

The Custodian's Last Dance

by Scott Cimarusti

Chuck Simmons pushed the rolling mop bucket through the dim hallways, one squeaky wheel echoing too loudly off the parade of metal lockers on all sides. He'd just finished cleaning all the first floor bathrooms—no small feat considering how uncivilized high school students could be—so all he had left to do was mop the gym floor.

He rotated his wrist to peek at his watch. Ten minutes to midnight. Right on time.

Something about being a high school custodian seemed especially bittersweet for Chuck. Even though it had been almost three decades since he'd graduated from his high school, he still got a contact high off the haze of hope and promise that hung in the air as he roamed the labyrinthine corridors five nights a week, long after the students and teachers had scattered for the day. High school was when you had your whole life ahead of you, he mused with the slightest hint of bitterness, and countless options available for the taking. Options that life systematically revoked with each passing year.

And nothing made that narrowing of options clearer than having to look for a job when you should be planning your retirement instead.

He gritted his teeth every time he heard some talking head in the media proudly trumpeting the dropping unemployment percentages while conveniently omitting the woefully underemployed. Like men in their mid- to late-forties with masters degrees who had to take custodial jobs after being downsized from the company they had loyally served for almost twenty years.

There was no denying it to himself; Chuck had become the stereotypical bitter old man that he swore he'd never be back when he still possessed the priceless gem of youth.

How disappointed his younger self would be in him now.

Shaking his head absently, Chuck hiked up his sagging work pants and ran a hand through his thinning and graying hair. He rounded the last corner that led him to the gymnasium and reached for the retractable key ring clipped to his belt. And with an overly loud metallic jingle of keys followed by an audible click of the lock, he jerked open the gymnasium door and steered the mop bucket inside and onto the hardwood floor.

Nudging his glasses back up the bridge of his nose, he did a quick survey of the gym as he wheeled the squeaky mop bucket over the high school's mascot logo painted in the center of the floor. Something about the stark shadows under the harsh fluorescents and the towering walls of pushed-in bleachers made him feel claustrophobic tonight, and—as weird as it seemed—like he was being watched.

Chuck quickly dismissed those feelings and focused his attention back on the task at hand. As was his routine, he would start at the opposite end of the gym and mop his way back toward the door. And the sooner he finished, the sooner he could head home to his bachelor's apartment for another fitful night's sleep followed by another day of fruitless online job hunting.

So Chuck wrung out the mop and got to work.

But the insistent nagging nostalgia kept his mind wandering.

Back to his own high school days when he associated the gym with an hour of goofing off with his buddies under the pretense of “physical education”; back before dwindling education budgets whittled PE out of school curricula. He couldn't help but smile wistfully at those long-gone days of devil-may-care exuberance unique to adolescence. And he found himself lamenting yet again the fact that life robs us of that priceless treasure—one that we take too much for granted during that all-too-brief period while we have it in our possession.

Failed careers... Failed marriages... Friends and colleagues succumbing to illnesses... The responsibilities and burdens of adulthood... These were the thieves that stole our youthful optimism from us and taught us the harsh lessons that we are not invincible as we once believed; we are not destined for greatness; and we are not immune to the misfortunes of life that we thought only happened to “other people”.

We are flawed and mortal beings.

And the rushing river of years takes it all from us, one way or another—the good and the bad.

And all we are left with—if we're lucky—are the memories that slowly fade over time like the washed-out snapshots that predated digital photos.

Memories that often included school dances held in gyms just like the one in which he now found himself.

Girls in sherbet-colored dresses, their hair meticulously coiffed, posing with boys in ill-fitting suits or rented tuxedos. Pinning each other with corsages or boutonnieres while gushing parents snapped photos with actual cameras in the days before smartphones.

Chuck halted mopping momentarily and surrendered to the stubborn nostalgia, letting it wash over him like a lukewarm bath.

His gaze wandered over the dimly-lit gym again, a tug of melancholy in his chest as he imagined the gym festooned with pastel-colored streamers and glitter-encrusted paper stars taped to the walls. He thought he could even hear the dull echoes of once-contemporary music that was now relegated to the oldies stations on the radio. He could even picture the dancing couples, rotating to the rhythm of the music, many in rigid formality, others in a tender embrace.

Chuck had a handful of lovers over the years—including a few girlfriends in college and during his twenties—and of course his ex-wife. But he always felt that there was a simple and

untainted intimacy to dancing that in many ways surpassed sexual intercourse. It was an affirmation that one could be desired by another without the customary complications that came with sex. Dancing could be both innocent and intimate at the same time.

One high school dance in particular came to mind for him now: homecoming his senior year when he took his then-girlfriend. The whole experience came back to him in an almost dizzying rush. The intoxicating fog of her perfume... The silken rustle of her dress... The sparkle in her eyes... The allure of her smile... The scent of her hair as she lay her head against his chest while they danced.

That wistful tug in his chest became a longing ache as Chuck came to the harsh realization that he would never dance with anyone in quite the same way ever again.

He understood how relatively trivial such a notion might seem to anyone else who wasn't alone in a deserted high school gym at midnight, desperately trying to recapture a glimpse of simpler times... But with the stark shadows and the droning buzz of the overhead fluorescents as his only companions, the harsh finality of the idea was almost suffocating—to the point of bringing him to the verge of tears, even.

Especially since he knew he'd be right back here again night after night for the foreseeable future to do it all over again—all while time kept slipping through his fingers like rainwater. And as his memories continued to fade like aging photographs.

Ignoring the hollow emptiness in his chest, Chuck raised his glasses to wipe his eyes on his sleeve. Resigning himself to his task, he dunked the mop back into the bucket. Then he paused, the mop halfway through the wringer.

He could have sworn he heard muffled music again, just beneath the threshold of his hearing.

Followed by an unusually fragrant whiff of perfume—a scent that seemed distantly familiar; the kind of perfume a high school girl might borrow from her mother for her special night.

Chuck closed his eyes.

He found that with his eyes shut, he could hear the music a little clearer—like tuning in a distant radio station through a hiss of static.

And the perfume seemed stronger, too.

And, as strange as it might seem to anyone else, the mop handle didn't feel much like sanded wood anymore—but rather the silken smooth caress of dress fabric against his palm. He could almost hear it rustle to the touch.

The sensations were so vivid, Chuck didn't dare open his eyes for fear that the illusion would dissipate like smoke.

He decided he'd get to the mopping later. After all, how often was one treated to such a vivid sensual flashback? Might as well savor it while lasted. Because he knew such a flashback—just like the fading memories that fueled it—would end far too quickly.

So Chuck surrendered to the experience.

And in his mind, he danced.

It was the head custodian who found Chuck's body shortly after he clocked in at six a.m. He didn't really know Chuck all that well, but he figured the guy probably had a heart attack or something, the poor bastard—sprawled out on the hardwood floor with the mop handle still in his grasp.

While this was the first time he'd encountered something like this, a dead janitor would still be relatively easy to explain to the school administrators—especially once medical personnel examined the body.

What would be harder to explain, though, was the rose boutonniere he found pinned to Chuck's work shirt.