

# The Fourth of July

by Chuck Holmes

Carrie Lena Peacock at sixteen was not a particularly pretty woman. Her lips were a little too thin. Her face was a little too long. And her figure was mostly straight where it should have been curved. But, even at sixteen, Carrie Lena seemed to be able to get anything she wanted out of any boy she wanted it from.

The secret was that every boy in Congress High School thought that he was the only boy who had not had sex with Carrie Lena, and the hope of changing that made any boy she chose very accommodating. That's how she got Jacob Millsap to take her to the Junior-Senior Prom, and he was glad he did even though he went home in great pain. And that's how she got Howie Pickens to take her to Raleigh to the Canton Inn and buy her fried rice. He, like most of the others, went home walking very stiffly.

There was no question that Carrie Lena could get about anything she wanted. The only question that June morning was which boy she wanted it from. Carrie Lena sat on the side of her bed, staring at herself in the mirror on the dresser. Carrie Lena had never really understood why the boys were always thinking about sex or why they would do almost anything for you if they thought you'd put out. But she thought as she sat there smiling at her reflection in the mirror, you didn't have to understand it to make it work for you. And you didn't really have to do anything, either. As long as they thought you might. Since it was already the middle of the morning her mother and daddy had already gone to work at the family's grocery. School was out, and she really didn't have any place she had to be. She thought about falling back into the bed and sleeping until noon, but she decided against that. The Fourth of July celebration was only three weeks away, and she didn't have anybody to take her to the street dance that night. Carrie Lena decided it was time for her to choose her date.

She thought about Jacob Millsap, but Jacob couldn't dance, and he might not be as easily handled on the second date. Howie Pickens was a pretty good dancer, but he had spent most of the evening at the Canton Inn talking about his prize pigs. She didn't want another evening of prize pigs. Johnnie Smithdale was going steady. Charley McLamb didn't treat his dates very well; Carolyn Sue O'Connor said that she had spent a whole evening trying to keep his hands out from under her dress. It looked like she was down to one of the Johnson twins, either Travis or Trevor. As Carrie Lena pulled on a pair of short shorts and a halter top, she was wishing that she lived in a bigger town than Congress.

"Okay," she thought. "Who would it be?" Travis or Trevor. Not that it mattered, since they looked just alike.

In the week between the time Carrie Lena set her sights on one of the Johnson twins and when she actually found one of them, she encountered three boys who were not on her list. Howie Pickens came into the grocery store while she was putting canned beans on the shelf. He stood over by the cash register for a couple of minutes watching her while she ignored him. Finally, he came over to her.

"Hey, Carrie Lena,"

"Hey, Howie." She continued stacking beans on the shelf until it occurred to her that stooping over with her back to him wasn't the best position for her to be in.

She stood up and pushed her hair back on her forehead. When she looked him in the eye, Howie started studying a box of cake mix.

"I was wondering if you're going to the street dance," he said, still eyeing the cake mix box.

"Oh, I don't know. It's something I've already done three or four times. Maybe not this year."

"Well, I was hoping you'd go with me."

Carrie Lena turned around and picked up two more cans of beans and put them on the shelf. Telling boys "no" was one of the skills she honed; she pushed them away, but not too far.

"It's nice of you to ask me, Howie. Real sweet. But I don't think I want to go again this year. Maybe we can do something else later."

Howie started to say something, then stopped. Finally he said, "I'd like to do that."

She had essentially the same conversation with Jacob Millsap and Ronnie Jones, pushing both of them just a little bit away. Finally, she found a good time to talk to one of the Johnson twins, and when she started she wasn't sure just which one it was. He was standing at the magazine rack of Dixon's Drug Store, flipping through a Captain Marvel comic book. Whichever one he was, Carrie Lena decided that he looked good enough to take her to the dance. He was tall and had blond hair, and his teeth were only a little bucked. He was wearing Chinos and a short-sleeved light-blue shirt with a button down collar. He looked a lot like those pictures of college boys that Carrie Lena had seen in the magazines. She decided she could do a lot worse.

As she walked by him, she let her hip lightly brush his as she passed. He looked around.

"Travis," she said, making sure that she used the smile that showed all of her front teeth. She thought that her teeth were one of her best features.

"Trevor," he said.

"Oh, darn. I never can keep you two straight. Y'all look just about exactly alike. I don't know how two people can be so good looking."

Carrie Lena had learned at an early age that you couldn't be subtle when you were trying to get a boy's attention. Trevor, for his part, was trying not to show the pinkness that was rising from his neck up his face. Congress boys didn't admit to blushing.

"I was just going to get me a Coke," she said. "I don't guess you'd want to have a Coke with me."

Trevor stuffed the Captain Marvel comic in the first rack his hand hit, mixing up Captain Marvel with Superman. "Yeah, I would," he muttered.

She grabbed his hand and pulled him across the drug store to a booth. Carrie Lena slid into the booth, pulling Trevor into the seat beside her. They had hardly quit sliding when Edna, the Dixon's old maid daughter was standing beside the booth. "What can I get y'all?" The Dixons really didn't want teenagers cluttering up the booths at the drug store if they weren't going to buy anything.

Trevor said, "I'll have a cherry Co'Cola." And he looked inquiringly at Carrie Lena.

"That sounds good. I'll have a cherry Co'Cola, too."

While they waited for the cherry Cokes to arrive Carrie Lena pulled a straw from the round holder on the table and began to peel the paper away, one thin sliver at a time. Very slowly. Trevor's eyes

locked on her fingers as they pulled thin strips of paper down the straw.

“So what have you been doing since school got out?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Been fishing some. And Travis and me, we went down to the beach. Fished some down there. Not a whole lot to do.”

“That’s Congress for you. There’s nothing to do here. After I graduate, I’m going to get me out of this town and go somewhere where they have a lot of people and all kinds of excitement.”

Edna brought the drinks, and Carrie Lena finished unwrapping her straw and put it in the drink. As she took her first sip, she batted her eyelashes over the straw at Trevor. Trevor seemed to have forgotten that he was there to drink his cherry coke.

“Your ice is going to melt,” she said, returning his attention to the drink in front of him.

“Uh-huh,” he responded, picking up the glass. He still hadn’t taken his eyes off of Carrie Lena. She saw his eyes get a little wider as she moved her leg just a little closer to his, close enough that she could feel the heat of her leg on hers — and she was sure that he could feel the same thing.

“You going with anybody now?” she asked. She knew that he wasn’t, not since he and Zona Faye McLamb had broken up, but it was an easy way to get into the subject at hand.

Trevor shook his head, making the straw connecting his mouth to the glass slosh Cherry Coke back and forth.

“Me, neither,” she said. “But I really don’t mind, because it gives me more time to do some things I need to, like help my mama.” Even as the words came out of her mouth, Carrie Lena wondered why she said that. It was a running battle between her and her mother just to get her to pick up her clothes and keep her room straight. Her mother had given up on her making up her bed years ago. But, for some reason, it evidently impressed Trevor.

“Well, that’s not exactly true all the time,” she continued. “Sometimes — like now — I wished I had a steady boyfriend.”

“Why’s that?” Trevor asked. That was his first contribution to the conversation since he told her he had gone fishing.

“I guess I just don’t like to be left out. The street dance on the Fourth of July is coming up, you know.”

Trevor just stared at her as he sucked on his straw. Carrie Lena wondered if Trevor was as smart as she thought he was. But, as she knew, you couldn’t be too subtle with a boy.

“I don’t guess I could go if I don’t have a date. You know, I just wouldn’t feel right going to a dance by myself. People might think the wrong thing.”

As she said it, she slid her leg a millimeter closer to his, just enough to increase the body heat.

He finally took the straw out of his mouth. “Well, I hadn’t thought about going to the street dance, but I guess I could — if you’d like to go with me.”

Carrie Lena waited a couple of seconds before she answered. “Well, that would be nice, if you’re sure you want to,” she said. “I mean, I wouldn’t want to put you out or anything.”

Carrie could almost see him trying to reposition the words in her last sentence, but since he couldn’t,

he just nodded.

"Naw, I'd like to go to the street dance with you," he said. "It wouldn't put me out none at all."

"That's just fine. We'll plan on going to the street dance together then. I'm glad I ran into you here today."

Then she pressed her thigh up against his and watched as his eyes opened wider. His jaw dropped. And so did the cherry Coke, right into his lap. He didn't even move his leg as the Coca Cola moved in an ever widening stain across the front of his chinos.

In the two weeks between their meeting at Dixon's Drug Store and the Fourth of July celebration, Trevor called Carrie Lena's house about a half-dozen times, asking her to go to the Princess to see a movie or down to Dixon's for a milk shake. Each time she was able to come up with an excuse that kept her from having to do it and still made him think that she was heartbroken because she couldn't. Twice she was sick, hinting vaguely at "female problems." Once she had to do some things for her mother. Once she had to visit her very sick, very old aunt who might not live much longer. Once she had to go with her daddy to pick up some things for the grocery. And once, not able to come up with a good excuse, she just said, "I can't talk right now. I've got to go vomit."

She had to be very careful when she went out because she didn't want to run into Trevor or Travis downtown, and in a town the size of Congress, that took some planning. She began to wonder if getting to the street dance was worth all of the effort she was having to put into it. But she did make it through the two weeks, and the night of the street dance finally came. Trevor had called and said that he would pick her up at her house at eight so that they'd be there right at the beginning of the street dance. And he told her that his daddy was going to let him drive their brand new 1955 Nash Rambler.

"Oh, that'll be real nice," she said. Her mind had already moved to the next occasion she would need a boy for. As she dressed for the street dance in plaid Bermuda shorts and a white blouse and sandals she cataloged all of the boys left in Congress, and wondered if she'd have to start all over again.

However, when he pulled up in the brand new car on the night of the street dance, she had to admit to herself that she was impressed. It was so shiny, black on the bottom and white on the top. The chrome swept from the front to the back. The car looked almost like it was going fast even as it stood still in front of her house. Carrie Lena began to think that maybe this was worth all of the effort.

She was even more impressed when her date got out of the car and walked up to her door. He had on clean and pressed chinos and a shirt with the little polo player on the pocket. Carrie Lena yelled good-bye to her mother and daddy, and went out to meet him.

"Trevor," she said. "That's just the prettiest car."

"Travis," he said, smiling and showing almost all of his front teeth.

Carrie Lena stopped. "Travis? I'm supposed to be going to the street dance with Trevor."

Travis stopped, stuck his hands in his pockets and studied the ground right in front of his shoes.

"Well, maybe I shouldn't have told you. I've been Trevor a lot of times, but I didn't think you'd mind. Trevor got a fishhook caught in his lip and his whole face is swole up. He didn't think you'd want to go to the street dance with somebody whose face looked like a puffed up bullfrog."

It only took a second for Carrie Lena to reassess the situation. It hadn't mattered two weeks ago which of the Jones twins she ended up at the street dance with, and she couldn't see how it mattered

now. "I'm just so sorry that Trevor got hurt," she said, with just the right amount of sadness in her voice, not so little as to make her seem heartless, but not so much to make Travis think she was going to spend the whole night wishing he was his twin. "I'm sure we'll just have a wonderful time, anyway."

Travis escorted her back to the car and opened the door for her. The new car aroma streamed through the open door right into her face. It didn't even smell like cigarette smoke. Travis held the door open for her as she got in, then walked around to the driver's side. Carrie Lena was wishing that Carolyn Sue or Zona Faye could see her now in the brand new Rambler. And she wished it was more than three blocks to downtown.

Travis drove with the assurance of every seventeen-year-old boy, one arm resting on the open window, his hand on the top of the steering wheel. He glanced at Carrie Lena out of the corner of his eye. She crossed her leg so that her browned thigh showed at the bottom of her Bermuda shorts. And they each held their pose for the three blocks between Carrie Lena's and downtown. Travis pulled around behind City Hall and parked in the empty lot the town used for parking. Even from the parking lot they could hear Country Jim Campbell and the Smile Awhile Boys. They got out of the car and headed for the music.

The Fourth of July street dance was the climax of the day's celebration. The festivities had started early in the morning with tractor pulls, greased pole climbing, and contests for the best jams, the largest tomatoes, and the most perfect cross stitched piece. At ten o'clock there was the parade, featuring mounted riders, floats from the town's businesses, and the Congress school band. In the afternoon, there was the Miss Congress and the Jr. Miss Congress contests, modeled as closely as Erma Higgins could make it on the Miss America contests, but without the bathing suit competition. Erma, the librarian at the Congress Public Library, felt that bathing suits away from the water were just plain exhibitionistic.

Finally, there was the street dance. Every year since Carrie Lena could remember, Country Joe Campbell and the Smile Awhile Boys had provided the music for the dance, and every year since she could remember, they had started off with "I'm looking over a four-leaf clover."

That's what they were playing when Travis and Carrie Lena got to the roped off block that was reserved for dancing and watching dancing. One end of the block, stoppered by Congress' only police car, ran into Main Street. The other end, cordoned off with some black and white barricades ran into Parrish Drive. Moores Livery Stables sat on the corner, and you could smell the mules if you spent much time at that end of the street.

This early in the evening there were only a few people dancing — the older crowd who would dance a little and be gone by nine o'clock. Around the edges of the dancing area, clotted in groups according to age and community was the rest of the crowd, waiting for the older folks to go home. Right now, for Carrie Lena and her friends, the only thing to do was to see and be seen.

"You want a snow cone?" Travis asked.

Carrie Lena wondered what he could be thinking about. If you had a grape snow cone, you looked like you had a clown mouth, and if you had a lime snow cone you looked like you were about to die of jaundice and it was starting at your mouth. If you had a strawberry snow cone, it looked like you had really cheap lipstick, and it was running all over your face. Nobody over eleven had a snow cone at the street dance, but, since the night was still young, all she said was, "No, thank you."

Finally, Country Jim and his band quit playing square dance songs and went into a country and western version of "My Prayer." It didn't sound the same as it did on the radio, but it was good enough. Travis took her hand, and she followed him out into the street.

When he first put his arm around her and pulled her body up to his, Carrie Lena wondered if she hadn't gotten the better twin after all. She didn't know how well Trevor danced, but his twin moved smoothly, holding her close, but not so close as to be obvious this early in the evening. Later, as the night grew darker and the older people went home to bed, she would let him hold her closer — if everything went well to that point.

And it did. Travis was a gentleman, staying with Carrie Lena between dances and not wandering off to talk to some other boys about hunting and fishing. On the faster numbers, he kept his steps small and easy so that neither of them was too hot and sweaty. And he walked with her up to the drug store to get a Coke when the band took a break. Carrie Lena, as critical as she was, had to admit that Travis treated her well. In the back of her mind she wondered how he expected to be treated, just how much reward did he expect for his gentlemanliness.

*"Your cheatin' heart..."*

You could tell it was late when Country Jim started playing country lamentations. The crowd had thinned out, and the average age had dropped from about forty-five to twenty-five, and from that point on the music would alternate between slow dance and a steamy blues for what could well have been a mating dance. The later it became, the closer Carrie Lena danced with Travis, resting her head on his shoulder and relishing how well his trim body fit hers. The more they danced, the gladder she was that she was with Travis and that Trevor had caught a fish hook in his mouth. As they danced she could feel her heart beating a little faster and her breathing quickening. She fitted her body more tightly against his.

"What time do you have to be home?" Travis whispered, as they almost motionlessly danced to "Only You." The saxophone sounded very lonely in the late night air.

"Mama said I better be home by midnight," Carrie Lena whispered back. "But mama always says that. It'll be alright if I'm home by one o'clock."

"Maybe you'd like to take a ride in our new car?"

Carrie Lena sneaked a glance at her watch. It was 11:20. That would give them almost two hours together.

She just nodded her head into Travis' shoulder and pulled him just a little tighter.

When the song ended, they left the street holding hands, winding through the scattered remnants of the crowd. When they got back to the Rambler, Travis held the door open for Carrie Lena and — she thought — reluctantly turned loose of her hand.

They left the street lights of Congress and drove toward the country. The Rambler rode smoother than any car Carrie Lena had ever been in. Travis turned the radio dial to the late night record show from Raleigh. Roger Williams' *Autumn Leaves* was playing.

"What do you like to do?" Travis asked.

Carrie Lena wasn't sure just what he meant. What would she like to do now? What would she be willing to let him do?

"What do you mean?"

"What do you like to do? Read? Listen to music? Just what do you like to do?"

"I don't know. I read magazines mostly. And I like to listen to music. I like to go shopping in Raleigh sometimes. What about you? What do you like to do? I guess you fish a lot, like Trevor."

"I fish some, usually just because he wants to. I really like to read. Sometimes I read novels. Sometimes I read poetry."

Travis came to the place where the Four Oaks road was cut by the new Interstate that was being built. He pulled over beside a huge road scraper that was left from the day's grading.

"You mind if we stop here for a few minutes?"

Nobody had ever asked Carrie Lena if she minded parking before. Usually her dates just pulled into the parking spot; then they were all hands. But Carrie Lena was comfortable in handling those. She wasn't so comfortable being asked if she minded. But she knew that she didn't mind. She remembered how Travis had held her at the street dance, and the thought of him holding her again wasn't something she minded.

"No. I don't mind," she said, sliding just a little toward the middle of the seat, reaching over and taking his hand.

"I've really enjoyed tonight," he said.

By the light of the nearly full moon Carrie Lena could see the small smile on Travis' face and the sparkle in his eyes. If Carrie Lena could have imagined a prince charming, he would have had the same smile and the same sparkle she saw there. She felt a surge of emotion that she really couldn't identify.

"I enjoyed it, too. You're a real good dancer."

"You think maybe we could go out again. Maybe to a movie or something."

Oh, yes! Carrie Lena thought. We can go anywhere you want to go. But what she said was, "I think I'd like that."

Carrie Lena noticed that his hand still held hers. It hadn't moved. She also noticed that she was willing it to move, to reach up and touch her face or to stroke its fingers down her neck. Even to trace the slight curves of her body.

"I read a really interesting book this week," Travis said.

The concept of book and reading were so far from Carrie Lena's mind that all she could say was, "Oh?"

"It's written by a guy named George Orwell. It's called Animal Farm. Have you read it?"

For Carrie Lena, who read nothing but magazines and what the teachers said she absolutely had to read and report on, that wasn't a hard question.

"I don't think so," she said.

"Well, the next time I see you, I'll bring it. There are some parts of it I know you'd like."

Carrie Lena focused again on his hand holding hers, then on his lips. Why was he talking about

books?

She pulled her hand so that his slid across her leg, and she felt the heat of it resting there. She leaned toward him.

"The story in this book is about a bunch of animals that take over a farm and what happens to them, but it's really about what happened in Russia when the Communists took over. It's a satire."

Carrie Lena leaned a little closer to Travis, finally reaching over with her other hand and pulling his face toward her. Their lips touched, and she could feel her breathing quicken. The chasteness of the kiss surprised her; it caused her to lean closer to him, increasing the pressure on their lips. She pressed his hand down into her leg. For once in her life, Carrie Lena wanted a boy to wrap himself around her and let her feel his body matched against hers. She wanted the pace of his breathing to match hers.

Travis slowly pulled his lips back from hers, staring wide-eyed into her eyes.

"Wow!" he said, almost without sound.

"Yeah," she said. She wanted to tell him that she had never had a kiss like that.

"I think we better go," he said, pulling his hand away from hers.

"I don't have to be home right yet," she said.

"But if we stay here, we might do something that we shouldn't do."

"What do you mean?" Carrie Lena said. Right then she couldn't think of anything that she and Travis shouldn't do.

"Just something that's not right."

She couldn't think of anything that wouldn't be right. She wanted him to put his arms around her, pull her close and kiss her again. Then whatever happened happened.

"I've kissed some girls," he said, "but I don't think I've ever kissed one that kissed like you."

"Did you like it?" she asked.

"Oh, yes. That's the reason we need to go home. I liked it too much."

"How can you like it too much? How can it be too good."

Travis started the motor, turned on the headlights, and began to back out from under the shadow of the road scraper.

"I made myself a promise," he said. "I promised that when I find the girl I'm going to marry, she'll be the very first one."

"First one what?"

"The first one that I was ever really close with."

"But it's going to be a long time before you get married."

"Yes," he said, as he pointed the Rambler down the Four Oaks Road back to Congress. "But when I make a promise, I aim to keep it."

Carrie Lena leaned back in her seat, an aching in her body, staring at the passing white stripes in the middle of the road illuminated by the headlights of the car.