

STEPS

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It seemed like such a simple thing to want.

One dance. My crush on Javiar, the smoldering latin dance teacher, had escalated for weeks ever since my 28th birthday. His very scent- an earthy mixture of nicotine and something woodsy-removed words from my mouth and my brain. It also caused all blood to leave my hands and siphon to other areas of my body.

I was there every Wednesday night at the club, just for the chance that he would hold my icy hands and glide me about the dance floor. Javiar rarely chose the new girls. I accepted this. In the beginning I did not dance well at all. But like anything one does with practice a few weeks turned into a few months and slowly combinations and rhythms stayed in my body and, on beat, slipped out onto that parquet dance floor.

Well, I'd thought, I had been devoted in my study, surely now I had graduated from beginner to advanced. Un-noticed to chosen. Lost to found. Yes- I finally became a gifted dancer. Surely when the band began playing and the real dancers get on the floor, he will choose me. Me.

But the night ended before it began. Three outstretched hours of watching him choose others. Just like all the rest his hand continued to reach for another girl, and then another, and then another...

I became a shadow of myself; hung out the window like a flapping anemic memory. Those skinny, little hopes inside me stood up, peering out the window of my heart, just

tall enough to look over. They had to sink collectively back into their shoes and creep towards their dark hidden beds.

Heartache is the simplest of experiences. Its pain is so pure. Oh that spot- that tender spot where with the slightest touch it all caves in. Within one shattering evening, I relived every rejection of my life. When the band played its' last number and Javier took his final outstretched lucky hand to the dance floor, my heart flipped through every snapshot of pain it had stored away and pasted this one to the front of the line. For eighteen years I had accumulated my own album of rejection, *the gallery of hurt*. Now it had a front cover. I was tricked, scammed –it should have been different by now. But this dismissal, this scorning in particular hurt without mercy. Hadn't I been promoted? Wasn't it my turn? Some pain is negotiable and becomes absorbed- others pull all the years of grief up along with it and presents itself for review.

I returned most vividly to the first one, the initiation. Third grade: Hawthorne Elementary cafeteria. Friday afternoon. Three-thirty. The smell of it a cross between an aquarium and old pickles. Tinny. Girls lined up with combs in their back pockets. Tumbling, giggly and dewy. I stand far off at the other end of the wall encased in boy's clothes, dirty and amorphous with traces of sticky buns between my fingers.

Every single Friday afternoon we had these dances and every single Friday afternoon I went...and endured. Even in the darkest caves some light dwells and so it was with my expectant ten-year-old soul. I carried my hope and my lipgloss in my back pocket, wishing to be proven wrong and have some boy ask me to dance. But at the end of the day, of every Friday, I sustained not only the rejection of an invitation, but also the betrayal of my own hopes.

“Wanna dance?” it said, hands in pockets, hands out of pockets choreography. A moment after the music begins a boy in a blue shirt approaches Tracey. She is standing next to me. He asks, she accepts. They walk to the dance floor. I find some wild fascination with the stitching on my sneakers. Another boy looks at me and then away. He coughs and whoops it up with a third. We all watch Tracey. Tracey had the most beautiful red hair in the world. GOD-like. She and blue shirt dance slowly together, her face a little flushed and shiny, his serious and controlled. At one point, they both stop to adjust where hands go, how feet are placed and resume. Their fumbling gives way to a kind of grace, an innocent grace. Or is grace by nature always innocent? They move with their arms wrapped simply about each other’s waist, picking up their feet in time to the music. I cannot watch a moment longer. Two hours pass. The last song is played.

In that time I have studied every pair of shoes, memorized the week’s menus and then trudged home with what remains of me in my back pocket. I am syrup and agony. Undanced. Undanceable.

My relationship to this world has always been an odd one, fragmented, unrealistic and largely dissatisfied. I often viewed my spirit as a picture in someone else’s dream, or a word in a foreign language. Here I continue to grasp at the me that longs to be whole.

It’s not just the steps I couldn’t do, it was the music I couldn’t hear and the rhythm I could not breathe. It wasn’t the red hair I wanted to be- it was the clasped hands and arched backs and more- the whoosh of turning together. Fastened. Merged. **To know** the hand that reached for mine and no one else’s.

My heart is a babbling child, forceful and demanding. (Sigh) It tires me so.

The rite of passage my junior year was no better, nor any year subsequently. I knew the prospect of letting someone in was too much, like yanking my soul through the roof of my mouth. Those delirious adolescent crushes gave rise to a greater fear. The idea of any kind of intimacy was far too advanced. It was all knocking limbs and elbows, the smash of damp bodies. All too cacophonous and clumsy to this rigid spirit. I didn't know that was not the way in. My heart yelped back as the chasm was thrust open, forced apart. This was the dance I didn't want to do and did many times, perhaps believing that with repetition what was flaying and cold would transform into radiance.

Somehow.

Maybe men are like the cages at the zoo. You keep opening one up, hoping to befriend the beast within and somehow with each new creature the roar gets quieter, the claws less sharp. Or maybe the animal to wrestle with is on this side of the bars. Men may always be the roaming padded-foot creatures who alternately purr and hiss at me, but as I gain strength in myself and wisdom in my healing, I don't have to stand silently in front of the animals gaping mouth. For it is not they who need taming. The peaceful union I seek, the clasped hands are really my own.

There is always a dance to be danced. If only the Tracey in me could have stepped out of those clothes, if only that boy could have seen my authenticity, perhaps I would have been spared my ungainly future. What wonders a dose of confidence and faith could have done- a potent mixture, a recipe for success. With that, my first dance would have been born this way.

I would have waited at the south wall of the cafeteria with the other girls, grinning. When he approached, I would've accepted. Our dance would be lissome and proud and I would move with a bracing glee, as I am one with the music, our rhythm, and my very own me.

Today I move closer to this fantasy. I am an ingenious dancer where I once was blundering. My dance is not without it's mis-steps and wrong turns; but I have hope. There are new steps to be learned and mastered. New invitations. Blissfully I dance to my own sweet music.

I know I will re-meet that part of my spirit that was once completely light filled. And when I do, I will greet her warmly and invite her to stay for a long afternoon.