

Prom Night

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The night of my junior prom, I went only to the banquet. I joined friends at linen-covered tables in the armory-gymnasium that had been transformed into an undersea world. Twisted crepe paper streamers in three shades of aqua dropped from wires stretched between basketball hoops to the floor where they were taped securely to the court's boundary lines. In strategic locations, stage walls from the drama department formed two sea caves. One served as a backdrop for photos and the other backed the temporary bandstand. In a corner formed by the arched bridge entryway, a blue whale spouted a live stream of water. I had been on that committee. We were proud of our chicken-wire and papier-mâché sculpture. It took hours to get it to look like a whale. That challenge paled during the trial run of the recirculating pump. We discovered that adding water to tempera painted papier-mâché reduced our efforts to a soggy mass of newspaper strips drooped across chicken wire. We started over. Our second whale was more cartoonish. He was heavily enameled and shellacked. Now, seeing our masterpiece actually performing as imagined was the highlight of my evening.

I found the name card designating my seat at a table with other dateless teens. After a welcome and a grace had been delivered from the head table, sophomore servers began delivering our meals. The menu centered on chicken cordon bleu. We approached the dish with trepidation. Cautiously we cut into the rolled chicken breast. Exchanging glances, we looked carefully to determine what ingredients were hidden inside. This was foreign fare compared to that served at Watt's Finer Café or at the A&W. We tasted tentatively. Not bad!

The emcee announced the conclusion of the banquet. A teen tidal wave swept out the doors, leaving to change into tulle, taffeta and ties. They would return in an hour for pictures and for the pageantry of the grand march. Then they would two step and jitterbug until the 2 AM breakfast prepared by parents and served at the local Vet's Club.

I joined the tidal wave flowing out of the gymnasium, hopped into my parents' Rambler, and headed west. Twelve miles later, I parked in the garage and walked to the house. While my classmates changed into flowing formals, I changed in my work clothes and barn jacket, and grabbed the big flashlight. While boys escorted girls across the arched bridge into the undersea world of the gym, Herman, our collie-setter mix, escorted me across the frost-firmed mud path worn between the house and barns.

Twelve miles east, a crowd of parents watched from the shadows. Their juniors and seniors and dates stepped into a circle

of spotlight where, in a rite of passage, they were formally introduced to the beckoning world of adulthood. I stepped into the corral. A crowd of heifers watched me from the shadows beyond the yellow pool of light coming from above the barn door. I shined my flashlight beam across the heifers, spotlighting each one, looking for signs of impending birth. A couple of heifers had withdrawn from the others. I walked a circle around each of them. Hooves, transparent through protruding water bags, announced birthing times were approaching. These heifers would need to be checked in two-hour increments throughout the night. We could not afford to lose another calf.

While my classmates turned into the arms of their dates and began gliding to the music, I reached down, patted Herman's head. He leaned against my legs. Together we listened to plaintive coyote songs coming from the hills in the back pasture. Together, we returned to the house. Once there, I shed jacket and shoes. I poked my head into my parent's bedroom. The room was dim, lit only by light from a living room lamp, light which spilled across Dad. His cancer was taking its toll on all of us. Mom sat on the dining room chair she had placed next to Dad's side, listened for each labored breath. She dozed while she waited to see if I would need help with the livestock. I tapped her shoulder, roused her from her semi-sleeping vigil.

"Everything under control?" she asked.

"Got feet showing on two," I said. Mom looked exhausted and haggard. "You better lay down before you fall down, Mom."

"Guess so. If you'll check them at midnight and two, I'll check at four. That'll give us both a little sleep."

I grabbed a book and settled into Dad's chair in the living room near the lamp. At the midnight check, I looked for the two heifers. One had given birth. Her still wobbly calf was sucking, his tail happily wagging. At 2 AM, while my classmates were entering the Vet's Club, I was re-entering the corral. My flashlight quickly found the second heifer that I'd identified on my first trip. She was lying in a corner away from the others. I flipped the beam of my flashlight on her, watched as contractions rippled through her body. The calf was well on his way to being delivered. After a few more contractions, there was a quiet whoosh. The heifer stood, turned, and began licking amniotic materials from her calf's nose. I waited until the calf found his feet, then headed to the house and bed. And thus, the heifers, their newborn calves, my classmates and I made our way through the night, through one more rite of passage, moved one step deeper into the thing called adulthood.