

*First Place Winner*

# The Dancing Queen

*Ann Henley Brown*

Ralph Mason moved his tall, bulky frame quickly around the kitchen. He had much to do before he checked on his wife of forty years, who was still in the bathroom of their modest home. Feeling a sense of urgency, he hurried with the breakfast preparation, knowing he could not leave her too long by herself. Turning over the eggs, he blew out a long, troubled breath. Ralph could see the coffee was ready and could smell that the biscuits needed to be retrieved from the oven.

Suddenly, the small, thin figure of his wife appeared in the kitchen doorway. She was no longer in the pajamas she had worn the previous night. Instead, she was in a slip, her dress shoes, and a purse dangled from her shoulder. Bright red lipstick was smeared around her lips and her large brown eyes crinkled before she spoke. "I'm late—need to go pick-up the kids from school."

She looked around the kitchen and made a high-pitched sound in her throat, confusion clearly displayed on her face. Grabbing the refrigerator door, she frantically peered inside. "Oh no...can't find the keys for the thingamabob," she cried.

Ralph set the biscuits down on the counter and guided his wife to a chair at the kitchen table. He wiped off her lipstick with a wet paper towel as he spoke. "Have a seat, Jeanie. Just relax now. I'm going to go get your robe and slippers."

Jeanie giggled and tried to grab the offending towel before he quickly threw it in the trash. "Stop tickling me, old man." She slapped at the air and laughed like she was watching her favorite comedy show on television. She ducked when he tried to kiss her on her cheek.

Ralph took the purse from her arm and swiftly moved toward their bedroom, thankful that they no longer had the big house with the upstairs rooms. This much smaller, one-story house retrofitted for senior living was a godsend now that the kids were grown and gone. Their current lifestyle had facilitated this dramatic change.

In the bedroom, he retrieved his wife's robe and slippers. Looked at her comb and brush on the dresser but decided to comb her curly gray hair when he had her dressed for the day after breakfast. He glanced at his reflection in the dresser mirror before leaving the room. My how that image had changed since he retired from the police department last year. The tall, erect frame was now slightly bent at the shoulder. Scratching his chin, overdue for a shave, he noticed that the dark, ashy color of his face reminded him of the bark of a dying oak. Shaking off this image, Ralph rekindled the younger image of himself by flashing his lopsided, handsome grin.

This was supposed to be a period of exciting renewal in his life—getting back to more time to enjoy the fruits of their labor and relaxing into a simpler life. Instead, he had gained at least twenty pounds, had high blood pressure, and had trouble sleeping. His retirement was nothing like what he had envisioned for himself and his wife. Jeanie had worked, raised their two kids, and took care of the home. Until his mother-in-law died from a stroke five years earlier, she had also been the main caregiver for her own mother.

Now, instead of traveling and enjoying their mid-sixties, they were two people captured in the web of Alzheimer's disease. Ralph had witnessed many upsetting scenes in his years in law enforcement, but nothing could prepare him for the one step forward and two steps back—the step-ball-change of living with these life-altering challenges.

He removed these thoughts from his mind as he re-entered the kitchen. Jeanie was dancing around with a broom as her partner to music only she could hear. Ralph clapped his hands, smiled and bowed with a flourish.

"May I have this dance, madam?"

Dropping the broom, Jeanie beamed. "Yes, you can, kind sir. Just don't step on my toes—that's all I ask."

Removing the suitor-broom from their dance floor, Ralph took his giggling wife in his arms. The couple spun around the kitchen, bumping into a counter and then the table. Slightly out of breath, he took the opportunity to deposit his wife at the table again. He slipped on her robe and swapped the shoes for her slippers.

“My Prince,” she said and looked up at her husband with loving eyes. “You look a lot like my late husband, you know.”

Late indeed, he thought. But how could he complain? When he saw a slight flicker of memory transform those bright, shining eyes in her sweet brown-sugar face, all was right with the world again. He could forget her agitation and the sound of her frightening screams of the previous night. He could renew his faith in their life together—from hopeful, eager beginnings to the present new-normal setting.

The ever-ready paper towel near, he mopped up her spilled coffee and listened to her chatter. “Oops,” she said after every spill of coffee or crumb of wayward food. He thought of their daughter, Lindsey, when she was two. She would drop a bit of food to the floor from the throne of her high chair. “Oops,” their little princess would say and they would all laugh, even her older brother who was not so easily amused by this squirming intruder of a sibling.

Lindsey and her brother Ralph, Jr. were grown now with lives and families of their own. They kept in touch, called often and visited whenever they could. The kids had wanted to give them a Renewal of Vows Ceremony for their 40<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary but those plans fell through with their mother’s deterioration. Ralph had agreed that it was best to renew their love with just a small intimate family gathering that would be better tolerated by their mother. He was proud of his children and was always careful to put a positive spin on the current realities of life after his wife’s diagnosis.

In sickness and in health was a vow he planned on keeping. Ralph agreed with his kids that he would eventually need help. Jeanie was on several waiting lists for adult daycare. He knew that other options would be needed in the future and he prayed that his own health would not decline any further. The fear of being a burden to his children hung over

his head like a coming storm. Ralph still felt he could keep those storm clouds at bay – even though the unknown future accompanied his days and haunted his nights.

But right now, he was ready to clear the dishes and retire with his dancing queen to the living room. Some habits would never change. “Oops,” he heard her say. “I’ll get it, Jeanie...your Prince Charming to the rescue.” Then, he saw her blow him a kiss and give him her broadest smile, so content in her very own world. With a big exhale of breath, he reached up, caught that kiss in midair and held it to his trembling lips.