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First Dance

On a hot Friday night in the summer of 1975, four of us from Concert Dance Company--Robb, Kitty, Deb, and I--strolled into 1270, one of only two gay dance bars in Boston. We arrived to take over the floor, as we often did, just as the music began around 9:00 p.m.

We wasted no time filling the dark, empty expanse with our oversized strutting, twirling, swinging, bopping, and leaping. The smooth wood floor provided a springboard to toss ourselves into each other's arms, roll over each other's backs, groove into and out of synchronized steps, and slide on our knees in an extravagant demonstration of bravado, two years ahead of John Travolta in Saturday Night Fever. We laughed, and grunted, and whistled at each other's antics and sang along with tunes we recognized.

After an hour of our weekend unwinding, we all kissed each other goodnight, and Kitty and Deb scurried off to their apartments for a good night's sleep. They had no interest in the next stage of the weekend's rituals that drew Robb and me in like a pair of moths. They didn't want to hang around to be crowded out by the disapproving stares of the young men who claimed this sanctuary as gay-male-only from 10:00 p.m. on.

Robb and I had an unspoken agreement to give each other space once "the boys" arrived in sufficient numbers, so we could shift from our free-form dancing into the more strictly defined movements of the disco style, a movement language that we each adapted for maximum seduction value.

On my own, I reined in my dancing only a little, even with the available space dwindling rapidly. I believed that being upfront with my movement skill and my deft handling of rhythms gave me a better chance of attracting the attention of a man I would be interested in--a man who pulsed with the same aliveness and sensual joy that I did.

As the hour got later and the music got louder, I repositioned my dancing near the entrance of the club. I wasn't quite ready to give up, but I told myself I was on my way out. Here at the bottleneck of men oozing in and out of the club, my bobbing body added one more impediment to the flow. Here it was that a lovely boy collided with me as he tripped into the club with his friends.

We both flailed in surprise but found our footing again quickly, as our startled hands latched onto each other for support. And then our eyes met. And something happened for which I was unprepared. I hadn't intended to lose my edge, nor my constructed image. But in that moment, I connected to him from a part of me that had no outer form.

That moment was interrupted when he grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the center of the densely packed dance floor, abandoning his friends without a backward glance. My rising spirits pulsed new energy into my dancing, and I matched his rhythm and style.

As the first song ended, I yelled, "What's your name?"

"What?" he yelled back.

I cupped my hands around my mouth and yelled louder, into his ear. "Name."

"Oh." He leaned in enough for me to smell the freshness in his hair and cupped his hands around my ear.

"Tom. What's yours?"

"Roger," I yelled back and smiled.

A few minutes later, I again cupped my hands around his ear and added, "I really like dancing with you."

Coordinating his movements with the beat of the music, his mouth moved and his hands waved back and forth between us in the well-understood gesture of, "Me, too."

Without any further conversation, we spent the next hour moving in harmony. My body seemed to know exactly where his weight would land on each beat. My fingers sought and intertwined with his. I tuned in constantly to whether he was leading me or following me, and how quickly and how often that changed.

Tom matched my dancing with equal attention and met my eyes with a mischievous grin. In this crowded and noisy environment, it was not easy to get enough distance to see his whole body, but I could see he was my size. We matched each other perfectly--the same wavy dark brown hair and flushed pale skin, deep-set hazel eyes with long black lashes, intensely focused gaze, untempered exclamations of delight in each new disco hit the DJ played.

Later, both of us sweating and breathing hard, we bubbled out of the bar and rushed for my old, clunky, black Volvo. As soon as we fell into the wide front seat, we kissed and grabbed at each other. That dilapidated hulk of a car that usually offended my sense of style now seemed the perfect backdrop for our lusty groping.

I had to push Tom's hands away repeatedly to drive, although I really didn't want to. I was thrilled that he pulled himself up close to me for the entire time it took to cross the Charles River. At the Cambridge apartment where I was housesitting that month, we tumbled out of the car and raced for the door, laughing and bouncing off each other, unaware there might be neighbors sleeping. As soon as we fell through the doorway, we dove onto the high four-poster bed that dominated the tiny studio, pulling at each other's sticky clothes. With our pants still hobbling our ankles, our freshly exposed bellies finally made sliding contact, and sent both of us over the edge.

Saturday morning, I woke up with Tom's nose touching mine, and just a hint of his sweet breath in my nostrils. I leaned in and kissed the tops of his eyelids, then laid back on the pillow to watch his long lashes flutter open and a big grin grow to fill his face.

Then I kissed him on the lips, full and long, savoring the rich emotional sweetness that was contained in the soft flesh. Our early morning cuddling awakened a fierce and mutual arousal. It was simple, adolescent, filled with youthful urgency.

The second time we woke up, faces only inches from each other again, we finally began to talk.

"Good morning, beautiful," I said to his slightly spacey smile.

Out of his fog of afterglow, and with half-awake lips, he somehow managed to find a lilt in his voice. "Good morning, gorgeous."

"What's on your agenda for the day?" I asked, hopefully.

"You," is all he answered.

I melted inside, and, for a long moment, lost myself in his eyes.

"Shower?" He asked.

"Good idea."

In the luxurious, walk-in alcove, the fancy sea sponge and bar of lilac-scented soap grabbed our attention. They quickly proved their potential for boy-body worship. If tile is uncomfortable for long periods of kneeling, we didn't notice.

Once we had dried each other off, we picked out fresh shorts and T-shirts from my stack on the dresser, leaving our Friday night clothes, still damp with sweat, crumpled in a pile on the floor. He looked really sexy in my clothes, as we strolled down to Harvard Square for a late breakfast.

Between bites of pancakes, we filled each other in on what our lives were like, how much we loved our respective artistic disciplines, how it felt to be an artist and learning to live as one. My rehearsal schedule with Concert Dance Company had just slipped into a late-summer pause. I was still planning on going to the company's studio to take company class starting Monday, but I made it perfectly clear he was welcome to spend as much of the weekend with me as he wanted.

He was on summer break from classes at the Massachusetts College of Art and felt compelled to go into one of their studios to work on a project that he hoped to complete before school resumed in the fall. He gushed to me about a wall-sized collage piece, and how important finishing it this month was to him.

"I just have to get the colors right, first. It's still not right even with all the stuff I put on it this week. I really need to get back into the studio soon." But then a tantalizing twist of his lips betrayed his stated intentions, and he added, "But maybe it can wait till Monday."

I grinned back, broadly. "Then maybe we can head back to the apartment?"

All through that weekend, we interrupted our bed time only to shower or go get food. If kissing Beth had been like sipping sweet rose water, kissing Tom was like lapping up vanilla cream. I loved the taste and smell of him, sweaty, or spunky or freshly showered, it didn't matter. When we had sex, I merged inside him, feeling what he was feeling, physically, emotionally and energetically. When he giggled, or twisted away, I pulled him closer. When I tickled him, he just laughed. We gave ourselves over to each exquisite connection.

From that first weekend, our life together left as little separate time as possible. If we hadn't had somewhere else we needed to go each day, we would have stayed glued together in bed. But our individual needs to reconnect with our artistic endeavors outweighed even this enthralling new love.

As another week came and went, we began to make meals and do laundry together, we went shopping in the farmers' market, took walks around Harvard Square. I shared my new boyfriend joy with the other dancers in the company, and he talked about me with his college friends.

My dancing began to reflect this euphoric mood. Without a calm center, balancing got harder, but I cared less about it, too. I flitted around the studio, barely touching the ground. Never having felt myself a particularly athletic dancer, my excited body now found pleasure in the most athletic movement phrases.

Back at the apartment, Tom and I cuddled with each other as we talked at length about art. We read to each other--one day poetry, another day essays on being an artist--sharing big dreams and untested confidence. We even read the news aloud, our cocoon of caresses insulating us from really registering the world's horrors.

We fell asleep and woke again in each other's arms. We scrunched our noses at the musty residue of our sex. We formulated at great length, and with much debate, our own theory about the art and science of snuggling. And, eventually, we shared with each other the realization that we'd found in each other a soul mate--the identical twin from whom we had been separated at birth. When we looked in the mirror together, as we sometimes did just to confirm what we felt, we saw ourselves in each other. When we strolled through the streets of Cambridge or Boston, laughing and hanging all over each other, we pretended we were twin brothers. In those days before gay liberation really took hold, our look-alike presentation was a good cover, we thought, for the irrepressible glow of our infatuation.

I merged so deeply with him, it was magical. So intense. So right. I could not imagine not being with him and loving him for the rest of my life. I assumed he felt the same for me.

One afternoon at the beginning of September, physically drained after rehearsal, but emotionally excited and ready for another evening of surrender to the sensual pleasure of being with him, I drove over to pick him up at his apartment. We never spent time at his place. With his roommate there, it lacked the privacy we wanted. We were just intending to have a last night at the spacious Cambridge apartment we had been enjoying that August--a final night of being alone together--before I had to move back into my tiny room in the huge, ramshackle house in Brookline I would be sharing the rest of the year with a whole community of struggling artists and destitute students.

When I got to his apartment, though, his roommate came to the door to answer the bell.

"Tom isn't coming," she told me.

"What?" I didn't understand.

"He couldn't come down to tell you himself, because the whole thing has become too intense. He couldn't handle it. He can't come with you tonight."

"What do you mean, too intense?" My efforts to keep my voice from climbing up out of my throat weren't working. "Is he under too much pressure from school or something?"

She hesitated. Her narrow eyes pinched tighter and she bit her lower lip. She was not comfortable delivering the unexpected and disappointing message.

"The only information he gave me was that he just had to call the whole thing off. It was getting too intense."

When she closed the door quickly without another word, I stood there for a long moment, stunned. Then I staggered back to my old, boxy, black Volvo sedan, slid into the driver's seat, and pulled the door firmly closed beside me. I gulped in one big breath. I paused, eyes wide. Then I watched as my mind separated from my body, observing what happened next from some inner distance. I filled the inside of that car with sounds I didn't

know I knew how to make. I wailed so hard, my stomach cramped. I couldn't focus my eyes. The wailing eventually slowed down, but then I sobbed again so hard it hurt my throat. I coughed in fits of hacking, and gasped for air. Inside that safe and soundproof coffin, I watched as a younger part of me suffocated and died.

My mind grabbed for explanations. What did that mean, "too intense"? Wasn't that the point of a passion such as ours? Wasn't intensity what drove us to seek connection with each other through the vulnerable sharing of sex? Hadn't we both said this relationship was the most beautiful and satisfying experience we'd ever had? Wasn't intensity what everyone longed for?

As that day gave way to the next, and the weeks disappeared in blurry succession, I ran these questions over and over in my mind. I drained my fellow dancers with my obsessive rehashing. I burst into tears at the most inappropriate moments in rehearsal and had to run outside to catch my breath before I could go on.

With no previous experience to prepare me for this level of emotional pain, I just wallowed in it. I didn't hear from Tom again. He wouldn't answer my calls. The sudden loss of the relationship became a dark and heavy presence I could push aside only partially. It would revisit me whenever I had time to rest--while watching the other dancers work on sections of the choreography, or even more intensely once I was alone in the car on the way home from rehearsal. It was a struggle to get back to the studio each day.

One bitter Tuesday morning in November, I trudged into the big drafty studio, bundled up in layers of tights, sweats, socks, leg warmers, sweaters, and even a scarf around my neck. I began rolling on the floor, groaning and stretching, until everyone was ready to begin our daily class. On some mornings, Deb would lead us through a free-flowing modern dance warm-up. But on this morning, Kitty led us through a well-constructed ballet barre, with frequent changes in tempo that helped us get warm quickly and deep down to the core. She wanted us to work not only the big outer muscles, but also to stretch out the intrinsic muscles around the spine. Although I had already been working these past two years on lengthening and realigning my central axis, this morning's efforts demanded even more core lengthening. The work was hard, but it felt real and important, and, I sensed, also touched into the tension that was holding my grief.

At the end of the hour-and-a-half class, with our muscles warm and minds now awake, Barbara, our artistic director, asked us to run through "Cartouche," a dance we had recently learned from New York choreographer Phoebe Neville. This dark and slow-moving piece was set to some particularly ponderous music of Henry Purcell, tympani and trumpets at a funereal pace that only underscored my mood.

The piece is for two dancers. Since the roles are not gender specific, all of us were learning both parts. Rehearsals involved the whole company, and each time we ran it, we would be paired up in different combinations.

This morning I took the role we affectionately called the "bottom." That meant I started the dance lying face down on the floor. Robb, as my "top," stood on my back, one foot on my sacrum and one in my mid back. With his solid 160 pounds of muscle weight, it was a lot for my body to handle. Robb's wide feet distributed his weight well, and for the first six minutes of the dance, my attention focused on nothing but breathing and letting my body be flattened on the floor. I forgot my emotional pain.

Halfway through the dance, Robb executed his slow motion dismount and spread out on his belly. Then I climbed up awkwardly onto his back, worked my way through some proud and architectural gestures, eventually tightening into a crouch, where, without any conscious intention, my body began filling each posture with the passion of unresolved feelings. In the final triumphant and gruesome gesture, hovering over

Robb like a vulture, my grief found its form. My gut squeezed up through my heart, my jaw clenched, and a tear fell on the back of Robb's head.

As the music ended and we all broke the tension at the end of the dance, I stepped carefully off Robb's back. Deb glanced over at me as she got off her perch on Kitty's back. "Roger, are you okay?"

I stood there, my body beginning to shake violently. I couldn't speak, still full as I was with the dawning awareness of what my body had just done.

There was silence in the studio for several long moments. Then, in a gesture of fatherly tenderness he would never show me again, Robb pulled me back onto the floor and held me in a tight, full-body curl. Barbara simply said, "Let's take a break, everyone."

As the other dancers ambled over to retrieve warmer clothes and cups of coffee, she came up to Robb and me on the floor, took my face in her small, bony hands, and looked me straight in the eyes to be sure she had my full attention. "That's how I want you to dance that piece every time. Nothing less."

I nodded, wiped my nose, and gave Robb a quick thank-you hug, then got up and, still shaking, began wrapping myself in layers of warm clothes. The emotional roller coaster I'd been riding had finally found its way back to earth. I'd discovered how to convert emotional intensity into a way of dancing that projected both depth and power.

From then on I "owned" that dance. Whenever the company performed it, I was cast--in the role of the bottom who ends up triumphantly on top.