

Dancing Alone Without Music

A Novel

Larry B. Gildersleeve

Also by Larry B. Gildersleeve

Follow Your Dreams

The Girl on the Bench

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of my brother Kent

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One

“There’s nothing more we can do for your wife, but we may be able to save the baby. When is Mrs. Taylor’s due date?”

The doctor’s words instantly made the emergency waiting room seem even colder than the December temperature in Chicago. Despite the numbness now over-whelming his entire body, Ben Taylor’s mind and voice connected sufficiently to answer. “Eight weeks.”

As the physician hurriedly departed, friends surrounding Ben didn’t know whether to tighten the circle, or give him space. When he began to cry softly, one by one they slowly eased away, taking up chairs that were close, but not too close. All except for the one with his arm around Ben’s shoulder. The Reverend Joseph Freeman.

Ben met Carol almost exactly one year ago, and they married six months later. It had been a year packed full of togetherness, and planning for the future. Now, he faced a funeral during the holiday season, Carol’s favorite time of year. It all came down to a speeding car and a missed stop sign near their suburban home. Carol had been airlifted to the trauma center at CHC University Hospital, only a short cab ride from Ben’s downtown office, which is where he received the call.

After a few minutes, Ben regained his outward composure and wiped his tears with the handkerchief offered by one of his friends. Everyone remained silent, the darkness of their thoughts in stark contrast to the room’s bright institutional lighting.

Ben’s mind turned to how Carol had entered his life. It began with the man sitting next to him.

Pastor Joe delighted in going to Ben’s high-rise corporate headquarters, his clerical collar occasionally stimulating muted comments among others eating lunch in the employee cafeteria. The balance of his wardrobe most days was inspired by Blackie Ryan, a fictional Chicago priest in novels by Father Andrew Greeley. Today, Joe was wearing black jeans, worn running shoes, a Bulls jacket and a Cubs baseball cap.

This Monday, in early December 2004, the sky was clear, and the unobstructed fortieth floor view spanned Lake Michigan and a portion of the city skyline.

“So, are you dating anyone?” Pastor Joe asked, after a quick blessing over their meal.

“No,” Ben replied.

“Any hot prospects? And I mean that as in *promising*, not in a degrading sort of way.”

At five foot seven and of Irish descent, this self-described world’s tallest leprechaun felt his friend and parishioner lacked anything approaching a work/life balance. This was not an uncommon condition for a driven corporate executive, but Ben was at the excessive end of the out-of-balance scale. As was his nature, and his calling, Joe intervened in places and at times when the welcome mat for such personal intrusions was not necessarily visible.

“I know what you meant,” Ben replied, “and the answer is, well, ‘maybe’.”

“Does she have a name?”

“I’m certain she does. I just don’t know it.”

“Help me here, Ben. Does she work for the company?”

“Of course not,” he said, quickly and emphatically. Although the ten-to-one ratio favoring men, and his executive visibility, often presented opportunity and temptation. “I’ve seen her at church.”

“Details, please.”

“Joe, all I can tell you is she’s a tall, slender brunette who dresses conservatively. Like me, she attends second service. And she’s always alone, at least on the Sundays when I’m there.”

“That’s not much help,” Joe said, between bites of his Rueben sandwich. But, in truth, it was all he needed to begin formulating a course of action. Not wanting to play his matchmaking hand prematurely, he changed the subject. “How’s work?”

Ben had just turned forty. As head of a trading company that was part of the far-flung Lehman Brothers global financial empire, he was well-known and, he thought, highly regarded in professional and social circles, in downtown Chicago where he toiled ten to twelve hours a day, and in suburban Glen Ellyn, where he lived and from where he commuted daily by train.

An only child, Ben’s behavior had not been tempered by siblings. His mother died when he was young, so he grew up emulating his father, a high achiever in his own right. Competitive in academics and sports, in both high school and college, he excelled more in the classroom than on the playing field.

The pursuit of fame and fortune propelled Ben out of his Kentucky home town immediately following graduation from Western Kentucky University, and into the heady financial world of the Windy City. He began in an entry-level position, studied hard and worked even harder, and rapidly rose up the organization chart.

His early management style reflected his drive to be successful. An older colleague, somewhat of a mentor at the time, told him many years earlier, “You’re like a minor league pitcher with only a fastball. But if you want to get to the major leagues, and stay there, you’ll need to develop finesse pitches in your management style.”

Ben followed that advice. Internally, his competitive edge was as sharp as ever. But the visible edges in his spoken and written communication, as well as his mannerisms, had been replaced with an enviable smoothness. A highly effective executive, he often exceeded the lofty performance expectations of the company’s ownership group, and this brought him professional respect.

But he was not especially well-liked by those who knew him because, well, they knew him. Even Pastor Joe struggled to square his friend’s professed Christianity with his narcissism and materialism. As did Ben’s father. On one occasion, after listening to Ben describe his commercial accomplishments, often achieved to the disadvantage of others, his father said simply, “Ben, you weren’t raised this way.”

Ben was impervious to the disapproving opinions of those close to him. His highly compensated position made it easy to self-indulge in luxury cars and tailored clothes, as well as expensive restaurants several times a week. If a dollar was earned, it was spent, and he was highly leveraged with debt for investment real estate. And then there was the Glen Ellyn house.

His work and travel schedule made it difficult for women to be interested in Ben for more than a short period of time. And he had become skilled at avoiding the commitment they sought. Yet all this, and his age, conflicted head-on with his strong desire for children, especially a son. It was a conflict he felt confident would resolve itself when he met the right woman.

Later that afternoon, following the lunch with Joe, Elaine Martin, Ben's administrative assistant and professional 'gatekeeper', stood in his high-rise corner office doorway and interrupted his concentration with words he really didn't want to hear, at least not then.

"Leprechaun on line one."

Ben reached behind to his credenza and picked up the phone with his left hand as soon as the call was transferred.

"Good afternoon, Joe. It's been such a long time. I hope fate is smiling kindly upon you this cold winter day."

Ignoring the slight bit of sarcasm, The Leprechaun replied, "And to you, as well. Her name is Carol Keyes. She's an interior designer. Like you, she lives in Glen Ellyn and works downtown. Minister's daughter. Never married. I'm guessing about thirty or so."

"Thank you for your detective work. But really Joe, I'm both extremely busy, and fully capable of connecting with available women on my own."

"She's expecting your call," Joe pressed on, undaunted. "Got something to write with?"

Ben cradled the phone with his left ear and shoulder, and reached with his right hand for the Montblanc pen lying on his oversized mahogany desk. Holding it above a personalized note pad, he said, "Yes. Go ahead."

"Carol Keyes. That's K-e-y-e-s. I told her you'd call today. I also gave her number to Elaine. Just in case."

"In case of what?"

"Just eliminating your only possible excuse for not calling. Today, Ben."

"Don't you have souls to save, or good works to do?"

"Today, Ben. And a gracious good afternoon to you."

"And to you, as well."

Putting the phone back in its cradle, Ben stared at the note with the phone number. He folded it, put it in the pocket of his custom-made shirt, and returned to his business musings. But with

much less concentration than before the call. Fearful of not heeding Joe's "today" instruction, he decided to call her from home that evening.

Two

“Hello?”

“Hello, this is Ben Taylor calling for Carol at the suggestion of Pastor Joe. Is she available?”

Even Ben realized he sounded like a corporate executive, and not a potential suitor. He had poured himself a glass of tawny port wine, and was sitting in his favorite leather reading chair in his home office.

“Available for what?” asked the warm voice on the other end.

After pausing a second or two to collect his thoughts, Ben continued, “Um, is this Carol?”

“Yes.”

“And did Pastor Joe tell you I would be calling?”

“Well, he said someone who’s been silently stalking me at church wanted my phone number. Is that you?”

Carol had just finished dinner at a small table in the breakfast area next to the kitchen in her modest walk-up apartment, and was checking email messages on her phone.

“Uh, I’m sorry if that’s your impression. I didn’t ask for your phone number. Joe called me this afternoon and gave it to me. And I have not been stalking you, silently or otherwise.”

“So why are you calling?”

“Because he told me to,” Ben said, a bit of annoyance creeping into his voice.

“Do you always do everything Pastor Joe tells you to do?” she asked, but he didn’t pick up on the playfulness in her voice.

“You know, I think this was a big mistake, and I apologize for inconveniencing you. I ...”

“How do you know you’re inconveniencing me?”

“I don’t,” Ben said, sensing a positive change in circumstance. “I just, well . . . , it sounds as if you don’t want to talk to me.” Shifting to offense, which was his preferred posture, he added, “And I don’t want to bother you, so I’ll just say goodbye.”

“People don’t challenge you very often, do they?”

“Actually, they don’t,” he answered honestly, but perhaps a bit too quickly. Back on defense.

“Thought so. Want to try again?” she asked, invitingly.

“Uh, sure,” he said.

“Hello, this is Carol.”

The next ten minutes or so went by very quickly and ended with an agreement to meet for a drink the next evening. He suggested the time, she suggested the venue. He told her where he worked, but not his company position. She told him the downtown company that employed her, but nothing about her job. He was intrigued by this woman, and felt a pleasant sense of anticipation before falling asleep.

The next evening, Carol was already waiting when Ben arrived at the bar adjacent to the street level entrance to the well-known 111 SW Tower on South Wacker Street. Since other after-work patrons were crowded shoulder-to-shoulder, it took him several moments to locate her at the far end of the bar. Pastor Joe had provided a description sufficient for her to know it was Ben as he walked in her direction. She motioned next to her to the open seat she'd reserved with her coat.

“Am I late?” he asked, after they exchanged greetings.

“No, I'm early.”

“Were you that anxious to meet me?” he said, hastily and without thinking.

“No. Just thirsty,” she replied, smiling and lifting her glass of chardonnay.

Despite the crowded and noisy environment, their connection, in the Wall Street-themed after-hours gathering place, was immediate. A handsome business executive and a beautiful designer, together for the first time at the urging of their pastor. A previously scheduled dinner commitment of Ben's necessitated ending their first meeting after only an hour, but not before Carol accepted an invitation for New Year's Eve.

They left the bar in opposite directions, bundled up against the winter weather, with Carol walking toward the Ogilvie Train Station a few blocks away for her forty-five minute commute home to Glen Ellyn. Ben headed to the Metropolitan Club for his dinner meeting.

Ahead of their second evening together, Ben faced the challenge of obtaining a suitable holiday reservation with very little advance notice, so he did what he usually did in such circumstances. He delegated the task to Elaine and, as always, she came through. A last-minute cancellation enabled her to secure a reservation for the gala New Year's Eve party at the luxury Princeton Hotel.

Elaine, a knockout with red hair and model-perfect complexion, was tall and slender like Carol. Over the years, Ben correctly sensed she wanted more than a professional relationship, but he successfully kept temptation at bay, and they'd resolved that matter long ago. Or at least he thought they had.

For her part, Elaine was simply biding her time. She knew full well that Ben's commitment avoidance would ultimately provide her with ample opportunity to orchestrate his selection of *her* as Mrs. Taylor, and for him to think it was all his own idea. She knew him better than anyone else, and was certain she could leverage his pervasive desire to control events, and others, to her advantage.

After picking up Carol at her apartment, they drove downtown from Glen Ellyn. Ben had his Mercedes valet-parked at the Princeton, and upon entering, they deposited their winter coats in

a room set aside to serve the evening's overflow crowd. Ben gave the young woman at the coat-check a substantial tip, and he and Carol proceeded to the elevators. Ben wore a dark suit and festive holiday tie. Carrying a small clutch purse, Carol looked gorgeous with her hair up, wearing a simple but elegant black cocktail dress, with a single strand of pearls her only jewelry.

They dined at a window table in the revolving restaurant overlooking the glow of the city at night. During the course of their dinner, the restaurant achieved a full rotation, affording a 360-degree view of the city skyline. Following dinner, they took an elevator down to the third floor to the beautifully decorated ballroom.

They joined other celebrants who needed another couple to fill in their eight-person table. Following introductions all around, and a first glass of champagne, Ben asked Carol to dance. Moving effortlessly to the music, they were recipients of admiring glances throughout the evening.

The orchestra played for thirty minutes into the New Year. There had been a somewhat chaste kiss upstairs at midnight, and another, not quite so chaste, when Ben joined her in his car after the valet delivered it at the hotel entrance. Half an hour later, they kissed a third time at the door to Carol's apartment, and then held each other for a few moments. But she offered no invitation for him to come inside.

As he drove away, Ben made a mental note to call Joe and thank him for insisting that he call this woman who had so quickly captivated him, and literally danced into his life. He didn't need a self-reminder to call Carol, knowing he would be thinking about her several times a day until they were together again.

Completely thwarting Elaine's plans, Ben fell in love with Carol, and proposed to her in February. For her part, Carol thought things were moving entirely too fast, and was concerned about both his workaholic lifestyle and his materialistic ways. But she was swept up in the intensity of his personality, and his aggressive pursuit of her, which was flattering and intoxicating. And she was certain she was in love with him.

Those who knew Ben well, especially his father and Pastor Joe, couldn't help noticing the positive change brought about by Ben's love for Carol. For the first time in his adult life Ben was thinking of someone other than himself, and putting her first. Well, some of the time, at least. Ben was aware of this change, of course, and was happier than he could remember. He was confident she was "the one", and his latent desire for children, especially at least one son, was re-kindled now that his children's mother had entered his life.

The first Saturday in May, family and friends joined them as they stood before Pastor Joe in the sanctuary of his church to become husband and wife. Carol knew of Ben's strong desire for children, and agreed to start a family right away. Following a honeymoon trip to Hawaii, during which Carol became pregnant, they settled into newlywed life in Ben's home.

Carol learned Ben's selection of his suburban residence came only after lengthy and careful research several years earlier. Even back then, he was planning for marriage and children, and Glen Ellyn "ticked all the boxes" as one of his British-born colleagues had commented. Although he knew he would always work downtown, Ben's forward thinking involved assessing things like the academic ranking of schools, public safety ratings community-by-community, a vibrant social life among his peer group, and so on. And he shared with Carol his delight that his choice

of Glen Ellyn assured his children would be attending a high school with the same athletic team name as his university alma mater -- The Hilltoppers.

It all seemed perfect to Ben. He had found the love of his life, and together they were awaiting the birth of their first child. He knew Carol loved him, and his mind would occasionally fast-forward to a time decades out when they would be doting on their children's children. Especially those of their son, or sons. He congratulated himself often on the scope and quality of his planning for his family.

"Ben," Pastor Joe said, squeezing his friend's hand. "The doctor wants to talk with you in private. Would you like me to go with you?"

Those words, and the antiseptic hospital smell, brought Ben back to his harsh reality. "I'm sorry, Joe, what did you say?"

Motioning to the man in green, sweat-stained surgical scrubs standing in the doorway to the waiting room, Joe repeated his words.

Ben nodded. "Of course."

Joe and Ben followed the doctor down the busy hallway, but only Joe noticed the Chapel sign above the door as they were led into the room. As soon as they entered, Ben knew where they were, and sensed why. No one else was in the room, and the doctor closed the door behind them. When they were all seated, he spoke as he removed the surgical mask from his neck.

"Mr. Taylor, this is never easy for me to say. We tried everything, but were unable to save the baby. I'm so sorry."

Apart from sharing details of their operating room failure, which would serve no purpose, the surgeon could think of nothing else to say, so he didn't. He'd been in such situations countless times, and no two encounters were the same. But one constant was a recognition his skill was with a scalpel, not words, so he learned early on to leave the consoling of survivors to others.

The physician offered his condolences and stood to leave. Carol was a registered organ donor, so his work was not yet finished.

"Was it a boy?" Ben's voice broke the silence.

Before the doctor could reply, Joe asked, "Ben, is that important at this moment?"

"It is." The words were spoken softly, but firmly, as Ben gazed down at his hands clasped tightly in his lap.

"Mr. Taylor, the child was a male." With that, the doctor touched Ben's shoulder, squeezed it lightly, and departed.

Ben broke down and began sobbing, his body heaving. Despite Joe's best efforts, Ben was inconsolable.

The day began with Ben and Carol planning a future for three. Before nightfall, there were two deaths and a tortured survivor.

Three

The next three days leading up to the funeral were a blur for Ben. Still, he was able to dig deep into his Type A personality and make every decision pertaining to Carol's funeral. He decided against the church, which was resplendent in festive holiday trappings, in favor of a more somber funeral home. The nicest one in Glen Ellyn, of course.

Because of their short time together, Ben barely knew Carol's parents, but he thoughtfully asked them to choose the interment location. Lifelong Glen Ellyn residents, they selected the Oak Hill Cemetery because it would also be their final resting place. Carol's only sibling, a brother, had followed their father into the ministry after a brief career as a teacher. He and his wife flew in from their home in New Hampshire.

Ben's father made the seven-hour drive north from Kentucky, followed by his father's best friend who drove separately. Ben knew of their friendship, but had no way of knowing that future events would bring him into this other man's sphere of influence in a life-altering way.

The traditional visitation the evening before the funeral brought the Taylors and the Keyes together. Ben struggled to graciously accept the outpouring of sympathy from those who braved the cold to be there that night. He was so accustomed to being in control that his mind was consumed with how his wife and their unborn son could so suddenly, and so brutally, be taken from him.

Neither the injuries that ended Carol's life, nor the harvesting of her donated organs, precluded an open casket, either for visitation or prior to the service at eleven thirty the next morning. There was one difference, however. In the morning, unlike the prior evening, there was a tiny object covered entirely in a blanket and cradled as discretely as possible in her right arm. Two Taylors would be laid to rest that day.

After Carol's burial, and a few days of very private grieving, a different Ben emerged.

Ben's father said good-bye to his friend who was returning to Kentucky, then remained to be with his son in the Glen Ellyn home. The elder Taylor was the first to notice the warning signs, but having lost his own wife at a young age, he felt it was too soon to say anything to Ben before he headed home to Kentucky a few days after the funeral.

Time heals, others would say. But the father knew that his son's healing process, regardless of the time involved, would more than likely result in less-than-desirable outcomes for Ben and those whose lives he intersected. He just had no idea how soon the changes would occur.

Since the driver of the other car, the one that ran the stop sign at a high rate of speed, survived, Ben assumed he would be prosecuted. Likely a drunk driver, he thought, and he wanted to attend the trial. Not because he was vengeful, he told others, rather a desire to see justice dispensed. But he knew the truth about his motives.

Weeks later, when his attorney checked at Ben's request, no scheduled proceedings could be found. After further investigation, the attorney dreaded his call to Ben, since he knew his client's desired outcome was unlikely to occur.

Elaine informed him his attorney was on hold. "What did you find out?" Ben asked.

"Ben, there will be no prosecution of the driver who caused the accident."

“How is that possible?” Ben practically screamed, his knuckles turning red as he gripped the phone. Elaine raced to close the door to his office.

“Because the investigation determined the man had a heart attack, causing him to lose control of his car at the intersection. It was an accident.”

“That’s impossible!” This time, Ben did scream. “My wife and son are dead, and he’s responsible. How can this be happening? He kills my family, and just walks away?”

“He didn’t just walk away, Ben. He’s in an assisted living facility. Before the accident, he was under the care of a cardiologist. They found prescription heart medicine in his car.”

The attorney waited out the long silence that followed until Ben finally spoke.

“Okay, he may not be a criminal.” Ben said, his voice calmer, but still angry. “But that doesn’t change what happened. I want to sue him. I know lawyers have a word for it. I just can’t think of it now.”

“Wrongful death?”

“That’s it! Wrongful death. I want you to get busy on it. Right now!”

“Ben, are you certain?” his attorney asked, trying to slow down, or derail altogether, the legal train before it raced down the tracks. “It’s only been a few weeks. Don’t you want to take some time to think about it before we go down this road?”

The pent-up anger Ben’s father sensed before his departure spilled forth into the phone. In a profanity-laced tirade, Ben berated the attorney for even questioning him, and told him to make an immediate decision.

“Are you with me on this, or not?” Ben demanded. “Or should I take my business elsewhere?”

“Ben,” the lawyer said in the calmest voice he could muster, “we both need time to think about this before making any commitments, and starting something that will impact so many people.”

Before slamming the phone down, Ben ended the conversation with two words to the man who had been his attorney, and his friend, for more than a decade. “You’re fired.”

Over the coming days, Ben’s anger lessened each time attorney after attorney told him his chances of prevailing in such litigation were highly unlikely. And even if he won a lawsuit, the other driver’s insurance had lapsed prior to the accident, and he lacked much in the way of financial assets apart from his pension and Social Security. The passage of time his longtime attorney friend had first suggested did, in fact, end Ben’s desire for courtroom revenge. But only as a matter of practicality, and not because Ben thought it was the right thing to do.

As the anger dissipated, Ben’s emotional bucket began filling up with other feelings. Despair over his loss of Carol and their unborn child was his constant companion, joined now by overwhelming survivor guilt. It wasn’t until halfway through his anticipated lifetime that he’d found the love of his life, the mother of his children. Then it all ended tragically in just over a year. Carol, a minister’s daughter and a woman of deep personal faith, was gone.

Ben was fixated on Carol's "due date," and chose to take a rare day off from work when it arrived. He spent the day alone at home, consumed with his thoughts. He was the only son of an only son. He couldn't suppress the thought that he had lost the son who could have carried on a family lineage traceable in a direct line of descent to mid-15th century England. This passion to continue his family lineage was not shared by his father, so what had become an obsession in Ben's life was of his own doing.

Ben grew up in a church-going Southern family, and continued attending as an adult, as much out of habit as a deep Christian connection. He was a self-described "back bencher" in that his church involvement was pretty much limited to attending Sunday worship service. He first found his way to Pastor Joe's church when invited to a wedding there. He and Joe spoke briefly after the service, Ben gave him his business card, and Joe's call for lunch came a few days later. In a short time, Ben joined the church in Glen Ellyn, and his friendship with its pastor became an important part of his life.

Ben stopped attending church immediately after Carol's funeral. Joe waited a few weeks before attempting to contact him, and Elaine was surprised that, for the first time she could remember, Ben would not immediately take his calls. What she didn't know was the calls all went unreturned. One morning, the outer office receptionist called her to say, "Pastor Freeman is here to see Mr. Taylor."

Elaine checked Ben's schedule in her computer, and not seeing an appointment, knocked on Ben's open office door and told him of his waiting guest. Although completely surprised, Ben lied and said he was expecting Joe for lunch.

"But it's only ten thirty."

"So he's early. I'll go out and meet him. Thanks."

Walking past Elaine's desk and down the marble hallway polished to a high sheen, Ben did his best to quickly put himself in the frame of mind for a conversation he really didn't want. Not today, anyway.

"Joe, what a pleasant surprise," Ben said, as he entered the lavish corporate lobby and extended his hand. "What's the occasion?"

Responding to Ben with a firm handshake, Joe said, "I could say I was in the neighborhood, but that would be a lie. Something uncharacteristic for me. You haven't returned any of my many phone calls. Something uncharacteristic for you. As is your absence from church these past several weeks. That's why I'm here."

"Joe, I'm sorry. Not about missing church. I'm done with that. But for not accepting your calls. I just wasn't ready to talk. And I'm really very busy this morning. Can we please do this another time?"

"Done with church? I see. Afraid to take calls from your friend, and pastor? Too busy to spend a few minutes with me when I spent over an hour getting here from Glen Ellyn? That about it?"

"Yes, Joe, as you say, that's about it. At least for now." Ben made no effort to hide the impatience in his voice.

Joe paused, gathering his thoughts before continuing.

“Please forgive me, Ben. There’s no denying you’ve been through a lot. I realize I’ve intruded unannounced on your day, and you don’t want to talk now. But before I leave, can we agree on a time and place for us to talk?”

“Joe, I have some travel ahead of me, and some other commitments, but I promise to call you as soon as things open up for me. I really will. Call you, that is.”

Ben looking at his watch was all it took for Joe to understand they were done, at least for now. They shook hands again, and Ben departed for his office, turning his back on Joe and not even waiting for the elevator to arrive to carry his unexpected guest back down to street level.

Ben never did call Pastor Joe. A month after their last meeting, Joe left a message on Ben’s cell phone. He told Ben something he didn’t know -- that the other driver’s family had come to Carol’s funeral, sitting in the last pew, away from the other mourners. Ben had not grown so insensitive that he was untouched by this news, or the message that the driver had passed away the previous day. Joe encouraged Ben to go to the funeral home in Lombard, near Glen Ellyn, and pay his respects to the man’s family.

Later that evening, Joe was both surprised and heartened to see Ben bending down to express his condolences to the man’s widow and her children. As Ben prepared to leave, Joe touched his shoulder from behind. Turning, Ben readily accepted Joe’s public embrace.

Out of respect, they walked in silence to the foyer to retrieve their heavy winter coats. Once outside, Joe said, “Can I buy you a cup of coffee?”

“Of course.”