

In the Jukebox Light

by Curtis Smith

At first we envied Tom and Betty's dancing. Friday nights at The Big Club, Saturdays at Mickey's, and none of us can remember a time we saw them in the arms of another partner. Crowded around the bar, we caught our breath and ordered the drafts that never quite quenched our thirsts, but Tom and Betty kept dancing, jitterbugs and twists, the new steps they whipped up on the spot that were as sharp as any on Bandstand. We dabbed our sweating brows with cocktail napkins and grinned discretely at the picture they made. Betty had left for college a pigeon-toed girl, and when she returned four years later, she brought home a teaching degree and an adult beauty that made us uncomfortable for not knowing the old her. The elementary school in town hired her, and at recess, the other men teachers, Principal Stevens included, fumbled and fawned for her attention, but Betty always opted to join her children, and her lanky frame ensured she was the first pick in the boys' basketball games, the one the other children ran to when a kindergartner needed rescuing from atop the jungle gym. A good six inches shorter, Tom had been the second string center for our high school football team, our heavyweight wrestler's battered practice partner, and in the ensuing years, Tom filled out even more, growing to resemble the square butcher's block he worked over in McKalb's grocery. No one knew the particulars of their first date, but we were always happy to bump into them on the street because the sight of their intertwined hands -- his thick nails tinted pink from years of butcher's blood, her fingers as slender as daffodil stalks -- made us momentarily forget ourselves and believe, if only for a heartbeat, that perhaps anything was possible. On the dance floor Betty's flat soles whispered and clicked, the hems of her sewing machine dresses ruffling, while Tom, moving with an odd, lumbering grace that surprised us all, answered with his asthmatic's wheeze and the pocket jangle of the loose change he never got around to spending on beer. At their wedding

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we rushed forward to take snapshots of their first dance, and in our returned photos, they float like blissful astronaut lovers in a sky of flashbulb stars. That whole next year they glowed the way just-marrieds do, the absent brushing of a misplaced curl, the distracted glances when the other took too long at the bathroom. When Betty's stomach grew and her thin ankles swelled, she and Tom abandoned their fast dances for slow tunes where they held each other with an intentness and devotion that blinded them to our inebriated ruckus, the crash of mugs dropped from clumsy fingers, the last call fistfights that had the rest of us clambering onto our seats for a better view. Oblivious, their forms lit by the jukebox's blue-green glow, they circled each other in endless, delicate orbits.

Their boy lived for a month, and Tom and Betty haven't been to Mickey's since. Now we watch them the way any small town watches its sad stories, with concern and curiosity, politely distant as we sift for the telling details, but none of us has noticed more fat on Tom's T-bone cuts and Betty still teaches long division the way she did before. On our way home from the bar we've been know to park outside their house. We kill our engines and listen for the music from their windows. On tiptoes, we sneak across their lawn and tuck ourselves in among the bushes, and when the wind blows the curtains, we peek inside. They dance the way they once did in the jukebox light, slow and close, their new carpet worn in the tiny plot beneath their feet, the front of their clothes rubbed threadbare. Understanding sorrow, they have become like the rest of us. Or not. Either way, we can't stop looking.

