The Dancer and the Dance

Joel Nugent

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Love while a gentle sort of trap, is an infinitely ornate and delicate affair, a maze of concentric circles, where one goes from chamber to chamber without ever being aware that the one he has just passed out of has been locked away from him forever. But looking backward one can often detect the very moment, and the very place, when a particular door closed quietly behind him.

The first room was the one we entered when we first began to find that boys’ society didn’t totally satisfy. We didn’t have anything against boys (still don’t, as a matter of fact)—indeed found them a great deal more ingenious and daring than girls. Around boys there was always excitement: with boys one short-circuited the housemother’s toaster, or went out with some bootleggers to import a load of whiskey, or drove all night to Pecos just to play pool, and while the experience was booming along one felt that this was really living. It was only when, red-eyed and tousled, one returned to the dormitory room that the old black ennui settled down again.

And contrariwise one found very little in the girls’ way of living that was endurable for a second. All that girls ever did was talk. Life to them was a vast conversation-piece that one stitched away at all through the day. Like a dialogue from a Jane Austen novel their talk was grave, common-sensical, and touched with acid; and we could no more get a girl to drive to Pecos to play pool than we could get her to do another thing that frequently popped into our thoughts. No, all the girls wanted to do was sit around and play their little game of oracular chess.

So that’s why it was all a paradox when we suddenly began to want to be with girls—or, to state it more exactly—when we didn’t always want to be with boys. For trips to Pecos or tricks on the housemother were infrequent, and while we played tennis or baseball in the intervals, to siphon off part
of the ebullience, there began to arrive that moment, regularly at the end of
the day, when going out with the fellows was hardly more exciting than stay-
ing home with the biology text. Or when, having gone out with them, one
found the whole evening a sort of neutral waste, and half the time one ended
up quarreling with somebody, getting into a fight, or—more likely this—
going out and looking for girls.

The first year or two after we started dating, all we wanted was a sort
of mechanized group hysteria. To be together in a car, packed hip to hip with
so many couples that the springs sagged, bowling along past the cottonfields
late at night—one such evening could flavor several subsequent weeks of
loneliness. Mere group consanguinity was enough. If we could ever corner
enough people at one time, and if the night was fine and nobody was mad—
there was nothing else we could ask for. The wit and laughter took care of
itself, and while sooner or later there was always a bit of catch-as-catch-can,
there were usually too many bodies in the back seat to allow any real success.
There might be an awkward, half-hit of a kiss, but it was usually followed by
screams and giggling, and could no more be compared with love's true talis-
man than a game of marbles can with international diplomacy.

But during this first season of let's-be-with-everybody the trapdoors were
silent on the move. For one thing, there soon arose the problem of whom
one should be with. At first, it didn't particularly matter—one girl was about
as good as another, and often we mortified our mothers by telephoning down
a list, rather like an encyclopedia salesman, not at all disheartened when Jewel
refused us, and even while the amenities were being conducted rifling through
the book to find Helen's number.

But we began to learn that free-lancing in love has its drawbacks, chiefly
man's adhesive nature. Love, we found, resembled a game of musical chairs,
and unless one were careful he found that he was dancing so hard when the
music stopped that he had no place to sit down. So circumspection taught us
foresight, taught us to call Jewel early, before somebody else got around to
her. And as sequel to that discovery (one of the doors clanged quietly to
behind us), we discovered that, since catch-as-catch-can meant that occa-
sionally we ended up with no catch at all, things were more secure if we
removed Jewel, or Helen, or Marie, from the communal plot and staked her
out for our own.

So there followed several years during which we went from one girl to

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another, driven about more by the winds of convenience than by those of
desire.

The first girl I remember staking out a claim on was Pearl. It's odd how
memory catches the past—it's always a still picture, never a movie—and I
always remember Pearl in a red knit dress in one of the more abandoned poses
struck from the middle of a rhumba. I had tried for Jewel, as I remember, for
Jewel, a small, good-natured, easy-laughing girl, was the one we all called
up first; but Jewel had been snared by someone else, and Pearl's name being
next in the datebook, I spent several tempestuous memory-years doing the
rhumba with her. Perhaps because of Pearl I've always had mixed emotions
about knit dresses. It seems to me that they have the reputation of being
voluptuous but are chiefly, in practice, bulbous, with a certain flavor of home-
cooking about them; and as Pearl did the rhumba the yarn stretched and
contracted, yielded and flexed, and couples passing on the dance floor regis-
tered a sort of flare in their eyes at the sight.

I wasn't, as I remember, very good at the rhumba, but Pearl had what we
all called "lots of spizzerinktum," which meant that on the dance floor she
went her way and I rocked along somewhere within her orbit. Pearl had a
good time. The moment the band started up, Pearl did too. She began hic-
cuping her way out onto the floor while everybody else sat entranced. Pearl's
rhumba was like a mechanical toy I once had as a child—a marvelous affair
of springs and wheels that curled itself up rhythmically, drew itself up into
a ball and then sprang up and out, clicking and purring away, and started to
draw itself into a ball again for another revolution. Similarly Pearl started
off making herself compact—head down, arms in, legs close together; then
as the music ticked away toward an explosion Pearl did too; and at the
moment of detonation the drum exploded and so did Pearl: everything flew
upward and out, while at the next moment Pearl began rhythmically
and cooingly to draw everything back together again, to have things in order for
the next firing. As I say, I moved along in the slipstream somewhere, often
matching her movements vaguely, especially at the moment of crisis, but
otherwise providing a sort of neutral accompaniment.

But of course, once I really peer into my memory, I see more of Pearl than
a knit-dress and the rhumba. We had an awfully good time together. Pearl
was known for being a girl with whom one had a good time, and while I
don't remember a thing she ever said nor, off the dance-floor, a thing she ever
did, Pearl was credited among us with great originality and as far as I know nobody ever tried to draw on the account. I do remember that Pearl had an interesting eyebrow. One of her eyebrows was retractable: it could go up, for a quizzical look, down, for a challenging look, or snake itself into an S-curve, for a problematical look; and a witty remark by anyone in the car usually sent it off on its little tour. It was a well-shaped eyebrow, and Pearl made the most of it by being the first girl in our crowd to use eyebrow pencil and mascara, and consequently I was the first boy in our crowd to come home with black on his collar instead of red.

So I spent several memory-years with Pearl. Memory-years are different from calendar-years, and I discovered in an old letter the other day that Pearl and I had gone together only a couple of months when (another of Pearl’s firsts) she suddenly had to get married, and an attendant at the Conoco station turned out to be bridegroom. So I found myself back in the dating market, wearily trudging from stall to stall.

At the time I was abandoned by Pearl the event didn’t have any especial significance. If she had to get married that was her business, though I remember thinking ruefully that if I had known what was in the offing, Pearl and I wouldn’t have spent quite so much time on the dance-floor. At any rate finding myself alone again wasn’t particularly heartbreaking, and I didn’t even realize (what I realize now) that going with Pearl was but one part of a total pattern I was to trace out for several years.

This pattern was to be the Search for One Particular Girl, and though I didn’t know it at the time, Pearl cut away one of the edges, and narrowed down the total area to be searched. Experience has that negative virtue, that while it can’t teach the things that should be done it can exhaust those that shouldn’t; and my brief flight with Pearl taught me that out of all the potential dates on earth, I would never again choose one in a red knit dress, or one that loved to do the rhumba, or one that had a retractable eyebrow.

IN ITS SWING from side to side, the pendulum always passed through the norm, which was Jewel, and for a couple of weeks or so after Pearl foreclosed on the Conoco attendant I dated Jewel. I don’t remember much about the interval. Jewel and I had a good time together; she was the pattern against which all the other girls were held, and perhaps for that very reason those few dates have fled from memory. She was fun to be with (but not for Pearl’s

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reasons), and often we left the crowd to go out and date alone. Our dates were happy, relaxed affairs, and I would no doubt have kept on, but hardly had we started when Jewel’s own love-life hit a rapids, and through no fault of my own I was left again. I was pretty well in the dark about what was going on, and discovered only in later years that my best friend had proposed to her, and while not accepting the proposal she had at least agreed to go steady. So Jewel dropped away and the pendulum continued on its swing carrying me to the other extreme from Pearl, to Minnie Marie and her sweetness and light.

Since Pearl had exhausted my taste for the vigorous, all-out-for-the-beach type, I found rest and solace in Minnie Marie (such names are common in Texas), for Minnie Marie was gentleness and ladylikeness and softness, and made one think of cottages with primroses beside the path, or boxes of chocolate all gussied up in pastel and silk. In the first place, Minnie Marie had the reputation among us of being beautiful. She wore soft things, dainty things, white-and-pink things; things that furred up around the collar or flared out around the wrist, and often one turned around to find Minnie Marie looking exactly like a valentine. Those were the moments we cherished, the gifts (like Pearl’s eyebrow) for which Minnie Marie was known; and at such times we moved about the dance-floor pointing it out to each other. “Look at Minnie Marie. Isn’t she a picture?” Then we’d all hover together and look, much as if we were at a window admiring the sunset. These epiphanies tended to come at odd moments, in the half-light of a door or in the oblique shadows of a half-darkened cafe, but they were somehow more scintillating for their undependability. Whenever we actually scheduled a showing of Minnie Marie, she looked just like everybody else.

For oddly enough Minnie Marie wasn’t particularly good-looking. She had the slightest hint of buck-teeth, and during much of our dating had trouble with her complexion. So it happened more than once that she was dressed like a heroine from a Civil-War romance, and came into the car like a breath of lilac on a spring night, but then as we drove off down the road we had the disquietening suspicion that she had a pimple just beside her nose. In retrospect I sometimes feel that Minnie Marie’s beauty was given her by her audience. Like certain movie queens or popular singers she was a creation of her admirers, and sometimes the creating took a good-deal of single-mindedness. One had to catch her, for one thing, with her mouth closed, and in a
particular crossfire of light and shadow that masked her pimple and revealed her cheekline. For the line of her cheek, we all agreed, was superb. Again, it too had to be caught only at transient moments: if one stood too close the buckteeth came into view, and if he stood too far all he saw was her ear, and Minnie Marie’s ear (if one looked closely enough) had a delicate brushwork of hair all along the upper conch.

Of course certain types of beauty, like certain types of clothes, fabricate the being beneath. With her looks Minnie Marie had to be soft, pliant, and demure, and there was nothing conflicting in the total syndrome for her to seem the least bit stupid. I have no reason to think that she was any less bright than the other girls, but just as one wouldn’t expect rock-'n-roll in a rose-covered cottage, or curry in a box of chocolates, her creamy exterior predisposed her to a rather bland inner being. She always reminds me of the girl in Fitzgerald’s story whose chief conversational opening is the observation that it gets hotter in St. Paul than it does in Eau Claire. Actually I don’t remember talking to Minnie Marie at all; memory (no doubt a liar here) tells me she simply sat by my side looking pretty, or potentially so, though a friend of mine says she always started off the evening telling us what kind of weather we were having, and never omitted, on getting out when the date was ended, thanking everybody for such a marvelous time.

I remember being proud of Minnie Marie, especially when the little thrill of beauty arrived; but at the same time I found a certain draughtiness in our courtship. For one thing we had nothing to say to each other. I always knew what the weather was, and, moreover, was at the age where whatever went on outside the car was irrelevant. Generally this fact—that in Minnie Marie I had drawn a conversational blank—didn’t matter, since I would never have thought about going out with her alone; but during the time I went with her there were a few mishaps (the other couple failed to show, one evening) that forced on me several hours of Minnie Marie alone, and even if I managed to catch a moment of the full glory of her cheekline at its most breathtaking, the thrill was followed by whole stretches of unsweetened boredom.

Another drawback to Minnie Marie: no sex. There had been no sex with Pearl either, at least for me—she was much too active—but as the memory-years passed by, sex began to drum more loudly in our ears. Or, to be more truthful, the boys in our group were beginning to long for an occasional kiss and a squeeze or two, which was about all we could hope for with the girls.
we took out—though apparently some of the other boys (the Conoco attendant, to pick an example) had reached a learning plateau the rest of us didn't as yet suspect. But even the mildly wicked delights of a kiss or a squeeze were impossible with Minnie Marie. As a matter of fact I think I did kiss her once, partly out of desperation and partly out of boredom, but unlike the prince in the story the kiss didn't bring her to life. Her kiss, like her conversation, was smooth, cool, bland and antiseptic; there was none of the tarry lipsticked messes that I got into with other girls later.

So while I've always agreed that a thing of beauty is a joy forever, in practice I dropped Minnie Marie after a couple of months too, and went back to Jewel. My, it was just like old home week. We had a tremendous time. Jewel looked pretty nice too, and one didn't have to squint the eyes or tamper with the lighting to bring out the effect; Jewel's was just a sort of pleasant-looking prettiness, not a rich enough heritage to warrant her investing a lot of time and effort on it. Jewel was having a temporary break-up with Carl, the boy who had proposed to her, and I think part of the fun was that both of us felt that we were playing hookey. We even tried a bit of necking, and I at least found it very agreeable; but within a couple of weeks Carl came back contrite and swept her away again. So I got out the address book, sat down by the telephone, and started off the next chapter, this time with Marguerite.

IT MIGHT BE SUITABLE here to add a little warning about what might seem to be ego. As a matter of fact I had no looks to speak of, and in conversation and general musk didn't stand out from the crowd. But I've always found it a sign of the general benevolence of the universe that love is equally available at all levels, from the penthouse to the bargain-basement. Sometimes I see love as an ocean containing (if the ladies will forgive a rather predatory figure) countless varieties of gaudily colored male fish swimming past countless varieties of gaudily colored female anemones. And while the biggest and brightest fish can be caught only by the most brilliant and highly enameled anemones, there are enough of the smaller, paler flowers paving the ocean floor to make the progress of the rest of us an exciting and dangerous affair. Occasionally ambition made me try for one of the larger specimens, but I always got so mauled in the process that I soon fled back to my own stratum. And (another evidence that in some ways the universe sheathes its claws) somehow the range and angle of my eyes became adjusted so that only my
own stratum mattered, and while I saw and admired the great big beautiful flowers I ignored them just as, even if I wandered inadvertently into the reach of their tentacles, they ignored me.

I’ve mentioned before that sex was crescendo, all during my caprices with Pearl and Minnie Marie, and while I certainly didn’t go out and choose Marguerite for sensual reasons, I’ve often wondered if some sort of subconscious sexual selection didn’t direct my finger to her number on the dial. Not, I want to state for Marguerite’s sake, that we ever did (as Mother used to phrase it) anything that any nice upright young girl wouldn’t do—in fact we were so busy with preliminaries that we never got around to anything else—but there was a certain paradox in Marguerite that I haven’t resolved even to this day.

The night I first went out with Marguerite was almost like releasing a catch I didn’t know existed. Marguerite was a sweet, pretty, low-voiced girl, and has since made a fine mother to eight children; she was as modest and virtuous as could be, and had a soft retiring manner that made no one suspect the lava that simmered below—but when Marguerite went out with a boy she suddenly enveloped him. It was strange, and I was almost stunned, for while I’d always thought necking and an occasional kiss great fun, I was hardly prepared for the overpowering, cohesive invasion-action that took place almost as soon as we had pulled away from Marguerite’s door. She was all over the front seat. Had my senses not been reft by the attack I might have wondered that, as I remembered, the male was supposed to be the aggressor, but we hadn’t even turned the corner by the post office before I was so busy, trying to accommodate Marguerite and still keep some remnants of my own control and the control of the car, that the matter of who attacked and who defended was a muted, distant issue, like the phlogiston theory or Ptolemaic astronomy. We were somehow one great interlocked entity, a living jigsaw puzzle, and O great rooted blossomer’ (I was tempted to quote from Yeats), how can we know the dancer from the dancer? Again, I want to emphasize that Marguerite was a nice girl, but she was also a very loving girl, and she had the straightforward idea that it was good to love one another and good heavens she set to as soon as she could.

My dates with Marguerite never lasted more than a couple of hours; like the Medea anything started at such a pitch can’t last for long, and Marguerite
had no time for prolegomena. By the same token, the entire period of dating Marguerite was brief, in conformity with the principle that anything starting about two seconds before the climax will find itself in the denouement shortly.

I had adopted the policy of having another couple in the car on the first date (Minnie Marie’s influence), and I seem to remember making a pleasant remark to the crowd as we pulled away from the door, and then totally losing awareness of anybody else from then on. For the presence of others made no difference to Marguerite. She encroached, she enfolded, she needled, she nibbled—at a moment when I thought it physically impossible for us to get closer together, by an adroit movement Marguerite got closer still—and from time to time we drove along in second gear simply because I was too busy to change. She embayed one in a sort of amatory atmosphere, like smog. And she was endlessly inventive. The game of love, she made me realize, is rather like ladies’ poker: the rules are so marvelously elastic that one is not always sure what game he is playing. Every evening there was a new approach, a new caprice, a new delight. I suspect Shakespeare had gone out with somebody like Marguerite before he wrote those lines about Cleopatra. Marguerite’s ingenuity was astounding, and sometimes the couple in the back seat merely watched the bout, with the fixity of attention of the spectators at Wimbledon. Little kisses in new and exciting areas, interesting little nuzzlings in places one had never been nuzzled before (but it was all very decent), odd little tremolo effects as the lips parted—one had never suspected that the human body was so latent with potentiality. One never knew what a kiss could develop into, or how infallibly Marguerite could press an unsuspected synapse that would make every hair on the head rise in delight.

But as might be expected, a date with Marguerite was hard on the constitution. She was an expert on timing. When we had had amorous hors d’oeuvres, antipasto, the opening course—when we had stroked and kissed and pressed and caressed, and when nothing seemed to lie before us but the main course . . . Marguerite sat up, rolled down the window, straightened her hair and began to apply new lipstick. And then, like a comedian in a comic strip, stars and flares and meteors exploded in my brain, and I could hardly keep hold of the steering wheel. I’ve often wondered if Marguerite knew her own power, for once or twice when I raved and roared like a lion whose meal had just been reft from the cage, she looked across with great mis-
understanding, and tried to console just as a mother would a recalcitrant child. And I must say that at that moment, to console in Marguerite’s way was like trying to put down a rebellion by arming the populace.

The exact length of my involvement with Marguerite is unclear even to this day. I seem to have gone into a sort of coma about the time we passed the post office that first evening, and I came out of it only gradually, some time later, like an amnesia patient finding his way out of an attack. I must have walked about dazed for several months. My work in Dad’s store was even less distinguished during that period than it was most of the time, my schoolwork didn’t merely suffer but disintegrate, and most of my daytime hours were spent either reliving what had gone on the night before or anticipating what might go on the night to come. Marguerite moved away, one weekend in an indeterminate month, and for a couple of weeks after that I made my way back to the daylight world, rather as a stunned fish slowly circles up to the top of the water.

It was true, she had gone. Oddly enough I felt no particular sorrow—in a way my harried nerves felt it restful merely to lie back and enjoy the sun—and I suppose it must have been after several weeks of rest and recuperation that I was “well” enough to be conscious again of the outside world. I remember the moment when that consciousness awoke: one afternoon while carrying a sack of flour to a farmer’s car, it suddenly dawned on me that I didn’t have the least idea what Marguerite was like. She was sweet and malleable and had a pleasant voice, but as to what sort of person she was, I had no more idea than (this came as an especial shock) I did of the color of her eyes. We might as well have made love in a sack. Since we never did anything but head straight out of town and start necking I had no idea how she felt about movies, friends, or anything else. When she climbed into the car she and I got our backs up, rather like a fakir and his cobra, and for the rest of the time there was a sort of intensity of fixation, as if we were maintaining a fine invisible thread between us which took every ounce of energy in our bodies to keep taut.

I was sometimes embarrassed by this realization. One time a year or two later, when an acquaintance asked me what Marguerite was like, I could hardly answer. There was no way to tell him about the little nuzzling kisses, or the areas of frisson she knew to find so unerringly; but at the same time it seemed stupid to have gone with a girl so cohesively that the town thought we were engaged and then to reply, as I’m afraid I did before realizing how it
sounded: “Marguerite? She’s the only girl I ever knew who could pop your eardrums in the middle of a kiss.”

I TOOK TIME OUT from love, for a couple of months after Marguerite, and let my exacerbated nerves heal up. Of course I had a date or so with Jewel, who, like me, seemed to have gone through a superheated period and was anxious for quiet and undemanding companionship. We were both recuperating, and often we merely drove, side by side, letting the night wind blow off the cottonfields onto our perfervid foreheads. There was a new and deepened sympathy between us, as between escapees from a tropical island or a penal colony; we saw a perspective, we thought, the rest of the world didn’t know existed. Not that we discussed it; we didn’t need to. Our whole constitution had been reshaped by the experience, and we revealed the new configuration in our every attitude.

Jewel and I went together for quite a while, during that period. We never broke up, indeed; about that time the war came along and I went into the Army. Jewel came down to the bus station to see me off, I remember, and laughingly told me to be careful of my field of fire. Her warning wasn’t really necessary, however, for while I continued my amatory education while in service, I don’t think any girl I went with subsequently contributed quite as much to my learning process as had Pearl, Minnie Marie, and Marguerite.

I seem to remember that educational theory tells us as much: the initial experiences are the steep ones: the curve rises sharply, thrillingly—so much so that one may be tempted into the delusion that the slope will continue indefinitely, leading up to who could predict what heights. But after that initial sweep there’s a leveling off, one begins to glean in the corners, to change the figure, and while one may pick up a rag of information here and another there, the greatest accumulation has already been made.

So it turned out that the girls I went with in the Army merely gave variation to a by now familiar set of themes. There were good-time dates like Pearl, there were tableaux vivants like Minnie Marie, there were unsuspected cores of magma like Marguerite. And there were others of as yet undeciphered categories. Many of the girls were combinations—some had, say, Minnie Marie’s cheekline and Pearl’s eyebrow, or Pearl’s knit dress and Marguerite’s precise flight to the supersensitive nodule. But having gone over the terrain once gave me a certain adroitness: I knew just how often to take a Minnie
Marie out, just what moves to make with a Marguerite, just how to fortify myself for an evening with another Pearl. But of course one pays the price; learning maketh a man to sorrow, and while there was nothing else to do but take the ladies out, seeking the treasure not yet found, one was surprised at how frequently he pulled at the slot-machine handle and found himself faced with the same three old lemons.

For the trap gates were closing behind him. Unhearing, unsuspecting, one had gone from circle to inner circle, slowly approaching that little floor at the heart where he would turn and face his mate. Each girl locked off a bit of area, cut down the total to be covered. One found that beauty alone wasn’t quite enough, or a good time, or sex. One found that, in that area at the center, there must be a being who combined a myriad of ineffable qualities, whose total configuration was closest to what one had been looking for. Not, of course, that that configuration would be any more perfect, in this world, than was one’s own—and in that imperfection lay a certain risk of strife. Nor, of course, that only one girl possessed it. The target area was fairly large, and various girls could fall within it, but most of one’s amorous adventures had worked toward eliminating those who wouldn’t. Of course they were all working their way through their little traps too, marching slowly closer to the center where the one they needed lurked; but that was their problem, and mine was mine.

So the day approached when the maze had been traversed. Other things than dating hastened it: being far from home, being lonely, being bored, the passage of years. This girl and that girl one tried and discarded. Like Goldilocks in the bears’ house one found this porridge too hot, that porridge too cold; this chair too hard, that chair too soft. . . .

And the final day arrived. The day came when going out with another girl wasn’t worth it; one wanted to stay in with the girl. One was tired of shopping; one was ready for home. So one turned, with what shouldn’t have been surprise, to find who was there, at the center of the maze—to find the one who had threaded her way, as you had yours, to the heart of the labyrinth. One turned to see who was there.

And there she was. There, of course, was Jewel.