

# Cotillion

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**T**HE KID ATTENDS COTILLION.

He loves it. It gives him a chance to dress up, and he loves to dress up.

It's his second favorite pastime now, dressing up, something that nourishes his soul and reinforces his sagging self-esteem. For, he's older. He's making his first tentative advances into the middle-class milieu and he's finding isolation and loneliness. He's eating too much. He's getting fat ... and, of course, this makes everything worse because the fat leads toward rejection which leads toward eating which leads toward fat which leads toward rejection, and now, he finds himself crying a lot.

He tries to ignore it, but he can't. It hurts too much. So, he erects defenses, falls into fantasy, into classical music which he loves but which isolates him even more; into electronics, little hand-built radios in snap-lid cuff-link boxes that comfort impersonally and warm only with the heat from their tiny tubes; into dreams, where he's thin and muscled, where he tosses his golden hair out of his eyes and is admired for what he likes.

There is not a single human being to whom he can confess his loneliness. He feels that somehow he'll be letting his parents down if he tells them, so he doesn't. He blocks and hides, makes himself laugh as he plunges into project after project, finding solace in masturbation, tiny tubes and music. He resurrects his pain only when alone, but *resurrection* isn't the right word. It implies an effort made to affect a result, and the Kid's condition requires no effort. It floods into being, appears by itself.

It inundates his chubby body, leaves only his mind to grasp desperately for a hold. It's a lot for a fourteen-year-old to have to bear. It ages him.

But there is one time each month when his problems recede somewhat, when he enjoys himself, and when that time comes he tries his best. He does his hair with a dab, splashes too much *Old Spice* on his chubby cheeks and dresses up; starched, lavender dress shirt accented with a narrow black tie, with "gold" cuff-links and a pink, quarter-inch belt holding up charcoal grey slacks under a black jacket with a white fleck. He feels pretty good.

And, reflected in the mirror, he sees that all that black makes him look thinner. He tightens his belly. That helps. Now, if he can just get by without breathing. He stares at himself, figures the angles. He notices that his chin looks less doubled when he swallows, so he practices swallowing. He finds that if he can stop his swallow half-way through it holds his chin in, makes his face look almost normal. It closes off his air, of course, but that doesn't matter. He's not breathing anyway. So, he's feeling pretty good, except he's dizzy from holding his breath. Then he hears his mother call. His ride is waiting. It's time for the cotillion.

*Cotillion.* The word originally means patterned, aristocratic dances done in couples. Now it means the woman's clubhouse downtown where Mr. and Mrs. Enterprising Couple teach ball-room dancing and what are considered to be social graces to middle-class kids. All the teenagers in Red's group attend, the ones he's grown up with. But there are too few of these to fill the club, so the enterprising couple has opened the dances to a similar group from the next town as well as to a few individuals from local private schools. One of the strangers concerns us.

He doesn't remember her name. He can't remember ever having heard it. Nevertheless, this stranger makes an enormous impression on Red. He's not sure why, beyond that her lone-

liness is even more deeply rooted than his own. Whatever, it affects him so profoundly that ever after he thinks of this girl. He wonders about her and to this day wishes her well.

She is his own age. She attends a local private school, a boarding school which he comes to understand is more a place to keep her than a home. She never sees her parents as they occupy themselves in some remote place, which in itself is difficult for the Kid to fathom as his own parents are so very present.

But, this girl is subject to just such a bleak existence. She lives at her school, experiences Christmas and Easter and birthdays and summer and all the joyous times alone, among strangers, among those who are paid to show her attention.

She's attractive, or rather, will be. Her beauty is not obvious, rather a growing maturity, a sensitivity, gained from her isolation, and she is isolated, as much as if she'd been born on the moon — in spite of the private school, in spite of her keepers, in spite of Cotillion — for she shakes, whether from disease of nervousness or shyness our hero never learns. All he knows for certain is that her hands shake, her entire body seems out of control ... not intensely, just noticeably, with the result that her peers, the teenagers around her, strangers or familiar, avoid her like some obnoxious disease.

It should be mentioned at this point that this is not a love story. The Red-Headed Kid doesn't find romance and start liking girls. The girl doesn't find it and stop shaking. The Kid isn't sure exactly what kind of story it is. He isn't that much different than his contemporaries. Compassion is still unfamiliar to him, so it isn't even too clear how he becomes involved with this girl. But, he does realize instinctively that in any fifties place a male, even a fat male, has more options than any women, and because of this, and because of his inherent response to loneliness, he develops a habit which causes trouble more often than he likes to remember, yet one which he maintains always, like a trust.

He is a good ballroom dancer, even better than good, and he always makes certain, especially in those days when he and his cohort are attending parties consisting essentially of a knot of mumbling boys on one side of the room and a demure line of seated girls on the other, that every girl at the party gets to dance at least once. It's because of this that he first experiences another's pain.

On this night, a friend's mother is driving. He trudges out to her car, a *1955 Pontiac 870 Station Wagon*, calls excited hellos to the girls in their stiff formals, to the boys in unaccustomed suits and ties. The girls look alike, objects of pale yellow, pale blue, pale rose, some just pale in white; the boys look alike, pink shirts, lots of charcoal gray, thin purple belts, although it must be confessed that no one is aware they all look alike, except the Kid, of course, but at the moment he's many years from understanding such things.

He jumps into the back seat, sinks into a sea of pale chiffon. The air in the car startles him at first, a close combination of *White Shoulders*, a popular perfume among adolescent girls, and over-liberal applications of *Aqua Velva* and *Old Spice*, the only two scents a boy would dare to use in the fifties.

But, who cares. He's dressed up. Everything concerned with the night is magic. Without realizing it, he settles elegantly into fantasy. Layers of chiffon cushion him. The Pontiac? A sumptuous coach whisking him off to a "glittering" pre-dance party, to onion dip and that red punch which, as he recalls, flavors all of his adolescent celebrations. Everything seems wonderful for a change. He glows, through the short, pre-dance party, through the ride to the woman's club house, right up to the very minute he approaches the main event. Cotillion. Patterned aristocratic dances done in couples.

The clubhouse seems to shimmer. The ever-present mirrored ball hangs, revolves, casts particles of colored light into

swirling patterns. The music hasn't begun. Mr. Enterprising Couple hasn't turned on the record player, but no sooner do the boys manage to gather in a mumbling knot than he gets with it, drops the needle, and a waltz floats out.

The Kid heads for the girls. Unlike most of the other boys, our hero loves to dance, never misses a chance. Who to dance with? That one, perhaps. Good dancer? Yes, but she always looks like she's going to faint. Too delicate. Get someone a little more substantial. That one? Sure. She's fun. Good dancer.

"May I Have This Dance?" as he's been carefully taught. "Certainly" as she's been carefully taught, and they whirl onto the floor. The waltz is his favorite dance by far. They soar, create a clearing around themselves, although it's not all that hard to do as the boys are mostly still mumbling, the girls mostly still sitting. They finish the dance and part just in time for Mrs. Enterprising Couple to take the microphone and announce the evenings activities.

He notices the girl soon after that, a new face in the corner. He doesn't remember having seen her before, so he guesses she's new. She's sitting alone, empty seats on each side. She looks around — there's something in her eyes — but, he's too far away to tell what it is and, as Mr. and Mrs. Enterprising Couple are demonstrating the Tango, his attention is diverted. He doesn't notice her again until later.

The first half of the evening, when new dances are taught, is finished. Refreshments are being served ... cake and red punch. General dancing begins. It's a tango and the Kid is having a great time, feeling mysterious, continental and thin. Then, he notices her again. She's still in the corner. As far as he can tell, she hasn't moved. The seats next to her are still empty, so she's not talking to anyone. Her eyes seem wider, and then he sees into them and it stuns him, for her expression stems from something he knows, from something he tries to finesse during those dreadful

moments when the girls ask the boys to dance, when he sits, his chubby body trembling with the realization that all the girls he's danced with will ignore him, that he won't be asked to dance, that every person around him will be on the floor and he'll be sitting there, trying to contain his desperation — for that's what it is, desperation — like that pouring from the girl's eyes. For she is desperate and lonely and, my God, how he wants her at that moment — to throw his arms around her, to say “there, there, it's all right. They don't know ... they're stupid children” ... words too mature for him by far, words used again and again to assuage his own loneliness, words that he doesn't ever, even for one moment, believe himself.

That's why he asks her. He can't bear her pain, the sound of her soul calling out across the room, so he's soon across the floor, soon standing at her chair, soon asking her to dance. At first, she doesn't say anything. He's not sure she even sees him. Then she smiles and he's overwhelmed, for her gratitude is so tangibly real that it hurts, and he feels ashamed. Her hand reaches out. He takes it. He feels it shaking, and he suddenly knows why she's sitting alone, why she's being ignored. His heart breaks.

He puts his arm around her. They dance, not saying much. He doesn't know what to say, so, they just dance. She trembles, shaking gently in his arms, and when the dance ends he's sorry he has to leave her at her chair. He's ashamed that there's no one else in that whole damned place who will ask her to dance, no one who will try to understand and help — and right then he hates it all, the pastel girls, the boys with their cheap shaving lotion. He hates the tawdry glass ball and the shabby woman's clubhouse, and it becomes too much to bear ... so the boy takes over and he runs, hides in the men's room. But, he doesn't cry. He wants to, but can't. There's someone else in there.

And, it's perhaps because of this, or perhaps because he aches alone through two more girl-ask-boy dances, that he

chooses to ask her for the last dance of the evening. It's strangely like the first. She trembles even more violently than before. They don't say much, although he does try and make conversation. "What's your name?" He hears it, then forgets. "How long have you been coming to cotillion?" He hears that too. She's attended all year, four earlier dances during which he hasn't even noticed her, and his guilt forces him to make jokes and they laugh and at the end she doesn't seem to tremble so badly. Then, the dance is over and cotillion is finished for another month. He's in the Pontiac, at home, and in bed jerking off. He's fourteen, remember?

He thinks of her several times during the next month, but his thoughts are confused. He feels compassion, certainly, although it shames him as he mistakes it for pity and he feels that pity is wrong. Once he sees her in a car. He smiles and waves, but he never knows if she sees him. She doesn't respond, just sits, stares, eyes wide, her misery touching him even through layers of metal. It builds as he thinks of her again and again until by the next cotillion he's eager to see her, determined to help, to reassure, to let her know that she's not totally alone, that there is at least one other person who understands her pain.

This evening is much like the last except the "Lindy" is danced and the refreshments are ice cream and red punch. The Kid makes a point of dancing with the girl early. He talks, forces the conversation as he's always uncomfortable when the person he's with doesn't respond directly, and she does respond finally, asks a few questions of her own, relaxes a bit. But, still she trembles. Still she sits alone. Still she speaks to no one else.

It's at the height of his bravado that she startles him. Again, it's girl's choice. Again, he sits, acutely aware that one-by-one the boys on either side are being asked to dance, are clearing out around him, exposing him. He steels himself. His defenses

snap automatically into place. He watches a tall girl he's asked to dance many times ignore him and choose someone else. He grits his teeth, throws back his head, swallows and forces a smile, and she's suddenly standing there.

Timidly, she asks him for a dance. His confusion stops him for a moment. He can't move. Then he's up. They embrace, and her arm presses against his shoulder. Helplessly, his mind fills with thoughts that shame him even now. The initiative is no longer his. It's one thing to choose to give support to this strange girl, quite another to be chosen by her. Does she pity him? Is he suddenly the object of something akin to his own highly questionable compassion? Or worse, has she misconstrued his intent? Can it be that she thinks she loves him?

The evening becomes agony. For the first time he dances every single girl-ask-boy dance. She's always there, and he knows that the boys on either side of him notice. He catches them snickering, changing the conversation at his approach. But, he cannot refuse her. He cannot say *no* as she appears, more and more boldly, to ask him to dance. It's been a minor dream, not having to sit out these cursed girl-initiative dances, but now it's become something else. He's created this situation. What can he do? How does he handle this? During the next month he thinks of little else.

As each day passes his anxieties increase. What has begun in innocence, regardless of his motivation, has turned into a can-of-worms. He cannot bear to hurt this girl. Even without being able to state the problem, he knows that to openly, or even tacitly reject her would be cruel. At the same time, in spite of his facade, it hurts him when the others snicker. Can he keep giving her attention when every thoughtless jibe from one of his peers reinforces his own pain? And, too, he doesn't love her. There's certainly no question of that. So, just where does his obligation end?

There is no answer. He cannot decide. On the one hand *cruelty*, on the other hand *pain*. There is no answer, and this is the situation when the “night” comes again — when he does his dab, holds his breath and goes off for an evening of dancing.

He doesn't remember the featured dance of that night. He doesn't remember the refreshments, except for the red punch. He does remember a reference to his “girlfriend” from some adolescent jerk, and he does remember that, to his shame, he is unable to ask her to dance. But, he is vividly aware. All evening he feels her eyes. He still sees her there — alone, in her chair, her eyes, hopeful — markedly lacking their former bleak acceptance.

And, when the inevitable moment comes that she approaches him, a small gift in her trembling hand, he is so overwhelmed with grief that he cannot speak. They dance in silence, her arms around him, clutching tightly with the sure knowledge that he's already gone. She tucks her head into his shoulder, something she hasn't done before, as if wanting to get everything possible out of this last moment. But, he's numb. He's confused and cannot respond, so there is no joy in their dancing. And, when at last he takes her aside and tries to tell her, honestly and as gently as he can, that he knows what's happened and can't deal with it, she denies everything, insists she is not interested, insists she doesn't care and that he is nothing more to her than a strange, red-headed boy with a talent for ballroom dancing.

He feels like a fool. A lock of shining hair falls across his eyes as he stumbles backward. He is a clumsy, stupid little boy and he turns to run. He knows absolutely that the entire world is watching, and it's this, coupled with shame and grief and the tears in her eyes as she turns back to her lonely chair, that propels him once again into the men's room where, in spite of the boys sneaking cigarettes, in spite of the snickering and a

dirty crack from one of his “friends,” in spite of every bit of self control he is able to muster, he finds he has no choice. He locks himself into one of the stalls and cries. ■