

DIRTY DORA



Nancy Bourne

I seen the papers. I know what they say about me, what they call me. Dirty Dora. Just because I danced one dance with a colored boy. Just one dance. This whole town's been in a tizzy ever since some fancy court said we got to go to school with the colored. So they make me out to be some kind of criminal and shut me up here in the courthouse. It ain't exactly a jail, at least there ain't no bars. But the door's locked, except when they bring me food or let my mama in to see me, which I wish they wouldn't, she's so shamed.

I been here a month, mostly in this room, sitting on this bed, looking out the window at the statue of Mayor Spottswood, white as chalk, up in front of the courthouse. Dead now. I ain't seen Trish or Faye since they picked us up, but I reckon they got them stashed away in rooms like this too. They supposed to get me a lawyer, but I ain't seen one yet.

Dirty Dora. It's not even my name, which is Doreen. But they don't care bout that. They just want to make a joke out of me, that's all. All those little pipsqueak boys in my class. The girls ain't a lot better. Much shorter than me with thin little arms and no chest at all. Some of them are nice though and ask me to draw things, horses mostly or girls all dressed up in pretty clothes.

One thing about being shut up in here, I don't have to go to school. I been going for eight years, seems like forever, and I never got no further than sixth grade. Had to repeat first. Then nasty old Miz Brown failed me in fourth. I'm fourteen now and stuck in sixth grade, second time around, and I can't read the science book or the history

book or any of the books. I can do the arithmetic good as the boys, so long as they ain't written out problems. Numbers has always been easy for me. That's how I know I'm not dumb. But, since I'm no good at reading, they'll probably flunk me again. All I can say is, two more years I'm outa there. No more school.

Long about fifth grade I started changing. Got real tall, started developing, got myself a bra. The other girls in my class stayed little, even the ones in sixth who had been in my class before Old Lady Brown flunked me. I could see them trying not to look when we changed clothes for gym.

Funny thing was those same little girls like me in gym class. We line up to choose sides for kickball, and whoever's captain yells out, "I want Doreen."

"No fair. You had her last week," the other captain says.

So they draw straws, and the long straw gets me. And good for them because we won every time. So I like gym class. But I like art best. You give me a subject and a pencil and some paper, and I can make it look so real. Dogs, cats, pretty girls with curved lips and long hair, like in the comics.

"Bet you can't draw a monster," Jerry Myers said just last month in that smart-alecky voice of his.

"What kind of monster you want?"

"I don't know. With fangs and stuff."

"Piece a cake," I said. Fact is, I could do it with my eyes shut. I'm that good. But I still hate that Robert E. Lee School. Every time I have to read out loud, I say all the big words wrong and people laugh. I hear 'em call me Dumb Dora. Teachers too.

Back when I was in fourth my mama took off from her job at the Mill to see why I was doing so bad. She made me sit there while she asked Miz Brown straight out, "How come Doreen ain't moving up with her class?"

"I hate to tell you, Miz Harris," the old witch said, "but your daughter is behind in her reading."

"Well, whose fault is that?" my mama asked.

"I've done my best with her, but she just doesn't seem to progress."

"You think another year in fourth will help?"

"If she applies herself, I don't see why not."

But I been applying myself and it don't do no good.

"Why can't I quit Robert E. Lee and go to beauty school?"

"Law says you gotta stay till you're sixteen," Mama says.

So I kept on going, kept on getting bigger. At recess when all the girls are playing hopscotch or jumping rope, I sit on the steps and draw pictures. That's how I met Trish.

She's this big red-headed girl who turned up one day during lunch period and sat down next to me on the stairs.

"You a good drawer," she told me after she been watching awhile.

"Thank you," I said. "You ain't in this school, are you?"

"Nope. I'm in seventh over there." She jerked her thumb toward the junior high across the street.

"How come you over here?"

"I got permission to go home for lunch, but I usually mess around instead."

"Messing around at a grammar school don't sound like fun to me."

"Yeah. Well, I seen you over here all the time and couldn't figure out what somebody so grown up was doing at this baby school."

"I don't read so good," I said.

"Me neither," she said. "Draw me."

I looked sharp at her long carrot colored hair, her icy white skin, her purple dress bulging at the top with the biggest bosom you ever saw, and I said, "I need colored pencils for you."

Well, Trish rescued me. Mama says she ruined me, and I have to admit she got me into this mess. But I don't blame her. I didn't have no friends till she showed up. Early on, I'd had a couple of girlfriends at Robert E. Lee, but they'd moved on to the junior high and didn't have nothing more to do with me. Anyway, Mama said they was trash, and maybe she was right. All I know is till Trish showed up, I was lonesome all the time. Mama was working the afternoon shift at the Mill and didn't get home till after I went to bed. I don't have no daddy; he joined

the Army when I was a baby and never come back. There was another baby before I was born, but he died.

The drawing was what did it. Trish loved the picture I did of her with the colored pencils I borrowed from the art teacher. I say "borrowed" because I meant to give 'em back. Anyway, Trish had me draw a picture of her friend Faye in Calhoun Street Park after school. Faye's a short little thing with a dirty blond pony-tail and skinny legs. So now I had two friends.

"You like dancing?" Trish asked me one day when we was smoking cigarettes in the park.

"Sure do," I said, although I had never danced a step in my life.

"You got a radio?"

"Yeah?"

"They play all kinda good music on WBTM. Elvis, Buddy Holly, Bill Haley."

"Sure do," I said, bluffing. What did I know? Mama told me she'd wear me out if she ever caught me listening to that nigger music.

"Let's go over to your house and do some dancing," Trish said.

"My mama wouldn't like that," I said.

"Is she home?"

"No."

"What she don't know won't hurt her."

"What bout your house?" I asked.

"My mama's home. You don't want to mess with her," Trish said. Faye nodded like she knew. "Come on, Doreen, let's go to your house."

I wanted to say no, but I didn't want to lose the only friends I had.

"Mama'll know if we leave a mess," I said.

"We won't leave no mess."

And we didn't. Most afternoons after school we'd have our smoke in the park. It was April and getting warm and it felt good to sit on the benches with my friends, like other people, and smoke our Camels. Sometimes the grown ups gave us dirty looks, but we just laughed. Then we'd walk over to my house, which is one of those houses the Mill rents out to its workers. They're all alike, wood frame, most of them

needing a paint job, a little patch of grass out front. My bedroom is small, just enough room for a single bed and a chest of drawers. But the living room is big enough for dancing. We'd shove the sofa up against the wall and carry the two chairs and the rug into the kitchen. The rug was easy, just a small rag rug Mama made. Trish found the radio in the kitchen and turned on WBTM.

I'll never forget that first time. This voice was singing, "Get out from that kitchen and rattle those pots and pans," and Trish just started bouncing all over the room, waving her arms and singing. She grabbed Faye's hand and they bounced together, twisting and turning and laughing and singing. I hadn't heard that song before, which is hard to believe, but remember, I was in sixth grade with all those little kids.

"Come on, Doreen," Trish called out and grabbed my hand. I started hopping from foot to foot.

"Ain't you even been dancing?" she asked.

It was pretty obvious I hadn't.

"Come on, Faye," she said. "We gotta teach her."

They started me out just bouncing to the beat, not even moving my feet, just bending my knees up and down and waving my arms. Once I got the beat, they showed me how to move my feet. We practiced awhile, and pretty soon I got it. I got better and better at it. I didn't want to stop. Mama never guessed because we fixed up that living room good as new every time.

That summer Trish and Faye came over to my house every afternoon as soon as Mama left for work. We didn't always dance. Sometimes we played rummy or double sol. Sometimes we read love comics. One day Trish said, "I'm sick of dancing with girls. Let's find some boys to dance with."

"How do you mean?"

"I hear there's some dancing in the pavilion in Boyle Park," Faye said.

Trish perked up. "Yeah? When?"

"Friday nights."

"I can't," I said. "Mama won't let me." Truth is I was scared to be out in that park at night.

“Whose gon tell your mama?”

“Somebody might see me.”

“Somebody’s gon see you, alright, but they ain’t the type to tell your mama.”

I see now I was dumb to listen to her. But I loved that dancing. And, to tell the honest truth, I didn’t know no boys and I was itching to dance with one. If I hadn’t listened to her, I wouldn’t have met Jimmy.

It was August and steaming hot that first time, even at eight o’clock at night. Trish, Faye and I walked through the park to the Pavilion, talking and laughing real loud to cover up how nervous we were. I was wearing my white pedal pushers and those cheap ballet shoes that look like Capezios, and I was sweating under my arms. Once we got there, we hung around on the sidelines for a few minutes watching couples close dancing to *Love Me Tender*, which was playing on the jukebox. I looked around to see if I knew anybody. I didn’t and it made me feel easier.

Trish and Faye started dancing with each other, showing off, hoping to attract some boy’s attention, which they did pretty fast. Then this soldier come up and asked me, real polite, “May I have this dance?” He was taller than me and had this blond curly hair and blue eyes. I mean I couldn’t believe somebody so handsome was asking me to dance. *All Shook Up* was playing on the jukebox, and he took my hand and swung me out and pulled me back to him, his feet hopping to the beat and me right along with him.

“I haven’t seen you here before, sugar,” he said when we took a rest from the dancing.

“This my first time.”

“You in high school?”

I nodded. You couldn’t tell a man old enough to be soldier that you’re in sixth grade. “You in the Army?” “Fort Dix.”

“Where’s that at?”

“North Carolina, about an hour from here. Name’s Jimmy,” he said, “and if you have no objection, I’m gonna monopolize your company tonight.”

I kept staring at him and breathing in a lemony smell like from shaving lotion and smiling like a big fool.

"Not much of a talker, are you, sugar?" he said. "What do you want me to say?"

He laughed. "Anything you want to say?"

"I can draw," I said.

He looked at me so solemnly. "Well, you have to draw me some time," he said.

I was having trouble breathing, he was so close. I wanted right then to draw him. I wanted to take my blue pencil and color in those deep violet eyes. I wanted to use the side of my pencil to shade in his cheekbones. I wanted to touch his ears that were so small and perfect. I wanted to feel the skin of his white neck against my mouth.

"I'm Doreen," I said. —

"I saw him every Friday night after that. We jitterbugged and slow danced. He would pull me right onto the front of his starched khaki uniform and rock me back and forth, whispering right in my ear, and every part of my body would be singing. We took breaks from the dancing, of course. Out in the dark where there were lots of trees. I let him do whatever he wanted, it felt so good. We didn't go all the way; I held him off there. But I wanted to. I still think about it. I loved that man.

Now here comes the bad part. School started and after a couple of weeks it got cold out there in the park. People stopped coming on Friday nights. But we wanted to keep dancing.

"How bout your house, Doreen?" Faye asked.

I thought about Jimmy in my house, sneaking up to my bedroom, shutting the door. I almost said yes.

But then, "Too many people," I said. "Besides the neighbors would tell my mama."

"I know a place," this GI said. His name was Wayne and I never seen him before. "What place?" I could tell Trish was all for it.

"Called Dix Dance Club. Other side of town."

"What other side of town?"

He named a street I hadn't heard of. I didn't suspect. The cops don't believe me, but I had no idea.

"What's it like," I asked.

"It's a guy's living room. He got hundreds of records and he charges a dollar a person to let people dance there."

"How come I never heard of it?" I asked.

"Come on, sugar," Jimmy said. "It'll be just fine. You know you want to."

He was right. I wanted to real bad.

So the last Friday night in September, Trish, Faye and I met Jimmy and a bunch of soldiers in the park like always, only this time the soldier named Wayne had a Ford car. We all squeezed in, the girls sitting on the boys' laps. We was so busy giggling and carrying on, I didn't pay no attention to where we was going.

"Here we are," Wayne said as he slammed on the breaks.

There weren't no street lights, no lights in the houses, no car headlights even. It was dark.

"It's okay," Jimmy whispered, kissing my ear. "You're with me." He pushed me off him and out the car.

Suddenly I heard Peggy Sue coming from somewhere and I seen Wayne standing in the open door of one of the houses, motioning us to follow him. "Hurry up," he called out in a voice we could barely hear.

Now what choice did I have? We couldn't just stand out there in the dark.

Inside, the room was bare. No furniture. Shades over the windows. The floor was scuffed up and some of the boards was cracked. The only light come from a bulb hanging from the ceiling. And it smelled. Not real bad. Just like yesterday's dinner.

And then we saw them. Standing in a line against the wall, an old man, maybe fifty, two young ones about my age, and a small woman with a rag around her head.

They was colored. We was in colored town.

"We're leaving," Trish said.

We rushed back out the door, but Wayne had gone off. Left us high and dry. Jimmy came outside. "Come on in, sugar. You can't stay out here. I promise we won't be here long."

"How we gon get home?" It was all I could think about.

"Wayne'll be back. I promise."

I believed him.

What happened next I can't explain. One of the colored boys put a record on the record player, which was in the kitchen, and the soldiers started dancing, first by themselves, turning and twisting and singing, then they was pulling Trish and Faye out into middle of the bare room. Jimmy and I just watched. A few minutes later some more girls turned up, girls we'd seen dancing in the park. White girls. But they didn't act surprised like we was. It was like they'd been here before.

The old guy was handing out paper cups of lemonade, and we all started drinking it. We was thirsty. Now I know that it had something in it, but at the time I didn't even suspect. Tasted like lemonade. After awhile, the beat of the music just got to me and I found myself hanging onto Jimmy and swinging round the room.

Then I somehow lost hold of Jimmy and he was dancing with Faye and it didn't even bother me. I just kept on dancing by myself. And then those colored boys was in the middle of us, shaking their shoulders and their hands in time with the music, moving their feet in a kind of shuffle. And the music wasn't Elvis or Buddy Holly anymore. It was this dirty song called *Work with me Annie* that WBTM wouldn't play on the air. But I'd heard about it. And I didn't know what to do with that dirty music and those colored boys shaking their hips and laughing. Then one of 'em grabbed my hand and swung me round so hard I got dizzy.

I was standing in the middle of the room, with that colored boy hanging onto me, crying out for Jimmy, when the door burst open.

Mama says they gon send me away to reform school. Says they gon reform me so I never dance dirty with colored boys again.

"What happened to that lawyer?" I said.

"He's the one got you reform school instead of jail," she said.

She keeps on crying every time she shows up, says she so ashamed.

"What'd I do wrong for you to turn out so delinquent?" she says. I reckon she got that big word from the newspaper.

"Weren't your fault," I tell her.

"It was them girls. They the ones made you so wicked. You stay away from them in that reform school. You hear me?"

"Yes m'am," I say, but I'm glad to hear Trish and Faye will be with me. Makes me less scared.

I heard the cops just got those colored people and all the girls. They didn't bother with the soldiers. I wrote to Jimmy, but I didn't hear nothing from him. I figured the guards was throwing his letters in the trash. I missed him so much I started drawing him. They give me paper and a pencil and I drew him over and over. I said to those pictures, "Hurry up, Jimmy. They gon send me away."

But he didn't come. Then I figured it out. Jimmy's done with me; he don't really love me. He'd visit if he did. Or at least write. I try not to be mad at him, but he's the one put me in that colored man's house. If anybody's dirty, it's him.

I know I ain't. I may not be good at reading, but I ain't the Dirty Dora they talk about in the papers. And I can draw. Nobody can draw like me.