

***Ding, Dong, Ditch* by Joanne Courtemanche**

Susan Erikson was the coolest girl in fifth grade. She was a champion baton twirler, had long golden blonde hair, and was petite and popular. So when I was invited to her summer sleepover birthday party for a camp-out in her back yard, I begged my parents to let me go. They had never met her parents, but I convinced them that it was just a birthday sleepover, so they let me go. After all, it was the summer of 1977 and things were different then. I waved goodbye as they drove away thinking this was going to be the best night of my life. Mistake number one.

There were a bunch of other girls there, some older, and most of whom I didn't know. The party started normally enough...a cookout of burgers and hot dogs, ice cream birthday cake, and presents. After the sun went down, we retreated to the tent in her back yard where our sleeping bags lie in wait.

Back in the 1970's the trendy things to do at slumber parties were having seances, performing levitation, telling ghost stories, and making a game out of the (still frightening to this day) OUIJA board. Thankfully, none of them were on the agenda. However, a game of Ding, Dong, Ditch *was* on the agenda. I had no idea what that was, but at the risk of being ridiculed by a group of cool girls, I agreed to play. Mistake number two.

For those who are not familiar with this game, it involves ringing the doorbell of a nearby house, and running away before the occupant can answer the door. Unbeknownst to me, they had been doing this for most of the summer, bringing the neighbors to the height of their frustration and poisoning unsuspecting participants (like me) for trouble. As the newbie, I was unwittingly the sacrificial lamb; but I was naïve to the ways of the older girls.

We headed out and rang the first doorbell. Since I had no idea what the game was, I hesitated when everyone ran, but then quickly caught on; but not quickly enough. You see, I had worn my new flip flops with the plastic daisy between the toes; not the best running shoes for Ding, Dong, Ditch. Mistake number three.

I was still on the front lawn when I felt a hand grab the back of my shirt, pulling me in the opposite direction of my friends. (Well, they really weren't my friends, since it was clear that they had all ding, dong, ditched me.) The offending hand at the back of my shirt belonged to the adult male occupant of the house. Immediate fear set in, as this was not a situation I had ever encountered. Up to that point, I had been living a pretty sheltered twelve years on this earth.

The homeowner (how many times had they done this to him for God's sake?) dragged me into his house and demanded that I call my parents or he would call the police. In the split-second before I shakily dialed my home telephone number, a list of thoughts raced through my mind: Where were the rest of the girls? Were they worried about me? How would my parents react when this guy called them? I would never be allowed out of the house again. Goodbye

sleepovers, goodbye friends, goodbye any possible future invites to cool girl parties. Heck, goodbye life!

Oddly enough, I don't remember what happened when my parents came to pick me up, but I do remember thinking that they were more annoyed at the guy than they were at me. However, the retrieval of my belongings at Susan's house made up for the lack of parental disapproval. Rolling up my sleeping bag, I caught a glimpse of the group of wide-eyed, silent girls watching (almost in awe) as I slowly collected my belongings from the tent, the tears still drying on my cheeks. They quietly said goodbye as I turned and retreated to the family car waiting in the driveway. Did they feel bad? Did they think I was a dork? Or did they think I was brave for having been through the fires of hell and lived to tell about it? I will never know, because I never saw any of them again.

After relaying the evening's events to my parents, I believe they had some guilt over the fact that they had allowed me to infiltrate a group that was clearly out of my league. As I was drifting off to sleep, I remember thinking two things to myself: one, that I would never, ever again play Ding, Dong, Ditch; and two, that my parents were the coolest parents in the world.

After all, it *was* the summer of 1977 and things were different then.

