

## The Dance

Theresa Cormier was poor. You could tell by the way her pale hair hung straight and stringy and her skin stretched tight over her face and her dresses hung loose and too long. She had sores on her legs. She was the poorest girl in our class and everybody knew it. Theresa got free lunches. She always ate everything on her plate, lima beans included. I covered my beans with ketchup or hid some in my milk carton so Mrs. Broussard wouldn't notice and tell me to eat them. But Theresa always had a clean plate. You'd almost think she licked it.

At the end of school last year when we were in third grade we went to River Road Park for an end of the year picnic. We got to wear shorts that day, and we all brought our lunches to school. Mary Ellen and I—she's my best friend since kindergarten—had decorated our little paper lunch bags with colors and stickers the day before after school; most kids decorated their bags or at least wrote their names in big letters on them so our lunches wouldn't get mixed up. But nobody got mixed up about Theresa's. She brought a big grocery sack. It was all crumpled and folded way down with a big fat roll across the top. I sat on the grass with Mary Ellen, and we traded halves of our sandwiches—ham and cheese for bologna with dill pickles. But I watched Theresa some. She sat on a bench next to Mrs. Williams. Theresa brought a jelly sandwich. I think it was fig preserves. I saw some drip on her dress when she took a bite, and then she had brown spots on the front of her dress the rest of the day. I bet they were sticky. She didn't bring a napkin. Or anything else. Just that sandwich. I saw Mrs. Williams cut her apple in half and share it with her. But it wasn't like Mary Ellen and I trading half our sandwiches and her letting me have a bite of her chocolate cupcake for a bite of my peanut butter cookie. For one thing, Theresa didn't have anything else to share. And who would have eaten anything she brought anyway? Not even Mrs. Williams, I bet. It would have germs. I know it would.

Nobody really liked Theresa. One time last year we were on the playground at recess riding on the merry-go-round. One of the boys started shouting, "Push, push, push." Then other kids joined in like they did sometimes, and sure enough, Bonnie Brown shoved Theresa off. We laughed as we went around in circles, passing by her over and over as she lay face down on the ground. Finally, she got up without looking at us and brushed off her dress as she walked over to the water fountain. She ran water over her arms until the bell rang to go inside.

Later when I went to the back of the classroom to sharpen my pencil I just happened to glance over at her desk. She looked up at the same time and our eyes met. Blue eyes, angry eyes. She blinked and looked away. I guess she had been crying the way her face was streaked with dirt, but the teacher didn't notice and Theresa never told. I thought it was a mean game, but I never told, either.

After that day she usually found her big sister, a sixth grader named Dora Ray, and they sat together under one of the big oak trees or sometimes they would walk along beside the fence that surrounded the whole school ground. They almost never came over where we played on the slides and swings and jungle gym. Dora Ray was bigger, a lot bigger. She was slow. That's what my brother said. Mack was in her class and he said she couldn't do anything right. Except draw pictures. She drew animal pictures. Mostly horses. He said she probably copied them.

This year Theresa didn't have Dora Ray to walk around with her since Dora Ray was at the junior high, just like my brother. Theresa spent a lot of time by herself during recess. Sometimes I noticed how she would pick up stuff like she was interested in rocks or maybe a bird feather or she would just walk around or stand near the building until recess ended. I sort of wondered why she never played with anybody the whole year.

Well, anyway, it was the end of this school year and we were doing a school play like we do every year. Every class had a part, and our class was doing “The Dance of the Flowers”. The boys had to be the grass and dress in green costumes and stand in one place and sway back and forth, and the girls got to wear long dresses, all made alike but different pastel colors, and we got to dance all across the stage.

We could pick any color we wanted to wear and I picked light blue, my favorite. Mary Ellen picked yellow. Our mothers made our dresses and after school we’d try them on and they would measure and pin and sew some more. “Hold still,” my mother would say. “I can’t pin with you wiggling.” Or, “Is that too tight in the waist? You have to be able to move around.”

Later, talking to Mary Ellen on the phone, she said, “My mama said I can wear some of her lipstick.”

“Mine, too.”

“And some of her perfume.”

“Mine, too. And some rouge.”

“Mine, too. And my mama has a locket she wore when she was little and she’s going to let me wear it to the play.”

I didn’t have anything to say to that. But later I checked with my mama and she said I could wear a small pin she had. It was a tiny emerald heart. She’d had it a long, long time, she said. The next day I told Mary Ellen first thing.

The week of the play the excitement was almost too much to stand. Four boys in our class got sent to the principal for acting up. All in one afternoon. Mrs. Broussard said if we didn’t straighten up and fly right we wouldn’t be in any play, and then she said it would be terrible if a handful of people ruined the whole thing for everybody. I agreed. My dress was already finished

and ready. One time that week I did get my name on the board. I was talking, but I was talking to Mary Ellen about the play. Well. Almost everybody got their name up that week. Except Bonnie, little miss teacher's pet. She could whistle "Dixie" in the middle of a math lesson and not one teacher would ever pick up the chalk.

Finally, on Friday, we practiced our dance for the last time. I did it perfectly. That's what Mrs. Broussard said. Well, she actually said everybody did it perfectly. But that meant me, too. She stood below the stage, just in front, and looked real serious the whole time we danced while Mr. Sullivan, our music teacher, played. But then when we were done she clapped and said, "Perfect, perfect. Excellent class. Everybody knows their part. I know you'll do just fine tonight and your parents will be so proud of you. And so will I." And then of course she had to give us a million instructions like we couldn't remember she'd said the very same thing every day for the past month.

I walked home happy. I couldn't wait! Plays were my favorite! When I got home I had a banana and graham crackers and I told my mama all about our rehearsal and how Mrs. Broussard said my dancing was perfect. Then I took a bath. I had washed my hair the night before and my mama had put it up in pin curls with bobby pins and then she took it down that morning for me. I made sure I didn't get any of the curls wet while I bathed. When I finished, she told me I needed to lie down for thirty minutes and rest.

Finally, my mama called me. "Alice Ann, come on down for supper!" I put on my robe and went downstairs. We had to eat early because my whole family was coming to see the play. My mother, my daddy, and Mack were all going to be there just to see me. We had tuna fish sandwiches and macaroni and cheese and carrots and iced tea. Mama had made it clear she was keeping it simple because she didn't have time for a big meal and a lot of dishes. I couldn't eat

much of it, though. I was too excited! Finally she told me, “Go on upstairs and get ready. Let me clear up here and then I’ll come help you.” I ran upstairs to my room.

I stood in front of my mirror and put on my slip, and then I sat down on my dresser stool and put on my white socks and my black patent leather Sunday shoes. I was brushing my hair when my mother came in with my dress. She’d pressed it the night before, and she brought it up on a hanger from the laundry room. She took it off the hanger and held it up while I slipped under it and into it. She helped me pull it down. “Careful, be careful. Not so fast. Take your time.” She zipped it in back for me. I looked in the mirror. It was beautiful! She took the blue satin sash off the hanger and tied it around my waist, and made a big bow in the back. Next, she reached in her apron pocket and got her rouge and put some on my cheeks. Then some lipstick. “Only a little of this. And try not to smear it or bite it off.” And then the tiny, perfect emerald heart. She pinned it on my dress. “Don’t you lose this,” she said. And she smiled. I wouldn’t dare. “You look beautiful.” I knew I felt beautiful. I went downstairs to show my daddy. He took pictures and then he took pictures of me and Mack together, and then after a few minutes my mother was ready and it was time to go. On the way out my daddy said, “We’ll get ice cream afterwards if anybody wants to.”

When we got to the school all the fluorescent lights in every classroom were on and light filled the building but outside everything—the trees, the cars, the people walking—looked grey in the gathering darkness. I could see kids through the open windows, and I could hear their loud voices. My daddy and my brother went to the gym, and my mother walked with me to my room where we were supposed to wait until it was our turn to perform.

Everybody looked different with rouge and lipstick on. Even the boys had rouge on their cheeks. Some of them said they weren’t going to wear that sissy stuff but the room mothers put it

on them anyway. Our classroom was so noisy! I think our whole class was a little bit nervous. I was! Everywhere I looked it was like a sea of soft colored dresses and dark green costumes. The colors were beautiful. I loved school plays more than anything! Mary Ellen and I stood in the back of the room comparing our mothers' jewelry when suddenly, the room got quiet.

We stopped talking and looked up. Theresa and her mother were walking in. I stared. Her mother was like an older, bigger version of Dora Ray. She didn't look anything like the mothers I knew. She was old. Her grey hair was pulled back in a bun with bobby pins that showed. She wore black shoes like my grandmother wore. And her hose were rolled below her knees and knotted so they'd stay up. My grandmother did that, too, only she pulled her hose above her knees so the knots wouldn't show. My mother kept her hose up with a girdle. I thought everybody's mother did that. Theresa's mother walked like Dora Ray. Slow. I heard Billy Bob snicker and then, when Mrs. Broussard gave him one of her looks, he tried to make it sound like a cough. Then one of the home room mothers called some of the girls to come get their sashes re-tied, and Mrs. Broussard said she needed some help from a couple of boys, and suddenly, the room was filled with noise again. Nobody paid much attention as Theresa and her mother walked to the back of the room, near where Mary Ellen and I stood, watching.

Theresa looked awful. Her pink dress was the same pattern as ours, with a scooped neck and puffy sleeves. But it was all wrong. The material wasn't shiny like ours. And it wasn't a pastel. It was more like kind of a rusty looking pink. The hem was uneven. The sash looked old, like maybe it was from another dress. Her socks were loose around her ankles, and she was wearing her brown lace-up school shoes that she wore every day. Mrs. Broussard said wear your Sunday shoes.

I could hear Theresa's mother talking to her. "Be careful now. Don't get to playing rough with your little friends here. See how pretty all you girls look? We don't want any of these pretty dresses to get wrinkled." Her voice was soft. Theresa stood still and didn't say anything. She just looked down at the floor. Once she looked up when Mrs. Broussard was giving directions, and her eyes were wide. Her skin was pale, like she was sick. She stood so quiet and still her arms looked doll like. Her mother kept muttering, straightening the sash, patting her, smiling at the air in front of her.

Finally it was time to go. The mothers walked on down to the gym while we lined up in the hall the way we would go on stage. Everybody kept putting their fingers over their pursed lips and going, "Shhh," until the "shhh's" got so loud Mrs. Broussard just turned around and glared until we were quiet again, and then we walked in a straight, quiet line down to the gym.

I felt so sad. Poor Theresa! How embarrassing! How horrible to have to wear such an ugly horrible dress. How horrible to be so poor. How horrible to have a mother more like your grandmother. I felt sorry for her. I wished my mother could have made her dress, too. I wished I could have given her a pair of shiny black shoes like mine. Why did she even come?

We waited back stage until the music for our entrance began. When we walked on stage the lights were bright in our faces. I looked out at the audience, but I couldn't find my parents. Mostly all I could see was the tops of heads, and eye glasses reflecting the lights. I heard some folding chairs scraping on the gym floor. Somebody's baby was babbling. Finally we were all on stage and in our places. The music changed and our dance began. One-two-three, we moved across the stage while the boys began swaying. I looked over at Theresa. How could she dance in that horrible ugly pink dress with her ugly brown shoes? I was thinking maybe she shouldn't even be here.

But then I saw her. She was floating across the floor. Like magic! It was my feet in my shiny black shoes that didn't seem to work very well. Our eyes met. Her blue eyes were clear. I felt like she saw right inside me. But then she twirled and danced the other way.