

GOOD DANCERS

On a chilly Saturday morning in November, eighty year old Kathryn McClelland stands on the top step outside the Lutsen Elementary School. She can see her reflection in the big glass doors. One hand tucks a loose strand into the knot of white hair at the nape of her neck, the other smooths the front of her red flannel pajamas.

A rusty plaque embedded in the brick above the locked doors says FOUNDED IN 1945 – the same year Kathryn started teaching and one year after she married Henry. Kathryn presses her face against the glass. At the far end of the empty hallway, lined with bulletin boards and large crayon drawings, is her old first grade classroom. Across from that is the small cafeteria, full of kid sized tables and chairs and saturated with the smell of steamed hot dogs and hard boiled eggs.

A car pulls up to the curb. Ruth McClelland, Kathryn's younger daughter, turns off the ignition and gets out, a long quilted coat over her arm. She takes the stairs two at a time, places the coat on her mother's narrow shoulders. "Let's go home, Mom," she says. "It's cold out here."

Kathryn's pale blue eyes begin to water. She doesn't recognize Ruth. The muscles behind the papery skin of her cheeks quiver. She tries to pull away but Ruth keeps a strong arm around her as she guides her toward the car.

"It's O.K. Mom," Ruth says, snapping her mother's seat belt in place. "It's O.K." She points to the 5x7 photo taped to the dashboard for times like these. Kathryn and Henry are sitting in the swing on their big front porch, holding hands and smiling into the camera.

Kathryn studies the photo as they drive away from the school.

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Ruth and her sister Myra are sitting on the couch in the livingroom, where they have a clear view of the stairs leading up to their mother's bedroom. The sisters, tall green eyed redheads beginning to gray at the temples, are often mistaken for twins.

"That's the third time this month, Ruthie" Myra says. "What happened?"

Ruth fills their cups from the chipped teapot, spilling a few drops on the coffee table as she pours.

"She got away while I was changing her sheets," Ruth says. She shakes her head. "It's my fault I know."

"You can't watch her every minute," says Myra, shoving her long hair behind her ears.

"It's scary," Ruth says. "She was always so independent."

Myra gets up and walks around behind Ruth. She rubs her sister's shoulders through the sweatshirt she always wears on weekends. **NO LONGER SHOCKED BUT STILL APPALLED**, says the shirt, left over from Ruth's volunteer days at the rape crisis center.

"I feel like I'm letting her down," Ruth says.

Myra gives Ruth a final squeeze. "I'll go check on her," she says.

Kathryn's white hair glistens on the dark blue pillowcase. She sleeps on her side, the heavy afghan pulled up to her prominent chin. She snores lightly. On the night table is a small brass bell. The words **RING ME** are taped to its wide wooden handle. On the floor where it has fallen from the bed is something Myra wrote in seventh grade about her

gramma, a story that took first place in the school contest that year. Myra picks it up and places it next to her mother, thinking about the Saturday afternoon visits to her gramma's house, the big console radio she used to sit in front of, the marshmallow peanuts she ate till her stomach hurt.

The cedar chest at the foot of Kathryn's bed is covered with photographs. Kathryn and Henry's wedding picture from 1944, she in her second hand satin dress, he in his army uniform ready to ship off for Germany; Myra and Ruth on the swings in the big back yard; their baby brother Virgil digging in the sandbox. Myra runs a finger across the top of one dusty oak frame. It topples over, setting off a chain reaction that wakes Kathryn.

"Sorry Mom," Myra says, quickly restoring order and relieved to see that none of the glass has broken.

"The wasps still nest in the joints of that swing set, did you know that?" Kathryn says, turning over on her back. "Every summer your dad sprayed them and every summer you got stung anyway."

"I know. Ruth too. She always got it under the arm where it really hurts."

"You have my skin," Kathryn says. "You got sunburned every summer no matter what I did." She smiles and closes her eyes. "Virgil's like your father. Turns brown as a hazelnut." Myra tiptoes out of the room and down the stairs.

"I'll stay over tonight, Ruthie," says Myra. "You can use a break." She walks past the couch to the big front window. "Where'd you find my old story?"

"In the attic. Mom and I were looking through boxes for baby books and there it was."

A truck is parked in the driveway of the house next door, and men are carrying red leather furniture inside. Kathryn's best friend lived there until she died last month.

"You think Mom misses Nancy?" Myra asks.

"I don't know," Ruth says. "She remembers going to the funeral but she gets it confused with Dad's." She leans forward, chin in her hands.

"I should move in for awhile," Myra says. "She's getting worse and Virgil's no help."

"He's got his hands full," says Ruth, getting up from the couch. "Jude's drinking again."

"I wish you wouldn't make excuses for him," Myra says. "It's not right you had to quit your job."

"It's O.K.," Ruth says. "You're a lawyer, Virgil's a teacher. You can't just quit jobs like that." She gathers the teapot and mugs. "I have to pay more attention, that's all."

She goes to the kitchen and comes back with a wet cloth. "Anyway, I can go back to the Credit Union anytime."

A draft comes through the molding around the window. Myra shivers, wraps her arms around herself and looks out again. "On the way over this morning I saw a bumper sticker that said MEAN PEOPLE SUCK, only it was plastered to the rear window of an SUV. A bunch of blonde girls with ponytails and baseball caps were bouncing around the back seat."

Ruth joins Myra at the window. A black and white cat is toying with a dead bird on the front lawn.

“When they saw me watching they made faces at me, like this.” Myra puts her index fingers in the corners of her mouth and stretches her lips as far as they’ll go.

Ruth smiles, tucks a pulled thread into the weave of Myra’s thick wool sweater. “I know it’s silly,” she says, “but I’ve never had Mom all to myself before.” She puts one hand into a pocket of her jeans, lets the other dangle at her side.

“Looks like snow,” Myra says after awhile, slipping her fingers between Ruth’s.

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Virgil’s wife Jude is a Robert Redford fan and Scott Fitzgerald is her favorite author. She’s seen The Great Gatsby at least fifty times. Whenever she feels down she hums the “What’ll I do” tune from the movie and imagines Redford/Gatsby dressed in a tux, opening a bottle of bubbly in the living room of her deluxe double wide trailer. Today is one of those days.

Virgil, a dead ringer for Redford in the right light, delivered an ultimatum before he left for work. “I mean it this time,” he said, Jude sitting at the kitchen table, her hands around a glass of Crown Royal. He put a cup of black coffee in front of her. “You quit or I’m gone.” Jude raised the crystal glass to her lips, the thick bottom distorting her view. She heard the door slam behind Virgil.

Jude spends the morning making ratatouille, Virgil’s favorite, and tweezing gray hairs from her black eyebrows. After a late lunch of french fries topped with a poached egg and chased with three of the six Miller Lights she drinks each afternoon, she tapes seven sheets of paper to the bedroom walls. On each sheet she writes a line from “What’ll I do,” using musical notes as quotation marks. To sheet number seven she glues a picture of an overturned champagne glass from Gourmet magazine and a real cigarette, broken in half. Tired out, she sinks to the floor with the rest of her six pack and

calls Ruth.

“It’s me,” says Jude.

“What’s wrong?” Ruth asks.

“I’m waiting for Virg. He’s pissed at me.”

“Jude, let’s go to an AA meeting. There’s one every night at the old bingo hall.”

“Sure, OK,” says Jude, taking a swig of beer. “I’ll think about it.”

“I can go out tonight. Myra’s here.”

“I drank when he married me, you know,” says Jude. “He didn’t mind it then.”

“Sure he did, Jude. He thought things would change.”

“You can’t change people,” says Jude. “I wouldn’t change a hair on Virgil’s head.”

“Jude.”

When Virgil gets home, he walks into the bedroom and looks around, reading the walls. WHAT’LL I DO - WHEN YOU - ARE FAR - AWAY - AND I’M - SO BLUE - WHAT’LL I DO. Then he sits on the corner of the bed nearest Jude. They both listen to him taking long deep breaths the way he does when he’s at a loss for words. “Babe,” he finally says, “I’m afraid I’m losing you too.”

“Jesus Virg,” says Jude, “I quit, honest. After today, I quit.” Her fingers are tracing the grain of the imitation oak floor next to her leg.

“I’m going see my mother after dinner,” Virgil says. He gets up, touches Jude’s limp hair and walks out of the bedroom. She hears him moving around the house, picking up a few days worth of beer bottles that knock against each other, dropping them

into the garbage can in the kitchen. The radio comes on, oldies but goodies on the local station.

“Dree-ee-ee-ee-eam, dream dream dream. When I want you...”

“The Everley Brothers,” Jude says, standing up and going into the kitchen where Virgil is spooning ratatouille into bowls.

“It’s funny,” she says, running a hand lightly down the length of Virgil’s back.

“When that song came out I didn’t even know you were alive.”

Virgil carries their food to the table. “Yeah,” he says, taking Jude’s hand and pulling out her chair. “I know the feeling.”

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“He’s a weird combination,” Myra says, sipping scotch with her sister and their mother Saturday night. They’ve been talking about Myra’s boyfriend Stew. “A romantic who falls for smart women he’s afraid of.”

“Your father was a little like that,” Kathryn says. “He’d bring me flowers then fret about getting the wrong kind. Or he’d pick me up after school and stay in the car so his electrician’s uniform wouldn’t embarrass me in front of my students.” She settles deeply into the couch between her daughters. Whenever they’re all together like this, nobody uses Henry’s worn easy chair. It still feels, in the evenings, like he should be in it, smoking his favorite pipe and figuring out what supplies he’ll need for the next day’s work.

“He must have got over it, Mom,” says Myra. “You two were married forty years.”

“No,” says Kathryn. “Over time he was more sure of himself, especially after he started the business, but he was never completely at ease with me.” She takes a sip

of her drink. “We just learned to be comfortable the way things were.”

Myra holds out her glass to Ruth, who pours her another shot. “You’d think a creative guy like Stew would be more together,” Ruth says.

“Yeah,” Myra says. “He’s published three poems in the last ten years.” She inhales the smoky smell of peat rising from her scotch.

“Three GOOD poems, though,” Ruth says, grinning so her dimples show.

Myra smirks. “I thought Virgil was coming.”

“That’s what he said last night. I’d give him a call but he and Jude might have something going on.”

“Jesus Ruth,” Myra says. “I love Jude but - ”

“It’s time,” Kathryn says, standing up and walking over to the fireplace. She puts her glass on the mantelpiece next to Henry’s pipe collection.

“Mom?” says Ruth.

Kathryn turns around, fluffing the ends of her hair with the palms of her hands, then tightens the cinch of her chenille robe. “Your father and I are going out tonight,” she says, smiling. “I want you girls to do your homework and get your rest.”

“O.K. Mom,” Myra says, going to her mother and gently taking hold of her shoulders. “Why don’t we go upstairs and get ready.”

“I’ll bring up a glass of warm milk,” Ruth says, heading for the kitchen.

“Your father’s such a good dancer,” Kathryn says. “That’s how he talked me into marrying him, you know.” She starts to hum a tune Myra doesn’t recognize and slips into her daughter’s arms. “Henry,” Kathryn says, moving to a rhythm stored deep in her

bones. “Remember the first time we came here? You were on leave. I didn’t know how we could afford dinner in such a fancy place.”

In the kitchen, Ruth adds nutmeg to the milk heating in the copper saucepan. She shifts from foot to foot, waiting, one hand on her hip, the other holding on to the corner of the stove. The phone rings and she lets it. She can see Myra and Kathryn through the doorway, waltzing slow circles around the living room as though they’re the only two people in the world. Her whole body feels like this is goodbye to both of them.

Stew’s voice comes out of the answering machine. “Myra,” it says, “I’ve got the last line of a love poem:

LINGERING LIKE THE MOON IN THE MORNING.

What do you think?”

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A key turns in the lock and the kitchen door opens. Virgil steps inside. Ruth is rinsing glasses and cups in the sink. Her tumbler of scotch is on the counter next to her.

Virgil kicks off his snowy shoes and hangs his coat on the doorknob. “Ratatouille from Jude,” he says, putting a plastic container on the table. He walks up behind Ruth and wraps his arms around her, making a sandwich of the two of them. “You O.K.?”

“Yeah. Want my scotch?”

Virgil kisses the back of her head and lets go. “Where’s Mom?”

“Upstairs with Myra.”

“How is she?”

“She thinks she’s going out with Dad tonight.” Ruth wipes down

the chrome faucet and threads the dish cloth through the handle of the refrigerator.

“Myra’s talking about moving in.”

“I know. Saw her downtown the other day.”

“Everything O.K.?” Ruth says.

“Jude’s promising to quit again.” He sucks in his lower lip. “What’s the music?”

Ruth tilts her chin toward the ceiling and listens to the sounds coming from their mother’s room. “Frank Sinatra.” And then the words: “Last night when we were young....”

“Wanna dance?” Virgil says, extending a hand.

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At 2:30 in the morning Ruth sits up and turns on the small lamp next to her bed, soft mauve light filtering through the rice paper shade. She goes to her mother’s room, listening for Kathryn’s breathing. There is a glass of water on the night table. Kathryn’s bifocals and the brass bell are on top of Myra’s story. Ruth tucks the afghan around her mother’s shoulders. Then she carefully lifts the bell, takes the story and goes downstairs to her father’s old chair to read.

Grandma died when I was six. My mom said she was forgetful, so I used to think she was lost and would find her way back soon, but when she didn’t come home for Thanksgiving I knew we wouldn’t be seeing her again.

I remember her couch. It was covered with piles of jigsaw puzzles from one end to the other. Every Saturday afternoon, I sat on the floor and tried to make a puzzle while I listened to “City Hospital” on the big radio and ate a whole bag of orange marshmallow peanuts. Mom and Dad stayed in the kitchen drinking coffee with

Gramma. Mom always brought her a package of those thin brown cigars she liked so much. When it was time to go, Gramma came to the doorway and watched us drive away.

I remember Gramma's kitchen from the time I stayed overnight when Mom was in the hospital having my sister Ruth. That was before Gramma started to forget things. I was four. Before we could eat supper we had to move all the canning jars off the table. They were full of pears, peaches, pickles, and beans from Gramma's garden. After supper, we went out to the barn where Gramma kept her big white rabbits with pink eyes. Each one had its own cage. She fed them lettuce and carrots and filled their water bowls to the top. Then we sat on the back porch looking at the fireflies and listening to the crickets.

That night we slept in Gramma's bed. It was a lot bigger than mine. After I put on my pjs and got under the covers, Gramma sat down on her side and turned off the light. I could hear water pouring into a glass and pills rattling inside a bottle. She told me not to be afraid of the dark.

Now Gramma is gone and somebody else lives in her little house. I don't know what happened to the rabbits, but Mom gave me all the puzzles and a paperweight with a butterfly inside. Ruth likes it so I'm going to give it to her on her next birthday.

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Upstairs, Kathryn wakes up with a craving for peanut butter. On the way out of her room, she catches a glimpse of herself in the wall mirror. She stops to study her reflection. Even in the moonlight, her eyes are so deep set and dark rimmed they startle her.

In the livingroom Kathryn finds Ruth in the easy chair crying, Myra's story in her lap. "Come on honey," she says, holding out her hands. "Sit on the couch next to your old mother."

Kathryn puts her arms around Ruth and rocks her gently, the faint smell of Henry's tobacco on the air.