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The call comes in the middle of the night.

Five hours later I am on a plane, staring down at the springtime tartan of the prairies, knowing the world below will never be the same again.

She is there to meet me at the airport. Her eyes are not rimmed in red, so I am hopeful.

"He's gone."

My father is dead and I am not sure what I feel.

We are silent on the ride to her house. For the first time, it is her house.

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I always liked it best when he needed my help. "I'll pile these old boards over here," he said. "Take all the nails out, like this. Make sure you put all the nails in this pail so we don't drive over them with the truck."

I threw myself into my job. As the afternoon sun bore down, the bent nails piled up. While I worked beside him, I hummed a popular country-and-western song I had heard on the radio.

"I like to hear a man sing while he works," he said. I swear my smile almost split my face open when I heard that. "When you're done pulling the nails, you can straighten them on this here piece of rail. Try not to hammer your fingers too much."

We worked hard that day but knocked off early. There was a dance at the community hall in the evening. My father and mother loved those get-togethers. I have such a clear memory of the exotic scent of Evening in Paris mingling with the smell of perked coffee and simmering cabbage rolls. Sometimes you would catch a faint whiff of manure that clung to a neighbour's only pair of boots. I can still see the fancy new dress my mother wore so proudly that night.

Once the local band had tuned up and someone had sprinkled the floor with yellow dance wax, the festivities began. Even those men who were outside smoking their rollies and sipping their moonshine answered the call of the music. Feet quickly found their rhythm, and the dancers circled the hot, crowded hall. Simple foxtrots gave way to frenetic polkas and eventually to slow, intimate waltzes.

Friends and neighbours traded partners throughout the evening. I watched as my dad confused dancer after dancer with the extra quick-step that was his trademark. The women seemed to enjoy his company anyway. My mother never lacked partners either. Her favourite, she once confided to me in an unguarded moment, was Hugo Ostlund, a bachelor who lived just down the road from us.

She was in Ostlund's arms that night when my dad suddenly broke away from his partner, grabbed my mother roughly by the elbow, and jerked her from the dance floor. They headed for the door without me. I ran after them and barely had time to leap into our truck before he sped away. A dreadful silence filled the cab.

He dropped us at the front step, backed up, and gunned it onto the road. We did not see him for two days. He returned in time for supper on Monday evening. I wanted to ask him where he had been, what he had been doing, but I knew better. He did not talk to my mother at mealtime that day or the next. She served him in silence.

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At the funeral parlour she answered the undertaker's questions with clinical precision. Then we returned home and she put the kettle on for tea. We drank from Royal Albert cups at the kitchen table, staring out the window, still not saying much. The local radio station played softly in the background. At five minutes before noon, the announcer read a list of upcoming funerals. The very sound of his name made her shiver. Then the music returned, this time a slow country waltz. She closed her eyes and almost imperceptibly swayed to its rhythms. Moments later, she rose from the chair, extended her arms, and asked me to dance.

"What are you talking about, Mom?"

"Come on, I'd like you to dance with me."

I had no idea what she thought she was doing.

"You know I can't dance, Mom. Never could."

"Who cares if you can dance or not? Come on, son, dance with me. Twirl me round the floor. Come on. What are you afraid of? No one's watching."