slipping in and out of novels for hours in the sinking chair which holds her like a lap. Alyce is twenty and Ginny is eighteen. They are tall, spare girls with their mother's high cheekbones and their father's brown eyes. But they resemble each other more than either parent, as though they'd arrived together to join the family with a pair of shoes each and a jumble of clothes in one suitcase.

Byron's youngest sister turned thirteen on April 6th.

Robyn is bedrooms. She perches in the window seat and scribbles atrocious poetry in journals embossed with butterflies or purple flowers. She naps fully dressed, lying on the bed as though laid out for her wake, and she sits on the thick gray carpet, legs outstretched while she babbles on the phone.

Quietly, Byron begins to move again. He passes the bathroom.

His next step brings him beyond the door that hides a stairwell leading to the attic and a very private bedroom for the family's only son. Byron massages his right hand. It is appreciated.

He's at risk now. If he's caught this far down the hall, there will be questions asked.

Robyn is struggling with her math homework. It's her worst subject so their mother makes her sit at the dining room table to see that she doesn't give up in frustration, in spite of the fact that she will be sent to summer school if she fails. Also, if she doesn't at least try, their mother will not let her run track next fall, though it's clear she will not be getting into college on an algebra scholarship. At any rate, Robyn won't be paroled until she's finished. Which means Byron has some time.

He leaves the door ajar for quick escape, but in case he can't, he has an excuse prepared as to why he's in Robyn's room: a CD of his is missing, she must have taken it.

As much as he would like privacy, a shut door is suspicious, as though he's gone in there to steal, though nobody will be able to think of a single thing of Robyn's that Byron could possibly want.

The bedroom is done in pale blue (robin's egg, of course) and there are two colorful throw rugs on the floor discovered at a thrift shop in town. Robyn shrieked with joy for a wholly annoying ten minutes when their mother brought them home for her last year. Byron recalled yelling at her to shut up. She'd ignored him.

Her bed is high; it takes three steps to climb into. It's covered by a white and blue quilt. Byron inhales the scent of Johnson's baby powder and the sharper underlay of athlete's foot spray. While watching television at night, Robyn sometimes props her foot up on the coffee table and picks at the peeling skin between her toes. Byron used to find this revolting.

He closes the closet door to hide the full length mirror so he won't catch a glimpse of his whole self. A smaller mirror is attached to the bureau. In its frame are party invitations, blue and red ribbons won at track meets, photographs of Robyn

and her friends, most of whom she's acquired in the past few months—girls that Byron used to ogle at when they came over, which he can do quite safely because he does not exist for them. His penis doesn't exist for them.

He studied the slim legs and small breasts and the shoulders and necks bared by ponytails and understood that if he were the handsome big brother, they'd be competing for his attention. Robyn's House would mean *him*. His name would not be a Kick Me sign, more permanent than any tattoo, but a synonym for sexy. Byron Arthur. Bear, Bear. Both names mean that, he would tell them with a grin to make them shiver.

But those kids hardly matter anymore because he compares them to Robyn, who has thick brown hair with natural gold highlights, envied so by Alyce and Ginny. Blue eyes, identical to his. Her scrawny legs have gotten taut from running. She shaves them. The oval face is their mother's but with finer lines. Of her friends, Robyn is the prettiest, and he is not just saying that because he's her brother and in love with her.

Stuck in the bottom corner of the mirror is the Mass card for their father from that time he died running with the bulls in Spain.

Their father did not hear that he was dead until he had been so for three days. San Francisco, a long, long way from upstate New York. On the first weekend visit, which did not happen for a month, they went to Burger King. Alyce and Ginny were absent, having refused to see him. But Byron and Robyn were ten and eight and had no choice.

They took a corner booth. Robyn swung her legs nervously until Byron pinched her thigh. She squeaked and then clamped down on the pain. Later, when she'd climbed over him to fetch more ketchup, Byron asked his father if he was mad about being killed. He'd laughed and said hell, a woman with balls like that was rare. It almost made him consider coming back. But you won't, Byron said. His father mashed a French fry with his thumb. Well, no. There's June. Confused, Byron thought he meant the month but of course, he'd meant the woman he'd

run off with and later married in a brief civil ceremony. The party afterwards was quite small, not worth the kids missing school for.

Byron's father and stepmother both taught mathematics at the same college and did not get to New York much. The funny thing is that Byron's mother is also a college professor. She teaches American Literature.

Once when Byron was a little boy, his father said "Mathematics is a waltz, a minuet!"

And his mother answered: "Waltz is from German: high, turn around. Minuet is French: small, dainty."

How strange that the children of a failed marriage should go on existing as though the parents had not admitted in court that they'd been awfully mistaken. All the procreating was like a spill of milk spreading across a table, never to be gotten back. We love you! We'll always love *you!* That hasn't changed. Byron and the girls heard it again and again and again and again.. Oh, but hadn't it changed? Just a little? Didn't the two have days when they wished they'd never met?

Robyn has a bouquet of old roses tacked on the wall beside the mirror. Their mother had presented them to her four months ago on the occasion of Robyn's first period, a family tradition. Byron remembers Alyce and Ginny getting their roses. He's always thought it a gross thing to celebrate and hated that he had to know, but now he's glad he has the information.

Byron doesn't linger at Robyn's mirror. He's perfected the art of averting his eyes to avoid his reflection but can only sustain it for so long before his head begins to ache. Beside the bed, he sees Robyn's jeans on the floor, a pair of white underpants tangled in them. One sock lies nearby. Her bra is next to it.

Byron smiles. She must undress the way she has always opened her Christmas presents. He and Alyce and Ginny are patient, but Robyn tears the paper off as though she suspects each gift is the very thing she's longing for. He swipes her pink bra off the floor. The cups are triangles, not even as big as the palms of his hands. He probably has bigger tits.

He's thought hard about how to get her attention. There has to be some courting and it won't be easy, what with one thing and another, but he's decided the best strategy is to take advantage of the fact that he knows her better than the idiot boys in her class ever can. But after scanning and sorting his memories, he was surprised to find how little he's really paid attention to her. The battles have been between him and Alyce, the competition between him and Ginny because he used to be a reader like her and they both vied to be their mother's favorite. Then Byron grew tired and so by forfeit Ginny won the gift of their mother's unabstracted gaze, which might last as long as fifteen minutes. Free Byron discovered that he preferred nonfiction.

Yet it is Robyn beside him at every meal and in every posed family picture: Communion, Confirmations, graduations. He's looked back through the albums recently to see if there's any spark but there isn't, of course. He is never even glancing at the child, Robyn Leigh. (*Robynly*, their father used to call her.)

She was beside him as well on the pew at Our Lady of Sorrows Church, which they'd attended until their grandmother passed away. For a month of Sunday's after her funeral they'd trooped faithfully to the eleven o'clock service. Then one week, Carolyn stayed in her office, answering her mail. The four of them grouped outside her door and listened to her fingers tap the keys as though they were listening to a pianist play. At five to eleven, Alyce shrugged, and they dispersed.

But in the day, he'd smuggled Hershey's Kisses in the pockets of his winter coat because they could be unwrapped quietly, palmed and popped into the mouth with a fake yawn. He worked them with small movements of his tongue, pressing them to the roof of his mouth, tip first until there was nothing left. No chewing required.

Robyn knew. She'd nudge him with her elbow, begging him to share, but he'd ignored her, wondering why she didn't just steal some for herself. Later, he decided that to take from him was less of a crime than to bring them in herself. He believed she thought him daring, and he'd liked that. Not enough to share his candy, though.

Today, Byron lays four Hershey's Kisses on her pillow in a straight line. They are plain chocolate, no almonds, no peanut butter, no caramel. None of that foolishness.

He kneels beside Robyn's jeans to touch her underpants. He runs two fingers over the seam of the crotch. There's no scheme to steal or sniff them. That's perverted and he's not, though nothing hurts like this. He hunches over. He will have to teach her how to take off her clothes. *Slowly, Binna* (he doesn't call her that in life, but he plans to). He's wondered, if a girl ever let him, how would he figure out what to do? How many chances would she give him before shoving him off her body in disgust? He's studied *Playboy* and Tampax instructions. Though it *appears* uncomplicated, he's sure the whole construct is really a trapdoor with an unknown mechanism ready to trip him up.

But he's not worried anymore. His girl grew where he did. Robyn has always been near. Just the way he knows her face by heart, so will he know the rest of her. He will find his way inside with ease and, there, be home.

But first, he'll take her hand, he'll hold it hard, and tell her about ancient Egypt and how the pharaohs' sons and daughters married each other to keep royal bloodlines pure, to keep kingdoms together.



Two weeks ago at dinner, he reached for a buttermilk biscuit. Alyce made them from scratch. She does almost all of the cooking now, even though she works two jobs, at the Coffee Palace and at the Macy's in the mall. She needs the money because next September, she is going to the CIA: The Culinary Institute of America. She will pay her dues in restaurants, but someday she will become a personal chef to someone rich and famous. She will write cookbooks and have her own television show.

Their mother hardly minds being usurped in the kitchen, consumed as she is with her course load and notoriety. The latter came quickly from the first two articles in *The Onohedo*

Bee: the obituary she wrote for her husband and the article that followed two days later, headlined: "Angry Wife 'Kills' Cheating Hubby."

There were follow-ups and interviews. She became known throughout Onohedo and towns beyond when she went on a local morning talk show, billed as the woman who held a funeral for her marriage. In the years since, she's written articles about adultery and divorce and children and is in demand as a speaker at support groups. *What to Tell Your Daughter About her Cheating Father: Parenting a Son After Divorce*.

She talks about how she and her then-husband left Brooklyn to buy a home in what for them was the country—the quaint town two hours outside of Manhattan. They meant to write books, raise children and flowers and vegetables and be very quite happy.

But Carolyn does not inform her fans that the house has become a memorial for the dream. They don't know that without the husband and father, the great plans for restoration never came to be. The front porch boards are rotting like teeth in a sour mouth. The pipes rattle and the roof leaks in the dining room so that a bucket is permanently kept in the corner. The banister to the second floor is half-sanded and the roses on the kitchen wallpaper have faded to gray. It's as though she and her children were not exchanged for a twenty-four-year-old graduate student but instead had become the widow and half-orphans of a flood or hurricane or some small war. Later, when he finished disappearing, she added *When Dad Doesn't Visit* to her repertoire.

"Byron," Alyce said.

"That makes three," Ginny said in the exact tone of a toddler who's just learned to count.

Alyce had grilled steak, and to go with it, sweet corn and potatoes au gratin, which were getting to be her specialty. Though Byron will never compliment her, he's had two servings of them even though he'd stopped at McDonalds for Chicken McNuggets and French fries on his way home from school, as he'd been

doing since he quit his job at Key Food, which he'd had to do since he asked out Anna, a shy girl a year behind him who was herself not so thin. She went to Our Lady of Sorrows.

She came to his line at least every other day with a bag of Kettle One potato chips and green apples or nectarines. She paid with her head down. Byron stared at the judicious part in her blond hair, hoping to make her look up so that he might give her a smile of camaraderie and tell her that he was not Bryon, as his nametag said. The fruit was beard-buying. He knew. He knew. Selecting a sympathetic cashier was the whole key to avoiding the worst of the shame.

Then, one Wednesday, an old lady on the next line raised her voice when Jimmy refused an expired coupon. Startled, Anna looked up, caught Byron's smile and returned it. They began mumbling hello and exchanging bits of gossip about teachers the way they might have shared the rectangles of a Hershey Bar. If Byron still ate them, that is. But he won't anymore now that they are packaged like every other candy bar. Slipping it out of the sleeve, sliding a finger up the seam of its silver underwrap to open it wide, that's what made the Hershey Bar special. Now, you might as well have Twix or a Three Musketeers. Byron grieves for the silver foil.

He and Jimmy, and Dozy too, sat on the hood of a car in Key Food's parking lot after their shift, sharing a bag of Doritos and trying to work it out in the fifteen minutes they had before a manager yelled at them to stop loitering. Jimmy and Dozy said go all the way. Ask her to the spring dance.

"She likes you," Jimmy said.

"You don't know that," Byron answered.

"She's got to like you," said Dozy.

"Why?" Byron asked.

Jimmy, short and skinny with bad hay fever, and Dozy, taller, just as thin, with a zit forever blooming above his right eyebrow, exchanged a look.

Because she's fat too. They didn't say it out loud, of course.

"She always gets in your line," Dozy added, downcast. He'd

proved too slow on the register and so was moved back to stockboy.

"She'll probably let you fuck her," Jimmy said.

"She's no Clem, but she has big tits," Dozy offered.

"By—don't be a pussy," Jimmy said gruffly.

Don't be shy, he meant. Was Byron shy because he was fat or fat because he was shy? It was the great mystery of his life, besides why his father forgot he had four children and how his mother had gotten addicted to the pity and admiration cocktail so quickly and why his grandmother had to die when he was only nine, long before he got tired of being loved best by her.

So he listened to Jimmy and Dozy, both of whom had made the online list of Mostly Likely to Go Columbine while Byron had not. The posting was pulled before Byron had a chance to see it, but Jimmy told him about it.

"It's a good thing, man. No one thinks you're psycho," Jimmy had said.

"I'm gonna sue," Dozy added, but neither could hide their pride at being thought dangerous.

Anna is not Clem, true. But he'd never have Clementine Hart, who glided through the hallways at school, not seeing him the way a doe running through the forest doesn't notice the ants she tramples. Byron never touched Clem's shoulder. When she passed, he stepped aside and turned to watch her go.

One Thursday, Anna was alone on his line, a gift. He scanned her chips, Sea Salt, which he took to mean she was feeling adventurous. Usually, she got Plain, but sometimes Mesquite Barbecue.

"The thing at school? The Spring Fling thing?" he began, blushing at the rhyme. He sucked in gallons of stomach and tried to stand up straighter.

"What about it?" Anna asked, fishing in her wallet.

"Want to go?" Byron said. The words nearly choked him.

Anna turned to stone, holding out the \$10 she'd just dug up. "With you?"

Byron quit at the end of that shift. He hasn't told his family

yet. They will probably say it's a good thing and that he should get a job like dog-walking for the forced exercise.

"Three rolls, b-f-d," Robyn said, gulping her milk. Lately, she has been preoccupied with the strength of her bones.

Carolyn's fingers drummed the table without making a sound.

"You should go on a diet," Ginny said.

"Diets don't work. It's been proven," Alyce waved her hand. "It's a lifestyle thing. You have to commit to eating right. I would cook only health food meals if I thought you would eat them."

"I'd eat them," Byron lied. "If that was all there was."

"Or maybe you'd just go out for junk later?" Alyce asked. She actually put her fork down.

Byron hated it when she pretended to be overwhelmed by his problems.

"Fuck you," he said.

"Get your stomach stapled already," Alyce said.

Ginny snickered, then put a hand to her mouth as though she hadn't meant to laugh.

"That's for grossly obese people. Byron's not grossly obese," Robyn said, poking her congealing potatoes with her fork. Since she had not taken one bite, Byron had been considering asking her to fork them over but he couldn't now.

Their mother focused on him hopefully. "You just need to eat less and exercise more, that's all."

Byron knew how badly she wanted him to look well-adjusted. A son thirty pounds overweight made it hard to present yourself as a successful single parent.

He looked around the table. None of them seemed to care that the dad was missing. They kept the carton of milk and Ginny's vegetarian dish in the spot where his plate used to be. His chair was in the corner with a potted fern on it. All the females, they didn't get that Byron was the man of the house. He had to eat for two. He nearly said so, but instead he picked up the roll and shoved it in his mouth. Robyn laughed. Milk spurted out

her right nostril.

Alyce shook her head and Ginny exclaimed in disgust and their mother said, "Byron!"

Robyn took a fresh napkin and wiped her chin, still grinning. Her seat was by the window and she was backlit by the late afternoon sun. Beneath the table, she nicked his shin with her bare foot, a show of solidarity. She turned to stick her tongue out at Alyce, and Byron saw that her face was no longer a child's.



It's Friday evening, close to seven-thirty, and Byron is lying on his bed like a friendless boy in an orphanage as he listens to the water shushing through the pipes. Robyn takes twenty-minute showers. Then, hair turbaned, she emerges, wearing the white bathrobe with Eyore on the pocket that she got for her last birthday. Eyore has always been her favorite, which, Byron thinks, bodes well for *him*. She knots the belt for the walk down the hall.

He can be patient because it seems she has come to him a hundred times already on her little naked feet, hollow-boned the way birds are hollow-boned, allowing them to fly, and so waking no one with her footfall on the stairs.

But, really, she hasn't bothered with the attic after the initial fuss three years ago when it first became his bedroom so Alyce and Ginny didn't have to share anymore. For weeks after, she'd played a game with her friend Emma, whom she doesn't talk to anymore, where they were captured princesses waiting for rescue. He'd come home from school and chased them downstairs more than a few times.

The attic is divided in half: his room on one side and extras of their family life on the other. Boxes of Christmas ornaments are stacked in the corner beside a set of turquoise rocking chairs, bought to be refurbished and put on the front porch. A listing wardrobe is crowded with out-of-season and outgrown clothes.

He has a mirrorless bureau with a television on it and a desk that holds his computer. His mother believed a household should have only one of each for communal use. She speaks about the fragmentation of the modern family in her lectures.

"Oh, *Byron!*" she'd said mournfully. "We'll never see you again."

When the water stops, Byron scrambles to his feet but he can't move as quickly as he thinks he can. This continues to surprise him, his bulk. Rushing now, he moves down the stairs too quickly and practically tumbles into the hall just as Robyn is about to disappear into her bedroom.

She gasps. "Byron! You scared me."

He smells her shampoo—Pantene for Fine Hair—and for a moment, he's dizzy. "Listen, come upstairs to my room for a minute?"

"What? Why?" She tugs at the towel, freeing her hair, which has grown nearly to her waist. Alyce and Ginny keep urging her to get some kind of stylish cut, angling, layers, a fringy bang. There is not much chance she will listen to them, and Byron is grateful. He wants to comb her hair and braid it as he has watched their mother do so often, but without interest. Not then.

"I want to show you something," he said, his voice low to intrigue her.

She frowns. "What is it, some website about Ireland or something?"

"I thought you wanted to go to Ireland," he said, stung

She shrugs, finger-combing her hair. "Someday."

"I'm going," he says. "I might live there."

Her hand stills. "For real?"

He's got her interest. "Why not?" he says boldly but leaves off there. It's too soon to invite her. When he does, it will be to point out that they can move to County Clare, where their grandmother was born but no one knows them. There, they will be at home and strangers all at once.

"That'd be pretty cool," Robyn says with grudging respect.

"Did you get the Hershey's kisses?" he asks.

"Huh?"

"The Kisses. I bought a pack and I know you like them too, so—"

"Oh yeah," she says. "Was that you?"

"Who else would it be?"

"I don't know. I thought Lisa for some reason. What is it?"

"What's what?" Byron asks. His heart begins to pound because he's sure she's noticed the way he's looking at her. He can't help it. But maybe it's good she sees.

Robyn rolls her eyes. "Upstairs? What you have to show me? Because I have to get ready. We're going to the eight o'clock movie."

"We?"

"Me and my friends." She is fidgeting.

Eight o'clock. So soon, the doorbell will ring for her, or the mother chauffeuring tonight will honk the horn. He feels stupid because he should have known she was going out. It will have to be a weeknight or a Sunday then.

"It can wait." He pinches the rolls around his waist. She averts her eyes.

"Okay, then." On the threshold of her bedroom, she turns. "It's not an email from Dad, is it?"

Though Byron wants to lie and say yes, because for that she'll dash and might not even bother throwing her clothes on first, he can't because he isn't cruel. He shakes his head and she nods back and goes into her room, shutting the door.



The night is both moonless and overcast. Byron is sitting on one of the two sagging wicker chairs on the front porch, sipping from a bottle of Heineken and eating Tostitos. There's no salsa so they taste flat. He keeps eating anyway.

He's lost count of the number of women who have arrived on the porch, some crying, some stone-eyed. In

weather too hot or too cold, Carolyn leads them inside to her office, but in fine weather she brings them to the two wicker chairs and listens as they say, "He left me for his secretarynursesthenannymysistermybestbestfriendintheworld." Many are pretty, a couple have been beautiful, but most have been average. Byron has peered out the window at them and wished only for the other side of the story, the man's. When they sobbed or whispered or shouted, "How could he do this to me?" Bryon asked himself, "Yes! How? Why?" The reason cannot be the same for all.

Carolyn doesn't drink beer but her boyfriend likes a few when he comes over for dinner and a movie. Then he has to stay over because even two is too many these days. Byron wishes he could just be honest and tell them, *Look, your mother and I want to fuck*. Byron basically likes him though he doesn't seem particularly interested in family life. He's an X-Ray technician. He and Carolyn met on New Year's Day when Robyn fell ice-skating and had to have her ankle checked. Thankfully, it was just a bad sprain. Byron has regrets. For two whole weeks, she did little but sit on the couch with her foot propped up on the coffee table. He might have spent time with her. They might have talked.

Tonight is Saturday and Carolyn and Michael are out to dinner with another couple. Byron used to hang out with Jimmy and Dozy, on weekends but their friendship has crumbled without the bond of Key Food. Ginny is out with her boyfriend of a year. She swears he will follow her to the Peace Corps though Byron has doubts.

They'd been born out of time, her and him. Ginny and Quint should have been a priest and nun, secretly in love, but not obliged to act on it. Ginny, who preferred reading to talking and swatted hands off shoulders and flinched if a stranger passed by her too closely. And Quint, who blushed when he ran out of conversation, which he often did suddenly.

Fickle Alyce is on a date with a guy she met at a bar she'd gotten into with a fake ID. Robyn is at a slumber party at

Genevive's house. Byron is not even sure which one. Genevive is. He remembers when Robyn used to have two best friends, not an entourage.

Byron is on his second beer when a car pulls into the driveway. Since he has not turned on the porch light, he doesn't see that it's Alyce until she's up the steps and approaching the door, keys out and jangling.

"Hey," he calls.

But he doesn't scare her. She isn't even slightly startled. Instead, she clicks across the porch to peer at him. "Is that beer?"

She's pulled her hair back in a barrette and it isn't flattering.

"It's light beer, don't worry."

She actually laughs, so he knows that she's had a couple herself. He's suddenly glad he didn't make fun of her ears.

"How was your date?" he asks, because, though it's Alyce, he is lonely.

"My date!" She sighs and sits down in the other chair. "Asshole."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Yeah, this one had me a little bit fooled. The night we met, he asks me what's the one thing a guy can do to really charm a woman? My answer: dance with her. So tonight, he takes me to The Haze --"

"Haze's? Fuck," Byron says. "They didn't card you?"

"Nope. Jake ordered wine and the waiter didn't blink. The music starts but he doesn't get up. I figured maybe he needed a couple of glasses to warm up, but no! Not one dance."

Byron laughs and she joins him.

"What a loser," Byron says, though this man's existence comforts him. In the world, there is awkwardness as great or greater than his own.

"Indeed." She is wearing a light white sweater over her t-shirt so, dark as it is, he can see her shoulders move in a shrug. "I'm out of here in a few months anyway."

Alyce promised their mother she would attend college for

at least two years. She is a student at Gilbride, though she never took a class with their mother. But now, in the fall, her obligations filled, she is going to the CIA.

"Must be weird, huh?" He drinks from his beer.

"But good. Great, in fact. You know me. I wish we'd never left the city."

"Yeah," he says.

"You need to study harder, By," she says.

"Yeah, yeah."

Alyce leans forward, making the rocker protest with a loud creak. "No, I mean it. I'm not just nagging this time. You need to go away to school. Okay, I'm not saying you can get into Harvard, but somewhere. Do the work now, or it'll be too late."

A lump rises in his throat. He tries to wash it down with Heineken.

"Think about it." She squeezes his arm and when she lets go, he nearly reaches for her.

But she sighs again and stands up. "And now I'm going to bed. I've had it. 'Night, By. Don't stay out here too long."

The screen door slams and when she's gone, Byron realizes that his sister did not ask why he was alone in the dark on a Saturday night drinking beer, light or not. This makes him sad.



Though he would prefer his own bedroom because it's farther away from everyone else's and the door locks, Robyn's room will have to do because he hasn't come up with a foolproof way to get her up the stairs.

Byron waits until after dinner on Wednesday, Robyn's day to do the dishes and a school night. She won't be going anywhere.

As soon as they finish eating, he leaves the table and rushes upstairs to the bathroom where he washed his face, his armpits and his penis. He considers tucking his t-shirt into his jeans but that makes his fat fall over his jeans like something just barely

corralled.

When Robyn comes in, he is sitting on her bed, his hands clasped between his knees. Her mouth opens in surprise. It's unseasonably warm for May and her face is pink with heat. Her hair is in a ponytail, and she is wearing green shorts and a white t-shirt, damp from the chore she has just finished.

"What are you doing in here?" she asks, and he hears uncertainty in her voice. She's not sure if she should get mad.

"I need a favor," he says.

"A favor? From me?" Her eyes widen in surprise.

Byron smiles. She's the baby of the family, after all, not used to being asked for things.

"What?" she asks, a frown coming and going.

"Close the door."

She does.

Byron stands up. Robyn stands still.

"There's a dance at school."

Robyn laughs impatiently. "I know. Spring Fling—Enchanted Forest."

He forgets that she's in the same school as him now. He never sees her. Their schedules are too different.

"I asked this girl to go and she said yes."

Her mouth falls open. "Oh!" she says and then again. "Oh!"

He can see her cataloging the school's piteous girls: acne, weight issues, the girl with pretty much no chin, the one with scoliosis (can that one even dance?), the girl with thirteen fingers.

It's going like he planned, but Byron's mouth is suddenly dry as a bone and his hands begin to tremble. "I need to—I wanted—"

She never sighs like Alyce, snaps "*What?*" like Ginny, or says his name encouragingly as their mother does. No, Robyn waits. She roots for him. She does so because she is his girl, though she does not know it.

"To practice," he finally says. "I've never danced before, not

for real.”

Robyn shoves her hands into her back pockets and shifts from one bare foot to the other. “Maybe Alyce. Or Ginny—”

“They’ll make fun of me.”

Robyn nods and chews her lip. “It’s not like I’m some kind of expert dancer.”

“But you’re an athlete. Athletes are naturally graceful and all that.”

She smiles, pleased. “I guess.”

“I brought music.”

He stole a Michael Buble CD from Ginny and after previewing each song, he chose “The Way You Look Tonight” to be their own. He presses the button on her CD player until he reaches track eleven.

When the song starts, he turns to her. “This might be a little weird.”

She giggles and smooths her hair. “No kidding. Whatever.”

Byron goes to her and slides one heavy arm around her small waist. They begin to move, their bodies not touching, not quite.

“I think you need to, uh, pick up your feet a little more or something,” she says.

“Okay.”

“And don’t stand so close.”

“Sure.”

“It’ll be air conditioned, right? You’re kind of sweaty.”

Byron had not thought she would really try to give him advice. “Just let me get a feel for it, okay? Tell me how I did after.”

“Oh! Sure.” She giggles again, snorting a little at the end.

But after that, he feels her breathing deeply, as though she’s falling asleep. He wants to inch his hand up to her bra strap.

“By?”

“Yes?”

“Am I graceful?”

“You are.”

She falls silent. He pulls her a little closer. Her hair tickles his chin. He drops head and buries his face in her neck.

Like lightening, she shoves him. "What are you *doing*?"

Byron stumbled back.

"Dancing."

"Dancing? Freak!" Her blue eyes, eyes to drown in, say even more.

"Robyn—"

"Fucking fat freak. Get a *life*." She spins on one heel, stalks across the room and yanks the door open. "I'm going. You better get out of my room."

She does not run, and her footsteps on the stairs are measured. Byron goes as far as the hallway right outside her door. Rooted there, alone for the next song, he understands that she was never going to be too afraid of him to say no, nor too curious to say yes, let's see what happens. Neither did she love him, too. She never would. She never would have, a girl like her.