

# **“Welcome to the Gala”**

**A Story by Stephen Hotchner** based on the  
Valentine’s Day Gala at the Aster Senior Center

I never liked dancing in high school: big empty gyms, boys sitting on one side of the bleachers, girls sitting on the other side. Eight members of the high school band playing music while a girl drummer stares up at the ceiling now and then slapping lazily at her drums. Now I was at another dance.

**Seventy years later I was the same shy sour puss  
I had been at thirteen.**

But this dance was different. This dance was for old people and I was one of the old people.



A tall boy with red and purple hair pinned an orange flower to my wrist. His younger brother followed wide-eyed and bashful. He looked up at me and asked, would you like some beads sir?’ “Sure,” I said. The boy hung a string of white beads around my neck. His mother swooped down on her son and said to her son, “He’s not a girl.” She undid the orange flower. “Can I pin this orange flower to your shirt?” “Sure,” I said.

**The Aster Senior Center had invited Fellowship Square to a Gala to celebrate Valentine’s Day**

My friend smiled at me as someone led her onto the dance floor.

She had beads around her neck just like me and a pale white flower pinned around her wrist. A tall, skinny man sat in the bleachers wearing a T-shirt and large beige pants with a purple flower in his shirt. He sang Elvis Presley songs and played an electric piano. He sounded just like Elvis.



I tapped my feet. “I couldn’t help it” I said to the sour shy person inside me. “I’m going to try and have a good time. STOP HERE I’d never been an Elvis Presley fan but I couldn’t help tapping my feet as the happy smiling tall man on the bleachers sang all of Elvis’ greatest hits: “Hound Dog” and “I’m All Shook Up.” Behind me my ninety-four-year-old friend, Billie, yelled, “Go Judy.”

A woman limped onto the dance floor. She had thin black hair, purple eyeliner and thick red lipstick. A short little man grabbed Judy's hand. They whirled around the floor. "She's a really good dancer," Billie whispered in my ear. Billie had dragged me onto the crowded bus. I felt kidnapped. What was I doing at this senior version of a high school dance. I kept tapping my feet. "She's my friend. Judy was missing half her hair and the other half is purple and orange. She loves Elvis: she loves all music: she can really dance." I wasn't listening. I tried to keep my feet from tapping but I couldn't stop my feet from tapping.

Suddenly there were young people on the dance floor. The mother of the boy who had tried to pin an orange flower to my wrist to my shirt was dancing with her ten-year-old son. The music man switched to "Funky White Boy." I never could resist that song. I ignored my Parkinson's legs and moved to the rhythm of this crazy rock and roll song. More people moved onto the dance floor. Three girls circled each other and rolled their hips. Their boyfriends watched them with slap happy smiley faces. I was the only one left not smiling.



MaryAnn Gardner and Lucky Sargent



Billie Saunders wears her aunt's 1920s dress.

**Mr. Music Man switched to a slow Elvis love song. "DO IT," a voice whispered inside my head. "You're part of this. Have a good time. Just ask someone to dance. DO IT."**

I looked at Billie. She looked at me. I looked down at the orange flower pinned to my shirt. My fingers ran over the white beads the ten-year-old boy had hung around my neck. "No," I said. "Yes," I said. Billie was still looking at me, her blue eyes blinking. I held out my arms. We swayed and hobbled our way onto the dance floor. Her arm was around my shoulder. We danced to an old love song.

The mother was dancing with her son. Judy was jumping up and down limping and turning in wide circles. The crowd parted. A six-year-old girl laughed and clapped her hands. For one brief moment I was not this shy sourpuss of a boy I had been long ago. I wasn't one of the old people "dancing." I whirled Billie in a circle. She barely made it around and fell into my arms. I caught Billie.

**The years fell away as we danced.**

