

The Dance of a Lifetime

By Josh Loomis

“Can you tell me a story, Grandpa?” squeaked a voice.

Grandpa looked at the source of the voice, snuggled up under the covers of her bed. He smiled at Annie, knowing full well he couldn’t resist her big curious eyes. “I suppose I could tell you a story. What would you like to hear?”

“Can you tell me about how you met Grandma?”

“Annie, I don’t think today is a good day for that story,” said her mother from the corner of the room.

“It’s alright,” said Grandpa. “I would love to tell you about how I met your grandmother.”

Annie nestled into her pillow, a grin spreading across her face that only Grandpa’s stories could produce.

“It was 1944, and I had just enlisted in the army. My buddies: John, David, George, and I were set to ship off the next morning to Europe.”

“How old were you, Grandpa?”

“I had just turned eighteen, you weren’t allowed to enlist until then, and we all wanted to join up together. John convinced us that we needed one last night of dancing, to help keep us alive over in Europe. I can still hear the Benny Goodman song blaring as we walked through the doors of that ballroom. The other guys were intent on dancing with as many girls as they could that night, but I had eyes for only one girl.”

“Was it Grandma?”

Grandpa nodded. “I can see her now, full of youth and energy, her blue eyes matching her dress. She had a smile that could pierce any man’s heart. Her curly brown hair twirled at her shoulders alongside her dress. From the moment I saw her, I knew I had to dance with her. It

took me half the night to muster up the courage, but when we finally danced, I knew that I had just met the girl of my dreams.”

“What kind of dancing was it?”

“Swing dancing was all the rage back in those days. That was when I still had the strength to swing Grandma around. I was shy, but once I had your grandmother in my arms, we danced the night away. Grandma had a way of getting lost in the moment, and for a brief second, I forgot that I was shipping off the next morning.”

“Did you marry her right after you met her?”

Grandpa chuckled. “It would be almost two years before I saw her again. But I had enough sense to ask Grandma if I could write to her before the night was over. She made me promise that I would return so that we could dance again.” Memories flooded his mind and for a moment he was back on the beaches of Normandy. “Grandma’s letters were what kept me sane while I was in France. The memory of her blue dress shimmering on the dance floor would always make me smile, no matter how cold or tired I was. In 1945, I vowed that if I ever made it back to the United States, I would marry her.”

Annie yawned. “Did you do more dancing when you came back?”

“We did more dancing, alright. I married your grandmother three months after I came back. I’ll never forget holding your grandmother tight on the dance floor on our wedding day. George made fun of me because he said I couldn’t see anything else in the room. But there was nothing else in the room worth seeing that day.”

“Were John and David there as well?”

“No, they never got to see my vow fulfilled,” Grandpa said, a lump forming in his throat. “After we were married, we went dancing as often as we could.”

“Swing dancing?” asked Annie, her curiosity returning.

“We did some more swing dancing. Any time we took the dance floor, all eyes would be on your grandmother. Which was good for me, because she was the better dancer between the

two of us. I felt like the luckiest guy in the world. When the 50s rolled around, the Foxtrot was the new dance. We learned how to slow down our moves, which is a good thing too.”

“Why’s that, Grandpa?”

“Well because Grandma was pregnant with your mother in ‘51. I couldn’t really swing her around anymore once her belly began to show. Not to mention our whole lives slowed down once we had children. If we were still moving at the pace of swing dancing, we would have never had the patience to raise your mother. And then you may never have been born.”

“But did you dance at all during that time, Grandpa?”

“We danced whenever we could find the time, but between raising children and working long hours at the factory, we didn’t have many opportunities to visit the ballroom.”

“What kind of dancing was popular in those days?” Annie asked, her big eyes shimmering.

“Oh, as soon as we had children, we lost touch with all the new types of dancing. I remember learning how to do the Twist, but my knees couldn’t handle all the movement. They weren’t able to get all of the shrapnel out of my right knee, so it would ache after we spent the night dancing. It didn’t bother me when I was in my twenties, but as I got older, my body began to plead with me to stop trying to keep up with the fast tempos.”

“You never did any dancing at home? We dance in our living room all the time!” Annie said.

Grandpa chuckled, the image of dancing with Doris in their crowded two-bedroom apartment coming back to him. “When we moved to Chicago, the Latin couple who lived next door, Pedro and Juanita, taught us how to tango. After your mother went to sleep, we used to glide up and down our living room to help keep warm in the winters. We had to keep our record player quiet, and we could just barely hear it over the buzz of the radiator.”

“Really? I didn’t know that you learned how to tango,” said Annie’s mother.

“Oh yes, it helped us keep the romance alive in those years. There’s a reason you have three younger brothers, Mary.”

“Dad! Annie’s only six years old.”

Annie giggled innocently, laughing at her mother’s reaction. Grandpa smiled, cherishing the memory.

“Did you teach Mom how to dance?” Annie asked.

“I helped a little bit, but it was mostly your grandmother. When your mother was two years old, Grandma began to teach your mom every type of dance she knew. Grandma had always wanted to be a ballerina, but she never had the opportunity. So, she was determined to teach your mom ballet.”

“Why couldn’t she be a ballerina?”

“Well, she worked in a factory during the war instead of going to ballet school. Then when we got married, we knew we wanted to start a family. But Grandma’s dream lived on through your mother.”

“Did Mom love ballet as much as Grandma did?”

“Your mom lived and breathed ballet for years. All she would talk about is pirouettes, chasse, and promenades. When she was your age all she wanted to wear was leotards and pointe shoes.”

“Mommy says that I’m not allowed to wear leotards in public,” Annie said through a yawn.

“Your grandmother used to say that. I used to come home from work and your mom was twirling around our living room while Grandma gave her pointers. After your mom went off to college, Grandma didn’t know what to do with herself. We were so busy with your uncles’ sporting events that for a while we forgot to dance at all. There was less joy in those days.”

Annie’s eyes widened at the very thought of forgetting to dance. “But you did dance again, right?”

A fond smile crossed Grandpa’s face. “After your uncles all moved out of the house, we would go square dancing. We had moved out of Chicago, and there was square dancing every Friday night. You had to have three other couples to dance with you, so we ended up making

some close friends. None of us were able to jump and twirl like we once could, but your grandmother and I could do si do with the best of them.”

Mary let out a chuckle as Annie’s eyes slowly closed. They sat in silence as Annie’s rhythmic breathing indicated that she had drifted off to sleep.

“Did you keep dancing towards the end?” Mary whispered.

“When your mother got sick, she didn’t have the energy to square dance. But she made me promise that I would dance with her every day until the end. We used to waltz in the kitchen, cherishing the memories of our youth. Doris used to tell everybody who visited her in the hospital the story of the nervous young lad who she prayed would ask her to dance back in ’44. She never got tired of telling that story, and I never got sick of hearing her tell it.”

A lump began to form in Grandpa’s throat. “During her rounds of chemotherapy, I had to support her weight when we waltzed. We usually only made it through one song before we had to stop, but I kept my promise to her.”

Silence.

“Dad, I’m sorry that she asked today. During your eulogy you mentioned that you and Mom met while dancing. Annie loves dance so much, she wanted to ask you about it.”

Grandpa smiled. “You don’t need to apologize. Annie loves dance as much as her grandmother and her mother.”

“We told her to wait until a few days after the funeral. I know how hard it must be to tell that story today.”

Tears began to slide down Grandpa’s face. He stood and kissed his sleeping granddaughter’s forehead. He looked at his daughter and saw that she also had tears in her eyes. Mary gave him a half-smile, at a loss for words. Silently, she stood from her chair and embraced him in a hug.

“I miss her already,” Mary said.

“Me too,” Grandpa said. “But I made her promise me that in the next life, we would dance together again.”