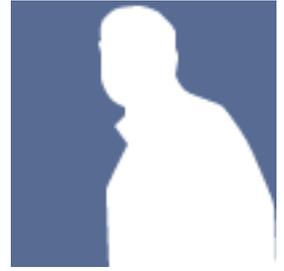


Dancing to Ray Charles: Ch 03, Ailing Amy

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Would learning the sexy little tramp she hated wanted to marry her best friend cause a relapse?

<https://www.storiesspace.com/stories/general/dancing-to-ray-charles-ch-03-ailing.aspx>

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The dream was back. So were those eyes. The ones that hovered in an angry sky, seeing everything but focusing on nothing.

Amy knew those eyes—knew a time when they'd been filled with happiness and a love of life. But then her brother had returned from Vietnam.

Young, naked, and skinny, she stood alone and vulnerable on a hill surrounded by flames. Everything kept changing. An older man in a business suit waved at her while fading from view. She sensed more than knew it was her Grandpa Collins. But before she could wave back, he'd gone.

She looked down. A dead cat lays a few feet away. A thin, blonde young guy in track shorts came running up. They embraced and kissed. He ran his hands over her body; it didn't seem quite as skinny now. But when he tried to pull her down, she resisted, and he melted away.

So why was she now stretched out on the ground? And where did the dark, handsome man come from? He covered her nude body with kisses. Once again she responded. Every touch sent her reeling. She wanted to please this man and stretched out her arms for him. But he wasn't there. Confused, she looked around and saw him walking away, arm-in-arm, with another man.

Something new, something that hadn't been in the other dreams, began to happen. The flames vanished. Moonlight and a soft breeze caressed her skin. She was dressed and in a man's arms, kissing him and being kissed in return. He touched her body, and it felt so good, so safe, so right. She didn't want him ever to stop. But he did. Though disappointed, she sensed it wasn't a rejection, but what he thought best, for both of them, and she felt great.

Amy Marshall woke with sweat pouring off her body. The fever had broken. And while she didn't feel great like in the dream, she did feel better. She'd come home from an after-finals party on the Gulf with something, or some things, that came complete with chills, fever, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. Now, whatever it was, seemed over.

With an effort, she got out of bed and changed into dry pajamas. After a quick trip down the hall to the bathroom, she crawled back into bed among the damp, rumpled sheets.

There were two books near the foot of the high four-poster. She remembered her mother had brought Confessions of Nat Turner and Death of a President from the library when she came by at lunchtime.

Amy had been impressed by the gesture, and a little startled. It was a point of honor with her mother not to take advantage of her position as the parish's head librarian to bring home new arrivals.

To make an exception this time meant even her mother had been concerned, a rare event in the Marshall household. The strong-willed Mandy Marshall looked upon being sick as something akin to a moral weakness.

With a groan, Amy reached down and pulled the books up beside her. It wouldn't do to kick new books off the bed.

She wanted to read them, but not now. Their contents were too heavy for her wasted brain and the books themselves way too heavy to hold. Instead, she reached into her nightstand and pulled out a paperback copy of Valley of the Dolls. Even that proved too much. The book soon became a shield for her tired eyes. The sound of a soft snore soon joined the discreet, rhythmic whirl of the overhead fan.

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Amanda Nicole "Amy" Marshall was that rarest of creatures, a gorgeous young woman not absorbed by her beauty. She thought of herself as skinny with no better than average, small-town good looks. She thought wrong.

Still, for the first time since high school, she'd be spending the entire summer at home in Pinefield. No boyfriend, nothing to do, and most of her old girlfriends out of town.

At least Mark would be around, plus Willie and Bob. But that wasn't the same. They were just old friends, even Mark, she supposed. Coming home sick might have been a warning of things to come.

The door to Amy's room always squeaked when being eased open. That warning sound now woke her. She whipped the book off her face and stuffed it under her pillow. Moments later, her mother's face appeared around the door.

At the sight of her second-born child awake and alert, a tentative smile replaced her concerned expression. "Hi, honey. Hope I didn't wake you. How are you feeling?"

"I'm a lot better, Mom. The fever broke sometime after lunch. I've managed to sleep a little since then."

For just a moment, her mother seemed to sag against the doorsill. "Oh, honey, I'm so glad."

She pushed the door open, stepped into the room, and gestured towards the two books near the head of the bed. "I hope you like them. They're supposed to be very good. Although, I don't think I can handle anything more about the Kennedy assassination. It gets me so depressed."

A lot had changed in the eight years since President Kennedy's election. Although he'd carried the town, Amy's mother was one of the few citizens who would still admit to having voted for him. Some people found this admission startling, but it hadn't affected her standing in the community. Most dismissed it as an eccentric by-product of working in the library around all those books.

With a gentle stroke, she pushed aside her daughter's damp, tangled hair. "Let's see if you still have a temp." She bent over and kissed Amy's forehead.

"Cool as a cucumber," she announced. There was unconcealed pleasure in her voice. "But you're a little clammy. So the dance is still out, understand? I don't want you getting all sweaty in that dusty old Legion Hall. In fact, just stay put for the rest of the night. We're having soup for supper. You've eaten almost nothing all week so that should be perfect. Once your grandmother gets here with the cornbread, we'll bring you a tray."

For the first time, she noticed the clutter in her daughter's big, corner room. "Why don't you go take a shower while I straighten up in here and change your sheets? It'll make you feel a lot better."

“Uh, well, what about waiting until after supper? You know what a slob I am. I always make a mess eating in bed.”

“Good idea.” She may have agreed, but Mrs. Marshall couldn’t resist a quick tug on the sheets. “Why don’t you take it easy and catnap, if you can, until suppertime?”

Amy agreed and thanked her mother again for the books. “You’re welcome, honey. And I hope you enjoy them. But don’t start reading right now. You need to rest.”

After kissing her daughter’s cheek, Mrs. Marshall walked out, closing the door as she left. At the sound of it latching shut, Amy stuck a hand under the pillow and pulled out her half-finished paperback. While almost positive the parish’s head librarian wouldn’t object, at least not much, to what she would consider a lurid, trashy novel. Still, why take any chances. Delaying the proposed shower and sheet changing protected both the book and her mother’s sensibilities.

An hour later, she heard familiar voices and the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. Valley of the Dolls once again vanished back under the pillow. Then she remembered her mother wanted to change the sheets.

She’d just finished shoving the book inside her nightstand drawer when the door opened. Her mother walked in followed by Amy’s grandmother.

Amanda Collins came in carrying an overloaded tray.

“It’s about time you started getting better, young lady. Laying around sick is a waste of time,” said the tall, tanned, gray-haired woman wearing a western shirt and blue jeans.

“I agree, Meemaw.” Amy sat up in bed and returned her grandmother’s sly grin. “That’s why I’m feeling so much better.”

“Well, I’m glad you are,” said her grandmother, while arranging the tray over Amy’s lap. Tray in place, she took a long look at her granddaughter’s tangled hair, pale complexion, and wrinkled pajamas. “But I’ve got to say you look like something the cat dragged up.”

“Meemaw, you’ve got to quit pussyfooting around. Just come right on out and say what you think.” Mrs. Collins grinned at the familiar, teasing comeback and further mussed her granddaughter’s hair.

Almost everyone outside the family referred to Amanda Collins as “Miss Amanda.” And they all agreed she was, “a real character.” She still loved to ride horses and had once played softball every

summer. A few years ago she had to give that up when she broke her ankle sliding into second base. At the time, "Miss Amanda" had been sixty. After her husband's death, she became the first woman to serve as Parish Tax Assessor. She had also been one of the first women to smoke in public and wear slacks to work.

Tanned and lean, she was an erect, handsome woman who wore her salt-and-pepper hair in a short, convenient cut. Notorious for being plain spoken and pragmatic, she could be impatient with people she considered fools. But she had a soft spot for the helpless and those in need. By some anomaly of the gene pool, her only child was, in so many other ways, her exact opposite. Mandy Marshall was slender, delicate, quiet, feminine, and always polite. While her mother played softball and rode horses, young Mandy might be, depending on her age, having a pretend tea party with her dolls, reading a Nancy Drew mystery, talking on the phone with her girlfriends, or getting ready for yet another date.

Although different in so many ways, they had two things in common. Both took being strong-willed to the brink of unwavering stubbornness, and both loved without reservation the girl sitting in the bed. Like them, she carried on the tradition of the first-born female in each generation being named, Amanda.

Amy's dark red hair was her father's primary genetic contribution. Other than that, she was a composite of the two women. As a kid, she'd been a tomboy and still shared her grandmother's passion for riding horses and sports. But like her mother, she'd always enjoyed playing dress-up. Now with equal pleasure, she might ride horses or play golf in the morning, and later become a very female, female in heels and evening gown.

Miss Amanda eyed her small audience. "I better remind you people that I won't be around tomorrow. Esther and I are going over to tour some of the homes in Natchez. I'm not sure how long we'll stay. But I'm almost certain she'll want to shop afterward. And if she does, we'll eat supper over there. I don't intend to drive back into the sunset. So Y'all don't have a hissy fit if we don't make it back until way after dark."

"Sounds like you two may be heading for some serious party time," teased Amy. "Sure Y'all don't want me to come along to protect your virtue?"

"No one's interested in any virtue Esther, and I may still have, young lady. Even if they were, the last thing we'd want is some sickly young'un tagging along and cramping our style."

"Now dear, don't tease your poor grandmother. You know how sensitive she is." Mandy grinned at her mother. Then she went back to getting sheets and pillowcases out of the dark mahogany chest-

of-drawers.

“I don’t know what’s worse, having a smart-mouth daughter or a smart-ass granddaughter. It’s a tough call.”

After supper, Amy was herded to the bathroom for a long, hot shower. It left her feeling clean and fresh for the first time in days. When she got back, her room had been straightened, the bed changed and new pajamas were waiting on her pillow.

Just after ten, her father, Stanley Jerome (S.J.) Marshall came by with his “sure cure for whatever ails you.” Thanks to her mother’s warning that he might stop by, Amy had prepared for the visit by tucking Valley of the Dolls back under her pillow. When he opened the door, she was on page ten of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, while “Summertime Blues” played on the radio.

“Got something for you,” her father announced as he eased the door shut. “I would have brought it sooner, but this stuff works best when you’re getting sick or getting better. And for the last few days, you’ve been somewhere in between.”

The “sure cure” formula consisted of three aspirins plus a double hot rum toddy. And while it didn’t always work, no recipient ever complained. Once they had reached a rather indefinite age, at the first sign of a cold or the flu, S.J. introduced each of his three children to this soothing remedy. When her mother discovered this medicinal rite-of-passage, she outlawed its use either by or upon any of her children. The decree gave the concoction a semi-sacred status and ensured its continued use.

After downing the aspirin, Amy sipped on the rest of the warm elixir and talked to her father. Even sitting in her desk chair, S.J. Marshall seemed to be in motion. A big, outgoing man, he had a round, genial face, hazel eyes, and the dark red hair Amy had inherited.

They spoke of local gossip, politics, sports, and the state of affairs down at Louisiana State. He and her mother had met on a blind date to a football game at LSU. The campus was a special place for them. Amy’s brother had already graduated. She would in a year. But she knew better than to mention the recent changes such as the ending of compulsory ROTC, the relaxed dress codes, or especially the growing popularity of the counter-culture lifestyle and anti-war sentiment among the current student body.

Such information would once have made him furious. A combat veteran of World War II, he’d named his son, Walter, after an Army buddy killed in France. But then that son had come back from Vietnam with a sound body but a wounded mind. Since then, talk about anti-war rallies and love-ins at his alma mater, once so militaristic it had been nicknamed, “The Ol’ War Skule,” now left him feeling

confused and depressed.

When she finished her drink, he took the empty glass, gave her a kiss on the forehead and said good night. He inched open the squeaky door, checked the hall, tiptoed out, and then banged it shut. Amy smiled at the closed door with unrestrained affection.

Before long, her kid sister would also break the quarantine and slip in for a late-night visit. The question was, how late. Amy guessed it'd be after the start of the Tonight Show. Their parents always watched it in bed. With one hand, Nat Turner, went back on her nightstand while with the other she reached under the pillow. With any luck, there should be plenty of time to finish another chapter of *The Dolls*.

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“Ooh, I’m gonna tell. You’re gonna be in such big trouble when Mom finds out.”

The words, spoken in a high, teasing, sing-song voice, made no sense, no sense at all. Where was that god-awful voice coming from?

When she tried to see who was talking, Amy realized her eyes were still closed. Opening them just enough to peek, she saw Jan standing by the side of the bed. On her sister’s face was a very mischievous grin.

“Guess you went to sleep reading this trashy old thing.” She wagged Amy’s copy of, *Valley of the Dolls*.

When Amy, still half-asleep, responded with a blank, uncomprehending stare, Jan continued. “I risked our mother’s wrath to slip in here and provide comfort to the sick and afflicted. And what do I find but you dead to the world. I mean your mouth was wide open, as usual, and, well, if you don’t mind, I won’t mention all the other disgusting things I had to put up with. And there, laying on top of your heaving bosom was this classic novel.”

“Do you mind?” groaned Amy. After a struggle, she sat up and snatched the book away from her grinning sister. Jan was the baby in the family. While Amy got the first name of her mother and grandmother, Jan became Sylvia Janette in recognition of her father’s first two initials. Although

pleased at this connection with her father, she absolutely, positively, hated her names. Many variations had come and gone over the years. By junior high, “Jan” had become the least unacceptable.

She was several inches shorter than her tall, slender sister. Thanks to a few pounds of persistent baby fat, Jan’s figure ran to cute and cuddly. Her face was round, where Amy’s was oval. Unlike her redheaded big sister, she had ash-blond hair like her mother’s that always lightened during the summer. And yet, no one seeing them together for the first time ever doubted they were sisters.

“What time is it?” mumbled Amy, who was drifting somewhere between sleep and confusion.

“A little after midnight. Tommy just brought me back from the dance. And do I ever have something to tell you.”

“You woke me up to tell me you stayed at a dance until midnight with Tommy?”

“No, silly. I woke you up to ask how you’re feeling. And also to tell you what happened at the dance.”

For Amy, the reply was a startling reminder that her little sister had somehow turned into a high school varsity cheerleader old enough to stay at a dance until midnight with her boyfriend, a tall, skinny basketball player named Tommy Barton. “So what’s the big news?” she asked, trying to sound more interested than she felt.

“Well, first of all, everybody said to say hello and hoped you’d get well soon. Skeeter and Penny said Mark told them you were getting better. Which reminds me, are you and Penny still fussing?”

“There’s no “we” about it. She’s the one doing all the fussing. Not that I blame her. I don’t know what got into me. Our being friends practically forever didn’t give me the right to call Ralph Lawson a jerk and say she was too good for him.”

Jan nodded. “Maybe not, but everybody knows that’s true.”

“Sure it’s true. And she knows it. That’s why she got so mad. What she doesn’t know is he’d just made another pass at me. No way could I tell her that, of course. But I shouldn’t have said anything. Considering my track record when it comes to guys, I’m the last person to give advice.”

“Of course, that was last Christmas before my latest fiasco. Still, I should have kept my mouth shut.”

Jan turned away and made a show of adjusting a photo on the wall. “Are you ever going to tell me

about Aaron, you know, about Y'all breaking up? I mean, if you don't want to, that's okay. It's just that you never said much about it on the phone and have been too sick to talk since getting home."

When Amy said nothing, Jan shifted her attention to the cluttered bookcase and continued, "It's just, well, I can't believe he dumped you for someone else. He wasn't like Ralph and seemed so nuts about you. And we've always been able to talk, you know, about guys and stuff. Well, I've done most of the talking, and you listened and all. But, if you want to talk about it, well, I'm here, and dying to know what happened."

The sisters smiled at the confession. Amy shook her head. "Not yet, kiddo. I'm over the worst part, but I'm not ready to unload on you. It still hurts too much. But I will. I promise."

She put a pillow behind her back and leaned against the headboard. "Now back to Penny. If you see her again, say I miss her. And I do. I might give her a call if I knew for sure Ralph wasn't around. But I guess she'll be in school all summer."

"That's what she told me," said Jan.

"It figures. Okay, enough about my screwing up friendships. What's your big news?"

"Well, Tommy and I had been there long enough to work up a good sweat. So we were sitting one out over in a corner with a group of kids from school. I'd noticed Bebe had shown up wearing this little, and I do mean little, blue number that had all the guys checking her out, even Tommy."

Jan sat on the edge of the bed to continue her report. "She didn't seem to be with anyone, just floated from table to table, talking and carrying on like she always does. I guess she's trying to get back into circulation. The word is she finished that secretarial course or whatever she took in junior college and is back working for her daddy.

"Anyway, she'd been dancing with someone, maybe Ralph, I'm not sure. They were walking off the floor when Bebe said something to him, or whoever it was, and took off toward the front door. I thought she must be leaving. But a couple of minutes later, she was moving towards the dance floor. And you'll never guess who was tagging along right behind her."

The problem is, thought Amy, with an unexpected sense of despair, she didn't have to guess, she was sure who it had to be. "I've got an idea, but go ahead and lay it on me."

"It was Mark," exclaimed Jan. "They danced a bunch of times. And it seemed like she thought that was a great thing. It seemed strange to me. I mean, she's never given him the time of day. And now,

here they were dancing slow and close to some of those sexy, slow Ray Charles songs.”

Amy started to say something, but Jan cut her off. “Now listen to this. The next thing I know, she’s leaving with Mark.”

“Well, thanks for giving me a wretched ending to a miserable week.”

“What are sisters for if not to spread gossip? So tell me big sister, what gives?”

Amy sighed. “I don’t know if this is a hunch or a relapse or what. But something tells me Bebe’s decided it’s time to get married and picked Mark to win the booby prize.”

“Are you serious?”

Amy nodded. “I’m afraid so. Think about it. Poor Mark’s been nuts about her since the day she first showed up in junior high. You just said she’s back in town working for her daddy. So if she wants to live in Pinefield, then who better for her to marry than Mark?”

A look of distress spread across Jan’s face. “But he’s dated a lot of girls. I mean he went steady with Jenny Connors for a long time. And didn’t you tell me he was starting to get serious about that sorority sister of yours just before she dumped him?”

“Yep. I’d talked myself into believing he was over Bebe. But I guess I knew better all along.”

Jan was, for the moment, speechless. The thought that Mark, someone she’d known and looked up to all her life, might marry Bebe Boudreaux left her looking stunned. “Amy, you’ve got to do something. This is Mark we’re talking about. He’s like my other big brother. And, well, I’d always kinda hoped you two might, you know, might someday.... I mean that’d be so neat.”

“I know what you’re trying to say.” Amy gave her sister an indulgent smile. “But Mark thinks of me about the same way you do him. You know, like friend and family. And, of course, that’s how I feel about him, too. He’s my best friend—always has been. And we’re comfortable together and all that. But I guess we’ve been too close to ever get serious.”

“Well, serious or not, something's got to be done, or we’re going to lose him to Bebe. Oh, I could just puke.”

“I’ve been doing that, and a whole lot more, the last few days. Believe me; it’s a lose-lose occupation. Now get out of here and go to bed. I’m beat and after our little talk, depressed as hell.”

“Fine, kick me out.” Jan assumed a look of hurt dignity. “Just be sure to let me have that smutty book when you’re through. That way I’ll be too busy reading it to tell Mom.”

“Here, take it you, little blackmailer.” Amy tossed the half-finished novel at her grinning sister. “I don’t need to read about screwed-up people. They’re plenty right here in Pinefield.”

With a giggle of triumph, Jan caught the book and left. In the silence that followed, Amy switched off the nightstand lamp and tried to digest what her sister had just said.

Why the hell does Mark have to be so crazy about that trashy Bebe Boudreaux? And if I’m right about Bebe wanting to marry him, and I am, what should I do? What the hell [can’ I do?

It’d be one thing if I loved Mark. But I don’t, not in a romantic way. At least I don’t think I do. Sure, when we kissed that night on the levee I got this warm, special feeling. And I swear, I didn’t want him to stop, not ever.

But he did stop. And that night doesn’t seem to have changed the way he feels about me. So I guess it’s just as well I don’t love him that way. I mean, if he felt about me the way I thought I might feel about him, he’d have jumped at the chance to go with me and a bunch of others to the Gulf, wouldn’t he? But instead, he stayed in Baton Rouge to help a friend move. And if that’s more appealing than going with me to the Gulf, well, that says it all, doesn’t it?

The thing is, if he marries Bebe, there’s no way we could keep on being friends, not as we’ve always been. And I don’t want to lose Mark, especially to Bebe Boudreaux. Marrying her would be so bad for him. She’s no good. Guys can’t tell it, but women can. That’s why she has no real girlfriends in town, except maybe that tacky Velma Meeks. God, now there’s a pair.

Amy sighed and tried to sleep, but couldn’t stop thinking about Mark and Bebe. She watched as the blades of the ceiling fan made slow arcs in the dim light. Unnoticed, a single tear slipped from the corner of one eye.

Maybe I’m kidding myself, but I don’t think she’d have a chance if he thought about me the way he does her—as a woman, not just a friend.

Sure he’s always liked sexy little brunettes like Bebe. And God knows that’s not me. But when we were kissing, I thought, maybe....

But tall, skinny redheads aren’t his thing. And I guess that’s only fair since I don’t want him like that

either. What we have is a special friendship and closeness, not passion, not like we had that night. That was just a one-time thing.

Another tear appeared. Amy turned over and punched her pillow. "But damn it," her voice was an angry whisper, "Mark's too special for me to just sit back and let someone like Bebe take him away from... well, take him away."