

DANCING WITH DADDY

"Diane," a hushed voice called from a room down the hallway. Lynn didn't hear her mother answer her father's voice. She heard her father call again, but all she could make out was her mother's name.

"Daddy?" A silence, again broken only by her father's voice, met Lynn's ears.

"Daddy?" she whispered again. No footsteps fell to meet and to calm her growing fear. Hugging her stuffed Snoopy close, the girl slipped out from underneath her overstuffed comforter and peeked into the hallway. Light spilled onto the hard wood floor from underneath and around her parents' bedroom door. The floor creaked as she crept down the hall, her warm feet leaving damp marks on the frigid wood. Lynn raised a hand and touched the white door. She pulled back as if it had shocked her and watched with wide eyes a slight fell onto her feet. The door had opened only a crack more.

"Mommy?" she whispered, "Daddy?" Her tiny voice dissipated into the hall. Holding Snoopy in a death grip, Lynn gently pushed the door just enough so she could slip through the opening. The hinges creaked loudly, but her father, hunched over the mound of covers on her mother's side of the bed, didn't even turn around. Lynn tiptoed to the overstuffed cedar chest at the foot of her parents' bed.

"Daddy?" Her father turned slowly towards her, as if he too were affected by the cold. When he faced her, Lynn could see the redness of his face and the tears in his eyes.

"Daddy, why were you calling Mommy? Where is she?"

"Come here, honey," he said, his voice quivering slightly. She climbed up and over the huge mountain of covers and looked at her mother buried beneath them. She was just sleeping.

"Mommy?" she whispered, not wanting to scare her mother. "Mommy?" Lynn reached out a fragile hand and touched her mother's arm. "Daddy, why won't Mommy wake up?" Her father pulled her closed, hugging her as she had hugged Snoopy.

"Honey, you know how sick Mommy has been lately?" The child nodded, her lips pursed in a manner too old for her age. "Do you remember how Mommy and Daddy and you talked about how one day Mommy would have to go away?" The girl nodded again, her head hanging so low that her tangled, blonde hair hid her face. She rubbed her eyes with two tiny fists. "And do you remember how Mommy said she wanted to go, because she knew that she'd see Grandma and Grandpa where she was going?" The child whimpered, but nodded a third time. "Well," he paused, drawing in a long breath, "Mommy has gone now."

"But she didn't even tell me goodbye!" Lynn wailed, her voice a mixture of fear, anger and sadness.

"She wanted to, Lynn, but she didn't want to wake you up."

It wasn't really a lie. Diane would have wanted to say goodbye to both of them if she could have. True, they hadn't been able to say their final goodbyes to each other, but in reality, they had been saying farewell for the past year and a half — ever since the doctors diagnosed Diane's cancer.

"Where is Mommy now? Is she with Grandma and Grandpa?"

"Yes, honey, I think she is."

"And with God, too?"

"With God, too."

"Daddy?"

"Yes, Lynn?"

"Daddy, are you going to go away too? Like Mommy did?"

"Some day, sweetie, but not tonight."

"I wanna sleep with you tonight," she said after the ambulance had driven away. "I'm afraid you'll leave, too. And you won't say goodbye either."

"Sure, kiddo." New tears welled in her father's eyes, but he smiled through them. It would only frighten Lynn to see him cry, but he wanted to, needed to. Diane and Lynn were the most important things in his life. Now, Lynn was all the family he had left. She was all of Diane he had left. Lynn's mother was buried a week later. On the day of the funeral, snow still covered the surrounding New England countryside. The clouds hung so low they invaded the skeletal tree line that stood protectively around the cemetery. The sky threatened to slowly unburden itself of the snow that had gathered in its bosom over the past day. A crowd of people sat under a tent the color of dying leaves, their silence weighing heavier upon their shoulders than

the threatening weather. A stout man cloaked in black stood with an open book in front of the seated crowd of dark clothing. On the ground in front of him, covered with flowers whose brilliant whites contrasted the greyness of the day, stood a dark mahogany casket, its lid closed, hiding the contents from the tears of the mourners.

Lynn sat between her father and her aunt directly in front of the casket. She clung to her father with one arm, her red mitten and most of her black sleeve disappearing into the folds of his coat. In Lynn's other hand was Snoopy, draped in the black of her other sleeve. The child slept through most of the funeral. Her father hadn't woken her, feeling she would benefit more from sleep than from the preacher's solemn words.

The next few weeks passed in a daze for both Lynn and her father. Faceless people continuously drifted in and out of the oak doors of the house bearing food and sympathy. Lynn's father decided that they would remain living in the ancient, stone-gray New England farmhouse. Leaving there would be like leaving Diane behind.

A month after Diane's death, Paul went back to work and his sister, Lynn's aunt, began taking care of her. Although Lynn was only five years old and didn't really understand the concept of death, she did seem to understand that her mother was not coming back to her. She began spending hours on end just sitting in the room her mother had always called the den.

"What's a den, Mommy?"

"Well, it's what some people call where a bunny or a bear lives."

"How come you call this the den? We're not bunnies!" she had giggled.

"Because this is our warm, cozy hole, just like the bunnies have."

"Will you read me the bunny story again?"

"Let's put another piece of wood on the fire first, okay?"

"I'll get the book!" Lynn had run to the oak book shelves which lined the wall by the door. Paul had built her a small step stool that she could use to reach the books. Even though she couldn't yet read them, those huge books captivated her complete attention with their heavy scent of leather and their thick bindings. That night, though, she had reached for one of the thinner, shiny books on her end of the shelf.

Once the fire had blazed brightly again, Lynn climbed onto her mother's lap. They sat on the fur rug in front of the stone fireplace and read for hours.

"Peter hopped across the field. He was in a hurry to meet his friend, Ann..." her mother's voice faded away. Lynn stared into the fire.

"What are you doing, sweetie?" Her father's voice interrupted her memory.

"Thinking about Mommy. I miss her Daddy. Won't she ever, ever come back?" Her father sighed. He turned away from Lynn and instead gazed longingly at the piano against the far wall. The used baby grand had been a wedding gift from Diane's parents. Paul remembered spending evening after evening in the den with Diane and that piano. On many night, they would exchange smiles and glances, and before he would play the piano, they always went through a sort of ritual. More than often, snow would begin to fall early in the evening, just before the ritual began. Lynn would watch as her daddy carried old, dry wood in from the porch so the den would stay warm. He hated to play the piano in a cold room because his fingers became stiff quickly. Lynn would run behind him for each trip, her miniature legs taking three steps to every one of his, picking up the pieces of bark which fell from the logs. The fire, once lit cast a bright light into the room, pushing back the grayness which threatened to creep in through the windows.

Lynn remembered how her mother would sit by the fire and listen to her father play that piano until the keys became more brown than white from his frequent touch. One night, when the keys of the piano were still white, her mother brought a tape recorder into the den.

Lynn's father began to play their favorite waltz, the one they had danced to at their wedding, her mother pushed the record button. After that night, the ritual changed slightly. Paul would play, but the tape recorder sat expectantly on top of the piano. After a while, Paul would allow his music to flow from the tape player rather than from his fingers. Then, he would gather Diane in his arms and they would waltz until the tape ran out.

"Do you remember how you and Mommy and I used to dance?"

Lynn nodded.

"I remember the first time we taught you to dance. You had almost fallen asleep watching us. You were even curled up with Snoopy. I picked you up and stood your pink-pajamaed feet on mine."

"I almost fell over when you kept turnin' and turnin' in those circles!" she giggled.

"Then Mommy came and danced too!"

Paul's grin left his face. He turned away from Lynn again, but when he glanced at her, he saw she was watching him.

"Don't you remember anymore, Daddy?"

Actually, he remembered everything, every detail about that night. But it just hurt to remember how Diane had laughed and stretched over Lynn to reach his shoulders. Lynn had been

dwarfed underneath the canopy of their arms. the three of them had danced until the tape had clicked off. Their laughter had drown out the crackling of the wood in the fireplace. That crackling was the only thing Paul could hear now.

Lynn's voice interrupted Paul's reverie, bringing him back into the present.

"Aunt Joan said that everybody's here for my birthday party. You wanna go in with me?"

"You think I'd miss snatching a piece of your sixth birthday cake? You nuts?"

Lynn's laughter lasted through the party, but no longer. After everyone had left the party, stuffed full of cake and ice cream, Paul found Lynn crying in her room.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm six, now, Daddy. Next month I hafta go to school. Everyone else's Mommy will be there to pack their lunches in little bags and write their names on them, and take them to their

rooms and meet their teachers, but I'll be all alone 'cause I don't have a Mommy anymore," she sobbed in one huge breath.

"Oh, honey," Paul sighed, wondering how she had thought of each little detail. "Tell you what. How 'bout if I take you to school and meet you teachers?" He paused and took a deep breath. When he looked at her again, he could tell she was going to start crying again. He started talking again, but even faster than before. "And guess what else? I'm pret-tee sure that your Aunt Joan wouldn't absolutely hate making you your favorite lunch to take with you. PB&J folded, not cut? I bet she'd even put it in a bag for you and write your name on it in pink pen so you'd be

ab-so-lute-ly sure which one is your when it's time to eat," he grinned, but his smile was met with a furrowed six year old brow.

"Daddy?"

"What is it, honey?"

"Daddy," she said, meeting his eyes directly, "why did Mommy have to go away?"

"I don't know, Lynn. I really don't. I wish I did. I miss her too, punkin." They sat there looking at each other for some time, the thirty-year-old father holding his six year old daughter on his lap, but looking more like she supported him.

"Listen," he finally said, "Mommy might not be around anymore, but we can always remember her."

"Huh-uh. I can't hardly remember what she looks like," she hiccupped through her sobs.

With that, Paul hoisted Lynn to his shoulders and marched down to the den. The coals still glowed in the fireplace. Paul shuffled through the antique desk until he found a tape...his tape. Placing the tape carefully in the recorder, he pushed the play button. Lynn giggled, then sniffled, as she stepped on his striped slipper. They danced until the last note had dried every one of Lynn's tears.

Lynn's first day of school, which she had fretted over a month before, passed relatively uneventfully. She went through the stages of pigtail pulling and freeze tag without too many spills. Once Lynn was in school, Paul felt as if he were watching a movie of her life, and his, running too quickly before his eyes. In that film, Lynn moved from knee socks to nylons, braces to bras, and from hating boys to loving them in what seemed to be a matter of minutes.

"Wherever you are, Diane, I hope you can look down and see the lovely woman your daughter is becoming," he whispered to the sky one evening after Lynn had left with her latest love.

The door slammed only an hour later, announcing her arrival home.

"Lynn?" Paul called from the kitchen where he was tackling the crossword over a steaming mug of coffee, "Is that you?"

"Yes!" she threw her coat onto the overstuffed chair in the living room. Stomping into the kitchen, she tore open the refrigerator, spilling a half gallon of skim milk onto the floor.

"Shit! What else can go wrong now?"

"Lynn!"

"God, I had to ask!"

"What the hell is the matter with you?" Paul finally reacted, sloshing drops of coffee onto the table as he stood.

"Jeff dumped me, okay? Happy now?"

"Of course not! What happened?"

"You wouldn't understand!" Lynn screamed at Paul. She sprinted up the steps, slamming the door as she flew into her room and collapsed on the bed in tears. After an hour or two, Lynn heard the beginnings of a waltz floating through the air. The piano music stopped. It started again. Remembering whose music that was, Lynn crept downstairs. She peered into the smokiness of the den, where her father had just started a fire. He stood staring into the flames, the music drifting through the background.

"Daddy?" He turned towards her.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, sure."

"You're thinking about Mom aren't you?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"It is to me. Especially with that music on."

"It's just that, at times like this, you need your mother, not me."

"That's not true, Daddy."

"Yes, it is, and it's okay. What do I know about boy problems? I try to help, to talk to you, but I just don't know what to say."

"Well, I didn't exactly help things."

"You were upset. It's okay."

"No, it's not. I'm sorry I yelled at you like that. It's just that..."

"You want to talk about it?"

"Maybe later. I could use a hug, though." The music filled the quietness.

"This music always reminds me of the night you and Mom taught me to waltz. It was to this song, too, remember?"

"I know." A single tear welled in Paul's eye. "You stood on my feet in your little feet pajamas and your mom stood behind you. Her arms barely reached my shoulders with you sandwiched in between us. I remember how you looked up at us and squeaked, 'I can't breathe!' in your little lisp." He fell silent. "I remember how she laughed...how we laughed," his voice drifted off and was lost in the notes of the music.

In time, Lynn forgot all about Jeff, and, in time, college, as well as many friends, came and went. It was just a year after Lynn started her new job in a prominent position at a company within commuting distance from her father's home. It was during this time that Lynn met Rob. Their courtship lasted just over two years. Lynn had wanted a late spring wedding, wanting to avoid the falling snow that had provided much of the background for her childhood would cloud her wedding day. The June Saturday was even more perfect than Lynn could have imagined. Colored sunshine danced throughout the church as the light shone through the stained glass windows.

Paul and Lynn stood in the foyer, waiting for everyone to be seated. Lynn straightened the flower on Paul's lapel.

"I guess this is it, huh?" he asked as if hoping for an answer to the contrary.

"I guess so."

"I guess you're not my little girl anymore, are you?"

"Oh, Daddy. I'll always be your little girl, no matter how big I get. I love you, Daddy," she reassured him through both a veil of tears and one of lace. The bride march began. Paul grasped Lynn's hand and firmly wrapped it around his arm. They started down the aisle. When the minister asked, "who so giveth this woman to this man," Paul, with tears shining in his eyes, replied, "her mother and I do," and placed her hand on Rob's.

At the reception, Lynn requested the waltz that had been played at the wedding of her parents, the same waltz that had followed her throughout her childhood. She excused from her new husband and walked towards her father.

"May I have this dance?"

"Always," he answered. Moving out of that farmhouse was one of the hardest things Lynn ever had to do.

"Why don't you take the piano with you, Lynn. You'll use it more than I will. Maybe you can teach your children to play."

"Don't rush me, Dad. Besides, that piano belongs here, in this den, with you...and with Mom. Anyway, the floor's probably so warped from its weight, anything else would tilt."

"You're probably right." Paul met Lynn's smile with one of his own. "I'll miss you. This old house is so big for just one person."

"I'll be around, Daddy. Don't worry."

Lynn was at work the day she received the call that her father was in the hospital.

"It's time," he whispered when she asked him how he was feeling, his voice barely audible and obviously pained.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, but Lynn..."

"Yes, Daddy?"

"Not here. I..." his voice tapered off, then grew strong again. "I want to go home."

The paperwork was complicated, but after several unsuccessful attempts to persuade her otherwise, Lynn obtained the doctor's permission to take her father back to the old farmhouse.

She helped him out of the car and held him to keep him from slipping in the fresh snow. she removed the covers from his bed upstairs and laid them on the couch in the den. After he was

resting comfortably, she swept the bark up from the floor where it had fallen when she brought in the logs from the porch.

Upon the piano, she set the tape recorder and searched for that tape her mother had made so long ago. It's music filled the air. she danced slowly to his bedside.

Leaning on her for support, Paul whispered, "One last dance, Lynn, please."

She removed her shoes and carefully placed her bare feet on his worn, plaid slippers. They danced, slower than years gone by, but they danced and danced until the tape, once again, ran

out. He laid down as she put the tape on to play again.

Covering him with the thick down comforter that had been her mother's shroud, she kissed her father's cheek.

"I love you, Daddy," she said, blinking back the tears. Now, it was her turn to be strong.

"I love you too, Lynn," he whispered. "Thanks for the dance." And with those words, Paul slipped away as silently as his wife had. The music continued. At that moment, Lynn looked into the glow of the fire. There, before the reflection of the flames, Lynn could see her father dancing their waltz with a woman she barely recognized, yet someone she had known in her heart forever.

Two years passed since the day Lynn's father died. The immense farmhouse remained empty, its contents in storage until the day Lynn and her husband could move in. As she approached the house, she noticed that it nearly disappeared into the grayness of the falling

snow. The window sills of the house, which had been a crisp, fresh white throughout Lynn's childhood

had been slowly, but surely, toned by time to the rather dim color of an aging piece of steel.

Entering the house, Lynn noticed that even the den seemed a cold, foreign place to be. Where had the cheerful, red-orange glow of the flames in the fireplace gone? Had they disappeared along with her father? Turning her back to the fireplace, Lynn looked to the window. Slowly, those white snowflakes interrupted the gray sky. As the snow began to blur her vision and block out the leafless trees in the distance, Lynn turned to the center of the room.

The floor was barren, dust gathering on the hard, knotted wood. The signs of emptiness even threatened to cover the bookshelves where those volumes of words which had captured Lynn's imagination had once stood. Faintly, she heard a musical note, the beginning of a waltz. Turning to the piano...there was no piano. A second note...a third. Where has everything gone? she thought. Looking to the window, Lynn noticed that the snow was still falling. The music continued. Slowly, hesitatingly, she took the first few steps of that waltz her father had taught her so long ago. It hurt, but she continued. For now, she must learn to dance alone.