

Savor the Last Dance

An awkward moment in time, a memory forever and a mystery of what might have been.

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I was in my first year at Chicago State College (CSC), and I had yet to have a Valentine, better known as a serious girlfriend. I was too shy to ask anyone out or to even approach a female.

Most people at that age harbor insecurities. But I was the only one hoofing it to the lunch counter at Woolworth's on 69th and Halsted every day to avoid having to mingle in the school cafeteria.

I was assigned four classes for the first semester. Three of them were in my wheelhouse: English, world history and German. The fourth, however, a P.E. class in ballroom dancing, might very well have ended my college career as soon as it started.

Any other version of physical education would have been acceptable: tennis, golf, wrestling, even badminton.

But CSC was jam-packed with male enrollees needing a minimum of 12 credit hours for a 2-S draft deferment during the Vietnam era, so you were stuck with whatever was printed on your schedule.

My first day at college started interestingly enough. The world history teacher had Einstein hair and a Russian accent. My English teacher was a published poet.

But at 2 p.m., wearing the required white t-shirt and tennis shorts for P.E., I felt an ominous roiling in my gut when I entered the gymnasium for dance class.

Two dozen young women in white collared shirts, baggy shorts and bobby socks were clustered in front of the folding wooden bleachers. A male student with wavy black hair, slouching like Marlon Brando, was chatting with the only blonde in the group.

They all turned to look as the door closed behind me, so I felt relieved when the teacher, a thin, businesslike woman with short gray hair and noticeably erect posture, asked for everyone's attention.

Holding a clipboard, she took attendance, pronouncing each name on the roster before giving a brief pep talk about how the objectives for this particular class, having to do with poise, confidence and so on, related to the field of education.

"Any questions?" she said.

Brando raised his hand.

"Do we gotta dress like this?" he said. "I mean, be like dancin' in our undies."

A few of the girls laughed. The teacher looked down at her clipboard:

"Mr. Romano, was it?" she said. "Drop the class, and you can wear whatever you like."

Silence.

"Other questions?" said the teacher. "Very well. We begin with the foxtrot. Partner up."

I was close enough to the door that I probably could have exited unnoticed. I knew I might be risking a very long flight to the Mekong Delta, but anything would've been better than this.

Until the gentle tap on my shoulder: "Would you be my dance partner?"

She had long brown hair bound in a ponytail and enormous blue eyes. Her mouth was set in a half smile that seemed ready to erupt in laughter any second. It was the same kind of electrical energy which my little sister had, so I figured she came from a big family, too.

Her name was Annie, very easy to look at, and the kind of girl who would never be with someone like me. Surprisingly, though, all of her fingernails were bitten down, the cuticles raw and red. Somehow, this gave me hope.

"Pretty please?" she said, her hands folded in prayer.

She was impossible to resist.

But I grew panicky. The fire started between my shoulders and rose to my neck when Annie touched my arm, guiding me to follow the teacher's instructions for the "closed ballroom dance position hold."

The rest of the lesson's logistics escape me now, except for how "The man's right hand is placed on the lady's shoulder blade." Whereas, my hand involuntarily jerked away when it felt the strap beneath her shirt.

Annie didn't flinch. Instead, she looked around at other struggling foxtrotters, making light of the shared awkwardness, glancing up at me with a conspiratorial smile, as though the two of us must humor the teacher, whom she named Sgt. Schultz, from *Hogan's Heroes*, whose "one-step, two-step" commands we dared not disobey.

In contrast with my sweaty hands and ripe man-smell, Annie was as cool as ice, with a hint of peppermint on her breath. She did most of the talking, and by the end of class, I entertained the possibility of surviving the semester.

Still in my arms, she leaned in closer and whispered, "Thank you, Colonel Hogan," before turning and skipping away.

On the long bus ride home, I was seeing those big eyes and trying to remember the way her face looked when she repeated my name. I nearly missed my transfer at 79th street.

On Tuesday, I only had German and no dance class. When I checked the bulletin board outside the registrar's office, I saw that a spot had opened up in intramural basketball.

I hesitated: The prospect of three more months with my angel-faced partner was intriguing. But was she for real or a put-on? Would I regret not grabbing that vacancy?

All I knew for certain was that ballroom dancing was suddenly expendable. So, I forced myself not to think much more about it and went inside.

A month later, when I changed buses at 79th and Western Avenue, there was Annie on a side seat next to the blonde from class. She wore a mini skirt under a wool coat and black leather boots over white tights. Her brown hair was combed out, framing a face more beautiful than I remembered.

"My dance partner!" she said, affecting a frown. "You abandoned me!"

I shrugged and smiled and kept moving down the aisle, for how could I know I'd never see her again.

Today I am older and richly blessed with three grown children I raised with Marianne. No more hurrying down aisles of any sort.

Still, all these years later, I wonder what might have been. Or what other story I might be writing had I chosen to stay in dance class.

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