

The Drifters

Words: 3707

"You should do the large bowls by hand." Philip retrieved the Corning ware bowl from the dishwasher and started scrubbing. "We'd save so much on our energy bills if you paid attention to the little things, instead of putting big bowls in the dishwasher."

"Honey, you're right." Brenda poured herself some more wine. Energy bills, Energy bills! As if they were poor.

"We should get going if we're going to make that concert."

"Just give me a minute." She drained her wine glass and headed upstairs to the master bathroom. A Jacuzzi tub sat under a stained glass window near the raspberry monogrammed towels she had given Philip last Christmas. The mirror showed a pretty blonde fifty-five year old. Brenda brushed her teeth, drew a careful line around her lips and filled in with creamy lipstick. The Drifters. She would never forget their music: jangling, Latinate drum-and-violin concoctions at once monotonous and sensual. When she was a teen-ager, the music of the Drifters had once conjured up images of dark men in striped robes dancing in a moonlit desert in the Sahara, like the picture of Saudi men she'd once seen in a magazine. The sands in her fantasy always resembled the Sleeping Bear dunes in Charlevoix, Michigan, where she'd grown up. She took a last look in the

mirror and went downstairs trailing a scent of Coco. Philip stood in the library, coat and gloves in hand.

"I found another poop, this time right on the Chinese rug in the hall for chrissake. You're going to have to do something about this or I'm getting rid of that dog."

"I try to pay attention, Phil, I do, but sometimes he forgets. C'mere, Little Edgar Hoover." She picked up the pug. "Now what is this about a poopy?" She stroked the dog's hairless stomach and cuddled him. "You're such a little cutie. Now get in your crate." She handed in a dog biscuit, closed the crate and put on her coat. Philip set the burglar alarm and Brenda hurried through to the garage.

"We really have to stop infantilizing him, Philip." She laughed as if she'd made a witticism. What was making her feel so giddy? The Mercedes roared out of the driveway into the dark night. Headlights twinkled along the black line of a highway in the distance. The seat warmer started leaching its heat into her bottom and made Brenda feel cozy. She smiled over at her husband.

"You remember 'Under the Boardwalk,' don't you?"

Philip brought the car up to a stop sign. K-blink, k-blink, k-blink, k-blink, k-blink went the turn signal. Philip eased onto Rte. 2 and accelerated, his face an emerald mask in the glow of the dashboard light.

"Hell-ow-ow," she said in the singsong voice. "Boardwalk?"

Philip cleared his throat. "Huh? No, not really." Philip's gloved hand searched out a Kleenex from the container suspended behind the passenger seat. He honked then said, "Listen. Can we stay for just an hour or so tonight?"

"Of course, Dear."

They tiptoed across the frozen parking lot toward the Elk's Club, strains of music leaking from the building. When they opened the doors, a blast of sound exploded in the sharp air. Brenda laughed out loud.

"What's the matter with you?" Philip said, shrugging off his coat in the overheated foyer.

"Cyu-pid / Pull back your bow – woe;

And let / Your arrow go – wo;

The place was brightly lit with people sitting at tables for eight, as if at a potluck supper. Wheelchairs dotted the aisles and several children were running around. Several couples danced in a roped area at one end of the hall. Brenda and Philip settled down at a table close to the performers with three other couples, beer bottles and cokes at hand. Brenda looked around. Nobody she knew. Not exactly the type of thing their friends would go to, but she felt virtuous, loving all people, not just those in her set.

The four Drifters were backed by three musicians on guitar, percussion and sax / trumpet. They wore white sports coats and gray slacks with thick gold chains glinting from their open shirts. And pinky rings. Exotic for a town like Concord, Massachusetts. The people with the real money in Concord, the old money, were the ones who never wore jewelry and dressed the dowdiest. Where else did one see boiled wool jackets and Pendleton skirts? Only in Concord. None of that crowd was here, of course.

When the song ended, a wave of polite applause rippled through the hall. Brenda clapped hard, compensating for the tepid response. She turned to the man next to her and asked, "Are you Drifters fans too?" The man had a gap-tooth. He held his beer bottle in

one hand, his arm showing a large, complicated tattoo. "Yeah, absolutely. This sure takes ya back, don't it?"

"Oh yeah." She thought for a moment and added, "Say, I may be wrong but wasn't "Cupid" done by the Spinners, and not the Drifters?"

"Now that I wouldn't know."

Philip lifted an eyebrow and shot her a glance.

Rhythmic thudding started up again, and the lead Drifter crooned into the microphone, "Who remembers this one? Where were you in 1959?"

They started singing "There Goes My Baby."

It was the music of the desert men, a true Drifters hit, heavy and persistent. Brenda's heart thudded. The song belonged to the summer before Brenda's senior year in high school. As the Drifters bobbed through synchronized steps, the years peeled away. She was working at The Menonaqua Beach Club on Little Traverse Bay, a private resort not far from her home. She and her best friend Marsha, another waitress, had had a great time sneaking half-glasses of wine and beer on luau nights, making sure to stay late enough at the club so that their parents would be asleep when they drove home. The waitresses wore short forest green nylon uniforms that buttoned up the front to a V-neck. They set tables, served meals from heavy trays and tried to avoid angering the itinerant cook, Bobby, a frizzy-haired maniac who would take your head off with his violent temper. There was plenty of time to fraternize with the guests, and Brenda was conscientious, efficient, and friendly with her people, especially the Clarkes, a family of three cute kids herded around by their sullen, distracted mother and portly father. All the men took special interest in Marsha, whose uniform stretched taut over her full figure, the

v-neck never high enough to hide her substantial cleavage. Marsha was a quiet girl and tongue-tied, yet many of the men tried to engage her in conversation, always when their wives were out of earshot. These fathers, whose children Brenda sometimes took to the beach, seemed oblivious to Brenda's effervescent personality and spoke only to Marsha. Especially Mr. Clarke.

"You must have a lot of boyfriends, Marsha?"

"I don't have any boyfriend, Mr. Clarke. I'm not allowed to date."

"Now that I find hard to believe. What's the story here, a beautiful girl like you without a boyfriend?"

Marsha didn't understand. Brenda did, however. It was Marsha's large breasts that drew the men to her. Brenda still harbored the hope that her own figure would fill out but still.... Sometimes her lack of curves brought her excruciating emotional pain. One day while she was walking down to the beach in her pink and white bikini on her free afternoon, a voice behind her said, "Excuse me, Miss, would you pose for the cover of the Charlevoix *Summerweek*? When she turned around, revealing her unsubstantial chest, he stammered. "Listen, I'll have to get back to you to set up a time. Is there a phone number where I could reach you? "

He never called. It's not that Brenda was ugly; she was just plain. And she had no bosom, a stunning physical inadequacy in the era of Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe. It hurt to discover that no amount of personality compensated for curves, and Brenda smiled at the memory of the naive girl she'd been.

Amidst the applause, the lead singer announced the sale of CDs and tapes during the break and the Drifters bounded off the platform.

“I’m going to buy a CD.” Brenda stood up.

“Not for me to listen to, I trust,” said Philip.

“No, don’t worry – just for my car.”

“Okay, while you’re doing that, I’ll get us some wine.”

Brenda paused. “Hey, how painful is this for you?”

“Let’s just put it this way. I’m planning to retaliate with my new Philip Glass CD.”

“Ouch. Well, you’re being a good sport.”

Philip squinched up his face at her. “Don’t buy out the place. Do you need cash?”

“No, I’m fine.”

She made her way toward the lobby. The four Drifters stood behind a table loaded with merchandise. She joined the crowd around the table and at the last minute decided on a glossy photo along with the tape.

“What happened to the original Drifters?” she asked the lead singer, Caesar Valentino.

“They’re all gone now, all dead, except for B. B. King. I knew Clyde McPhatter; he was still a part of the group when I joined.” Cesar Valentino had a warm smile and a heart-shaped face. His black eyes glittered. Brenda noticed his manicured hands and the warm cocoa color of his wrists against the snowy cuffs as he signed the photo. He handed it around to the other Drifters. “Here, we need more John Henries for this beautiful woman.” When he gave her the photo, his smooth dry hand lightly caressed her own.

“Some of the new guys have been with the Drifters for going on twenty-six years, now,” he said, crinkling his eyes.

"That's a long time, isn't it?"

"Well, yeah but we're like brothers, you know what I mean? We like being together." He flashed a smile and Brenda tried to think of something else to say but the moment passed, and she left feeling she'd missed something important. Threading her way among the wheelchairs and children, Brenda had a vision of herself alone with Mr. Valentino in one of the Elk's Club's shabby rooms, his gold necklace pressing against her chest. Oh, Brenda, she thought, shocked at herself. She'd never cheat on Philip.

Philip said, "I paid four bucks for this wine. They probably bought the whole fricken bottle for four bucks!"

“Well at least it's benefiting the Fire Department. We can't be too critical,” she said.

"Yeah, yeah. All for a good cause." Philip settled back in his chair.

The Drifters had returned. “Let's hear it if you remember this golden oldie from 1959!” The band went into some preliminary thumps and the Drifters started swaying and singing “Up On the Roof.” Brenda clapped her hands like a child.

When the Drifters did the next song, “Splish Splash,” a Bobby Darren song (!) Brenda felt she had to dance, so she stood up and walked to the dance floor. She caught the eye of another middle-aged woman, arms also held high, and they smiled at each other as they gyrated.

The next song was “The Twist.” Brenda sat down again.

"Why are they doing songs the Drifters never recorded?" Brenda asked. This was a problem. Philip gave her a thin smile and shrugged. She continued, "I have to say that these songs sound all the same. It's funny. I used to think they were unique."

After a few more songs, Philip signaled he was ready to leave. Brenda moved to pick up her purse when Mr. Valentino started to speak again, his voice intimate and sexy. Was he looking at her as he spoke? "How many of you can go back to 1960 with the Drifters? 'Cause if you can, you made this Number One on the billboard charts and we'd like to dedicate it to each and every one of you."

A single guitar plucked out the signature opening and they began.

"Oh, you can dance..."

Every dance with the guy who gives you the eye,

And let him hold you tight."

People in the audience came alive, hooting and clapping, shouting and cheering. They'd all been waiting for "Save the Last Dance for Me." Brenda said, "Just one more, Philip."

In the summer of 1960, when Brenda was a senior in high school, she, her sister Marcie, and their friend Anna Palmer, whose parents had also taken a cottage on Lake Huron over on the other side of the state, drove their dad's Buick Special to the Saturday night dance at East Tawas, Michigan. The dance hall was on a pier top over the lake.

The parking lot was filled with pickup trucks. Brenda remembered the faint sound of music, the softness of the night, and how the waves of Lake Huron made gentle lapping sounds against the shore huddling in the dark beyond. The girls in their halter-top sundresses and Capezio flats made a flurry of checking their hair and lipstick in the

mirror before leaving the car. Ascending a narrow pine staircase to get to the hall, they passed under the reproachful stare of a moose head mounted at the landing, its salad bowl-sized rack of antlers casting spidery shadows on the walls. Upstairs the hall was dark. It smelled of cigarette smoke and floor polish. The girls clustered and started whispering and laughing to show they were having a good time. Brenda darted glances into the void on the other side where shadowy silhouettes of boys moved. It wasn't too long before a boy appeared in front of Marcie; then another asked Anna to dance. The two girls stayed on the floor with their partners for a second dance, and then another.

Brenda kept watch through the next few dances. Surely someone would ask her to dance. Someone had to. Time passed. She fought her sense of humiliation and imagined there were invisible arrows identifying her as a wallflower. The music was good, of course, and she managed to maintain her smile. Marcie glanced now and then in her direction from behind the backs of her partners; once she even came and stood with Brenda for a few moments. Brenda's hopes withered and she could no longer quell her inner voice: You're too tall, too plain, flat-chested, geeky, ugly.

When she couldn't pretend any longer, she started to leave. She'd wait for the others in the parking lot. It was okay, she told herself. At least they were having fun. But it felt awful, too, to have this empty place in her stomach, as if all her happiness had been sucked away leaving behind a sickening vacuum. A new record began. The latest Drifters hit.

“Oh I know, (Oh I know) that the music is fine,

Like sparkling wine;

Go and have your fun.”

“Wanna dance?”

The boy standing before her had dark hair. He was okay looking. Not ugly or a loser at all. She could hardly believe it. He was wearing blue jeans and lumberjack boots, and his t-shirt smelled freshly washed.

“Sure.” His hand was calloused and hard and he was like the boys who took shop and automotive science, boys she didn’t know in high school. They moved around, pumping, hesitant, and Brenda, gripped by indecision and a fear of breaking the spell, could find no words. He broke the silence. “You here on vacation?”

“Yes, our parents have a cottage for a couple of weeks. It’s fun here, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s fun.” They danced past Marcie who flashed her a huge smile. Brenda said, “Do you live around here?”

“Yeah, I work over at Cohoon’s granary. I drive their truck most of the time, but I also help in the yard.”

“Did you grow up around here?”

“Yeah, I’m just a hick from East Tawas.”

“No.” She spoke with passion. “Why would you say that?”

“Well, you know, you probably think I’m a hick.”

“I don’t think you’re a hick at all.”

“Well, that’s good.”

He pulled her closer. She reveled in the soft cotton of his t-shirt and in the contours of his arm and shoulder. His smell was soap, cigarettes and Mennen aftershave. When the music ended, Brenda prepared to be left alone. She looked around, casual, indifferent so he’d know it was okay for him to walk away. She could still go to the car

and wait it out. But he didn't leave. When the music started again, he took up where he'd left off, taking her hand into his callused paw and wrapping his arm around her.

Each time the music stopped, she waited for the boy to leave, but he just gripped her tight around the waist again. They stopped trying to talk and when the DJ played "Unchained Melody," she found herself clinging to him, her cheek in his neck. The music was transporting; it had invoked a mystical experience that brought her close to ecstasy. The lyrics suddenly made sense to her; she "hungered for his touch." She knew she wasn't in love, but her heart ached with something like love. And joy. When the music ended the boy asked if she'd like to get some fresh air. They hurried past the moose head and crossed the parking lot to the beach. The breeze from the lake was warm. A golden strip of moonlight flung itself across the water from a million miles away. She felt outside herself. This was not happening to her – it was too important, something that happened to other girls, but not to her. She watched, spellbound, as he steered her to a dark corner by some rocks. He kissed her, shocking her by putting his tongue in her mouth. After awhile he had her on the ground. He slid his hand under her skirt and found her pubic hair beneath the elastic band of her green Lollipop cotton underpants. She'd never known a boy would want to put his hand on her private parts and she felt a sense of wonder.

And then he ruined it. The boy had gone too far; all of a sudden he was forcing himself into her and things were real, frightening. Brenda fought him. After a brief struggle, he stood up. "Why?" he said as she pushed him away. She ran to the parking lot. She hid in the car – thank God she had the key- and huddled, sheltered and rebuked at the same time by an oppressive silence. After awhile, the faint sound of music reached her

ears, reminding her that other kids did have fun at dances. She began to hate herself. She was the one who'd ruined things, not him. Why was she such a scaredy cat? The words of her mother clanged in her head. "Good girls keep their legs together," "You're a good girl." "Save yourself for your husband." The words had imprisoned her just when she had begun to learn about love and she hated her own prudery and cowardice.

Driving home through the woodsy back roads, Marcie and Anna dissected their various dance partners with much hilarity. "Come on, now, Brenda, we saw you with that boy. Did you like him?"

She only said, "He was okay," but as she drove the Buick along the dark asphalt, a ghostly run through the pine forests in which every black tree loomed as if from a Disney woods, she privately reviewed every gesture, every word, every nuance of her evening. Listening to Anna and her sister, her head swirled. It astonished her how they were so objective, so unimpressed with the dance, while she'd been so deeply affected. Devastated. A maelstrom of joy, guilt and regret raged in her breast.

Brenda was suddenly pulled back to the present as she realized that the concert was coming to a close.

"But don't forget who's taking you home,

And in whose arms you're gonna be."

And Darling, /save the last dance for me.

Brenda's tablemates, the people near them, and in fact, the entire roomful of people were smiling and swaying to the music as if they were all joined by a sacred, common cause. She fought back the lump in her throat, the sadness welling up in waves.

Suddenly and with the intensity of a slap, Brenda remembered exactly what it felt like to be seventeen; what it was like to feel joy and excruciating pain all at once. She'd forgotten how to feel much of anything, so swathed had she become in the routines of her comfortable life. She mourned the loss of the searing sensations of her adolescence that had carried her up and down roller coasters of emotions. She saw with clarity how she'd subdued her runaway emotions so many times that she'd become lost behind protective layers, devoid of lightness.

The Drifters were winding down.

“Oh darling, (do-do-do) / save the last dance for me;

Oh save (cha-cha-cha) / the last dance for me.”

There was a silence in the hall, a moment of grace that hovered in the air, and then all hell broke loose. Everyone cheered. Where was that exit? Brenda reached for her cashmere coat on the back of the chair and put on a bright smile, praying Philip hadn't noticed her tears. She gathered up her purse and followed him out.

The Drifters (Encyclopedia Americana)

American rhythm and blues vocal group that produced a series of chart-topping hits from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s. The Drifters were actually two groups--one built around lead singer Clyde McPhatter, the other an entirely different group that took the name. The early group reached number one on the rhythm-and-blues charts with "Money Honey" (1953) and scored several other hits, including "White Christmas" (1954). Three lead singers later, in 1959, Treadwell replaced the entire group with another ensemble, led by Ben E. King. Still recording for Atlantic, now under the guidance of writer-producers Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, The Drifters cracked the pop Top Ten in 1959 with "There Goes My Baby" (remembered for its innovative use of strings and Latin rhythms) and took "Save the Last Dance for Me" (1960) to number one.