



LYNNE JAEGER WEINSTEIN

# Dances

*A short story by* SAMANTHA SCHOECH

**W**e are supposed to be asleep in the van. Instead we are sitting up in the bed our mother has fashioned on the floor and peering out between the paisley curtains at three people splitting a joint. It's Friday night, and the community-center parking lot is full. Inside, a band from Sebastopol is playing Country Joe and the Fish covers. My mother comes out every half hour to check on us, and we pretend to be asleep. She is due in another ten minutes.

My brother is scanning the parking lot for people making out. Once, a couple banged right up against the side of our blue van and started humping. Benny laughed so hard he peed the bed a little. I am watching the open doors of the community center for our mother and timing her on the new digital watch our dad gave me. It's 11:22. Eight more minutes.

The band is playing a song I recognize from one of our mother's records. My brother is on his knees in his tiny white underwear playing air guitar and cracking himself up. He's tired of watching for couples making out. He pulls down his underpants and shakes his penis at me and then falls backward against the pillows, laughing. I hate it when he gets like this, all crazy and bored. The best thing to do is just try to ignore him. I pull my blanket out from under him and turn back to the window. He sings "Angie" to me, the way our mom sometimes does, but I keep ignoring him. She is already two minutes late. Our mother is wearing brown cords and a flowered peasant top pulled down off her shoulders. When I see her framed in the light of the community-center doors, I whisper, "Coming!"

Benny and I dive under the covers and close our eyes. He is laughing through his nose and I know he will give us away.

Our mother slides the van door open as quietly as she can, but it clangs and grinds anyway. My brother sits up and says, "Hi," all soft and sleepy, like he just woke up.

"Hi, Benny baby," she says, climbing in and lying down next to us.

I say hi too, because I can't stand pretending to be asleep anymore.

"Angie, too. Both my babies are awake." She smells like smoke and wine and sweat. I try to roll over Benny so that I can lie next to her, but he does that thing where he makes his whole body hard, nothing but edges, and I can't budge him.

"It's loud," I whisper.

"Is it?" our mother asks. She is distracted and doesn't notice the way the bass thumps against the sides of the van. She reaches over and smooths my bangs. "Try to go back to sleep. I'll stay here until you do, and then when you wake up, it will be morning and we'll be home." She sits up and peers out the window toward the community-center doors. Her hair is wet around her face and stuck to the back of her neck. I want her to lie down and go to sleep with us, but I know she is looking for her boyfriend, Carl. I peek at my digital watch in the light coming through the window. It is not even midnight yet. The dance doesn't end until two. I close my eyes and feel sleep pressing down on me against my will.

**M**y brother sweats so much in his sleep that when I wake up I think he's peed the bed again. I kick the covers off. The band is playing another song I know from my mother's parties. Carl's band plays it sometimes. I press my cheek against the window and blow the curtain to watch it flutter. There is a cluster of people around the community-center doors. I recognize Billy from the place where my mom buys hay for the horses. Clouds of smoke hang above them like thunderheads, and when one of them laughs, they all laugh, bending back and forth and screeching like birds. My brother says, "Ahhhh," in his sleep and rolls over. Then the van door slides open.

Carl's shoulder-length hair is almost completely wet. He recently shaved off his mustache, and he looks weird to me.

"You still up?" he says.

"It's loud," I whisper.

"Should I tell your mom you're up?" He is standing outside with the van door open. Cool night air and the crashing sound of the music rush in.

"Nah," I say. I just want him to go back to the dance; it wasn't so bad being awake by myself. But he climbs in and sits on the edge of our mattress.

"That's a good girl. She's having too good a time to be bothered right now, anyway." He takes a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket and shakes one out. He lights it and then touches the end of the match to his tongue to put it out. It makes a tiny sizzling sound. "Man," he says, exhaling, "your mom sure can dance. She just about kills me the way she can dance. I think half the men in Sonoma County have the hots for her."

I put my palm flat against the window to feel its coolness. My brother groans a little and turns his face into the pillow. My mom says he's more sensitive than me, and I wonder why he's still asleep and I'm awake.

Carl holds his cigarette between his first and second fingers and uses his thumb to pick something out from under a fingernail on his other hand. "Your mom," he says. Then he stops and takes a drag of his cigarette. "Lay down," he says. "You're never gonna fall back asleep sitting up like that. What time is it anyway?"

I look at my digital watch. "Seven minutes after one."

He lies down so that Benny is between us and smokes, staring up at the ceiling of the van. I lie down too and look where he looks. Tiny spots of rust bloom like flowers on the roof.

"Do you like me?" Carl asks. He blows smoke in a column to the ceiling, where it spreads like a mushroom cloud.

"Uh-huh," I say. I close my eyes, hoping that sleep will come.

"Your mom isn't sure whether you and Benny like me. She doesn't want me to move in because she's not sure if you guys would like it."

I don't say anything. I am trying to feel my eyelids getting heavy.

"Would you?"

"I guess," I say.

"You guess? Either you would or you wouldn't."

"I don't know," I say. I wonder if my mom is going to come

out and check on us, or if she's sent Carl instead.

"That means you wouldn't." He smokes for a while and then says, "I can understand that. You want your mommy all to yourself. Yeah, I can understand it."

It doesn't seem like he is talking to me, so I don't say anything. My eyes are still closed, but I can feel Carl moving. I hear him kiss my brother's cheek. Then I feel his big head lowering itself toward my face. I can see him, even though my eyes are closed. When his lips touch the corner of my mouth, leaving a tiny spot of wetness, I hold my breath. His breath feels hot and gritty and smells like smoke. He keeps his face close to mine and says, "Sweet dreams." Then he leaves. When the van door slides shut behind him, I open my eyes. Benny looks right at me and says, "I don't want Carl to live with us."

We lie awake quietly until the dance ends. My old red sleeping bag is unzipped and covers us like a blanket, and we both have Big Bird pillowcases left over from when I was little. Benny is playing with his fingers, holding them above his face and doing "The Itsy-Bitsy Spider" without singing.

**T**he way everyone comes streaming out of the community-center doors in long columns reminds me of blood moving through veins. I've seen it on TV; it rushes and stops, rushes and stops.

Our mother yanks open the sliding van door and throws her purse in the back with us. I can tell she's mad because she doesn't even care that it hits my brother in the shoulder.

"I thought I told you to go back to sleep," she says to us without looking.

We don't say anything, just keep lying on our backs and looking at her sideways. She slams the door shut and gets in the driver's seat. There is nowhere to go yet. A long line of cars is blocking the exit. She sighs, and I can see her jaw throbbing.

When Carl taps on the window, she gasps and says, "Jesus fucking Christ!" But she rolls it down anyway.

"Sandy," he says in a tired voice, "come on."

"'Come on' what, Carl?"

"Just calm down for a second. There's nothing to get mad about."

My mother points her finger at Carl, almost touching his nose. "Leave them out of this, Carl. Just leave them the fuck out of it."

Carl deflates and takes his hands off the car. "Jesus, Sandy—" he starts, but my mom puts the van in gear, and it lurches forward. The wheels screech under us, and I roll against my brother like a barrel.

**M**y best friend Jill's parents are Jehovah's Witnesses. I go to their house after school to drink Kool-Aid and play Lite-Brite. Jill's room is all yellow ruffles. Her mother made the curtains herself. My mother calls Jill's mother the "great white hope" behind her back. Maybe because she's so fat.

Once, when my mom came to pick me up, Jill's mom invited her in for lemonade and then started talking about God. She had all these little comic books with pictures of heaven on the covers that she wanted my mom to take home with her. My

mom gathered them up into a neat little pile and pushed them back at Jill's mom. "Sorry, Nancy. I'm just a heathen, born and bred," she said. Later, when I asked her what a heathen was, she said someone who is going to hell and likes it that way.

When I stay for dinner at Jill's house, we say grace, and we always pray for my mom. In my mind I plead with God to save her from hell. She won't let me go to church with Jill's family on Sundays because she says they'll brainwash me and I'll grow up to be a housewife, but Jill's mom taught me how to pray so I can do it by myself, quietly.

*(end of excerpt)*