

You Take My Breath Away  
*Pittsburgh, 1986*

Even though it was billed as an evening get-together, a dance, Mae decided to wear a hat because everyone noticed a woman in a hat. She took pains to assemble her outfit, too: the black Chico's suit which made her look perhaps ten pounds thinner, a soft white silk blouse, her silver earrings. Shoes were a problem, as always. The arthritis in the joint of her big toe made wearing anything but flats a bit of an ordeal but she needed the couple of inches of height only a pair of high heels could give her. She struggled into her heels. Looking good, in this case, was more important than feeling good.

She had set aside an hour to dress. The idea was to pamper herself: to bathe in warm, scented water, to refresh her face with a strawberry mask, to give herself an opportunity to totally relax.

Now, dressed and made-up, Mae assessed herself in the full length mirror. She did not spare herself: on the one hand, the body was fuller blown than she wished, almost matronly, even in the well-cut black suit. On the plus side she acknowledged a comparatively unwrinkled (although no longer young) face, nice brown eyes, a good hair cut, her smart outfit, and the neat dark cloche hat—a perfect touch. Peering closely at herself, and smiling, Mae recalled a small witticism of her mother's: when you are twenty-five you have the face you were born with—after you are fifty, you get the face you deserve.

“God, nothing ever changes.” Rosalie Samuels pursed her vivid red lips in dismay. Her mouth reminded Mae of a tiny angry cherry tucked into the wide expanse of her doughy, humorless face; her voice was silly too, childish and shrill. Squeezed into her spangled clothes, Rosalie resembled an aged, overfed, unhappy doll.

“The boys stand with the boys, the girls with the girls! Look!” She traced a stubby finger in an arc that swept the Holiday Inn party room. “Even now. It’s the same as it was in seventh grade. Jesus God, I hate these things!”

Mae listened politely, even managed a smile. She would not challenge the woman’s lack of logic by asking why she had bothered to come. Sadly, Rosalie needed to say this, to cover the tension of standing here unapproached or even as yet unnoticed by the ‘boys’.

They looked nice enough, okay enough, Mae thought. The usual assortment, but they were so few in number---maybe fifteen men in the far corner, half of them tall, half short, some balding, a few toupeed, all holding drinks and laughing too loud, while twice as many women stood in groups of two or three chatting with each other. Sad-eyed DJ Jack, spinning some swing dance oldies, was exhorting them all to “get in the mood!” Of course, no one was smoking.

“Lord, I’d like a cigarette,” Mae sighed, and closed her eyes on the scene. The so-called party room was actually used more for meetings. The metal folding chairs were pushed back along dull walls strung tonight with paper flower hearts in an attempt to celebrate Valentine’s Day, 1986. The Greater Pittsburgh Singles had done their best but somehow it seemed to Mae more desperate than usual.

“A Marlboro, hmm, a red Marlboro, right now.” Mae opened her eyes and waggled her fingers as though smoking. “Now there’s something that’s really changed.”

Rosalie snorted, “for the better!” as she bit wetly into a large bacon-wrapped chicken liver.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Mae said, thinking suddenly of the ladies room. In the tenth day of abstinence the nicotine urge still squeezed at her stomach. “I just might have to excuse myself.”

“Don’t! Don’t you dare go. Christ, don’t leave me here.” A thin line of perspiration had appeared above the grease and smeared lipstick on Rosalie’s upper lip. Her voice rose: “Why do you have to smoke anyway? Nobody else does anymore. It’s so dumb.”

“Excuse me? What did you say?” Mae barely held back a ripple of annoyance. Rosalie Samuels, she could usually take in the context of charity. A big loud mouth was something else.

“Oh, it’s so stupid and you know it.”

Mae thought of several things to say: True, I know it, but not as stupid as standing here with you. Or: Not as stupid as watching you stuff your fat, mean-spirited self. Instead she said, “Pardon me, Rosalie,” and fled to the ladies room.

“So this is what it’s like. I never come to these things.” The man paused and ran his hand over his hair. He had walked right up to her as she exited the ladies room, and was now staring at her or just above her head. Mae wasn’t certain because he was a big man, standing too close to her, and he was wearing aviator sunglasses. “How about you?”

Mae took a step back. "Me?"

"Yeah, you. You come to these things a lot?"

"Oh. Well, not a whole lot. But yes. Yes, I've been to these, um, events before."

"Yeah? No kidding?"

Now he lowered, but did not remove his aviators and peered at her, as though surprised. He had large, slightly protruding blue eyes. Clearly, his eyes said, few admit what she just had.

"Right. No kidding."

"Well, it just goes to show you." He pushed his glasses back into place.

"What? What does it show you?"

"Well, how tough things are, I guess. For dames--excuse me, for you gals these days, I mean, a nice looking gal such as yourself shouldn't have to . . . I mean, oh, you know what I mean." His hands, which were red-palmed and large, waved about, awkward and useless as two big ham hocks.

Mae nodded anyway. She did understand. In middle age the girls vastly outnumbered the boys. The man immediately grasped her hand and vigorously pumped it. "Ray, Raymond Novak, call me Ray. I'm a Culligan man, you know, in the phone book under water, ha ha ha."

"Hi, Ray. How do you do. I'm Mae Watkins."

"Mae--and Ray! We rhyme. Ray and Mae, well, well, well!"

He smiled with genuine pleasure and Mae felt the familiar sensation of having made a gift of herself despite herself. The chance that she and this tall, anxious, boisterous stranger might



find the least common ground was close to nil. But here he was, his smile splitting his wide plain face like a carved pumpkin's. Mae stifled a sigh and smiled back.

"Nice hat you got there, Mae. I like a gal in a hat."

"Thanks."

Then Ray waved his hands again, spun them in slow motion actually, following the husky sound of Etta James' *At Last* and finishing with a gallant upturned flourish of red palms pointed at the dance floor: "Like to dance, Madam-*moi*-sell?"

"Okay, I do love to dance," Mae said good-naturedly, and allowed herself to be guided past the roomful of other singles, who watched with what she was certain was amusement. There seemed to be no other graceful choice.

On the dance floor Ray Novak led, for one who appeared so cumbrous, with surprising ease, moving Mae effortlessly, applying just the right amount of gentle pressure on her back to execute a turn, a dip, a spin.

"You're good at this," he said as he swung her back into his arms following a spin.

A bit breathless, Mae nodded and danced into the fluid circle he made of his arms. As he spoke she could feel his chin moving near the soft brim of her hat, caught the scent of something spicy he wore, something clean and masculine.

"So are you."

"I ought to be, by now."

The music slowed, the jitterbug giving way to an old Cole Porter classic. She could think of no reason to release his hand.

“Night and Day, you are the one,” Ray sang along with Tony Bennett at her ear. “Only you, beneath the moon and under the sun . . .”

Mae let herself be swept along by the romance of the song, let herself enjoy the closeness of the tall stranger. *Stranger*: she turned the word over in her mind, liking it, with its intimation of mystery. Choosing to disregard her initial impression, Mae told herself that he *was* a stranger, this man named Ray, she knew nothing as yet about him, really.

And the love song wafted through her, transporting her. Her parents had danced to music like this when they were young. Back then, before everything precious in the world changed or went away, seated at the top of the stairs in their old house on Beechwood Boulevard she had watched her slim, handsome father twirl her mother around the living room to just such music. The staircase had been the secret perch from which she launched many a dream of love for herself, dreams that were long forgotten except at rare moments like this. “Oh, Elliot,” twelve year old Mae had felt both thrilled and strangely confused to hear her mother confess, back then, “you take my breath away.”

“Penny for your thoughts, gal,” Ray now murmured at her ear.

“You take my breath away,” she felt compelled to answer.

He leaned back for a better look at her just as the lovely song, having swelled to its climax, ended. He let go of her hand then, and actually removed his sunglasses. “I do?”

Mae, a bit taken aback herself, barely met his glance, his blue-eyed, boyish, aw-shucks expression. And to her surprise, apart from him she suddenly missed the warmth of his big, oddly graceful body, his physical self.

“Well,” she said, “forgive me, but just then, while we were dancing . . .”

“Yes?” he asked eagerly.

Ray stood waiting to hear more but Mae found it impossible to answer. How could she explain something as reckless as a willing heart, at their age, hers as well as his? What would be the point? That the other dance, the one ahead, which was just beginning for them would bring its disappointments, its probable catastrophes, its possible woundings. And yet, and yet! The music began again, a sweet saxophone from long ago, mellow and full of promise. Mae smiled and lifted her arms to Ray, and they danced.