

THE GREAT DANCE

By Barbara Freet

She stared at her closet. Even though the door was closed she could see the dress in her mind's eye. Every day it was the same thing. Thoughts of the dress interrupted her studies, occupied her mind when she drove the car, kept her from sleeping at night.

She wasn't sure exactly when she noticed it hanging in her closet. It was years ago, probably when she was 13. It hung in the back and she saw it, but she was too busy with other things to pay much attention. Somehow, then, she wasn't too curious about it. But as time passed she looked at it more and more and now it hung in the front of her closet and in the front of her mind.

It was beautiful. In fact it was the most beautiful dress she had ever seen. It was blue and she knew when she wore it her eyes would be more blue than they are now. Her eyes were one of her best features and she was glad the dress made them even more noticeable. "I need all the help I can get," she muttered to herself.

Two years ago she asked her mom about the dress. The strangest look passed over her mother's face; it was almost wistful. Her mother told her that the same thing had happened to her when she was about 13. One day she looked in her closet and she, too, had a gorgeous dress hanging there.

"Your Grandma told me that the dress was to be saved until The Great Dance. At that time a man who was my best friend and who loved only me would ask me to The Great Dance. And then I could put on the beautiful dress and go to this very special and almost magical dance. She said when he saw me in the beautiful dress he would be pleased and in his eyes I would be the most beautiful woman he had ever known."

“So...”, she asked her mom. “Did you ever meet that man and did you wear your dress to The Great Dance?”

“Yes, I did,” her mother said with the hint of a smile, “and he did think I was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.”

“What’s the big deal. I’ve been to dances before. And why do you have that goofy look on your face. *What actually happened!*”

“You are still young, my daughter. We will talk about The Great Dance many times before you wear the dress. You may look at it whenever you like, but it must never be worn until it is time.”

Even though that conversation went through her head many times since then and even though she did talk with her mother about The Great Dance, it became more and more difficult to wait to wear the dress.

“I think it’s just a lot of bull. Why is there a beautiful dress hanging in my closet that I can’t wear? It doesn’t make any sense at all. If it’s there, it should be worn.” She thought that thought many times.

“But I’ve seen the way my brother looks at his new wife. It’s practically sickening how much he loves her. He acts as though she actually is the most beautiful woman in all the world, even though I think her thighs are a little big myself...”

“Mom, what happens to the dress after The Great Dance?” she asked her mother one rainy day when there wasn’t anything else to do.

“After The Great Dance you hang it up in the closet. Something very wonderful happens to it over the years. Even though it isn’t as fresh and sparkling and new as it was the first time you wore it, it continues to fit perfectly every time you put it on. And when your husband shares

your closet, he smiles when he sees it because it is as special to him as it is to you. Really, it's quite wonderful, dear."

It was a surprise to her that her friends found beautiful dresses in their closets, too. She found out that interesting fact at Mary Ellen's slumber party two months after she first saw her dress. Since then somebody was bound to bring up the subject whenever they were together. The way some girls bragged about their dress was really sickening. They all talked about The Great Dance and about who they wanted to go with and who they hoped would ask them. Some had boyfriends, but most of her friends didn't and they created fantasies like she did.

Then it happened. Cindy said she wasn't waiting for The Great Dance to wear her dress. She was sick and tired of waiting and if it was going to hang there, she was going to wear it. Her boyfriend invited her to a party and she was just going to wear that dress. Some of the girls tried to talk her out of it. They tried to remind her about how special The Great Dance was going to be and how wonderful the man who would invite her would be, but she wasn't interested. Others hoped she would do it so they could find out what would happen without having to do it themselves.

Her parents weren't going to be home so it was the perfect opportunity. The next day Cindy got 11 calls from 11 friends who wanted to hear every detail. After the sixth call she gave up and told the rest to call each other. The first girlfriend got the most details so her story was the best. She said Cindy told her that she got dressed one hour early just so she could spend lots of time looking at herself in her beautiful dress. And she did look very, very beautiful. In fact, she thought she had never looked so good and she wished there were photographers there just to take her picture so she could remember how beautiful she was (and give them to everybody).

When her boyfriend came, she was sure he would think she was so very beautiful as her mother had told her the special man would. But he said, “Nice dress” and that was all. They had fun at the party and Cindy tried to make it sound like it was great, but she sounded tired and disappointed. “It’s no big deal,” she said.

Then several others decided to wear their dresses. One didn’t say too much about it, and the other one couldn’t stop talking about how great it was and what fun she had and how she was going to wear her dress whenever she was asked out. Liz stuffed her dress into a duffel bag and snuck out of the house one night to go to a fraternity party. She said she was so drunk she didn’t remember if she looked gorgeous or not. Her dress was very wrinkled when she came back home so she hid it in the back of her closet. Sure enough, her mother found it and asked her if she had worn it. Liz admitted she had. Her mother just shook her head and looked sad but didn’t say anything.

“Hey,” he said, “wanna go out to dinner next Friday?” He is cute and he is nice. “Sure,” she said, and smiled. And he is older. Not one of those immature idiots at school. Just because he works at the pizza place doesn’t mean he won’t have a good job some day. After all, he is going to college. She thought about him all the way home.

“So what’s the big deal” she said to herself. “I’m ready to see if this dress really fits perfectly and if I am as beautiful as my mother says I will be, even though I have been eating a lot of pizza lately. Why should I wait? It may take years for me to be invited to The Great Dance. And what if I never am! This dress will just hang here and bug me forever. And I’ll probably never get invited by a wonderful man. Waiting is stupid and all this magic-type stuff is a fairy tale anyway.”

As usual her mother seemed to read her mind. Thursday night she came in and sat on her bed. “Oh, no. The big talk,” she said to herself. Too late to pretend to be asleep.

“Something tells me you are considering wearing your beautiful dress tomorrow night, honey.” She always knows everything.

“I just don’t know, Mom. It hangs there and hangs there waiting. I met this really nice guy and I think he would love it if I wore it.” This sounded lame even to her, but she said it anyway.

“I’m sure he would like it, honey, but it isn’t The Great Dance. You only get to go to one Great Dance, and you only have one very, very beautiful dress. Please don’t waste it. You’ll be sorry if you do.” Mothers. They’re all the same. They mean well but they just don’t know everything.

She stood in front of her closet for 45 minutes trying to decide whether to wear it or not. It was beautiful. And it was just the right color blue. The other girls had worn theirs and nothing terrible happened. But visions of her brother and his new wife kept coming into her mind. She wanted someone to look at her that way someday. She knew her brother and sister-in-law went to The Great Dance together. But still, good things don’t happen to everybody. And she decisively took the dress off the hanger and put it on.

She couldn’t believe it. It was more beautiful than she dreamed it would be. Surely he would think she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen when he saw her in this dress. And her eyes looked bigger and bluer than ever.

The doorbell finally rang and she opened the door a little more dramatically than usual. “Wow, what a gorgeous dress,” he said. “You might be a little overdressed for where we’re

going, but it will probably be okay,” he said as he walked around to his side of the car and got in. She opened the car door and got in herself. “Oh well,” she thought, “you can’t have everything.”

It was nice. Not great, but okay. She felt beautiful when she left her house, but when she got home again, something had changed. Maybe it was when he said, “Later” as he dropped her off in front of her house. She took off the dress very slowly and hung it up. It was still beautiful, but it had wrinkles and there was a spot of spaghetti sauce on the front.

She lay in bed in the dark and looked up at the ceiling. It was over. She had done it. It was okay, she kept saying to herself. And then she started to cry. Now she had nothing to look forward to. Now if the wonderful man ever did come to invite her to The Great Dance, she would have to open the door in a wrinkled dress with a spaghetti spot on the front. If his eyes were filled with love maybe it wouldn’t matter. Maybe he wouldn’t notice. Maybe he wouldn’t care.

In fact, she said to herself, maybe his tuxedo would be worn, too, and he wouldn’t have anything to say about her dress in the first place. Yeah. But maybe he would remember the other girls he had taken out who wore their dresses for him. And maybe one of them was more beautiful and could dance better. And maybe her dress made her eyes shine for him, too.

Now she felt sick. She couldn’t go back. It was done. She’d just have to live with it and whatever happened next. She tried to go to sleep. Maybe tomorrow she’d go get some pizza....