

The Dance Hall of Her Dreams

Millie put the boy to bed, tucked him in, kissed him goodnight, and went back to the kitchen. It was the kitchen of her mother's tears, the kitchen of her father's anger. It had become the prison of her marriage and the dance hall of her dreams.

She wore a flowered dress with big pockets, common among the housewives of the early Fifties, among women who'd given up, or never entertained, dreams of gowns, cocktail dresses and party frocks. Millie stood about five feet two, a slightly fleshy, soft woman, a little immature for her age, at thirty-five, like an old doll or a young grandmother.

Millie's husband, Frank, was a sullen, difficult, uncertain, uncomfortable man. He worked hard, but never quite made it. He seemed forever preoccupied. Friends had, half-heartedly, tried to reassure him, but he didn't listen to their reassurances, and they never truly meant what they said.

Millie tried to be supportive and understanding of her husband, but she was whistling in the dark. He'd become distant in every way, and she took to the bottle. A little nip, here and there, at first. She never wanted to become a drunkard like her father, but it had crept up on her, and it was the only thing that made her feel that everything was all right.

A child might have helped, and her bond with her next-door neighbor, Jonathan, filled her needs, a little. They were drawn to each other. They were buddies. She didn't tell him much about herself. He was only a kid, only ten years old, but as he got older, and she got older, the feelings between them became stronger and more confused.

Jonathan could feel the change. It was uncomfortable at first. He didn't understand why she seemed different. The smell of alcohol was pleasant. She was a warm-bodied person, which felt nice, but she seemed to have gotten warmer lately. The more she drank, the warmer she got, and the more she seemed to touch him and hold him.

It was OK, as long as she didn't get mushy. He hated it whenever any adult or some friend of his parents got mushy with him. But Millie wasn't like that. She wasn't mushy. Except lately, she was getting a little mushy, and that made him feel uncomfortable.

Whenever she came into his room, when she was babysitting him, when his parents were gone somewhere, like they were on this particular night, it was with mixed feelings that he greeted her. It had always been one of his favorite times, and he would never forget that, but something funny was going on, and he didn't know what to do about it.

His own mother wasn't very friendly. She never kidded with him, or played with him, or hugged him, or tickled him. She treated him like he was *a little man* and gave him all kinds of advice. She checked his report card and asked him questions that she expected answers to, so he acted much older than he was. He came to believe he preferred the company of older people, grownups, over children his own age.

He thought that kids bored him, except babies, which fascinated him. He always wanted to hold them. He was always concerned if they were warm enough or had enough to eat. His dad called him *Buster*, or *Buddy*, or *Pal*, or *Kid*, or *Hey You*, and smiled at him once a week, whether he needed it or not. He could remember playing with his dad twice, or maybe it was only once.

But Millie was fun. When she came into the spare room where he always slept, when he was at her house, it was different from any other time. During that time only, he felt free to be a little kid, to let down his guard and have fun.

Millie had a bottle in the pocket of her housedress. It was a small bottle of peppermint schnapps. She diluted it with water, after she'd poured a drink off the top and then taken a long pull from the bottle, while she stood in the pantry where she kept her supply. She told the counterman at the liquor store that her husband gave out these nice bottles of schnapps to customers all over the western part of the state, so she needed to buy them by the case.

The man at the liquor store was no dummy, but he was content to accept the order and deliver the cases to her back door, and to inquire politely after her health. Even if he suspected the true destination of the booze, it mattered little to him. After all, he was in the business of selling booze to anyone who wanted it, anyone who was 21 years of age and had the money.

She'd been getting sick and tired of drinking the little bottles of peppermint schnapps. Her father had been a bourbon man, and the smell

of bourbon made her nauseous. She was afraid to switch liquors, but an occasional bottle of gin or wine felt just fine. In her drinking, she found a measure of freedom. Finally, she was able to at least imagine a different life. But the feelings were elusive and internal.

Occasionally, she dreamed of escape, listening to a male voice on the radio, but she never thought of taking any action. She was trapped, and the booze only increased her feeling of imprisonment. She fell into a cycle of temporary relief and greater pain.

The only person who seemed to understand her was her friend, Jonathan. He was wise beyond his years. He seemed to be tapped into something eternally wise, and eternally innocent. Wisdom and innocence were what she wanted for herself, and what she seemed to have lost, or never had. When she was around Jonathan, she felt like somebody liked her for who she really was and didn't care about anything else.

When she acted funny, he laughed. When she got serious, his eyes got big, and he seemed to hear what she was saying. Of course, he was only a kid, and she was older than his mother, but the two of them had a *special* relationship. Sometimes, falling asleep at night, she thought about him, and she would give him a pretend hug, as if she was lying next to him in her bed, her empty bed, the bed that felt even emptier when Frank was lying in it.

Jonathan's parents brought him over and dropped him off. They were on their way to the lake to spend the night, as they often did, to *get away from it all*, and they wouldn't be back until the next night. Millie fixed popcorn for Jonathan, while he listened to his favorite radio shows and read comic books. She felt shy and shaky and didn't say much.

There were days and days and days when she felt shaky, until it had become almost normal. She could still get by and do what she needed to do. There wasn't much of an alternative, as far as she was concerned. But, with the boy around, it was embarrassing, and she felt bad. It was like having arthritis, she thought. You just did the best you could. Life was no bed of roses, that was for sure.

He took his copy of *Boy's Life* to bed at 9:00, and she tucked him in, kissed him goodnight, and went back to the kitchen to drink. She drank most of the bottle of sickeningly sweet liqueur. Then she got up from the

kitchen table, ran water from the tap into her bottle, recorked it, and put it into her pocket. The radio was playing songs from the hit parade.

She began to dance by herself, dreamily, on the kitchen linoleum and took another pull on the bottle.

“Too much water,” she said and grabbed a fresh bottle from the flour drawer, which no longer held any flour.

She poured a drink in a glass, drank it, danced a bit, with one hand holding her balance on the countertop, took another swallow, and stopped.

A cold determination came into her eyes. She put the bottle in her pocket, turned, and looked willfully at a low cabinet drawer across the room. She let out a long, hard sigh and moved to the drawer. She opened the drawer, and lifted out a bottle of bourbon wrapped in a bath towel. She unwrapped it like she was unwrapping a gun in Anne Frank’s attic. She poured the bourbon into a glass, fresh from the cupboard. She began to feel powerful. She drank from the glass. Each swallow seemed to give her another piece missing from her puzzle, another jolt of courage, another lift to her spirit. She stood for a long time, letting the bourbon seep into every cell in her being, until she became transformed, filled, sure of herself.

The kitchen was backstage for Millie. It was where she let the spirit enter, whatever spirit was available to her. When she got to Jonathan’s door, it was as if she was going onstage. In her playful heart, and in her drunkenness, she was the consummate performer. She was dazzling. She was a captivating presence to her audience of one.

His room was lit by moonlight from outside, from the crack in the door, and the nightlight in the wall-plug. It was a soft, yellowish, warm light, that felt cozy and safe. Millie was the sugarplum fairie. She had been kissing Jonathan goodnight, ever since he was little, and he loved it. It was a little awkward, now that he was ten, but he still loved it. It was a ritual of hugs and kisses, of kidding and tickles and facemaking.

The room had been hers when she was Jonathan’s age. Then it was her younger brother’s. Then it was a guest room. Then she got married and lived on the other side of town, until her parents died. Her mother died of cancer and her father died in an accident no one talked about. She and Frank inherited the house, and they moved back in, three years ago.

She walked calmly and steadily to the guest-room door. As she approached the door, she lowered herself into a cat-burglar stance. She was

having fun, enveloped in a dream world of her own. She wanted to see if anyone else was in her dream world with her. The doorknob was in her dream world. The braided rug was in her dream world. This small room was a dream room in her dream house in her perfect, private dream world, aided and abetted by the amniotic fluid of a bottle of bourbon.

Jonathan looked at the crack in the door. He had been lying still, listening to the music, which he liked a lot, especially Phil Harris, who was funny. Jonathan liked it when Phil Harris sang, "Minnie the mermaid, down at the bottom of the sea." The music made him feel good. He had popcorn and listened to The Jack Benny Show, Inner Sanctum, and the Radio Playhouse of the Air, and he read Superman, the Green Hornet, Bugs Bunny, and he read Boy's Life, where he learned how to make a lean-to in the woods, and he read the jokes in the back.

He read one joke out loud to Millie, and she laughed and told him he was a real *comedian*, and now he was really comfortable. He'd had a piece of cherry pie and a glass of milk, and the blankets were piled high and the air was warm and icy cool by the window glass, where it was damp and almost frosty, and nothing bad could happen, and nobody would bother him, and Aunt Millie treated him like a king or a prince, or like he was really special, or like it was always his birthday.

He called her Aunt Millie, and she called herself Aunt Millie, even though he knew and she knew she wasn't his aunt, but she was more like an aunt than anyone he'd ever known who was an aunt or wasn't an aunt, so who cared, and so what, and that was that.

But life doesn't always stop when things are good. It keeps moving, even when things are great, and they don't always stay great, even when you want them to stay exactly as they are. Jonathan already felt that things had changed. Aunt Millie had been getting weirder and weirder lately. Even though she'd always been a little weird, it was OK-weird.

You can call someone you really like *weird*, but you don't mean that they are bad weird, you only mean they are different from the dumb or dopey people that you're used to. Or they might be better than what you're used to, and you'd call them weird for that. Even better could be weird.

And Millie was better than what was the usual thing for Jonathan, but she changed from being good-weird to some kind of weird he didn't understand. She seemed to be like a foreigner or a stranger in the same

body who had always been the closest to a real friend he'd ever had, who wasn't a kid like himself.

He noticed the smell of the schnapps, but women always had peculiar smells, like perfume and cologne and powder, and they used vaporizers and powder puffs, so he was used to women having odd smells, but this was a smell that seemed to come from the inside and not just the outside. Like it was a smell she drank and not just one she dabbed on, or splashed on, or rubbed on.

But he didn't put two and two together. In fact, there were too many details that had changed, for him to be able to fix the cause on anything specific. Not to mention that he was going into the 5th Grade, and he was getting to be a pretty big guy, and he'd gotten a lot more mature, since he had gotten out of the 4th Grade, where everyone was real childish and stupid, in ways he could hardly believe.

It used to be he was just a kid. It never occurred to him to be anything but a kid, but he was starting to feel like being a kid was a big mistake. He was beginning to feel like he'd better start acting more like a guy is supposed to act, when he gets older. Not like a grown-up man and not like a teenager, because he thought teenagers were really idiotic, but just not like a little kid anymore.

He was starting feel more like Huck Finn and less like Baby Snookums, and even though he forgot about the whole thing most of the time, and sometimes he felt like a baby, and sometimes he wished people would be nice to him like they were to babies, he was not so sure about what was going on inside his own personality, not to mention his body.

Sometimes, his weenie got tingly, and he wanted to rub it, and when he did, it felt real good, but it felt unusual, like he'd never felt that way before, even though he'd had a weenie all his life, and it was always doing funny things all by itself. It just seemed that everything had changed, and everything felt different, and there was no way of knowing what to think about anything.

Most of the time, he just shrugged his shoulders and said, "What the heck." So when she came to the door, some part of him, the part that had started being worried about her, said, "What the heck." He started to feel like a little kid, and he pulled the covers up under his chin.

He pretended he was asleep, but he kept his eyes a tiny bit open, like a tiny crack, like the door to his eyes was open a little bit, and he pretended to snore, even though he wasn't sure if he ever really truly snored, and he listened to her voice. She was pretending he wasn't there. She pretended she was just looking around, like she'd never been there before, and he pretended he had disappeared. Maybe the bed was empty, or he had become a bedbug or something.

"Hoo, hoo, who is there? Is anybody there?"

She pushed the door open ever so slightly.

"Hoo, hoo, who is there? Is anybody there?"

A Beautiful Garden

A wave of intoxication swept up Millie's back, across her shoulders, flooded the back of her head and exploded against her eyeballs. As she entered the small bedroom, she was entering an aquarium without a mask or an air tank, as if she could breathe underwater. The borders of her skin had dissolved, as if she was in tropical water and tropical sun. The normal separation between herself and everything else was gone. It was just gone.

It wasn't the way she usually felt. She was used to feeling cold and separate, with no connection between her and anybody or anything, like a stranger on a strange planet, and now, magically, she was intensely connected to everything. There was no separation. She was swimming in a beautiful garden among beautiful things. And everything outside her was swimming inside her. Nothing was outside her, and she wasn't outside anything else. It was like being a fetus in the womb. Inside and outside were the same.

Her brain felt just as free. She looked at the small face poking over the piled-up quilt, and she thought she could swim her thoughts across the room into his head and look back at herself, looking back at him. She didn't feel as if that happened, it did happen, in her toxic, borderless, magical garden.

He was part of her and she was part of him. She felt the same way about the walls, the curtains, the rug, the bed, and the flowers in the small crystal vase on the dresser, the vase she had put there, that afternoon, when she was the other Millie, the scared and foolish Millie who lived like a skinny rabbit in a world of briars, wolves and shotguns.

Now she was completely safe and powerful, and even those words were only bizarre concepts. She was in her own physical dream, where the tiniest thread of being belonged to her, and nothing was beyond her grasp. She pushed the door open and floated into the room.

"Where is my little fish - my little fishy - fishy - fish?"

She spoke the words slowly and deliberately. The sound of the words, in her mouth, in her ears, brought her closer to the surface, and she regained some semblance of normal human behavior.

She stepped into the middle of the room, reached back with her right foot, and touched the door, gently, toward its closing, just enough to leave it open a few inches. She performed the small gesture perfectly, and in her mind, it was a long, slow, and glorious dance.

She stood erect in the middle of the oval braided rug that her parents had bought on their honeymoon in Wisconsin. She stood tall and calm like a soldier, like a four-star general, floating atop a swirling whirlpool of yellow, crimson, royal blue, and the deepest black she had ever seen. The rug stopped swirling. She bent at the waist, like a courtier to the Prince Regent, and performed a regal bow.

“I trust that you are resting well, m’lord,” she said, and he laughed.

He couldn’t help it. It was fun to watch her go through these changes, right in front of him. She was putting on a show, just for him. His eyes began to sparkle. He started to slip back into the boundless joy of a baby. He almost cooed and gurgled. He didn’t care. He didn’t care about anything.

Over the next while, Millie slipped from one character to another with the ease of a master impressionist. She took his windbreaker from the hook on the back of the door and wrapped it around her head like a babushka. She bent into a stoop and spoke in a Russian accent.

“Yah, it is so cold in St. Petersburg, this winter. I hope we have enough shoes to eat.”

She put the jacket back on the hook, climbed up on the chair by the dresser and stood holding the small lamp in one hand and the copy of *Boy’s Life* in the other. She said, in a French accent, “Geev me your tired, your poor, your hungry, yearning to eat free.”

Jonathan was cracking up and trying to stifle it with his fists, wrapped in blankets, up against his mouth. Millie climbed down and put the lamp back on the dresser, but kept the lampshade, putting it on her head like a pith helmet.

She said, in a stuffy English accent, “Pardon me, you natives, but have you seen Dr. Livingston, I consume. Oh, I’m sorry, you’re the cannibals. You consume, I presume. Sorry, no offense, cannonballs, I mean cannibals. Oops, pardon me.”

She put the shade back on the lamp and stopped to brace herself against the dresser. A wave of alcohol washed over her, and she lost her bearings

for a second. Jonathan thought she was doing something new, and he laughed.

She took on the accent of a gruff monster, “Who is that person creeping across my bridge? Who is sneaking across my big, fat bridge? I think I’ll eat up anyone who’s crawling on my bridge. “

She pulled herself up with creeping hands on the covers. She pulled herself to standing position, close to the bed. She stopped, and her mood changed from the silly clowning she’d been doing.

She lifted her arms to the air that seemed to embrace her. She gave herself to the strong arms of the air. It was like being in the hands of a perfect partner. She became a dancer, the most buoyant, the most delicate creature of a choreographer’s dream. She was lifted into the buoyancy of the dance.

Two years of weekend ballet lessons, when she was his age, had been enough to build a recurrent daydream into a few moments of actual dancing. For a few turns, she seemed to lift free of gravity’s bounds. She trailed a spray of auric light from her spinning hands and feet. Her hair flew loose from her uplifted head like a series of time-lapse photographs of a waterfall or the wind in a wheatfield.

But she couldn’t sustain the grace, and as her right hand trailed her last turn, her fingers rippled over the dark blue sea of quilt, across Jonathan from his feet to his head, she slipped. She lost control of her untamed dance of freedom. Her arm lunged to break her fall, and the butt of her palm jammed against Jonathan’s open-jawed chin. It slammed his teeth together and forced his head back and deep into the pillow.

As soon as he was hit, she fell to the floor, and her arm was gone. She fell, a half-step backward, and dropped on her backside, square in the middle of the room. She hit the floor like a string of boxcars in her spine, and then collapsed to her side, like the same train toppling off the rails in slow-motion to the ditch beside the tracks.

All this occurred to her like a dream within a dream, but as soon as she came to a last jolt, she was laughing. She was laughing little pops in the throat, then staccato runs, then a burst, then trills, and finally a wide-eyed, open-mouth, standing shout at a stunned Jonathan, still in shock, from deep within his pillow.

He was scared. She had landed a solid blow from which her arm melted and disappeared. She had popped him in the chin, and then she was gone. He didn't hear her hit the floor. She was so light, and so loose, that she seemed to have dropped into a pool of water and just as softly floated back to the surface, roaring with laughter like mad teenagers from the lake. For a second, he had completely forgotten her, as his chin jammed against his skull, and then he forgot himself, as the demonic mask of laughing Millie roared back into his vision.

She collapsed around him, gushing with apologies and kisses. She ran her hands and finger all over his face, neck, shoulders, all over his head, eyes, ears, nose, chin, mouth.

"Oh, my baby, my precious baby, are you all right? My god, what a terrible thing. Are you OK? Oh, my baby, oh, my love, can you ever forgive me? What a terrible, silly, stupid thing to do."

Then she was laughing.

"Oh, my, oh, my, oh, my, what a fool am I. God, Jonathan, sweetie pie, are you OK? Do you still got all your teeth? Huh, sugar? Do you got all your little pearly whites, huh? Is everything in place? Is anything missing? Do you got all your precious bodily parts?"

She took a breath and went on.

"Jeez, I bet I must have scared you plenty. I bet I did. You still got your cute little tongue, or did you swallow it? Show it to me. Show me. Is your tongue still there? That lovely little tongue. Is it still there? The little snake. Is it still snuggled up in its warm cave? Is it OK? Show it to me! "

Jonathan stuck out his tongue a little bit, and Millie's eyes popped out, and she roared again.

"Oh, my yes, there it is. Still there. Oh, my."

She grabbed his head with both hands.

"C'mon, I wanna see if it's OK. Let me see that sneaky little old tongue again. Let's see if it got bit in pieces, or is it still in one pieces?" She heard her words, and repeated them, "In one pieces."

She laughed at her dumb word play. He stuck out his tongue, again, further, trying to accept her mania, trying desperately to accept it as a game. They'd stuck out their tongues at each other before, so he stuck out his tongue, trying to play, trying hard to play, but feeling scared and confused and trapped. He stuck out his tongue, even though Millie's face was only

inches from his, and her eyes were wide, and she was dripping sweat, and he could barely recognize her.

He stuck out his tongue, and Mad Millie licked it, with her fat, wet, slobbery tongue, like a dog, like a wild dog, and just as fast, she threw her head back, and she howled like a wild coyote.

“Oh, I got you. I got your naughty little tongue. I got it when it came out to play. You came out to play and I got you. My big old tongue got your little old tongue - got it good, and now you’re it. Your tongue is it. We played - tongue – tag – and - now - you’re - it.”

Her words trailed off, and she collapsed again. She fell back across the foot of the bed, sinking deep into the quilt and blankets, her legs over the side. Jonathan was overcome with the most awful repulsion, as if Millie had shoved her tongue into his mouth, as if she had put her fingers in his mouth, as if she had made him eat something awful, and he couldn’t get it out of his mouth, because he didn’t know what was in his mouth. It was his own tongue, and it felt wrong. It felt like it didn’t belong there anymore, but he couldn’t take it out, or swallow it, or spit it out. It was there, and there wasn’t anything he could do about it.

He looked around the room, and it was a different room. Millie lay across his legs, and he couldn’t move them. He felt crazy. He wanted to cry out for help, but there was no one to cry out to. There wasn’t anyone, no one, not one person in the room, or in the house, or in the whole world, who would come, and even if they did, it was like being trapped inside his own body, and there wasn’t any escape from that.

Millie began to rock from side to side, gently at first, and to sing, gently at first, enough to give him a ray of hope, a chance of comfort, but soon, she was rocking more and more, and then she was bouncing and rocking, and then she was sitting up. She looked terrible. She raised her hand to her forehead.

“Oh, Jonathan, I’m a little dizzy. It’s not so good when an old lady like me falls down - falls down and goes boom. Jonathan, listen to me for a second, OK? I need to ask you a question, OK?”

She rolled over and lay her head on his chest. His chest, in his t-shirt, was now exposed. Her hot, sweaty head lay almost covering him from chin to belly, with her hands against his skinny rib-cage.

“Are you all right, sweetie? Are you OK? I need to know. I really need to know. Are you OK? Did I scare you? Did Silly Millie scare you? I didn’t mean to scare you, sweetie. I’m the one who got scared, too, honey bunch. Wow. I got scared just like Boris Karloff or somebody. Are you just as scared as me, little honey bunch? Are you my big old Boris Karloff, huh, baby?”

She wasn’t looking at him. She was lying on his chest and talking to herself. She put her hand up across his mouth and felt around it, like she was trying to find something.

“What’s the matter, honey, can’t you talk to me? Are you scared of me? Are you scared to talk to me? “

She sounded serious.

“What’s the matter, my little Boris Karloff, cat got your tongue?”

She laughed. She began to tickle him in the ribs under his arms. She pulled back, sat up, and looked at the little boy beneath her. Waves of intoxication and nausea washed over her, in her. She was deep in her unreasoning panic. There was only the raging loss of her sense. Whatever autonomy of sensibility she may have had before, it was lost. She may have used Jonathan’s name, she may have had some shattered, scattered thoughts and feelings about Jonathan, but she no longer recognized him.

If Millie had been near water, her hands would have reached into water. If she had been on sand, her hands would have gone to the sand. If she had fallen among rocks and mud, she would have reached among the rocks and into the mud. She reached in desperate need for saving. Whatever demons had found Millie for residence were now free to run rampant, free to use her hands, her voice, her words, her history, her life. Millie was in the middle of a blackout. She would not remember anything she did. Jonathan would never forget.

A Little Princess

Millie looked down at Jonathan.

"Tell me, little boy, do you know who I am? I'm here to check your pulse - check your bones - make sure you don't have any broken bones - or not - injuries - not injuries. Are you injured in any way? Do you have - any bones broken - are you broken in your bones?"

She was drifting in a kind of delirium. The words were coming almost at random. She had no logical hold on her words, her thoughts, or her actions. She pulled the covers off his body. It wasn't cold in the room, and it wasn't warm, but it was warm, anyway. She was sweating hot and sweating cold. He was too scared to be cold, but he was freezing with fear. He lay in his thin underwear, in the middle of the bed, in his skinny little body, with his hands at his neck, in clutched fists of fear.

"What a white, skinny little boy you are."

She spoke as if it wasn't Millie who was talking.

"Is everything in its proper place - anything out of place - any bones out of place? Is your little boner in one piece?"

She put her hands on his crotch, still covered with his underwear. She made a little tent with her fingers. She dropped her forehead down to the knuckles of her hands.

Jonathan managed to speak, in a shaky, sad whisper.

"Stop, Aunt Millie, please don't do that. Please stop, I'm cold. Don't do that, please."

She turned her head and sat up.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said, coldly, "don't you like having the doctor check your bones?"

She smiled, cold and evil.

"Is there something - special about your - damn little prick - your little - piss prick - you little piss prick - you little pussy - Is there something so damn - special about your - about your pussy - you little pussy, you little bitch! Huh? What's so damn - special about your little pussy? What makes you - any damn different - from anybody else - you little, whimpering - you whiny bitch!"

She stood up as if Jonathan was not even in the room. She wasn't Millie anymore. She was her own father. She grew large, and she backed up against the door, blocking the room.

"Who fucking told you - you - were so damn special? Who made you a little - princess? **Princess!**"

She spit out the word.

"Princess - I'll show you - who's a damn princess - you fucking little pussy - you pussy - you bitch - you pussy - you fucking little bitch pussy."

She began to sway and blur. She slumped and turned around, as if to get out of the room. She shrank, and she started to cry. She started to weep, to disintegrate. She sank back into herself. She crumpled against the door, blocking it. She fell into a pile at the door, crying incoherently.

Jonathan had pulled the covers against himself. He stared in shock at the transformation he saw her go through, from demon, to ogre, to useless heap. She seemed asleep for a few moments. The room was quiet, except for his frantic breathing and her muffled, erratic, shaky, rasping heaving. Jonathan got up slowly and put his clothes on. He moved over to the chair by the dresser and pulled his shirt and pants on. He put his socks and his shoes on, all the time watching the heap at the door. As he got his shoelaces tied, she began to stir. She was coming around. A little color came back into her face, and she began to realize where she was.

"Oh, my God, what happened?"

She got herself around and seated on the floor with her back against the door. She tried to orient herself. She vaguely saw Jonathan in the chair.

"Oh, my good God. I must've fallen. Did I fall, Jonathan? Oh, yes. Oh, my. I fell when I was dancing. I must've made a nasty fall. Oh, I feel terrible. You must think I'm a terrible fool. Oh, Jonathan, why are you all dressed? It's not time for you to go, is it? It's not morning? It isn't morning at all. Not yet. You aren't going to go, are you, just 'cause I fell down."

He didn't know what to say. He wasn't sure who he was talking to. It seemed to be Millie, but she was still very drunk.

"I thought you were sick. I thought maybe I better get a doctor."

"Oh, no, no. No! No! You don't have to do that. I'm OK. I don't have anything broken or anything. I think I'm OK. I'm just feeling - I'm just feeling pretty - pretty - I'm pretty woozy, I guess - I guess I'm feeling a little woozy from the fall - when I was dancing."

"Maybe I better go home," he said. "I could go home, if you're OK. I mean if you're sick. You could be all right. I mean I could go home and you could be by yourself."

"Oh, Jonathan, that wouldn't be right. That wouldn't be right."

She'd gotten herself up, and she was sitting on the bed. She took the handkerchief out of one pocket, and she was mopping herself up, the best she could. She stopped, all of a sudden, as if she had realized something.

"What has happened? Something happened? Oh, no. What happened?"

She was beginning to come around, and she remembered, not what had happened, but that such things had begun to happen to her, and she was afraid. She knew it hadn't been good. She looked at Jonathan and started to move toward him. He cringed in the chair. He half-stood and pulled himself back against the wall. She recognized his panic and dropped to her knees on the floor. She reached a few inches toward him, tentatively and weakly, and then she withdrew.

"Something bad has happened, hasn't it? Oh, Jonathan, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I did something bad. Did I do something bad? Oh, god, I'm so sorry."

She pulled back and sat again against the door. She stared. Her eyes filled with tears. Her body began to rack with sobs. She pulled the bottle of schnapps out of her dress pocket and held it against her breast-bone with both hands, like a doll she was guarding or hiding.

"This is my bad thing. This is my bad thing I do. Did you see me? Did I take some of my medicine? Did I spill some? Did I get some on you? Do you hate me? Oh, Jonathan, it's not medicine. I know that. It just hurts me when I don't take some. When I don't take some, it hurts me, and I can't feel as good. It's not something that you need to worry about. It's not for you. It's only for me. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. You don't hate me, do you?"

The need to take a drink was greater than the words she had come up with to mask the need, "Look, see, if I drink just a little, I'll feel OK. I'll feel a little better, and I won't feel so bad, and maybe you won't hate me so much."

She drank quickly, wanting to drink politely, but instead, she gulped the liquor. He looked at her, hoping she would feel better.

"I don't hate you, Aunt Millie, I'm just - you scared me."

She didn't look at him while he talked. She had fallen into a passivity, renewed by the surge of alcohol in her bloodstream, and by the now-familiar sense of safety with a bottle in her hands. She looked at him and spoke in a calm, rational, controlled voice.

"Did I scare you? Oh, baby, I'm sorry. I don't ever want to scare you again. I won't do that, ever again, I promise. Don't you want to get back in bed. It's OK. I'll turn my back. I promise. I'll be just as quiet as a little mouse. I'll pretend I'm not here. You can jump in bed, and maybe we can read a story or something, or you can tell me about your Cub Scouts or school or something."

She took another drink. As the liquor swelled in her, she took a different tack.

"Hey, old buddy, I guess the cat's out of the bag. Now you know my nasty little secrets. Well, that's what real friends are all about. Listen, I could tell you some secrets that would curl your hair, and maybe you're just the guy. God, somebody has to know the awful truth."

She slipped into the bitter, self-pitying, well-worn banter of her family.

"You and me has allays bin 'onnis wid each udder, haint we, ole buddy, ole pal?"

And then she dropped it.

"And you can tell me all about your sordid past. Not that you got much of a past, at your age."

She stood up and grabbed a pillow from the bed. She tossed it gently to Jonathan. He pulled it against himself, almost covering himself. She saw him cover up. She grabbed the quilt and wrapped it around him and around the chair he was sitting on.

"Hey, as long as you're going to take up residence in that chair, you might as well be comfortable."

She had become nearly her old self. In a few moments, she had calmed down considerably. And she was standing. She wasn't threatening him. She almost twinkled as she looked him in the eyes. For a few second, she looked at him like the top-notch, A-1, good old pals they had been. She stood at the far side of the room and did an adequate curtsy.

"I'm little Bo-Peep - and I've lost my sleep - oops - my sheep. I've lost my sheep - and I could use some sleep. My sheeps are sleepy - my sheepies are getting sleepies."

She was being silly, and Jonathan, once again, tried to accept it, but by then, he could only wonder what would happen next.

“Hold on a second, will you, Jonathan. I’ll be right back.”

She stepped outside the room and took a long drink. Then she picked up a hallway chair and pulled it back into the room. She pulled it up next to his chair and turned on the lamp, creating a cozy little pool of conspiratorial light.

“Do you know who the culprit is in all of this? Do you know who is responsible for everything? I’ll tell you who. It’s Uncle Sam, that’s who. It’s Uncle Sam. And do you know why it’s Uncle Sam? Because Uncle Sam told your daddy and my daddy and my husband and all the men to get out there and kill all the Indians, well, not just them exactly, but might have been, and they did that, and when they did that, mostly, Old Uncle Sam said to them, ‘Well, now that that’s done, you better get a job that keeps you damn busy,’ pardon my French, ‘all the time, so you can’t ever be at home, ever,’ and that leaves people - all alone - to get into - lots of trouble - and they....”

Her train of thought broke down. She couldn’t keep it running.

“Oh, Jesus, I don’t know what I’m talking about. D’you know what I’m talking about? Hey, listen, kiddo, the real problem is having a goddam, pardon my French, a goddam heart. It’s having a goddam heart. “

She was caught by her own thought, “Jesus, nobody should have a heart.” She broke and started to cry, “They jus’ shouldn’t have a heart. Nobody should. Nobody. Hearts aren’t made for people who have to live in this world. Like you, sweetie-pie. Now, I know you’ve got a great big ol’ heart, because I know you do. I know that. Because I think about that, even if nobody else does, and I can tell.”

She was losing it again, and Jonathan could see it. This time she was getting weaker and weaker as she talked. She pulled her legs up under herself on the chair she was in, and she started to lose coherence. Her crying seeped into all her word.

“You, you have a big, beautiful heart, and I have a heart, too, and sometimes my heart gets so big, it feels like it’s going to burst, and oh, god, I’m sorry, I’m getting all weepy, oh, damn, I sure didn’t know this was going to happen, oh, damn it all, Jonathan, I just knew I could talk to you, I haven’t been able to talk to anybody for so long, for such a long time,

never, never, ever. I haven't ever been able to talk to anybody, and you're my only friend - you're the only friend I can count on, and I'm so happy that you're my friend, and I'm so sorry I scared you, I don't ever, ever want to scare you, can you understand that? I want you to understand - oh, what can I say to make you - such a good - and such a good and wonderful - such a wonderful, good boy."

She was weeping into the words so much that they didn't hold together. She was so pitifully alone, helpless, and sad, he almost wanted to comfort her. She wasn't looking at him. While she'd been talking, his hands had been nervously and compulsively rubbing and touching, wiping and pulling on any surface within reach.

Finally, she began to wind down. She had gotten her handkerchief sopping wet, soaking up her tears, and she used the corner of the sheet and her dress and the sleeves of her blouse. She was wiping her nose and her eyes.

"Oh, Jonathan, I'm so tired. I'm so really, terribly, really... tired. Do you mind if I'm so tired? Thank you. Thank you for - thank you for - I'm so - sorry."

And then she passed out in the chair. Jonathan waited. He couldn't be sure she wouldn't jump up and go into another round. But she didn't. Then she moved a little. He withdrew again. She slipped out of the chair and curled up on the rug, oblivious. The bottle fell out of her hand. It was empty. Jonathan got up and covered her with the quilt. He put the pillow under her head, and she snuggled into it. He picked up the bottle and put it on the dresser.

He got his jacket from the hook on the back of the door. He put his jacket on, and he turned off the light on the dresser. Millie lay in the glow of the nightlight. It was a plastic angel he'd always loved. He went to the door, opened it, stepped out and pulled it shut. He went to the front door and opened it. He turned off the living room light, and went out. He pulled the door shut behind him.

The Letter

It'd been a lot of years since his parents had died. He hadn't thought about Millie since he was a kid. The letter came from Millie's younger sister. He didn't even know Millie had a sister. She said she found the letter in Millie's desk, after her recent death. The letter was addressed to him. She read the letter and decided it might be important, so she took a chance and sent it. She got his parents address from Millie's address book. It was the house they had moved to, when he was ten. He was surprised to see that the letter had been forwarded. He took the letter with him when he went to the cafe that night. He took a table in the corner and read it.

Dear Jonathan,

I don't know if you'll ever read this, but I need to write it. I don't know if you remember, but when you were a boy, I acted in a way that's unforgiveable. I broke the trust between us. You didn't do anything bad. You were not to blame for anything bad that happened. I'm sorry I lost a friend. You mean so much to me, even now.

Sincerely, Millie

He hadn't been called Jonathan in a long time. He read the letter four times. Each time he read it, he felt more angry. Finally, he put the letter back in its envelop and put the envelop back in his coat pocket. He sat for a long time, staring at the table-top, while his eyes seemed to swell and glaze over.

He looked at the glass. He looked at the bottle. He looked around the room at the people laughing and talking. He heard his name called, and he got up from his chair and walked slowly to the door at the back of the bar. He stood with his hand on the door, and the memories came back, as if no time had passed. For the first time in a long time, tears came to his eyes.