

Lizabeth

The salmon-colored sofa was ancient, its back curved like a sideways S, with three sofa cushions and armrests at either end. The sofa cover was threadbare, shredded down to bare wood. It was heavy and hard to move, and probably the only reason it was still sitting in the reception area.

However, it still served its purpose for the elder woman sitting there. She nervously plucked at the holes of an old granny-square afghan lying across her lap, its colors a combination of burnt orange, tobacco brown, and a faded yellow that almost matched her nicotine-stained fingertips.

A cigarette was neatly balanced between her lips, the curl of the gray ash getting longer and longer. The young woman sitting in the armchair across from her was transfixed, barely able to take her eyes off the slight red flame that burned slowly with each draw. She watched in amazement as the care home resident plucked it out of her mouth, tapping the long curl against the cheap plastic ashtray perched on the end of the armrest, finally stubbing it out with a satisfied sigh. Squirming in the visitor's chair, the younger woman breathed a sigh of relief, thankful the old lady didn't set the afghan yarn on fire. That would never do, today of all days.

The resident's eyes twinkled as she noticed the visitor. Eagerly, she leaned forward. "Home on the Range, beautiful day! Were you worried a bit about the length of the ash? Oh, honey, I'm an expert at it. Most times, I can get two inches on the end. There's not much I'm allowed to do anymore. This is the only place in this hellhole where they let me smoke. I had to make a secret deal with one of the attendants. Five minutes in the morning, five minutes in the afternoon, but no smoking in my room." With a nonchalant shrug, she added, "But I'm dying soon, so they don't care. Nasty habit, cigarettes. Never could kick it once I started." She drew in a deep breath and coughed out a bit of blood-speckled phlegm on her old t-shirt, using her hand to wipe the spittle from around her mouth.

"My name's Lizabeth, what's yours? You sure are pretty; remind me a little bit of myself at your age." Peering at the visitor with watery eyes, she thought it would be nice to tell someone her story. She felt like talking today.

"I am Laurel," the younger woman responded.

"Huh! Who? Don't think we've met, but here you are! Did you come to visit me? I don't look so hot today, but having company is nice."

Lizabeth brushed her thin white hair with a shaking hand, staring at the woman sitting quietly across from her. "You know, I'm ninety-one or maybe ninety-two now. But I was quite the looker at your age. Used to dye my hair fire-engine red, wore these long fake emerald earrings that spun out when the men twirled me on the dance floor."

She cackled, laughing at her memories. "Yep, I sure could dance. I had this silk blouse, cut clear down to here, and a long green and red skirt that belled out around my knees. I owned a pair of black high heels, but I used to kick them off on the dance floor to move faster and wrap my legs around whoever was spinning me. Men loved to spin me around." Lizabeth's lips quirked up in a wicked little smile. She touched her breasts as though they were once more voluptuous instead of the scrawny, shriveled nipples barely visible inside her simple cotton t-shirt. "I met Charlie dancing. He sure was staring at my cleavage."

Lizabeth gave Laurel's body a once over. "Damn girl, you barely got any titties. I wish I

had grandchildren to come and visit me. It gets lonely in here. You know I had two kids, but one died in Vietnam. Jesse. He once wrote me that he wanted nothing more than to come home, marry, and have babies. But then he was shot in the jungle and died there, so I never knew who that somebody might have been.” She shook her head sadly and pointed a finger at Laurel. “Who did you say you belong to? Anyone I know? Though I probably couldn’t remember anyway. All the names in my head go away.”

Laurel smiled gently. “I didn’t say, does it matter? If so, you could consider me a granddaughter you never had.”

Lizbeth cackled a bit more, catching her breath in a wheeze. “Well, all right then, maybe you could have been one of my daughter Rachel’s babies if she’d been able to have any. Cancer took her back in the seventies. Not many people come to see me anymore. I outlived my children and most all my friends.” She stirred restlessly on the sofa. “I’d sure like another cigarette.”

“So tell me, Lizbeth, when did you learn to dance?”

“Well, I’d have to think back to the thirties to remember that. My mama and pap lived in the mountains high above Los Angeles. Mama was strict, always reading the bible, no radio, and tending her vegetable garden. She’d make me pull weeds when I cussed. I was always pulling those nasty things out of the dirt. Shoot, it’s a good thing she grew those vegetables because if not, we’d have gone hungry.

‘My pap was no provider. He’d sit around on his ass most of the day, flirting with the ladies at the bar down the mountain in the shank of the evening. I wonder how she ever got pregnant with me because she never gave Pap any encouragement on her own. I figure that’s why he went down the mountain. She went looking to haul him home once. I remember she came home with a black eye and a split lip. Never did go after him again.’

“I must have taken after Pap because all that bible reading, she made me do was wearing me out! However, I do remember parts of a bible verse. Want to hear it?” At Laurel’s nod, Lizbeth cleared her throat from the phlegm and proclaimed loud and clear. It’s from Ecclesiastes verse 3, something. I can’t rightly recollect what the other numbers were. . . *a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance;...*” Lizbeth grew somber, her mouth quivering. She sniffed, “I always liked that one because of the dancing part, but I never can remember all the words. I guess I never tried.”

The old woman twisted her gnarly fingers through the holes in the yarn again, blinking back the tears that hadn’t threatened her in years.

“After Mama died, I did some weeping. Then Pap buried her outside that small cabin next to her vegetable garden. The next thing I knew, pap left for good. A few days later, I packed her old bible away with my things and walked down the mountain to see what life was all about. I just knew I was made for dancing like in the bible verse. I wasn’t more than sixteen at the time.”

“Want to hear more?” Lizbeth grew quiet for a time, searching her memories for the story she wanted to tell, somehow knowing it was necessary. She looked at Laurel and spoke again.

“I guess I was what you might call a hellion, but I had to look after myself, you know? Pap was gone, mama dead. So I got a job at a factory in town and worked as a pastry wrapper for cupcakes, donuts, and whatever else the factory had contracts for. I did that all day, but the supervisor was sweet on me, so I made extra money, you know? It allowed me to buy some pretty dresses and shoes. I love pretty shoes.” Lizbeth sighed and stared in disgust at the old gray slippers on her feet.

“There was this dance hall down the street from the factory. Me and my two roommates

loved to go and watch from the hallway. I bought some face cream and red lipstick, and I sure looked good. Sometimes, we'd get asked to dance if there weren't enough fancy girls. One day this dolly came in, clinging to the arm of a flash man, and boy could she move. She slithered around that man like a snake. She had long black curly hair, at least a dozen bracelets that went up her arm, and earrings that flashed like fire when she spun around. She was gorgeous. I decided I could do that. Hell, how hard could it be to wiggle?"

'So every night I practiced dancing. I wiggled my hips and my titties until I figured I was good enough to get a partner. Then, on my day off, I dyed my long brown hair red, and one of my roommates curled it for me. I pulled one side of my hair back with a flower clip and let the other bounce around. I felt so beautiful. That night, I wore one of my new dresses and my black high heels to the Dance Hall and never lacked for partners ever again."

Lizbeth was exhausted after that long speech and soon fell asleep. The nursing attendant checked on her and let her remain on the sofa for her nap. She took away the ashtray and covered her gently once more with the afghan that had fallen off her lap. She left to check on her other patients, never noticing the visitor in the room, although she was standing by the window looking out at the beautiful sky and clouds.

Lizbeth woke a few hours later, happy to find Laurel waiting nearby. Laurel sat down next to her, taking Lizbeth's hand in hers. "Can you tell me more?" she asked gently.

Lizbeth smiled, and her eyes lit up. "Sure, honey, if you want me to. Those were wonderful times. I worked during the day and danced at night till closing, till I met Charlie. He was older than me, maybe around thirty, when we met. I never told him how old I was. I looked more mature than most of the other girls. Pretty soon, we were courting something fierce. He took me away from the factory. We went to some little justice of the peace in this hole-in-the-wall somewhere in Los Angeles. What a wonderful week! He had a car, and we drove along the coast to San Diego, making love at night and laughing during the day. Then, he brought me to a little house in San Bernardino that he owned. He said he didn't want me around all those other men."

Lizbeth sighed, "I sure did love that man. I got pregnant with Jesse, then Rachel, and he cared for us so well that I got spoiled. We were happy for four years. Charlie worked for the railroad and was in a bad accident one day. He died in the hospital before I could get there to see him. I thought for sure there'd be money." A man from the Railroad office knocked on my door one day. He said the money was for his real wife, and I wasn't her, but they let me stay in my little house."

She began to cry, slow tears, barely rolling down her cheeks, stopping somewhere in the wrinkled crevice of her mouth, which trembled in its sadness. Laurel squeezed her hand. After a bit, Lizbeth continued.

"No use in crying over spilled milk. I decided it was time to take charge of my own life. I went to work in a large San Bernardino hospital. The lady down the street took care of little Jesse and Rachel." Lizbeth said quietly. "It was such hard work. I was changing bedsheets, mopping floors, and cleaning toilets. I didn't have much money and never graduated high school, but it was an honest life. My dancing days were over, but somehow, I wasn't unhappy. Lonely, maybe, but the kids kept me laughing."

'Pap never took care of me, but Charlie did. I know it was wrong for him to pretend we were married, but I never knew. I was so gullible back then." Lizbeth looked fiercely at Laurel. "I wasn't going to hate on my Charlie for doing us wrong. That man loved me. Our babies were born in love. We were going to be okay because I would take care of them."

Lizabeth grew quiet, worn out from speaking more than she had in what felt like ages. Laurel put her arm around Lizabeth and whispered the rest of the story in the older woman's ear.

"You did take care of them; you tried so hard. You worked in that hospital for years, earning respect from everyone around you. You learned to love God and love yourself. You raised your children well, taught them right from wrong, put Rachel through university, and took care of her through the cancer. Jesse died bravely, earning a Purple Heart. You raised a good man, a hero."

Lizabeth craved one more cigarette but knew she'd never have another one again. She was tired now, but needed to share one more memory with Laurel. "Mama also had another bible verse that she made me memorize. I tried to live by it after Charlie died, though I was never much of a churchgoer. It is Psalm 143:8 *Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.*" Lizabeth's face flushed with embarrassment. "Did I say it right?" she asked.

Laurel held the old gnarled hands in her young ones and raised them both to a standing position. Her loving arms wrapped around Lizabeth, filling the old woman with warmth and wonder, while a nimbus of light seemed to light around them both.

"You've always been loved, Elizabeth Grace. Our heavenly father and your loved ones are ready to see you again. *There is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.* let's dance Lizabeth."

The attendant found the old resident an hour later, her face gently relaxed in death.