

### **THREE DAUGHTERS (excerpt 3)**

**By Kris Thompson**

After one semester I had become completely embedded in the fabric of Kensington life.

Amazing what having friends will do for a person's mental health. I was no longer thinking about taking my own life and, in fact, I was thriving, making good marks, and had become well-liked by students, staff, and teachers.

Ruthie and I were more than happy to become roommates in the Spring when Eloise was caught French kissing and heavy petting behind the field house with Stewart Carpenter, our school's best baseball player, and was promptly transferred to an all-girl prep school somewhere out west. Curious that Stewart emerged from the situation completely unscathed, continued to pitching for Kensington, and simply moved on to the next girl without missing a beat, choosing a more secluded location for his lascivious activities. Eloise left half of her clothes behind indicating that they were for girls while she was now a woman and that I could have them or throw them away for all she cared. I immediately put my inherited bundle of fashionable clothes to good use. Mother may have intended me to be plain Jane, but Mother didn't factor in Eloise pursuing womanhood behind the fieldhouse.

Being roommates with Ruthie was like having a fun-loving but reckless little sister who you could never quite control, even if you wanted to. We spent countless hours listening to her extensive record collection on her Philips turntable which was built into a small round tan leather suitcase that looked like a very fancy hat box. Until then, my musical exposure had not extended beyond Mother's favorite songs by Perry Como and Dean Martin. Ruthie introduced me to music-to-move-by. We listened to Ricky Nelson, Jerry Lee Lewis, Buddy Holly, and Elvis Presley. She

knew all the dances having learned most from her family's maid, Florence, with whom she spent more time with growing up than with her own Mother. It was only after coming home early from one of their many weekends away that Mr. and Mrs. Hunt discovered their only daughter in the basement with most of the colored staff, dancing colored dances, with colored boys, while colored music blared. That was Florence's last day of employment, Ruthie's last dance lesson, and the inspiration for her parents to gift her a record player, more appropriate music records, and Betty White's Teen-Age Dance Book. It was also the impetus behind Ruthie's enrollment in Kensington.

When we weren't listening to music, we still regularly visited the lake but in the winter months we bundled up. When it got cold enough, the lake iced over, and we traded skinny dipping for ice skating. As rich girls always do, Ruthie had more gear that she knew what to do with and was happy to give me a pair of ice-skates. She was only a half size smaller but insisted that, where skates were concerned, the tighter the better.

Luke taught me how to skate. I told him I would be terrible, but he insisted. I was still sort of in love with the idea of there being a "Luke and me" although I'd not received an iota of encouragement from him. But it was an opportunity to be close to him, to feel my body humming, so I accepted. Despite it being difficult to concentrate on the lesson, being so physically close to Luke, I ended up being kind of good at it which was a surprise since Mother had always told me I was uncoordinated and not good at sports. This was always her reason when denying me any extracurricular activities.

I had never joined a team, took a ballet class, or tried my hand at...well...anything. I had been told I was not worthy, and I had believed it. Of course I had. I was a child. What kind of mother would do something like that? It was a small thing, that realization, but how nice to come out from under another of Mother's weighty lies. With each little discovery, each little victory over

Mother, I gained just that much more of myself. I was piecing together who I was, what I was, and who I would become.

Our frozen lake provided hours of skating, and smoking, and talking politics as young people often do. We all thought we were so much smarter than our parents. But during the warm months, we went back to skinny dipping and, on occasion, ventured out together to the Friday night block dances in town at Landing's Garage.

Landing's Garage didn't seem a likely place for anything social. It really was just a greasy garage that fixed cars. But the owners, Mr. and Mrs. Landing, were an older couple who had grown up in Bridgewater, never had any children of their own, and wanted the local young people to have a place to dance. So once a month, always on a Friday night, they'd open their doors and turn the street in front of the garage into a big dance party. I heard they had permission from the local authorities, so it was on the up and up, and Kensington administrators turned a blind eye to our ventures into town. The Landings always set up a punch table and a few sets of tables and chairs for those that weren't dancing, but these remained largely unused as everyone was either dancing or sneaking behind the garage and sharing a bottle or flask or something even more precious. But it was usually pretty tame and loads of fun. You would think the local kids might not want the rich kids from Kensington mixing in, but for the most part it we were welcomed with open arms. The local girls appreciated having more boys to dance with and I know the local boys liked having more girls to persuade. Persuade to dance. To drink. To take a walk with. To...

The lake bunch always came to the dance as a group, but each of us danced with as many people as we could. It was like a dance marathon. It was late summer, and we were getting ready to head down to Landings for a much-anticipated evening of dance. As usual, Ruthie was on a mission to dress me up so we would be the best-looking girls at the dance and, as usual I

begrudgingly accepted, knowing that I would have the opportunity to dance with Luke and hoping looking good would help tip the scales from a friendship to...something more.

Ruthie put me in a gorgeous Vicky Von dress which she had her mother order in pink, telling her that pink, which she had traditionally shunned, was her new favorite color. It wasn't, of course, but Ruthie thought the pink floral embroidered fitted top would look great against my pale features and dark hair. The dress was the first non-sleeved dress I had worn although it came with a short jacket that Ruthie had to promise her mother she would include when wearing the dress and that Ruthie subsequently forbade me to wear saying that empire dresses with bare shoulders were the rage and who were we to question designer Vicky Vaughn. She also insisted, saying that my legs were my best feature, that I wear her pink patent leather pumps which I had no idea how I was going to manage while dancing.

We all arrived at Landing's together, except for Claude who stayed behind as he had come down with a cold and was sensible enough not to share with the many girls who could be counted on to fawn over him at the dance. He was quite handsome, popular, and happy to share the wealth with the masses. I asked Ruthie, who had shared with him in the woods, if she had regrets about not being Claude's girlfriend.

"I don't want a boyfriend," she explained. "Who wants to be tied down like that...always being expected to be somewhere or do something decided by someone else? No thanks. I'll be the captain of my own destiny."

I admired Ruthie for this, and so many other things. I'm not sure if I was actually aware while we were at Kensington but, looking back, I realize that Ruthie was the first person I really loved. I mean yes, I loved Joe...but that was a distorted love brought on by emotional manipulation of my love-starved child-self. If only Ruthie and I had been lesbians, she would have been the one

for me and the course of my life would have been much different than it turned out. But the heart wants what the heart wants. Actually, that turn of phrase should be adjusted...the flesh wants what the flesh wants. And, that night at Landings, more so than ever before, my flesh wanted Luke.

As usual, every member of the lake group danced our hearts out. Luke was no exception.

He danced with me at least three times and then spread himself out among the other girls from Kensington and from town, all of whom couldn't wait to dance with him. Next to Claude, he was usually the most sought-after boy at these dances and, without a doubt, the best dancer.

I had just finished dancing with Dennis, a tall blond Kensington boy who kept pretending not to be able to hear me so I would whisper in his ear. It was predictable and all the lake group girls knew this about him, but he was a very good dancer, so we all played along. I excused myself from Dennis and the dance floor to get a quick drink of punch and noticed Luke, head down, walking quickly away from the back of the garage. I moved to the far edge of the building and saw him slip behind a building adjacent to the Landing. I wondered if he was sneaking back there to meet a girl, which would be pretty risqué as most of the drinking and kissing was pretty tame and happened right behind the garage, not in the dark lot next door. Perhaps it was a townie that struck his fancy more than I ever could. I was contemplating this as the next dance was starting up and I heard Ruthie calling for me. I found her flushed and excited near the refreshment table, urging me to dance with her. She finished my punch for me and pulled me out on the dancefloor to dance the newest...the twist. Many of the kids had not done this dance before, but Ruthie and I had seen it on the previous Saturday night, the only night we were allowed television in the common room at our dorm, on the Dick Clark Show, and Ruthie could not wait to try it out. I was impressed with the Landings for playing the song as it was considered controversial and, as we danced, others picked it up until the whole dancefloor was twisting away all together, like a true group dance. I

looked around and saw all our lake friends participating except Luke. Was he still behind the building next door?

Deciding to look for Luke, I excused myself. Ruthie hardly noticed as she was twisting away with several others. I was afraid of what I was sure I would find...Perhaps Luke with another girl which would mean that it wasn't his girl-back-home but rather that he simply did not want to be with me that way. The thought of that possibility was devastating. Even after two years as just friends, I had remained foolishly hopeful and, while I wasn't sure I wanted to dash that hope just yet, I could not bring myself to turn away.

I made my way across the empty lot to the corner of the adjacent building and heard the familiar but devastating sounds of pleasure, the grunting, the moaning. I knew what I had heard and didn't want a visual to go with it. I left without looking, my heart nearly beating out of my chest. I suppose I should have been crying but that wasn't something I had done since I was a child. I returned to the corner of Landings, wanting to rejoin the dance and forget all about Luke, but couldn't help but watch across the lot to see which girl struck Luke's fancy. Was she a tiny, petite blond from town? Or was she one of the well-dressed snotty, spoiled bluebloods from Kensington? Either way, I knew I could not compete.

Finally, I saw Luke, head down, walk swiftly across the dark lot to behind Landings and then, from the other side, onto the dance floor without missing a beat. He looked happy. Good for him. I felt angry and sad and jealous all at once and to further my self-inflicted torture, I waited, keenly watching for the girl, and was quickly rewarded as someone emerged from the same spot.

But it was not a petite blond girl or a rich snooty trust-fund girl. It was no girl at all.

I quietly gasped as I watched Henry, a good-looking boy from town that was frequently at these dances. He and Luke had struck up a friendship months ago and he had, on two occasions,

even joined us at the lake. Henry smoothed his hair as he walked, head down, across the lot. I stood there in shock until someone tapped me on my shoulder, and I turned.

Luke stood before me. My beautiful Luke. The Luke that brought me friends, ideas, and opened up the world for me. The Luke that ignited my desire. The Luke that fiercely protected our friendship. The Luke that promised he would always be there for me, no matter what.

He gave me that sad smile, touched my cheek, and all at once things clicked for me. A flood of memories came to me and what was once curious or confusing became crystal clear.

Instantly, I understood everything.

“I’m sorry,” was all he said.

“Don’t be,” I responded as I pulled him in for the biggest, longest hug I’d ever given or received.

“He’s good-looking,” I offered as we walked to the dancefloor, hand in hand.

“Shut up and twist,” He responded, and we danced the rest of the night away.

Although occasionally a friend or two in the lake group would become romantically involved with someone outside the group and disappear for a bit, eventually they all came back.

Henry came and went as did others. Apparently, I was the last in the group to become aware Luke was gay. I finally shared with Ruthie that I had been pining after him since the beginning.

She, with just cause, chastised me for not sharing my feelings with her, being best friends and all, and we made a pact to never hold back again. To myself I justified not sharing what came before Kensington as I felt like a new and different person. I was leaving my old self behind, and I was more than ok with that.