

A Heavenly Reunion

By Kathi Gunio

It had been years since Annie had seen her mother. Thirteen, maybe? Annie was just a little girl at the time, and was only left with a faint memory of a woman with a blonde bouffant hairdo and wafting scents of Aqua Net and Lady Marlboros whenever she hugged Annie, which was usually after Annie 's father yelled at her. He yelled a lot—usually after he drank a lot: beer, whiskey, scotch. And he drank a good deal of the time. But, Annie's mother always comforted her, lying through her light yellow-stained teeth, "It's okay, he's just tired." Her mother was always there to comfort her her—skinned knees or cookie-making. Until she wasn't.

Annie remembers the Saturday morning when that happened. With bloodshot eyes and Jack Daniels on his breath, her father woke her and said, "I have something to tell you. Your mother left us. She's never coming back." He did not comfort Annie, there was no wiping of Annie's tears and no further explanation. He merely sat her in front of the television with a bowl of Lucky Charms. The next day, her grandmother came to take her to the zoo. Her grandmother told them she was sorry they no longer had a mother, and that she was too young to understand these thing—which of course, Annie was and didn't. And then everything changed.

Eventually Annie learned to care for herself—taking on a role that her father did not seem to be interested in. When Annie was only twelve, Avery Lansing tried to kiss her. She wasn't interested in Avery's demonstration of his affection. He had way too much acne and his armpits smelled like dirty socks. When Annie told her father about it, he told her, "Don't you go letting boys touch you. You'll end up pregnant." Luckily, Annie knew how one really gets pregnant, and had no interest in partaking in any of that sort of thing. Yet still, her father paid her no mind,

no attention. And when Annie was got into the Honor Society at school, her father was not there for the ceremony. His “alcoholic tendencies,” as her grandmother called it, had once again put him in a drunken stupor. “Just ignore him,” her grandmother would say. “He’ll eventually sleep it off.” But until he did, Annie was left to deal it all. And hiding it was not easy, but Annie managed.

Then the night of her senior prom arrived, and Annie prayed her father would be on his best behavior so that she could enjoy one of the most important nights of her life with her boyfriend, Kevin. They had been dating since the beginning of their sophomore year at Calvin Coolidge High School. Kevin was voted Class President, and she was voted Class Secretary. They worked together frequently, so it was no surprise to Annie that they started dating, and now would attend their senior prom together. To ready for the event, Annie’s best friend and budding cosmetologist, Patty, put the final touches on Annie’s hair and make-up. While Patty did a great job, Annie couldn’t help but wish it was her mother who was helping her to primp for her prom.

“Geeze, you’re so lucky, Annie. I wish my hair was straight like yours! This freaking heat makes mine so frizzy,” Patty complained.

Annie smiled. “It’s genetics. My mother’s hair was straight. Hair-sprayed to death, but straight.”

“Well, mine looks like a freaking poodle.”

Annie chuckled as she twisted her mouth and leaned her blonde head to the right. “Too many curls on this side?” she asked.

Patty fluffed the curls on the left side of Annie’s head and declared defensively, “Your curls are perfectly balanced.”

Annie straightened up her head. “I suppose. Thanks, Patty.”

Patty held up a can of hairspray, much like the Aqua Net Annie's mother used. "You got it. Just be careful with your dress. Step into it if you can so you don't mess your curls, and then spray the hell out of them again." After Patty left to put the final touches on herself so she'd be ready when her date came to pick her up, Annie did as she was instructed, all the while imagining the perfect night ahead.

An hour later, Kevin would arrive—on time, of course. Annie's father answered the door, opening it to reveal Kevin standing almost at attention, in a sky-blue tux with black piping, a ruffled shirt to match, and a black bowtie—a staple of the 70s decade in which they lived. It was a perfect complement to Annie's pale pink off-the-shoulder chiffon gown with white ruffles on the sleeves and bottom hem.

"Ah, Kevin. You're looking like a young man worthy of taking my daughter to the senior prom," Annie's father smiled cordially as he motioned for Kevin to enter the house. As Kevin did so, he lifted his eyes to see Annie descend the foyer stairs, the crinoline in her dress swishing side to side as she did so.

Kevin held his hand out to her, and breathed, "Hi, Annie. You look beautiful."

"As always," her father interjected.

"Yes, sir," Kevin agreed.

Annie nodded. "You look handsome yourself," she smiled as she took hold of Kevin's outstretched hand.

"Well, then, we make a good pair."

"All right, you two!" Interrupted her father. "Let me take a picture, then you can get going."

Annie's father snapped a few Polaroids and left them on the entry table to develop. But Annie and Kevin didn't wait to see the emerging images. After kissing her father good-bye,

Kevin shook her father's hand, and they left arm in arm towards Kevin's waiting Dodge Charger in the driveway.

"Have a good time!" Her father called from the doorway as they drove away.

Unfortunately, that's not how it really went.