

Red Spinny Dress

By Lonn Baender

The bedroom windows were as black as the bunting over the firehouse bay doors. The overhead hall light dimly lit the ruffled comforter at the foot of the bed. I was holding John's hand, careful not to squeeze. His once firm grip was now fragile. Everything about John was now fragile.

In the shadows, I looked at his profile. Though it changed over the past five decades, to me, it seemed exactly the same: Perfect. In the dim light, the dark patches around his eyes and the hollowed cheeks were hidden. The darkness hid so much, only revealing the man I met decades earlier.

John was a beautiful young man. Flawless skin and curly sandy blond hair that bounced like a slinky. His smile was brilliant with naturally perfect teeth. His eyes sparkled like sapphires in the sun. But what I fell in love with was his heart. He was the most . . .

"Two, are you staring at me again?" John's voice was a wisp of a sound but startled me nonetheless.

"I most certainly am staring at you, One." I kept my voice low.

'Two' is what John has called me forever and I call him 'One'. We were both given the name John and both felt odd calling each other that. One day, being younger, John decided he should be first and proclaimed he'd be 'One'. Therefore I was 'Two'. I laughed—it made no sense.

Knowing it would pass, I dropped it. But he's called me 'Two' ever since.

Our families and friends tried to call one of us Jack or Johnny, but those nicknames never stuck. I never wanted anyone to call us ‘One’ and ‘Two’, but they did.

One Thanksgiving my sister, Lynn, called out John and neither of us responded. Next, she called out John-John and we both snapped to look at her. I laughed again knowing John-John wouldn’t stick but within the year, both our families called us John-John. Our nephew, Godson, and namesake, Jack, call us both Uncle John-John.

Instinctively, I turned to the nightstand. An alarm clock with big red letters had been there since we bought the house thirty-five years ago. Months ago, the clock was replaced with lotions, wipes, and pill bottles. I checked my watch, it was 2:12 a.m.

“You want the TV on?” I whispered.

I expected a head shake, speaking cost him.

“I don’t ever want to watch TV again.” His words were breathy with rests between each.

My eyelids were getting heavy, but I didn’t want to leave the room while John was awake. Against John’s wishes, I’d been sleeping in the guest room. For the last forty-plus years, John and I have rarely slept apart. Even when faced with meager options, we always opted to be together. We’ve shared twin beds, sofas, and a single sleeping bag. Having his arm draped over me or his warm back pressed against mine, felt natural.

In his current condition, sleeping next to John meant sleepless nights for me. I couldn’t *not* listen to his breathing and I worried about rolling into him. The guest room wasn’t that much better. Many nights, I lay there wondering if I’d heard him call for me. More than once I raced to the bedroom only to startle him awake. The fear of missing his call kept me on the edge of wakefulness.

“Two?” John’s voice was a whisper.

“Yes?”

“Music?”

“One, it’s 2:15, you should sleep.” I patted his hand and saw him blink. He was looking at me.

“Play Top Ten.” His words were raspy.

Top Ten was a playlist of our favorite songs. After getting our first computer with a music app we started rating songs. Anything with five stars was placed in the “Top Ten” playlist. A year later, the list contained almost three hundred songs. It topped out at four-hundred-eighteen.

One year, we were playing our Top Ten while driving to Florida. I skipped a song that was one of John’s five-star picks. I wasn’t in the mood for it. Later, John skipped a song, one I had added. Neither of us had done it intentionally we just weren’t in the mood. So we came up with a rule: if either of us ever skipped a song, it got kicked off the Top Ten playlist. At last count, there were only sixty-seven songs. The last one to get the boot was “Losing My Religion”.

With Bluetooth, I linked my phone to the TV sound bar next to the dresser. I yawned, covering my mouth.

“Two, you’re tired.”

“Always.” I used to sugar-coat things, thinking I’d protect John from being hurt. But after finding him in tears, I stopped. He felt like a burden, unable to care for himself. He felt worse for curtailing my life to a caregiver. After another tear-fest, I gave him a choice: We could hire a stranger or I would continue on. That was when I stopped minimizing things and told him the truth, including how I felt.

“Come sit.” He rasped.

I stepped over and sat in the straight-back dining room chair beside the bed. I took his hand again and just as I did, “Greatest Love Affair” by Jeffrey Osbourne began to play.

“Two, our song.” John looked at me, his eyes glinted in the low light.

“Do you remember the first time we danced to this song?” I asked but shouldn’t have, it took all John’s strength to answer.

John and I had been together for almost a decade and never had a song we called ‘ours’. I lobbied for “Have I Told You Lately”, a Van Morrison Classic, but John was more fond of Donna Summer’s “Heaven Knows.” One Halloween night, we were dancing at a club. He was dressed in a red “spinny” dress (as he called it) with matching pumps. So when a slow song played, I insisted on leading. John hated to follow and it took a couple of steps on my toes, but he did give in. He leaned into me as I slowly danced him about. Then Jeffrey Osbourne’s ballad began.

There was something about the song that made us both take note. As it played, John swayed and hummed with the rhythm. When the chorus played a second time, he sang along. By the end, he was holding me so tight, like he’d never let go. John bought the album the next day and we slow danced around the house until the lyrics were memorized.

He grunted and I saw his teeth sparkle, “You told me you loved me.” He said slowly.

“No, you said you loved me first and then you stepped on my toes.” I chuckled.

“I wanted to lead.” He coughed and then gasped to catch his breath. I pushed the hair off his forehead.

John and I fell in love in college. We met at a party. It was the disco era and everyone was dancing. I loved to dance and when I saw John dancing with his friends, my heart missed a beat. I danced my way over to him and danced with him and his friends. Not long after, John and I were dancing together. I'm not sure who copied who but we moved around each other as if we had rehearsed. In unison, we reached for each other's hand as a song slowed. We laughed when spinning or being spun. When a slow dance played, we both tried to lead. It took years for me to give up that fight. On our wedding day, before we walked into the reception hall, John stopped and glared at me: "I'm leading, I don't want to step on your shoes."

I laughed at him, stepping on my shoes wasn't the reason he needed to lead.

"One, you know why I led that night." I smiled but in the dark, I wasn't sure he could tell.

He hummed and slowly reached out for me. "Where is it?"

When we bordered thirty, he was twenty-eight and I was thirty-one, a local club was hosting a Halloween party. It wasn't a gay club but we knew several gay couples going to the party. For costumes, John and I went to a thrift store. He spied a red princess dress. It had a knee-length pleated skirt, a stiff wide collar, short sleeves, and a lace-covered top. He was nervous but tried it on. It fit him well and the excitement on his face shown like a beacon.

We found red pumps that almost matched the color of the dress and a tiny red sequin clutch to finish the outfit. I bought a dated tuxedo complete with a top hat and off we went as Julia Roberts and Richard Gere from "Pretty Woman".

“In the back of the closet,” I watched, he nodded.

“Get it for me.” He spoke so softly that I had to lean in to hear him.

“In the morning.” I kissed his forehead and pulled the cover to his chin. “Sleep now.”

Exploding out of a deep sleep, I rocketed up. It was just about dawn when I’d finally fallen asleep. But the sun was bright and the ringing of my mobile phone that I kept under my pillow jolted me awake. I kept my phone there and left John’s phone on the bed next to him. All he needed to do was push two buttons to call me. His voice was so weak that I wouldn’t hear him if he called out. It happened a couple of months ago and I still cringe at the memory. John called for help to get to the bathroom, but I didn’t hear him. I found him on the floor a short time later. Even though he was very thin, I couldn’t pick him up being prone like that. Lucky for us, our nephew Jack lived close and had been home.

I fought my way out of the sheets and answered the phone.

“One?”

“Sorry, bathroom.”

I hurried down the hall and helped John to the bathroom. While he was there, I washed and shaved him; John insisted on shaving daily. “I don’t want to look like those old men in nursing homes,” he told me more than once. I changed the linens, got him settled in bed, and then went to make breakfast. I sometimes wondered if it was worth cooking, John would take a bite or two at most. Mouth sores made it painful to swallow. He mostly ate yogurt or applesauce. His favorite is vanilla ice cream. Still, I scramble an egg every morning hoping for a little nutrition.

John took his obligatory bite, squeezing his eyes closed as he swallowed. Then he pointed at the ice cream. The coolness helped. I finished his egg and reached for coffee that wasn’t there. I

stopped drinking coffee because the smell made John want some. The last time he sipped it, it burned and made him cough so badly that we ended up in the emergency room.

“Did you find it?” His voice was lower and weak.

It took me a moment to remember. I went to the closet and pulled a garment bag from the back. There were two things in there: an outdated tuxedo and the red ‘spinny’ dress. I laid the dress out on the bed next to him. John slowly ran a hand over the pleats and lace. He smiled and nodded, then inhaled and coughed.

Neither John nor I were ever into cross-dressing. But there was something about how that red dress fanned out like an umbrella when John twirled that lit up his face. His eyes were big and bright and his smile was so wide all his teeth showed. We borrowed makeup from my sister, Lynn, bought a used wig and John transformed himself into a beautiful woman. Looking at himself in the full-length mirror, he couldn’t have been happier. He spun in place and was laughing when he stopped.

“I hate to say this, but you look smashing,” I told him.

I honestly cannot point to any other time, except maybe on our wedding day, when John’s face was as big or as bright. He was giddy in that dress. When he entered the club, he moved as if he was the guest of honor. He sashayed in with a perfect smile and waved like the queen to anyone who looked at him. Our friends were stunned and made a huge fuss over him.

We danced that entire night, which surprised me. John had never worn heels before but he danced as if he had sneakers on. The heels seemed to quicken his spinning which he did after every song. He loved fanning out the dress.

Towards the end of the night, the DJ started playing ballads. When “Greatest Love

Affair” came on, John cocked his head at the opening violins. I took his hands and pulled him close, reminding him that since he was in a dress, I was leading. He stepped on my toes two or three times before giving in.

We moved slowly around the dance floor. John leaned into me, his breath tickling my neck. He swayed with me and hummed to the lyrics. Before the end, John was singing softly in my ear. He laid his cheek on my shoulder singing when he thought he knew the words. At the instrumental break, he whispered “I love you.” I held him tighter.

John loved to sing. He was in his high school choir, the college A Capella group, and he used to sing with a local men’s group. His low tenor voice was velvety and rich. I loved listening to him sing, especially at times like that when he was lost in the music. He sang softly but hit every note.

Just as the song wound down, John stopped abruptly and took a step back. “Give me twenty bucks,” he held out a hand impatiently.

I scowled at him but took out my wallet. John snatched it and ran. I laughed when he didn’t stop in front but hurried to the back of the DJ’s booth. He was talking fast, pointing at me with one hand and waving a bill with the other.

Grinning wide, John hurried back to me and put one arm around my waist. The song that had been playing faded out and “Greatest Love Affair” faded back in. John started humming to the violins and leaned in close. He sang to me as I danced him in a small circle. When the lyrics took a break, he leaned in and gently kissed me. I wanted more of those kisses, they felt more loving than at any other time.

It was the most romantic dance we ever had, ending with a deep kiss. A bit breathless, John said, “Two, we found our song.”

“One, look what else I found.”

John grinned at the sight of the old, battered Florsheim shoebox. Removing the lid, I selected a dozen photos from the hundreds in the box. The photos started in our college days and followed us through to the advent of mobile phones. There were a thousand stories to be retold in that box, it was like our memoir in images.

John’s shaky hands held them up to see until his eyelids began to fall. His hand slowly sank to the bed. I crept out.

I used to wear earphones and listened to dance music when I cleaned. The beat kept my energy high. But since John’s illness, cleaning was done in short quiet spurts. Every few minutes, I stopped and listened, sometimes tiptoeing down the hall. If he was sleeping or comfortable, I’d go back to work. When I peeked in on him later that morning, he was awake and studying a photograph. I hesitated, but he saw me.

“Look.” He raised the photo to me but dropped it.

I smiled when I picked it up. The shot was taken at that club’s Halloween party. We both looked worn out but happy. My shirt was plastered to my skin and John’s hair stuck to his face. Whoever had the camera, found the perfect moment to snap the picture. John’s smile was grand and his eyes sparkled. He had one arm around my waist and held out the skirt with the other. I was smiling too but I wasn’t looking into the camera. I was smiling at John.

“Look how skinny we were.” I laughed and handed it back.

“Put it on me, please?” John asked.

I cocked my head, he looked exhausted. It was taking a toll just to speak. “You want to wear the dress?”

“One last time.” He wheezed.

Moving him for important things like the bathroom or bathing was hard enough, but putting on a dress seemed ridiculous.

“Of course, let’s sit you up.” I sat him up and propped pillows behind him. The hospital gown was easy to remove and surprisingly, the dress slid effortlessly over his head. John had lost enough weight that the dress was big on him.

John sat there, ironing out the pleated fabric with a hand then he looked up at me. “Shoes?”

“Ah, you want the whole outfit?”

He nodded.

Rummaging in the back of the closet, I found the shoebox with the red pumps. While in the closet, I also saw the old brown cracked vase—that’s what I called it. The vase had been on John’s dresser for the last thirty-five years. John used to keep pretty things on his dresser: brass candle sticks, and a porcelain figurine; but this was his favorite. It was the reason he insisted on using the mirrored dresser. He liked being able to see both sides of the things he kept on top.

John kept all his jewelry in that antique vase. He didn’t have a lot but tossing tie pins, lapel posts, rings, and chains into what he said was a priceless Rookwood vase—it seemed whacked. I tried to buy him a real jewelry box, but he refused.

“Look what I found.” I set the vase dead center on the dresser top which was covered in a mosaic of clean spots surrounded by dust. Just a few days ago, all the medical supplies that had made those spots had been removed.

I didn’t have to search for his mother’s pearls, they were on top. When John’s mother passed, he petitioned his siblings for the pearls. He cherished them. The next time, and every time after that, when he wore the red spiny dress, he’d worn his mother’s pearls proudly.

John gently touched the pearls as I fastened them around his neck.

When I opened the shoe box, I’d forgotten that was where we kept the red clutch purse. He

brightened as I placed it on his lap.

The shoes were a problem, they slid right off his feet. And he didn't have the muscles to keep his toes up and the shoes on.

"Wait there," What a silly thing to say. I slipped a pair of short sports socks on him first and the pumps stayed put.

John was fiddling with the purse but finally got it open. The lipstick Lynn had lent him all those years ago was still there. He held it out and I ran a thin film of color on his lips. I smoothed it out with a finger, making sure he didn't look like an over-made-up eccentric old woman.

"Want to see?" I asked.

John nodded and I helped him up. He was unsteady in the pumps so I held tight. He took a step but stopped.

"What?"

"It's too big," He whispered. He looked down and then at me, the glimmer left his eyes.

"That's because you stretched it out the last time you wore it. "I chuckled. Sit, I'll fix it." I helped John back to the bed, propping him up. I thought about using binder clips but they could hurt him. Then it came to me, we had rolls and rolls of medical tape.

Climbing on the bed I moved the pillows to the side. I gathered up the excess fabric, tightened the top, and ran tape across his back. After several passes, the rolled-up excess fabric held. The dress fit well across his torso once more.

The old tuxedo jacket was poking out from the garment bag. I slipped it on and laughed trying to button it.

"Let's take a look," As I stepped over John pointed at the jacket and laughed, then coughed.

John wore the dress six or seven times through the years. Each time he slipped the

dress on, he radiated. It was like the dress had a magical power to make him happy. I've often wondered if the original owner of the dress had felt the same joy wearing it.

The last time John wore the dress he was almost fifty. Again, we were going to a Halloween party but he had trouble slipping the dress over his head. I tried hard but could not get the zipper up the back. John was devastated. I called Lynn for help. The white button-up sweater she lent him hid the undone zipper and replanted the smile on his face. As he did each time before, he stepped in front of the mirror and twirled. The skirt flared out and John laughed. He joined a gym the next day.

I helped John to his feet. Either the heels or the energy spent getting dressed had John more unsteady than that morning. I wrapped my arm around his waist and baby-stepped him to the full-length mirror. He smiled at our reflection. Then he reached over and patted the space between the tux's buttons and button holes, otherwise known as my belly.

He looked back and that same big smile found its place. I finger-combed his hair off his forehead and then pulled the phone from my pocket. "Smile."

I didn't need to say that. In that dress, smiling was all John could do. I took two pictures, one of us both smiling at the camera and a second photo where I smiled at John. It wasn't quite a replica of that first Halloween photo, but I would always cherish the pose.

"You look fantastic, One. But no spinning. I don't want to have to call Jack to help get you up."

"Ha." John tried to laugh. "What would Jack say if he saw me?" His words needed a breath between each.

Our nephew Jack wasn't homophobic, he couldn't be with us as his Godparents. But he freaked once seeing one of our friends who crossed dressed. He didn't understand it and I've wondered if that was why the dress hadn't come out since.

“He’d be totally confused. He’d see the dress, then see his favorite uncle. You’d screw with his head.” I mocked.

A moment later, John lost his smile and his head drooped as if he was focusing on his shoes. He was out of energy.

“Let’s get you back to bed.” Taking a firm grip, I practically carried John back to bed. His eyes were closed as I sat him on the edge of the bed. He was asleep before I got the shoes off and pulled the covers up.

John was a happy person. He enjoyed life and people. He was gregarious and funny. He listened to others even though I knew he wanted to jump in and tell his story. And he did things. He loved being out and doing stuff. Sitting at home watching TV was a weeknight chore. Come the weekend, we were with friends or family, or we’d go to the movies, the fair, the farmers market—wherever, it didn’t matter.

Traveling was his uttermost favorite thing to do. Whenever we talked about vacation, I would suggest the shore. He’d dismiss me with a shake of his head and say, “No, Paris,” or some other city we could afford to visit. Before we made enough money to seriously travel, he insisted on going someplace new each time. Disney World and Puerto Vallarta were the only places we visited more than once. Puerto Vallarta because I absolutely adored it there. He liked it well enough but went back for me.

And Disney? Some might think being a kid at heart, Disney would be his Mecca. They’d be wrong - Paris was. But when Jack was twelve, we took him to Disney on our vacation. He and John both lit up like Christmas trees the second they entered the park. By the end of day one, they had come up with a pact to try every ride in every park. There had to be fifty or more but I think they came close.

On the drive home, Jack made John promise to take him back to fulfill their mission. Two years later, on the drive back to Florida, Jack added the rides at Universal Studios to the goal. I don't know if we hit every ride, but for his eighteenth birthday and our last trip to Disney-Universal, Jack and John still lit up as we reached the park.

John's favorite vacation was in Australia. We flew into Brisbane and planned to spend 10 days up and down the Gold Coast. Australia was an amazing place, beautiful and wide open with friendly people. We meandered up the coast and by mid-week, we visited Fraser Island. We met a group of locals there that were our age. We spent the day swimming, exploring, and pointing at the dingoes with them. Over the course of the day, they made clear that being in Australia and not going to Sydney would be a wasted trip. So John bought plane tickets and off to Sydney we went.

Sydney was spectacular. Our new friends were right and John was thrilled. While at the opera house, we chatted with a couple next to us. When they heard we'd flown to Sydney from Brisbane in the middle of a vacation, they said Melbourne was even more special. We were on a plane the next day. Had we had a few more days, I am sure we would have seen Tasmania, Perth, and Cairns.

John slept until five that afternoon. Again, when I entered the room, he was holding that old photo of us. He had a look of envy in his eye and he was no longer smiling. In fact, his face held no emotion, it was bland - not a look I was accustomed to seeing.

"Are you still studying that old photo?" I asked. "You've been staring at that all day."

John's movements were slower and his smile took work. He said one word. "Martinis."

I know I wasn't supposed to but I could see he was having trouble breathing. I pulled the tube that hung from the bedpost over his head and placed it into his nose. Thankful they hadn't picked

up the oxygen tank yet.

“You want a martini?” My head shook even though I tried like hell to never be negative.

John nodded.

“One, the gin will burn your throat terribly.”

“Two,” John whispered, the oxygen seemed to help. “Just a taste.”

I shrugged—of course—martinis. “I’m going to make you the best martini, just the way you like it. Frozen glass, Bombay Sapphire, three olives, even though you never eat them, and will only think about vermouth.”

John grinned and closed his eyes.

I knew the gin would burn but even if he took just a sip, good for him. Live while you still have a breath. I polished and iced the etched martini glasses from the top shelf, they were expensive and John’s favorite. I shook the shaker full of ice and gin like a crazy person. A good martini is ice cold, a great martini has slivers of ice floating on the top.

I made two drinks, John wasn’t drinking alone. Holding his glass close, I lifted the toothpick with three olives to his mouth. John’s odd martini process was to bite off the ends of three olives and then stir the drink. He bit the end off one olive and it took some effort to chew and swallow. I was about to bite the other two for him but he leaned over and forced himself to bite the next two, letting the ends fall into the glass this time.

“Good.” He said and leaned back. “Stir.”

He watched me stir the olives around the drink. When he nodded, I held the frosted glass to his lips. He took the tiniest of sips, and my body tightened as he fought back the burn.

He leaned back. “Perfect, best ever.” John’s voice sounded scorched.

I turned away and sipped my drink, I couldn’t look.

When I looked back, John was pointing at his glass.

“You sure?”

He nodded and took a slightly bigger sip. Eyes closed, he swallowed several times. “Mmmm.”

I cringed but then thought at least he was feeling something.

“Music?” He squeaked out.

I set the phone to play our Top Ten playlist, then took hold of his hand, his fingers felt like twigs.

“Drink,” John whispered.

I held the glass and this time he took a bigger sip. His face flushed like fire. He nodded, exhaled, and leaned back. He rested for a minute then looked at me.

“Two, dance with me.”

“You want to dance?” My eyes went wide.

He nodded. His smile was sad, maybe knowing there was no way he could dance.

“Let’s do this right.” I helped him sit up. Next, I slid on the socks and red pumps, added a thin film of lipstick, and put my tux jacket on. I removed the oxygen and I set the phone to play “Greatest Love Affair” on repeat. We only needed to hear that song.

He held up a finger. “Wedding ring?” His words took work.

John stopped wearing his wedding ring a year ago when his fingers became too thin and kept falling off. It was in the Rookwood vase. After slipping it on, I folded his fingers into his palm.

I lifted John to his feet and cautiously maneuvered him to the middle of the room. I moved him so he saw my back and his front in the mirror, attempting to hide the spans of tape across his back. When we were in place, John loosely wrapped his arms around me. I adjusted my hold, making sure he wouldn’t slip, he was barely standing. Just then the song ended and restarted: Perfect timing.

“Remember, I’m leading,” I chuckled, John huffed. “Ready?”

John seemed so weak that I wanted to stop the craziness but then he started humming as the lyrics began.

In slow and short steps, I danced with John in a small circle. His feet took a few tentative steps and he almost swayed with me. Before midway into the song, John leaned into me and let me hold him up. He placed his head on my shoulder and sporadically hummed. His breath on my neck reminded me of that long-ago Halloween dance. I thought I heard him singing, or maybe that too was a memory.

Even though John always mocked my singing, I concentrated hard and softly sang while gently rocking him. I did my best to hit all the notes until Jeffrey Osbourne went into falsetto. John leaned into me even more, completely resting his head on my shoulder. A moment later, his wedding ring pinged as it hit the floor.

As the song progressed, John's steps slowed and then stopped. I tightened my grip, carrying him as we danced. One of his shoes slipped off so I danced us away to avoid tripping.

As the song ended, it was getting harder for me to carry John's full weight. I slowly danced him over to the bed. His soft breath no longer tickled my neck. One of his arms had fallen and was hanging loose.

When we reached the bed, John didn't move to sit. As I lowered him to the bed, I held his head to keep it from falling back. His sapphire eyes were closed and his lips were parted as if sustaining that last low note. It took some effort to get him placed properly, making sure the red spinny dress was smoothed out just how he liked it.

John looked peaceful for the first time in a very long time. I sat in the chair, held his hand, and let out a long breath. I studied him for a long moment and I knew I should have cried but couldn't. John's face looked untroubled. The pain lines had eased now that the battle was over.

There were a lot of calls I needed to make. Lynn and Jack would have wanted to be with John

before they took him away from me. But all that had to wait.

My hand trembled as I picked up the now-warm martini. I used both hands to raise my glass just as “Greatest Love Affair” restarted.

“One, you picked our perfect song,” I said then downed the martini.

**