

A Small Courtesy
by
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With a snap of her fingers and a bounce in her step, Sara fell in with the beat on her way to the dance floor. This was her kind of music and her body responded to its particular cadence instinctively, reflexively, like a woman sensitized to the rhythm of her lover. She could imagine those men, casually congregated in clusters along the edge of the dance floor, spotting the bright flash of her red dress and nodding in silent admiration. She would twirl merrily past them all. This was her kind of music and she was in control.

Dancing had been the last thing on her mind when she had offered to come for the week to help look after her sister's children. Her younger sister had insisted she bring her dancing shoes (But you love to dance! And it's a *live* band!). Although she had reluctantly agreed over the phone to go to the big county dance on Saturday night, it wasn't until she found she could still wiggle into her favourite old dancing dress that she knew she would. Now here she was, two months and three songs later, dancing with this handsome man at the local arena.

She could imagine what an attractive couple they made; he with his dark slick hair, smooth-tanned skin and black eyes, and she in her red slip of a dress and high-heeled sling backs. She looked down at their feet as they danced side by side, synchronizing their steps once again. She knew he was watching her feet, following her tiny shoes as they lightly flew back and forth. Two short steps. One long step. She studied her feet as if seeing them for the first time. This is what she saw: pretty red shoes with one scant sandal strap across the toes and a small

triangular heel patch which joined her ankle straps. She could imagine him noticing the dainty straps – two braided pieces of soft leather - that accentuated her slender ankles.

In these shoes they were the perfect height for each other, her crisp auburn hair just bruising his chin. She'd had it done especially that morning, again at her sister's insistence (A live band draws folks from miles 'round. Could you just fancy a rancher?), and the rollers and gel had given it the promised height and volume. Her younger sister's hairdresser, a tall, striking woman with cascading waves of titian hair, had assured her that this new style would hold through *three* nights of dancing.

Well, she had just wanted to make it through this one night, and she marveled over how simple it was, how natural it was. She had been standing along the side wall at the long bar, swaying to the music, trying to get some sense of the crowd around her, trying to feel like she was a part of it. (Of *course* it's safe to go alone. Just mind those strong young cowboys – their high steppin' polka will wear you out.) She had just ordered her second glass of wine and was about to light her third, no fourth, cigarette when a low, silken voice murmured at her shoulder.

"Excuse me, but allow me the pleasure," and a slim silver lighter yielded a steady flame with one smooth click. Careful not to appear too startled, Sara had watched the white tip of her cigarette catch fire before looking up at the lean gentleman with the manicured nails and capable hand.

"You're most kind," she replied before lowering her gaze to take in his silver belt buckle and black polished boots.

"Not at all," he smiled down at her, his head tilted to one side, his eyes half closed. "It remains but a small courtesy in a world of diminishing civilities."

Tipping her head back to inhale, Sara took in this stylish man who had suddenly appeared at her side. A solid bar of eyebrows dominated his narrow face, and his mouth curved down in a sullen countenance until he smiled. His straight hair was slicked back with the exception of a single lock that defiantly fell forward, the only thing amiss about his otherwise impeccable appearance.

“Are you from these parts?” he inquired, slipping his lighter into the empty breast pocket of his pressed white shirt.

“No, I’m ... I’m from the Coast. I’m here visiting my sister — looking after her children, actually — for a week or so. She’s recovering from surgery.”

His tongue clicked in sympathy and she felt the light touch of his tanned hand on her forearm. “Ah, I am truly sorry to hear that.”

She wondered if he knew her sister — don’t they *all* know each other? — and was about to provide her name in answer to his next question.

“But then, we must try to brighten your stay. Shall we dance? You look like a woman who would liven any dance floor.”

His kind comments produced a powerful reaction in Sara. It had been so long since she had felt herself glow under the radiant attention of a man; his steady gaze drawing out her full inner beauty. At once she felt a surge of excitement, a flash of impetuous hope, and a burst of confidence. She boldly sought his eyes and held them.

“Why, I dare say you may be right,” she chirped, stabbing out her cigarette with one emphatic thrust.

He gestured with a half bow and sweep of the arm towards the dance floor and she glided past him, conscious of her full skirt fluttering against her thighs as she walked. He followed at

her shoulder, and she felt his hand grasp her arm, just above the elbow, to guide her through the crowd. She let herself fall back to lean lightly against him, as if the crowd moving to and from the dance floor was more dense than it really was. His hand gently squeezed her arm, and she interpreted it as an acknowledgement of her small gesture.

As they approached the floor the band broke into a lively number and she responded to the new beat with the snap of her fingers and a bounce in her step. Her dance partner leaned forward to murmur his inadequacies in her ear. His admission, which she accepted without question, pleased her immensely and she took it as an invitation to teach him.

And so they danced and they laughed at the times he was unable to follow her or catch her after spinning her around. And her heart beat wildly when their eyes locked in conspiracy after successfully completing a new move. Out of the corner of her eye she caught the skirt of her crimson dress as it floated and twisted up from her knees and back down again, gathering first on one side and then, with a flick of the hip, spreading to gather again on the other side. She dipped and twisted, extended to the full length of her partner's reach, and folded back into his arms again.

Her cheeks glowed with unaccustomed exhilaration. Her body, no, her soul, felt so alive. Here she could express herself and be understood. Her language was dancing, and she was fluent, beautiful, passionate. She clutched her sides, laughing breathlessly when the third song ended. He caught her message.

"We must rest." He stroked his stray lock of hair into place. "You are a very good dancer, though I'm afraid I shall never be able to keep up with you," he said, maneuvering her off the floor with his hand on her lower back.

“Nonsense,” she replied happily over her shoulder. “You catch on very quickly.” They walked to the edge of the dance floor and she paused, turning up to her partner expectantly.

“But now you must excuse me,” he said, seizing her moment of hesitation, and bowing his sleek head at her sideways, disappeared into the crowd.

Sara returned to her place at the bar. She did not want to be hard to find. She picked up her drink, pleased to discover that it was still there, and took a sip, and then another without lowering the glass. She fluffed up her bangs to cool her forehead. Her mind had become a flurry of thoughts and feelings, flitting back and forth between tonight and tomorrow, retrieving moments on the dance floor she would savour with her sister over cinnamon toast and tea in the morning.

She knew she should visit the powder room to freshen up. She could feel a moist patch, now uncomfortably cooling, between her shoulder blades. She could almost feel the sticky thick line of shadow crease her eyelids. And she wanted to see how her hair was holding up. But she knew she couldn't leave her place. She dabbed at the corners of her eyes, tidied her bangs, and reached into her little flat bag for her cigarette case.

Her feet felt like they were crammed down into the toes of her sandals, the taut leather straps cutting painfully into the bone just below her little toe. The big toe on her left foot was tingling so she took turns balancing on the heel of one shoe and then the other until the circulation was restored. She had forgotten what it was like to dance in such impractical shoes – *however* did she do it? – although she still liked the way they tightened her calf muscles and threw her hips forward when she walked.

The band paused for a break and the crowd swelled towards the bar in waves of heat, perspiration and perfume. She did her best to accommodate the outstretched arms and wet

tipping glasses, but refused to give up her space, this place in time. She wished her dance partner – she didn't even know his name! – would hurry back. During the next set she would show what a good sport she was and dance to his kind of music, which was probably ballroom dancing, she added peevishly to herself, although this thought was really quite appealing.

She reached for another cigarette but, deciding there wasn't enough room to enjoy it, reached instead down the bar for a few peanuts to nibble on. Her hand entered the white plastic cup and collided with another hand. This one was long, yellowish-white with gold hairs and freckles. Her eyes followed the narrow wrist and plaid cuff up to a lanky young man in a leather vest with dark blond hair and a ragged reddish-brown beard. Finding his gaze openly upon her, she smiled, tentatively at first, and then in a more comfortable, almost leisurely way. She was, after all, waiting for someone, and therefore could afford the small courtesy of a smile.

He tipped his beer mug at her and took a quick gulp.

“It's the salt. Addicting,” he said, shoveling another fistful of peanuts into his mouth.

She nodded hesitantly, brushing away the salt from the tips of her fingers. She didn't really want to start a conversation with this man, but on the other hand, she also didn't want to look like she wasn't having a good time. And she did want to be talking to someone when her dance partner returned. Bringing back her smile, she tried to think of what to say to this lonesome cowboy. She didn't know anything about horses.

“Are you... are you from these parts?” Well that was an absurd question. Really, not being from this part of the country, his answer was sure to be almost meaningless.

“Waaat, you mean this one horse town?” He apparently found her question equally, if not more so, absurd. She should have gone with horses.

“Why, no Sir, Ma’am.” He chuckled to himself through loose-jointed shoulders, shook his untrimmed beard, and poured the remainder of his drink down his throat.

“Naw, I’m working my ole man’s half section ...”

She stared, stupefied, at this rustic man who was now leaning confidentially, half-invitingly towards her, waving his empty mug in front of her face. She felt the blood rush to her powdered cheeks and caught her breath. This was really most unbearable. She didn’t want this to happen at all. And now she didn’t know how to prevent it. She glanced down at her empty glass and quickly looked away. She didn’t want him to think she wanted another. She didn’t want to encourage him. She had just wanted to be courteous, exchange a few pleasantries while she waited.

“ ... ‘bout 20 miles due south a here.” He slid the peanut cup between them and withdrew a package of tobacco from his breast pocket. “Course we don’t farm it anymore – except to grow a little pot that is...” His shoulders shook again in silent laughter.

Was he joking? Was he high? Was he going to offer her a rolled cigarette?

Then she heard that deep, silken voice.

“Excuse me.”

Thank heavens! Her dance partner was somewhere behind her, no doubt fighting his way through the three-foot deep crowd at the dark and smoky bar. She would keep her back to him and wait until he got closer; wait until she felt the gentle pressure of his hand on her arm or shoulder, and then she would turn up to him, with feigned surprise, as though she was having such a good time she hardly noticed his absence. She looked at this young man with a piece of peanut skin perched on his moustache and wondered how she could look like she was enjoying

this. But perhaps her discerning partner had already comprehended, at a glance, from a distance, the awkward position she was in.

She forced herself back into the one-sided conversation – he was now down to 60 head of something – and she nodded at the appropriate time with a distant, but courteous, smile. Then her smile changed slightly, becoming a little more vague and gentle. It was to be the beginning of an apologetic smile, which would say: “I’m sorry, you must excuse me now. You see, I was just waiting for someone. You understand.”

Then she heard it again, closer this time. Yes! He had found her wedged along the crushing, noisy bar.

“Excuse me,” he repeated above the din of the crowd, and she reveled inwardly at the trace of impatience in his silver-toned voice. And then –

“But you must allow me the pleasure.”

The young blond-haired man watched in wonder at the transformation that now took place in this prim, but vivacious woman poised confidently against the dimly lit bar. The sudden flash from the silver lighter behind her seemed to set the teased ends of her stiff auburn-colored hair on fire and reveal, in that split second, the ghostly pallor of her pinched and powdered face. The skittish smile that had been playing along the corners of her painted-on lips had given way to a crimson slash. This once pretty widow in the gay party dress stood transfixed before him, her black spider eyes, wide and unseeing, as if her very heart had stopped.