Dawn Powell

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Come Back to Sorrento
Turn, Magic Wheel
Angels on Toast
A Time To Be Born

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DANCE NIGHT

For my sister Phyllis

Dance Night

WHAT Morry heard above the Lamptown night noises was a woman's high voice rocking on mandolin notes far far away. This was like no music Morry had ever known, it was a song someone else remembered, perhaps his mother, when he was only a sensation in her blood, a slight quickening when she met Charles Abbott, a mere wish for love racing through her veins.

The song bewildered Morry reading Jules Verne by gaslight, it unspiralled somewhere high above the Bon Ton Hat Shop, above Bauer's Chop House, over the Casino, and over Bill Delaney's Saloon and Billiard Parlor. It came from none of these places but from other worlds and then faded into a factory whistle, a fire engine bell, and a Salvation Army chorus down on Market Street.

Morry leaned far out the window and looked above and below, but there was no woman in the sky nor any sign of a miracle for blocks around. Girls from the Works in light dresses wandered, giggling, up and down the street waiting for the Casino Dance Hall above Bauer's to open, farm couples stood transfixed before Robbin's Jewelry Store window, the door of Delaney's Saloon swung open, shut, open, shut, releasing then withdrawing the laughter and the gaudy music of a pianola. Everything was as it was on any other Thursday night in Lamptown.

Nevertheless to Morry this had become a strange night and he could read no more. He thrust "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea" into his washstand drawer, turned down the gas, picked up a pack of cigarettes, thrust them in his hip pocket, and went downstairs. In the dark narrow hallway he ran into Nettie Farrell, assistant in the Bon Ton, her arms encircling a tower of hat boxes. Morry, absorbed in his new and curious quest, had no desire to meet anyone from his mother's shop and he hung back. But Nettie deliberately left the work-room door open and there was his mother, her pale cold face bent over a basket of cotton pansies, a blue-shaded lamp burning intently above her.

"You've been smoking!" Nettie whispered accusingly. "I'm going to tell your mother. And now you're going over to Bill's place! You are—you know you are!"

"I wasn't!" Morry denied everything sullenly.

"Hanging around poolrooms! You ought to be ashamed!"

A bell tinkled in the front of the shop and Nettie, hat boxes tipping perilously eastward, backed into the workroom without another word, only her black eyes blinking reproachfully at him.

Morry hurried out the side door into the little stone court where half a dozen Market Street shops ended in kitchen stoops, and half a dozen lights from these dwellings back and above shops united in a feeble illumination of a cistern, old garbage cans, a broken-down doll-buggy, and a pile of shipping boxes.

Where was the song now, Morry wondered, and vaguely he blamed Nettie Farrell and the Bon Ton for having lost it. A freight train rumbled past a few yards from the court, its smoke spread over the Lamptown moon, and then he heard above its roar a girl's voice calling. Though certainly no girl in all Lamptown could be calling Morry Abbott, he was always expecting it, and he tiptoed hastily across rubbish-strewn cinders toward the voice. A flight of steps went up the side of the saloon to where Bill Delaney lived with his mother, and here Morry stopped short for at the very top of these steps huddled a dark figure.

Morry hesitated.

"Did you call me?" he asked uncertainly.

"Yes," said the girl and since Bill had neither sister, wife, nor daughter, Morry could not for the life of him imagine who it was. "I was lonesome. Come on up."

Morry was embarrassed.

"I—I can't." He felt scornful of a girl who would talk to him without even being able to see who he was. If it had been daylight or even dusk a strange girl speaking to him would have meant that in spite of Nettie Farrell's repeated taunts, he was good looking, his black eyes, his broad shoulders, oh something about him was appealing. But it was clear that to the girl at the top of the stairs he might be just anyone.

"Come on," she urged. "I've got to talk to somebody, haven't I?"

The saloon back door opened and the bartender stood there against a sudden brilliant background of glasses, polished brass, and a rainbow of bottles. Morry ducked up the stairs, and the girl moved over for him to sit down. He could see now that she was a stranger in Lamptown, a queer pointed-faced girl, whose hair, black and tangled, hung to her shoulders. He would see if she was pretty when the next engine flashed its headlight down the tracks.

"There's a dance tonight, isn't there?" she demanded of him. In the darkness they eagerly tried to study each other's face, but all Morry could find in hers was a wildness that made him feel oddly older and more responsible.

"Even if I'm not old enough to go," she pursued, "why won't Bill let me go and watch? You ask him."

This terrified Morry. He didn't want to be teased by the factory girls at the dance, and he certainly didn't want to be ragged by the train men in Bill's saloon. Facing their good-natured challenges on his own account was torture enough, but to take on the added burden of a girl . . .

"We don't want to go to any dance," he said. "It's no fun watching. Look, who are you?"

"I'm adopted now," she explained triumphantly. "The Delaneys took me from the Home. This is where we live and I have a room of my own."

"Well." Morry didn't know why you were glad over being adopted but he supposed you ought to be congratulated. "Do you like it here?"

"I like the trains going by," she said. "I like it in my sleep when I hear them whistle way off. And I like it in my sleep when I hear the piano going downstairs and the men laughing. But I don't like to make beds. I can't make the sheets stay under."

Morry lit a cigarette.

"Let me see if I can smoke," she took the one he had lit, made a few masterful draws on it and then gave it back. "Oh well," she coughed, "I guess I can learn."

"What's your name?" he asked her. He liked sitting there beside her but he was a little afraid of her. He must remember, he thought, to hang on to her skirt if she should take it into her head to jump down stairs.

"Jen St. Clair. Maybe I'm Delaney now, but Bill and his mother say they don't care what I call myself." She casually fished in his pocket and drew out a pack of gum, unwrapped it and carefully stuck the wrappings back into his pocket. "But I'm going back to the Home sometime—when I get money."

"Why?" he wanted to know.

"To get Lil. She's my sister and she's still there."

An engine shrieked down the tracks, then a window flew up in the court, a woman thrust her head out and called, "Billy! Oh, Bill- -ee!"

" 'You'll come back for me, won't you, Jen,' is what Lil said to me," Jen went on. "I said I would."

The saloon back door opened again and a quiet scuffling noise was heard,—the engine's search-light briefly revealed Bill in white apron, wrestling with a heavy but feebly organized man in shirt-sleeves.

"There!" muttered Bill. "There, damn you. . . . Oh, Shorty! Give us a hand here."

Bill always handled the toughs but Shorty, the barkeep, had to pick them up afterward and start them home. Morry explained all this to Jen. She seemed pleased to hear of her benefactor's power. She stood up.

"Come in the house," she invited. "I want to show you something."

"But Bill's old lady wouldn't like it." It was Morry's experience that you weren't wanted in people's houses any more than they were wanted in yours.

"Asleep," Jen tersely nodded toward the old woman's bedroom. "Come on, I want to show you this."

She softly opened the screen door and Morry gingerly followed her into the dark vestibule. The rooms smelled of laundry and doughnuts. He caught her hand held out to guide him. It was the parlor, he knew, by the damp, musty air. Jen stood up on a chair and lit the gas light over the mantelpiece. With the flare of light Morry could see that although her hair and brows were black her eyes were sky-blue, he saw the patch of new calico on her faded blue dress. But she did not look at him again. It no longer mattered what he looked like since they were already established as friends. She took some little thing from the mantel and held it out to him in the palm of her hand.

"Look."

It was a tiny gold chair, barely an inch high, an armchair with delicate filagree for its cane back and seat. Morry took it and examined it,—gave it back to her. Jen let it lay in her palm a moment, then with a sigh put it back on the mantel.

"It's so little. . . . I wish I could keep it in my room," she said. "But I suppose it's all right here. I can come in and look at it every once in a while. She got it at the World's Fair in St. Louis."

"I've got to go," Morry decided, watching the door uneasily.

Jen looked stricken.

"No, you can't—you mustn't go yet. Wait."

She tiptoed hurriedly into the next room and came back with a pair of shining tan shoes.

"I've got new shoes with high heels. See? I wanted pumps, black patent leather, but Bill got me these. Look!" She reached down her blouse and drew out a locket on the end of a thin gold chain. "Asafetida. Smell."

Morry smelled. It was asafetida. But he still had to go. He was already out the door. Jen turned down the gas and ran after him.

"There's duck in the ice box," she said. "We could eat it."

Morry only pulled his cap down with more finality. He was amazed at an adopted girl's boldness in entering parlors, and offering delicacies that were undoubtedly reserved by Bill Delaney for his own midnight supper.

"Well, I guess I'm off," he said brusquely.

Jen hung on to the railing and swung her foot back and forth. She wasn't over thirteen or fourteen, he thought.

"I've got folks somewhere," she informed him, rather aloofly now, as if she sensed criticism of her lack of background. "They've got papers at the Home. There's a Mrs. St. Clair somewhere and that's my mother—Lil's and mine."

Morry said nothing, but he was impressed. An unknown mother—a Mrs. St. Clair somewhere who might be a millionaire or an actress.

The window on the court flew open again.

"Billy! Oh Bill--ee!"

And this must have reminded Nettie Farrell to tell something for the next moment Morry heard his mother on their back stoop.

"Morry! Where are you?"

"You're Morry," Jen whispered, and he nodded. Why not Billy, then he wondered. . . . He did not answer and his mother never called twice. He heard her go indoors and close the door.

"Listen!" Jen seized his wrist. From across the street in front of the building came the sound of a drum, presently joined by a piano. Then a man's voice, rich, resonant—on Thursday nights you heard this voice above all other sounds for a block away; it belonged to Harry Fischer, the dancing teacher.

"ONE and two, and ONE and two and ONE and two and—"

"Can't we go and watch?" Jen appealed again.

Morry shook his head. He started down the steps. She said nothing, just swung her foot back and forth, but when halfway down he turned to look back he was startled at the desolation in her face, as if this parting was forever, and as if he, Morry Abbott, meant everything in the world to her.

"What is it?" he wanted to know.

Jen twisted her hands.

"Nothing. Only people last such a little while with me. There's no way to keep them, I guess. Everybody goes away—that's why I've got to go back for Lil because I know how terrible it is to be left always—never see people again."

"I'll see you to-morrow," he promised hurriedly. "I live over the Bon Ton. Probably we'll always be seeing each other."

Jen shook her head. Morry hesitated a moment, then went slowly down the stairs.

"ONE and two and ONE and two and ONE and two—"

The dancing lesson lasted from eight to nine and then the counting stopped and the Ball began. Morry wanted to tell all this to Jen but it was better not to go back once you had said you were going. He looked up. She sat hugging her knees, leaning against the railing.

"Well—goodnight."

She didn't answer. Embarrassed, Morry stumbled over ash-cans and cinders to his own stone-paved courtyard. He wanted to look back again but he did not dare. He went down the little alley and slipped in the side door. The workroom door was

open and his mother was in there arranging her hair before a hand-mirror with deep concentration. He wondered if she was going to the dance. Behind her he saw Nettie Farrell's trim plump figure. She was rummaging through a large pasteboard box of ribbons. Morry went upstairs before she saw him.

The gaslight in Morry's room went up and shadows were chased up the low sloping ceiling. Jules Verne emerged from the washstand drawer. Morry, in bed, smoked as he read and squashed his cigarette stubs in to a cracked yellow soapdish. The short little dimity curtains at his infinitesimal windows quivered steadily with a busy breeze. Below, on Market Street, a group of factory girls gathered about two trainmen just come from Bill's place, and were convulsed by their masculine wit. The Salvation Army moved up a block; its aim was to reach the Casino and save at least a few of those headed for that modest hell. Tambourines clinked.

Morry jammed a third pillow at the back of his head, absently flicked ashes over the quilt, and turned page after page until words again took living shapes and allowed him to enter the book.

He had forgotten the unknown lady singing in the sky.

"Come to me my melancholy baby," sang Nettie, "Huddle up and don't be blue. So you're going to the dance again, Mrs. Abbott."

Elsinore lowered her eyes over the hat for Dode O'Connell. The factory girls always liked flamboyant trimming and she thoughtfully added a green ribbon to the flowers pinned on the straw brim. This was what Charles Abbott would facetiously refer to as a Vegetable Blue Plate.

"There's plenty of time," she answered Nettie. "I don't want to be there first, besides the lesson is still on."

"Huddle up and don't be blue," hummed Nettie. She watched the street door waiting for customers. She was eighteen, she had been in the shop a year and the importance of her work continued to overwhelm her. Other girls in Lamptown worked in the factory or the telephone office, but God had chosen to favor her with this amazingly attractive niche in the Bon Ton Hat Shop. This must be because she was supe-

rior, a cut above the factory type, she was on lodge programs, for instance at the Lady Maccabees' meeting she sometimes sang, "When the dawn flames in the sky—I love you——"

"Mr. Abbott ought to be in from the road soon," Nettie said. "What does he think of your going to the dances? I guess he's glad you have a little pleasure, maybe."

"He doesn't mind. He knows I work hard and don't get out much. I don't think Charlie minds." It had never occurred to Elsinore, for ten years self-and-home-supporting, that Mr. Abbott's opinion deserved little attention. She accepted his husbandly domination without demanding any of its practical benefits. If Charles, home for a week from a three months' Southern tour, objected to a gown of hers or a new arrangement of furniture, things were quietly changed to his taste. In Elsinore's scheme a husband was always a husband.

Nettie sat down on a work stool and examined her fingernails. She was a plump, sleek little girl, black hair parted in the middle and drawn back to a loose knot on her neck, her face a neat oval with full satisfied lips. Men followed Nettie on the street but Nettie's chin went up more haughtily, her hips swung more insolently from side to side because Nettie was better than factory girls or telephone operators, she did not speak to strange men, she wanted to get on. Some day she would have a shop of her own. Mrs. Abbott said she was a good worker.

"I don't care about dancing," she observed to Mrs. Abbott. "That's why I never took lessons."

Elsinore held a straw frame out at arm's length.

"I never cared at your age," she said. "It was only this winter I learned."

The echo of the maestro's voice could be heard again—One two three—ONE two three—One——and Elsinore colored ever so faintly. It was easier to wait from one Thursday to the next than from eight o'clock until nine, she thought. She always hoped—yet perhaps not quite hoped, for she was a quiet contained woman, that this night—or next week, then—Mr. Fischer would select her as partner. This had happened once,—just last winter in fact, when she had stayed over from the lesson to the regular dance; Fischer had been demonstrating a new dance and he turned to her, "Mrs.

Abbott knows these steps from the class lesson tonight. May I ask you to come forward, Mrs. Abbott?"

Usually shy, Elsinore had known no hesitation in going straight across the dance floor to him, aware of her own limitations as a dancer she yet was certain that with him all things were possible. If from a raft in midocean this man had called to her, "Now, Mrs. Abbott, just swim out to me," she would have swum to him without hesitation, safe in her enchantment. A few bars of music, two to the left, two to the right, swing, swing, dip . . . "All right, Mr. Sanderson"—then to the musician.

That was all. It might happen again. Always someone was chosen casually like that for a brief demonstration and even if it didn't happen again, there was that one time to remember.

"The girls are beginning to go up," said Nettie.

Elsinore's fingers trembled arranging the trimmings in their labelled boxes but she said nothing. Nettie drew out a nail buff and polished her nails intently. Her hands were plump, white, and tapering. Nettie greased them and wore silk gloves over them at night.

"Bill Delaney's adopted a girl from the orphanage for his mother to take care of," said Nettie. "Imagine."

"That's no home for a girl," said Elsinore, "over a saloon."

Nettie tossed the buff into her drawer and looked toward the front door. Still no customers.

"Fay's coming for her hat tonight," she said, remembering. "She wants it for the Telephone Company's picnic. . . . She said people thought the girl might belong to Bill—you know men are that way, and Bill used to run around a lot."

"Maybe," said Elsinore but she didn't care. In three minutes more she would go over to the Casino. In three minutes. "Did Morry come in?"

Nettie shrugged.

"How do I know, Mrs. Abbott? Morry never pays any attention to what anybody says. He hangs around poolrooms, he smokes, he sits up late reading and smoking. You ought to get his father to talk to him."

Elsinore's straight eyebrows drew together.

"I must, Nettie, that's quite true. He's just at that age."

"Seventeen-year-old hanging around Bill Delaney's!" said Nettie. Talking about Morry Nettie's face always got red, her

eyes flashed, every reminder of this boy's existence subtly offended her.

Two more minutes and Elsinore could stand up and say, "Well, Nettie, I'll leave the shop to you. Shut it up as soon as Fay gets her hat and put the key under the stoop."

Now she said, "He's lonely, Nettie,—he goes to Bill's for the company. But it's not a good place for a boy."

She heard a step upstairs and called Morry's name. A sleepy bored voice responded.

"At least he's in," said Nettie.

One more minute. The piano from across the street pounded out the rhythm Fischer had announced—ONE and two and three and FOUR—Come to me my melancholy baby, huddle up and don't be blue. . . .

"Oh it's g-r-e-a-t to be f-r-e-e," sang the Salvation Army, "from the chains of s-i-n that bondage me. . . ."

"Well, Nettie, I'll leave the shop to you," said Elsinore, standing up at last. "Shut it up as soon as Fay gets her hat—and put the key under the stoop."

She did things,—rubbed a chamois over her face, patted her hair, adjusted her dress, but these motions were curiously automatic for already she was swimming across oceans to a raft where Harry Fischer stood beating his hands to a dance rhythm—"one and two and three and four—"

"Here's Fay now," said Nettie, but Elsinore was gone. Elsinore gone, Morry asleep upstairs,—it instantly became Nettie's shop and Nettie bloomed. She chatted patronizingly with Fay's young man while Fay tried on the hat.

"Smile my honey dear," sang Fay softly into the mirror for the hat was becoming, "while I kiss away each tear——"

Behind her back her young man grasped Nettie's arm. He slid his hand along her biceps and pressed a knuckle into her arm-pit.

"That's the vein to tap when you embalm people," he said, for he was going to be an undertaker.

Two floors above Bauer's Chop House fifty pairs of feet went slip a-slip a-slip to a drum's beating. Sometimes a piano melody crept through the drum's reverberation, sometimes the voice of Fischer emerged with a one-and-two and a one-