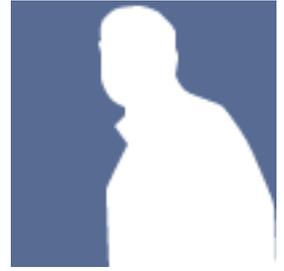


Dancing To Ray Charles: ch 01, Two Dancers

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She needed the nice guy, but wanted her bad boy.

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In the spring of '68, it was the worst of times. Student protests raged from the Sorbonne to Berkeley. Civil rights demonstrations and anti-war rallies were turning violent. Martin Luther King was dead; Bobby Kennedy would be soon. Hundreds of other Americans were dying each week in South Vietnam. Soldiers patrolled the streets of Saigon, Paris, and Washington. Soviet troops prepared to invade Prague. And in a nowhere place called Sandtown, Louisiana, an innocent black man had just been beaten and arrested on trumped up charges.

But in nearby Pinefield, it was the best of times. At least, that's what Mark Cahill wanted to believe.

Bebe Boudreaux's head rested on his chest as they moved in languid harmony to a recording of Ray Charles singing "You Don't Know Me." The petite, perfect form he'd always wanted was in his arms, molded against his body. It made for a perfect moment, in a perfect place, in a perfect world--at least it should have been perfect.

The funny thing was, he hadn't wanted to be at this or any other dance. Since that night on the levee with Amy. All he wanted to do was think about her and remember what did and didn't happen.

But he had to get over being in love with someone he could never have. That night had been a one-time thing. Girls like Amy Marshall didn't go for everyday guys like him, even if they were best friends.

Still, after being away at school, he needed to re-connect with his hometown friends and remind them he still existed. That might be very important in a few years.

He arrived late, shook a few hands, and walked inside. Thick cigarette smoke couldn't hide the worn

looks or musty smell of the old American Legion hall. The Junior League had done its best to spruce up the place. Balloons, banners, and other decorations were everywhere, but hiding all the World War II era posters had proved impossible.

Black-and-white photos of serious looking men in funny looking hats, like the ones soda jerks wore, covered the far wall. All were former post commanders. Among them were his father and grandfather. Fading pictures of American Legion and Women's Auxiliary activities completed the décor.

Aretha Franklin's demand for "Respect" segued into the Rolling Stones frustrated search for "Satisfaction." The sea of sweaty dancers paused, looked at one another, then broke into another spasm of jerking legs, flailing arms, and twisting bodies.

Mark was congratulating himself on watching from the sidelines instead of being among them when someone tapped on his shoulder. He turned, looked down, and saw Bebe Boudreaux smiling up at him. He'd last seen her during Christmas break. As usual, she looked great. Now, as he gazed down at that small, delicate face with the big, liquid-brown eyes you could get lost in, he was sure she never looked better.

Ray Charles began singing "I Can't Stop Loving You." Mark hesitated, then asked Bebe to dance. She gave him a warm smile and agreed. The next song was "Crying Time," another slow Ray Charles country ballad. Bebe made no effort to extract herself from his arms, and they kept dancing.

Bebe gazed up through her long, thick lashes. "Ah didn't remember you being such a good dancer."

Mark smiled, wondering when the "Gone With the Wind" drawl had replaced her soft Cajun lilt, and trying to recall when they last danced. "Ray Charles always inspires me. Besides, you're just saying that because I haven't stomped on your toes, yet."

"No, really, it's true." Her familiar, sexy, little grin broadened into an all-encompassing smile. "You must have been practicing a lot down at LSU."

He felt his face flush at the unexpected flattery. "Only the juke-joint shuffle and the Cajun two-step."

"Really? The Cajun two-step? Now you're talking about my people, cher." She cocked her head and stared into his eyes. "You'll have to show me your technique sometime."

"If you've got the nerve, I've got the time." Was that a pleased look on Bebe's face? She laid her head back on his chest.

Mark forced himself to breathe. It wasn't easy. Everything about Bebe, even her new accent and perfume, turned him on. He couldn't figure this new attitude, but he liked it, a lot, and wondered where it might lead.

The song ended and they sat at a rickety folding table talking with friends. When everyone else got up for a fast song, Mark made no move to follow. Instead, he cleared his throat, and in a voice he hoped sounded casual, asked if she'd like to go hear John Fred and The Playboy Band the next weekend.

Bebe Boudreaux, the girl he'd always wanted, the one who had always rejected him, paused for a brief, agonizing moment, then nodded and said that sounded like fun.

The tension in his body eased. The age of miracles hadn't passed. After all these years, he and Bebe were going on a date.

Ray Charles began singing "You Don't Know Me" and they joined the other dancers. "Born To Lose" was next, and they continued to move. Mark decided another Ray Charles fan must be working the stereo, and was grateful.

As the song's last melancholy notes faded away, Bebe said she had to go. "Ah really am sorry. But things can get really crazy at work on Saturday mornings, and according to that calendar over on the wall, tomorrow's Saturday."

"Don't pay that fool thing any attention," said Mark, only half-joking.

"Pity the poor working girl, especially when she works for her father."

"Well, I should be calling it a night myself. Why don't I walk you to your car?"

"Ah'd like that. Just let me get my purse."

He watched as she made her way to the cloakroom. The sight of Bebe's near-legendary bottom swaying in a seductive rhythm had always been arousing. Over the last eight years, he'd observed that wonder of nature many times. Far too often after another rejection. This time he felt no mixed emotions. Tonight, she would be walking back to him.

Out on the floor, Penny Harrison and Ralph Lawson gyrated past him. Penny, a slender, pretty brunette, smiled and waved. Mark liked Penny, always had, and wondered if she and Amy were still fussing.

Ralph, her long-time steady, pretended to be looking the other way. The barrel-chested blow-hard's grandfather was the parish register of voters—make that white voters. While Mark and Ralph were almost always civil to one another, their relations were, at best, tense..

Little "Skeeter" Cummings, flashing her new engagement ring, danced by with Mark's old football teammate, the aptly named, "Hoss" Driscoll. Her question at the table about Amy had caught him off-guard. But she didn't seem to notice his reaction. Probably too excited about getting engaged to pay him much attention. At the sight of Bebe coming back, all other thoughts vanished.

Outside, they hurried past the swarms of June bugs circling the yellow porch lights, and stepped into the warm, muggy night. With the moon hidden by low clouds, the gloom in the gravel parking lot was almost tangible. The sounds of crickets and frogs had replaced the thump of rock music by the time they reached the 1966 Chevelle Super Sport Bebe's father, Jack Boudreaux, had given her as a graduation present.

"Thanks for coming with me. Dark parking lots give me the creeps. Ah'm always afraid some crazy nig--, uh, nut might be waiting too, well, you know."

"No problem," said Mark. He had noticed her double-clutching but said nothing.

Everyone knew he was, by local standards, "soft" on the race issue. They also knew he and Amy were both life-long friends of Willie Carter, son of the town's leading black preacher and civil rights leader. Still, this was the first time he could remember Bebe, who had always been openly racist, trying to watch her language. Maybe she was getting better. God knows she couldn't have gotten much worse.

She unlocked the door and then turned to face him. "By the way, what time did you want to pick me up?"

"Well, uh, what about six? If that's no good, name your poison."

"Six sounds great." She reached up and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "Ah'm glad you were here tonight. You made it a lot more fun. And you saved me from dancing with Hoss and Ralph or, even worse, high school guys."

Before Mark could recover from the unexpected kiss, she slipped into her seat and closed the door. There was a smooth, powerful roar as the big engine sprang to life. She rolled down her window and gave him another smile. "Ah'm really looking forward to next Saturday."

Bebe fluttered her fingers in a goodbye gesture as she pulled away. The tires made a brief squeal when they hit the asphalt road. Mark watched the taillights vanish into the sultry night while touching the spot she'd kissed.

A warm breeze drifted past. With it came a faint scent of spring flowers and the succulent eroticism of approaching rain. It reminded him of another night and another girl. His hand dropped, his smile faded, and he whispered, "Ain't life a bitch?"

It was like a bad joke. The once unobtainable Bebe Boudreaux, the girl he always wanted, seemed interested in him. That would be great, except he'd just fallen in love with Amy, someone he could never have, someone he loved so much it hurt to even think her name.

Even the possibility of a well-financed shot at becoming a state representative couldn't get Amy off his mind. Once, they both loved politics. He still did, and had always wanted to run for office. But after today's meeting with local big shots, all he could think about was how, after what Vietnam did to her brother, she no longer cared.

Thank God he'd run into Bebe. What politics couldn't do, she could, well, almost. With Bebe around, thoughts of anyone else had a hard time slipping in, hard, but not impossible. And the moment she drove away, memories of that night with Amy came flooding back along with a familiar, sick, hopeless, soul-shriveling sensation.

A swarm of hungry mosquitoes began intruding on his thoughts. An absentminded attempt to wave them away failed, and he headed for his car. He wanted to think, to try and figure things out, not feed mosquitoes.

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The '66 Chevelle Super Sport raced down a narrow, blacktop access road, then slowed imperceptively before making a tire-squealing right onto the main highway. The car quickly accelerated until it was speeding through the muggy, north Louisiana night.

The cherry-red Chevy was always speeding—the only question being by how much. The better the driver's mood, the faster it traveled. According to the speedometer, the driver, Bernadette "Bebe"

Boudreaux, felt really good.

Windows down, her long, brown hair whipped about in the damp, evening air. While usually a fanatic about her appearance, tonight she didn't mind. It felt so sexy and uninhibited. Besides, she'd soon be home so it didn't matter.

The radio, set to a New Orleans station, began playing an Otis Redding ballad. With an angry, "No damn way!" she shoved a tape into the car's 8-track player.

An upbeat blast of sound by the Dave Clark Five replaced the melancholy refrain. Bebe grinned and began moving with the rhythm.

Everything was going her way, she decided, while firing up her first Taryyton of the evening. Her performance at the dance had been really great. The one slip-up being when she almost used 'that' word back there in the parking lot with Mark.

Everyone knew he had this thing about that one stupid word. So it made sense to watch what she said.

The same went for not smoking around him. She didn't know if he smoked or not. But she'd never seen him with a cigarette, so why take a chance?

The main thing is, the way Mark acted made it clear he still had it bad for her. If she kept playing her cards right, he'd soon be begging her to marry him.

And that's just what she wanted.

By marrying into Mark's family, she could stay near her daddy working in the office and helping out with some of his Klan activities. It would also give her a secure position in the upper reaches of Pinefield's clannish social world. And since Mark was so nuts about her, handling him after they were married should be a snap.

She swerved around a dead armadillo without losing her train of thought. Everything would be perfect, except he's such a boring Boy Scout. Come to think of it, he really had been a Boy Scout. Still, he didn't have to be so damn boring.

The land dipped and she passed over a small, sluggish stream. For a moment, the air cooled slightly as oaks and cypress replaced pines. The spot resembled the bayous near her old home in south Louisiana. The short stretch of road had long been her favorite. Tonight, it went unnoticed as she

reminded herself that while Mark could be boring, he was also nice, respectable, and planned on coming home after law school. As her stepmother kept saying, those things can mean a lot in a marriage.

Over the last few weeks Bebe had wondered if, for once, Martha might be right.

Bebe made a brief, half-hearted attempt at objectivity. Outside of his being a bore and having nigger friends, Mark wasn't really that bad. While no movie star, his looks were okay. He was nice and tall with a nice big body, a nice smile, nice hair, nice eyes and, except for being boring, had a nice personality. That was the problem. He was too damn nice.

And that's a shame because nice is just what you need, Bebe girl, a nice guy from a nice family with a nice future who, after your nice wedding, will always treat you nice. Someone like nice, boring, Mark Cahill.

Bebe's foot stayed glued to the accelerator as she passed a new Cadillac with Texas license plates. Not for the first time, she wondered what her life might have been like had she been born into an old, well-to-do Pinefield family like the Cahill's. Not that she'd ever been ashamed of her family or French heritage, far from it. Being a Cajun around all these rednecks made her feel special. Still, moving up here from south Louisiana had been such a drag and being the new kid in junior high even worse.

Those first days in school were torture. She almost died of shame the first time she overheard someone call her a "coon-ass." God, how she despised that name. It was such a rude, hateful insult. Hell, they might as well call her a jig-a-boo.

Well, bec mon chu, rednecks. You can all kiss my coon-ass. This Cajun, a newcomer and no brain in the classroom, won almost everything worth having in high school. Everything except Homecoming Queen. "I'd have won that, too," she muttered, "if it hadn't been for that damn Amy Marshall."

Every time she tried for anything, Amy Marshall got in the way. She was everything Bebe wanted to be: tall, elegant, smart, self-assured, a winner at everything she did, and rich.

While proud of her own family, they weren't part of the town's little social circle, and sure as hell weren't rich. Her daddy's business did okay. But they still owed a lot of money to the bank, the one run by Amy's father.

As for looks, Bebe knew from experience her own, in particular her eyes and butt, could stop traffic. Her legs, however, were just passable. And they were so damn short. Of course, so was she. Being short, she had to diet all the time. Even then the best she could hope for was the cute, sexy look.

Meanwhile, that damn Amy could walk into a room wearing cut-offs and a t-shirt and look like a damn fashion model.

Speaking of Miss Perfect, where had she been tonight? Maybe decided a country-club girl like her was too high class to go to a dance at the Legion Hall. Well, she blew it by not showing up. Judging from tonight's reaction, by the end of the summer, Amy's old buddy, the nice Mr. Mark Cahill, would be the personal property of the one-and-only Bebe Boudreaux.

And after what happened this spring, that's just what she needed, if not exactly, wanted. The dose of cold reality erased her smile. In high school, she'd been a fun loving, party girl who enjoyed skirting around the edge of the town's social norms. The last two years she'd lived away from home while going to junior college. That had let her party a lot harder and in a much bigger field.

Then she missed her period. The thought of being pregnant had been terrifying. She wasn't, thank God, but the experience left her shaken and convinced the time had come to cut back on the party scene and look for a safe nest. If possible, a comfortable one near her daddy in Pinefield.

Recalling those horrible days always made her cringe. How could she have told her daddy if she really had been pregnant? Even worse, what would she have said when he asked about the baby's father? She wouldn't have known, not for sure. The leading suspect, based on the number of times they'd been together, would have been Darrell Ray Sims.

Being positive he'd marry her hadn't made Bebe feel better. She didn't want to marry Darrell Ray, never had. Not that she didn't like him. The big, good-looking, party animal, always knew how to show her a good time. But those things, plus a new pick-up and a reputation as a fighter, were about all he had going for him.

Sure, he now worked for her daddy in the lumber yard. But odds were he'd wind up in the paper mill like the rest of his redneck, holy-roller relatives. In short, Darrell Ray might be fun, but he wasn't respectable, safe, or nice.

Memories of all the good times they'd spent together flooded back. He'd been her first, and probably still thought he'd seduced her. Bebe smiled at the idea. She knew better.

Back during her junior year, a fellow cheerleader had confided in glowing detail that she and her boyfriend had 'gone all the way'. Her apparently unfeigned, total happiness convinced Bebe the time had come for her to join in the fun. After settling on Darrell Ray to be the one for the task, she carefully schedule her seduction for the coming summer. For them, traditional dating was not an

option. Her parents didn't like his 'bad boy' reputation while his Bible-thumping Mama thought Bebe was too fast, flashy and might be Catholic. TBebe didn't care. She wanted Darrel Ray for a lover, not a steady boyfriend. Besides, having to slip around and meet on the sly made everything feel so wicked.

The usual trip around the 'bases of love' had been a blast, but went by faster than expected. In her plans, it would take all summer for Darrell Ray to seduce her. But within a few weeks, they had passed third and were ready for the final sprint to home plate.

That night, the moment the truck stopped in an abandoned, dead end road, they were all over each other. Neither wanted foreplay. Bebe managed a feeble protest or two while trying to hurry along her deflowering.

They didn't pause until she was stretched out on the truck's bench seat, her nude body exposed in the light from the dashboard.

They were, finally, about to do 'it.' Unable to breathe, much less speak, when he asked if she was ready, all she could do was nod to signal the beginning of the end of her virginity.

To her surprise doing 'it' had been good. And when they did everything again, and again, it had been really, really good.

In fact, it had been so good she'd had no hesitation about trying it again, either that night or in the future, and not just with Darrel Ray.

But with all that experience, she now knew it was the stuff leading up to sex she liked most. As for sex itself, in her opinion, unless she was really horny or the guy really great, about the best it had to offer was something between okay and pretty good.

Still, Darrell Ray had been a very good lover that night. He still was. What's more, he always seemed ready, not just to screw, but to party and show her a good time. It's just a damn shame his people were such trashy, low-class rednecks.

As she sped into Pinefield, Bebe remembered it was Friday night. That meant Darrell Ray should be at his favorite hangout over in Hawthorn. The more she thought about shaking loose with him, the less she wanted to go home.

Near the turn-off to her house, she decided to change destinations. She tossed out her cigarette, rolled up the window, and switched on the air-conditioner. A quick search under the seat produced a well-used hairbrush.

The traffic light across from the Dixie Pride supermarket turned red. She stopped, turned on the car's interior lights, checked her looks in the rearview mirror, ran the brush through her hair several times, and evaluated the results.

The traffic light turned green. She decided the reflection would do. Following a last glance in the mirror, she shoved the brush back under the seat, killed the dome light, then floored the accelerator, and raced away towards Hawthorn.

After all those slow dances with Cahill, she really, really needed some serious party time. That damn Darrell Ray just better be there, she thought, wiggling in unconscious anticipation.