



The Houston Gargoyle, 2 June 1929

Merrymakers

Walter Clemons

During the intermission we washed down gravelly oatmeal cookies with pineapple punch. Somebody figured out what oatmeal cookies are good for and lobbed one at a pal across the dance floor. Back it came, spinning through the air. Squeals. War broke out, but the chaperons crushed it. The orchestra lurched into a fox trot, net skirts rustled, chairs scraped, and boys in their first tuxedos, fifty faces blank with doom, rose and launched their partners.

Every month we came to these Merrymakers' Club dances upstairs in the old Junior League building. We were fifteen years old; there was no out. A board of iron mothers ran the club, and a week before each dance, if you hadn't asked a date yet, you were apt to come home from school in the afternoon to find a telephone number to call. At the other end of the wire a mother was waiting, with news that some sad tall girl or bouncy pill hadn't been asked yet, and a suggestion. So if you knew what was good for you, you asked a popular girl a month ahead, sent a carnation corsage trimmed with net the color of her dress, and box-stepped under the balloons without reasoning why, until another Merrymakers' evening was done. Our merrymaking was a thick gruel, stirred slowly clockwise to music by the mothers.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. I said politely, "Thank you, Kitty," and smiled down into a grotto of tiny white teeth. Impartial as a lighthouse, she turned her smile to the partner who replaced me, and I started for the edge of the dance floor. You had to be careful, for if you so much as brushed against one of the toiling couples they would split like a dry pod, the boy would make for the punch table without a blush of shame or a backward look, and you would find yourself dancing. I tiptoed around Hallie Beth Bosley as if she were a bomb and made it to the wall where Edwina Moore had been standing since the music began, thin and unhappy, with a worthless dance card dangling from her wrist. I said, "Would you care to dance, Edwina?"

"Oh, yes, thank you." She cast a farewell look around the room. "I was supposed to have this dance with Jack, but he chickened out." Then she gave it up and put her cool hand in mine and I led her out on the floor. Edwina didn't dance cheek to cheek like the popular girls and that made it awkward because we kept looking each other in the eye and having to say things. I said, "It's an awfully good dance, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Edwina said hopelessly. "The orchestra's good, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is." We danced on, uttering little pale sentences. I asked whom she'd come with and was sorry I'd brought it up. Her cousin. A put-up job, obviously.

"JoAnne looks pretty tonight," Edwina said.

Not knowing whether to say, "Thank you," or "Yes, she does," or to attempt a flight of fancy like, "Not as pretty as you," I kept my mouth shut. JoAnne was the girl I'd brought to the dance and whose

silver identification bracelet I wore on my left wrist.

I was in my usual condition of misery. I really only wanted to dance with the prettiest girls, like JoAnne, but then I would see some poor thing marooned and feel bad and go ask her instead. But it was shallow kindness, for no sooner had I done it than I would be chewing the inside of my mouth and wondering if I was going to be stuck. The shiftings of half-hearted do-unto-others and flighty panic gave me sweating palms I kept wiping on the hip of my tux.

I danced with Edwina until my left hand was moist beyond social acceptability. I couldn't jerk it away, and clearly nobody was going to cut in. I said, "Gee, it's hot in here. Let's go on the porch and sit a while, why don't we?"

We made our way among the couples, me wiping my hand, and stepped out on the long second-story veranda, overlooking a patio planted with banana and palm trees. Edwina sat down and I brought two Dixie cups of water from the cooler. These we drank in deep silence, and then Edwina slowly crushed her cup and tore it in small pieces. Meanwhile I stared. Her straight yellow hair was brushed severely back, and under the lights along the wall her high curved forehead gleamed as gently as pearl. Her face was centered high up, in her forehead and gray eyes; her serious thin mouth I hardly looked at. I was always riotously and guiltily thinking about kissing people, for lack of conversational topics, and my impulse was to kiss Edwina on her clear, vulnerable-looking forehead. Now that I looked at her, for the first time really, I was puzzled why Edwina wasn't pretty. Her hair was pretty, her skin was, her -

I suddenly saw her lips finish a sentence I hadn't heard a word of. "What'd you say, Edwina?"

"I just said, you were looking at me so funny. Is there something on my face?" She lifted a thin hand, with bitten nails, and touched her cheek.

"Oh, no, I was just - I mean, I was thinking you look - pretty," I said, whereupon Edwina blanched, and my remark fell between us like a new-laid egg. In an effort to bury it I opened my mouth and loosed a second horror. "And that's an awfully nice dress you have on." We both stared aghast at the dress, which I observed dimly was green. Then, utterly undone, we sprang up from our chairs, bits of Dixie cup falling softly to the floor, and fled back to the dance floor.

As we stepped through the French doors JoAnne whirled past in the grip of a handsome, dangerous boy a year older than me, who rode a motorcycle, and my heart went up in flames like a ball of crumpled paper. I hardly noticed that Edwina had stopped dead by my side. I turned and saw her stricken face and said, "What's the matter, Edwina?"

She said, "You were awfully nice to dance with me, but I don't want you to be stuck with me -" She began to back away.

"What're you talking about, what're you talking about?" I cried distractedly.

"Please, don't feel responsible. I'm used to it. I'll go comb my hair a while, that's what I always do."

I caught her wrist. I could see JoAnne not far away, laughing with her partner, and I was scared Edwina was about to cry, she was all pink. I said, nearly in tears myself, "What are you talking about, stuck? I like to dance with you, Edwina, honestly. Please don't talk like that, please don't."

Some time later, when one of the partners on Edwina's dance card had appeared and I was at large again, I hunted up a buddy who was playing odd-or-even for nickels in the stagline. "Hey, Stan, do me a favor?" He look wary, and when I said, "Go dance with Edwina Moore," he dropped his nickel in alarm.

"Are you crazy?" said Stan. "What I want to dance with her and be stuck the whole rest of the night for?"

"You won't be. I'll send somebody."

"But she's a head taller'n me and she's so serious and everything. In fact, she hates me. Man, have mercy."

"Come on, she's nice."

In sheer uneasiness he began to look around the room and snap his fingers in time to the music. Then he looked back at me more considerately. "What's the trouble? You bring her?"

"No, I just feel bad about her. Come on, five minutes, for pete sake."

Stan closed his eyes and nodded glumly. "But if you leave me with her, I swear -"

"I won't, go on."

"Where've you been?" said JoAnne when I got back to her half an hour later, haggard.

I swallowed. "Well, you know Edwina Moore, how I was dancing with her for a long time?"

"And now you're mad for her and it's all over between us."

"Uh-huh, she's so much prettier'n you," I said wittily and was rewarded with a snuggle. "Listen, JoAnne. There I was, dancing with her, and all of a sudden she said I didn't have to be stuck with her and she'd go comb her hair and thanked me and all." JoAnne groaned. "But I hadn't done anything wrong, JoAnne. I was nice, really. And I thought that was so nice of her, not to just hang on like old Hallie Beth does and talk you to pieces, it made me feel for her, and so when somebody finally cut in on me I decided to go hunt up guys to dance with her, you know, try to make her have a better time."

"And what happened?"

"Well, I got Stan. Then I got Bob to follow him. But then I got in hot water, because when I was trying to talk Horace

Ackney into going - what a stinking rat, that Horace Ackney, he wanted a quarter - Edwina looked right over where I was, and I got scared if Horace went, she'd catch on I put him up to it, so there wasn't anything to do but go back and cut in on Bob myself, he was rolling his eyes around. So there I was, big as life, dancing with her again, and it looked so fishy, bouncing back when I'd just got through dancing with her, I had to have some excuse, and what I said was, 'Edwina, I forgot to ask you when I was dancing with you before, would you go to next month's Merrymakers' with me?'"

"But you're supposed to be taking me."

I was totally unhappy. "I know, JoAnne. But there'll be hundreds of guys asking you, and it's just for this once."

"I just don't understand it," JoAnne said.

"Boy, me either! I just couldn't get over it, what she said. I wanted to do something to kind of make up for things. She never acts happy."

JoAnne nodded and said softly, "Well, with her parents the way they are."

"What way?"

"Oh, they don't get along. I don't know exactly. I've heard my parents talk."

"Are you mad, JoAnne - what I did?"

"No, I'm not mad. What did Edwina say?"

"When I asked her? Not much. She just said, 'Yes, thank you, I'd like to,' then she piped down and not another word. She didn't seem real delighted or anything."

Yes, *thank you, I'd like to*. Then, I supposed, if you were Edwina Moore, you fell silent because you just didn't know how to talk to a green boy you'd known distantly all your life. He came bungling up and asked you to a dance a month ahead; probably no one had ever done that before. What should you have done? Make big eyes or say something cute or at least, at the very least, dance cheek to cheek like other girls? Instead, you took the news inside, having been by yourself too much to change and be anything besides alone at a dance. It must be pretty terrible, I imagined, to stand unasked on the outskirts of the grins and music; you probably thought about being twenty-five years old and miraculously beautiful - and unhurt.

The dance ended while you were combing away at your hair in the powder room. Your cousin Jerry, I was fairly sure, held your velvet coat with a cousin's apathy just too high for you to get your arms into the sleeves. At your front door he grunted and shuffled away down the front walk before you'd even got the key out of your mother's beaded bag.

Other girls, maybe, rushed upstairs to sit at the foot of their parents' beds and chat about the dance. Your parents were social, beautiful people; I had seen them at wedding receptions. You would probably feel like a discredit to them, stiff and shy and sorry-looking. Though they probably didn't always look so handsome; sometimes they stopped talking when you came into the room, the skin on their faces shrunken with anger. You would have learned by now not to look, just get out of the room, not think about things you couldn't do anything about. Anyway, you wouldn't go tell about the dance.

As Jerry's car started off in the dark outside, you climbed the stairs. You sat down at the cool mirror in your bedroom and blurred your eyes to see yourself at twenty-five. At the dance your face burned, your skinny arm on your partner's shoulder felt light and outlandish, as if you had fever. Now you would be calmer; you could feel almost as if the dance had never taken place. Now nobody could touch you. I was sure it would never occur to you a boy was lying awake thinking about you. ■

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