

The last notes of the little dance band's final song hung in the air as the musicians began to pack up their things. A few couples who clearly didn't want the night to be over just yet clung to one another and continued to move across the smooth floor. Grace, the pianist, approached her husband, Art, as he was arranging his drumsticks in their case and beginning to remove the cymbals from the drum set.

"It's hard to believe this is the last time, isn't it?" Grace asked, keeping an eye on the floor.

"It's time," Art replied simply. "We helped these folks through the hard times in the war, and we helped them celebrate when it was done. They needed something to make them forget their troubles for awhile, and by God's providence we were able to give it to them. Now it's time for us to step down. They'll always have music and dancing, but our style isn't what most of them want anymore."

Art looked up from his drums to see Ed approaching. Ed had been a part of this little eight-piece combo from the beginning. He was the vocalist for the standard and Big Band songs, the caller for the square dance numbers, and he played the concertina for the old-world waltzes and polkas. "Well, Ed," Art called to his old friend. "This about winds things up for us, doesn't it?"

"I guess it does," Ed replied, turning toward the folding chairs lining the walls, where his wife, Emma, was sitting, with an apron she'd been embroidering lying across her lap. Emma didn't always attend the band's performances; six of her eleven children still lived at home, and she always had something to do. She made the aprons in what little spare time she had, and the local J.C. Penney store sold them on consignment for her, so she constantly felt the need to meet a quota. But tonight was different; tonight was special, and she wasn't going to make Ed go through it without her support. "Emma came along to help us close down the show," Ed commented, still watching her. "She brought along one of the grandchildren because she promised a few weeks ago that she'd baby-sit tonight. I suppose we could have left Elaine home with Ruthie and Marie – they're old enough to watch their little nieces and nephews now – but that little toddler just loves music, and Emma knew she wouldn't be any trouble. That's her out there, talking to the little boy over by the coat racks. Isn't he one of your grandsons?"

"Sure is," Art replied proudly. "That's Danny, Marilyn's oldest."

"He's how old now? Four?"

"Almost. He'll be four in July. And your little Elaine there, she looks to be about two?"

"She just turned two, about a week before Christmas. They grow up so fast, don't they?"

"Too fast," said Grace, joining the conversation. "And before you know it, they'll be listening to that new rock-'n'-roll stuff and they won't care two licks about the music their grandparents have been playing for years."

Danny was doing his best to carry on a conversation with little Elaine. She was a quiet child; but warmed by his friendliness, she found herself smiling and trying to appear more grown up than her two years would quite allow. As she walked with him and tried her best to look at him when he spoke to her, she didn't pay a great deal of attention to where she was going, and before too long, she tripped over a large rubber boot underneath the coats, and sprawled onto the hardwood floor. Before she had a chance to untangle herself and regain her dignity, Danny reached out a hand to help her back onto her feet. "Don't worry," he said gallantly, "I'll take care of you." And he led her back to her grandmother, who nodded and smiled her thanks.

Not all that many years later, in the whole scheme of things, but a lifetime from the perspective of two small children, Danny had been all over the world. His father, an army sergeant, had been stationed first in New Orleans and then in Germany for four years; the family had accompanied him and lived off-base in the little communities near the post. Upon their return to the states, they'd spent a few years in Texas, until a medical condition had caused an early retirement and the family found themselves back in their Wisconsin hometown.

Elaine, meanwhile, had become a Girl Scout, and now it was cookie-selling season. This was the 1960s, when small-town children could still safely walk the streets and sell their fundraising items door-to-door, without adult supervision. Elaine knew the streets around her neighborhood, but she wasn't acquainted with the people who lived in most of the houses. The residents of those area homes on this particular Saturday afternoon were generally very cordial, and when they saw her green Beanie and knew she was taking orders for cookies, most were quite welcoming. Elaine climbed up onto another front porch, this one just a block away from South School and next-door to the local soda pop factory, and rang the bell.

Most of the people who had answered the doors had been housewives with dust cloths in their hands, or trailing vacuum cleaners in their wake. But Elaine was somewhat taken aback at this house, when the door was opened by a smiling boy with dark, wavy hair, who appeared to be in about seventh grade. "Hello," he said graciously. "I see you're a Girl Scout. Why don't you come on inside where it's warm and I'll go get my mom to order some cookies?"

"I can wait out here; that's okay," Elaine replied uncertainly, looking at a face that seemed familiar although she knew she could never have seen it before now. "I don't want to track up your floors."

"Don't be afraid of that," the boy persisted, opening the door wider and giving a welcoming swoop of his arm into the room. "I know my mom will want a lot of cookies because we have a big family. So this might take awhile." It seemed to Elaine that the boy was studying her with a vague sense of recognition, as well, and his smile never

wavered as his eyes seemed to pierce her own. “She’s in the kitchen; I’ll bring her out here. Don’t worry,” he winked as he disappeared into the next room, “I’ll take care of you.” And shortly after he and his mother returned, Elaine’s order had increased by nine boxes.

Elaine was adapting well to high school. The ’70s had arrived, and she felt their energy. During the third quarter of her sophomore year, her friend, Donna, approached her at lunch one day and said, “Come with me a minute; I have a senior I want you to meet.”

The two girls walked down the quiet corridors that led to the music rooms, where a smiling boy with dark, wavy hair was tuning a tympani. “Here she is,” Donna said simply when the boy looked their way. “This is Elaine.”

“Hi, my name is Dan,” the boy replied, extending his right hand. “Donna said she knew a blonde I might want to get to know.”

“Oh, really?” asked Elaine, unable to think of anything else to say, never before having been put on the spot in quite that way. She looked toward Donna, who had backed off slightly.

“I just think you two would hit it off,” Donna said, by way of explanation. “I’ve known you both for quite awhile now, and it seems like you should get acquainted.”

“I’m safe,” Dan said, smiling in a way that allayed any fears Elaine may have been feeling. “Don’t worry; I’ll take care of you.” And with that, he took her pile of books and walked her to her next class.

The distance was narrowing, and every eye in the building was on Elaine. The pastor had just asked who was giving this woman to be joined to this man; and now, as her father responded, it was time for her to let go of his arm and take Dan’s to walk the rest of the way to the front of the church. Dan approached her with a smile, looking very handsome in his navy Dress Blues, and began to escort her to their places before the pastor. He felt Elaine’s uncertainty in the stiffness of her arm and in her measured gait as she let him lead her forward. But he knew they’d been born for this moment, and he wanted to ease her qualms. So as the music swelled, he tilted his head toward hers and whispered softly, “This is our day. Don’t worry; I’ll take care of you.” And he led her toward the spot next to their witnesses, where they would begin their new life together, from that day forward.