

DANCING GIRL

A short story



Alison Bouhmid

Dancing Girl

From womb. To the tomb. She would dance until she dropped. Turn cartwheels until they became creaky. Touch her toes forever. A lover of the bright lights. A West End showgirl. She thrived on attention and applause. She was talented for sure. And had one hell of a smile. But there was more to her than that. Discipline. Diet. Exercise. Ten hours sleep a night. Routine. Rigour. Respect. She looked after her body. She loved her body. Was her body. Narcissistic. For sure. They smooched along together, her and her body. Their clinch passionate and self-sufficient, shining and supple with luck and good health. Always dancing. Sashaying hip to hollow. Sensational.

Change began with her falling in love with the pianist, a quiet concentrate of a man who never raised his voice. They were an unlikely couple. He was still and sedentary and grey. She was a constant, colourful, flamboyant whirl. He had strong, supple hands and on the piano his touch was faultless. She discovered his fingers to be less sure along her body but nevertheless she arched and thrilled artlessly, in encouragement. Those hands of his required a familiar, practised score and he was uncomfortable improvising. But practise made perfect, she knew that, and she was willing to be patient.

They had a son. Within the year the pianist left because, he explained, the situation was beginning to affect him artistically and without his art he was no one. She stood on the doorstep, her hands on her hips, and she watched him go. As he walked stiffly down the path, she tossed her head, snapped her heels and turned her back on him, slamming the door as a finale. Ta daa. Good riddance. She had discovered that she did not have enough energy for the three of them. He had been a very intense non music-hall sort of pianist and had disliked sharing the limelight with anyone else. Even his son.

She told herself that whilst she might miss the stage, she wouldn't miss sex. Solo wasn't going to be the problem. The throb of frustration that resonated deep in her bones was from the lack of dance. Since she had given birth, her life had become a grind. Every movement demanded effort. She had aches and pains. And guilt. When she tried to dance, it was like dancing with the devil on her back and she was too exhausted for histrionics. There would be no remonstrating, refusing, rejecting, shaking her fists or flinging out her arms. Her baby's wandering eyes found it difficult enough to fix her as it was, even when she was as calm as calm could be. She tried to be reassuring and became fatally more measured. No cinch. It was impossible for her to hold onto the period before motherhood, when time had limbered up and had stretched out with such promise in her arms.

For five months she had been told that her new born was normal. That she, primipara, was imagining things. It had been a difficult birth and they had used forceps and facial nerve damage did in rare cases occur. But it would be temporary, the bruising would fade and he would grow into his features. Lopsided was nothing to worry about they said. Newborns did cry a lot. But her floppy dolly failed to acquire muscular tonus. They weren't sure of what the exact problem was. She persevered. Appointments. Referrals. Tests. Specialists. Healers. Superstition. Specialised specialists. Eventually a diagnosis was made. It was a rare condition with a long and complicated name, every twisted syllable of which was branded upon her heart. Welt forming words. Join a support group. She did as she was told and stumbled along. Tripped over stories, tips and tears. She even tried faith. But there was no dancing on the Sabbath and curing of the lame for her and her son. Only doubt, pain and sorrow. Time lurched. Strained. Stuck. Time was callipered. There was no cure.

From far away, her friends and her family advised her to go back to work. But her heart for entertainment had shrivelled and she became her son's full-time carer. There was a definite droop to the ensemble. Nothing remained of the show-girl, show-off veneer of yore. No look at me, head up, shoulders back, eyes a-blazing, high kicks and swirls, strass, sequins and spangles. Showiness was tamped down by a quiet efficiency of movement. Flightiness and fancy were channelled into duty and care.

Her dancer's strength and discipline stood her in good stead. There was lots of lifting in her new supporting role. In place of soaring, she soothed and reassured and did her best to let her boy lead their dance. In his own time. Chafing. There was progression, although it was slow and inherently limited. She could never assume anything and no part of their routine was automatic or natural or instinctive. Development was not linear but piecemeal. However, in her son's fifth year, against all expectations, his sighs became recognisable as words. *Mum. Mum.* This was progress. *Mum, Mum.* How wonderful. *Mum.* Yes. I'm here. *Mum. More.* She must be mistaken. He repeated the word. Her heart hardened. She had had enough of *more*. There wasn't any more of her left. She felt that she had to get away from him. Take a break. Just a short one. Before she said something she might regret.

She replied to an invitation that had arrived some time ago and by omission had not gone straight into the waste paper bin. The weekend house-party of the brother of a former dancing partner. She phoned and accepted. She flinched at the brief pause in her host's voice before the *Lovely. Great. Look forward to it.* She should never have called. But it was done. She organised interim care, primarily her parents. She left instructions and lists of what to do and who to phone: herself, the hospital, the doctor, the social worker, the physiotherapist, the ambulance, a helpline. She prepared the weekend's food in advance. She reminded her parents of the importance of sticking to his routine. Of being gentle. That was uncharacteristically primadonnerish of her, thought her mother. She explained as

best she could to her son where she was going. Her mother said to her if she didn't leave now she would miss the plane. She hesitated. He started to whine. *Please*, he said. She turned her back and her understudy shunted her out through the door.

She caught a taxi to the airport, then an air plane southwards. Stepping out onto shimmering tarmac, she felt pale and lacking, as if blanched by the fat salivating sun that lolled high in the sky. She phoned home in a panic. Her mother passed her son the phone, but he refused to speak to her. She listened to him breathing laboriously, wetly, crossly. Whispered wishing, wishing he was there with her. But her wish was neither here nor there. He understood only absence. There, there.

There were many people at the party most of whom she did not know. She could have been what she used to be. A flirt, an entertainer. The life and the soul. But no one could dance all their lives, she had come to realise. So she drank sweet blood red sangria and banged on about her son's recent progress to anyone who would listen. Her words were clumsy and discordant but she could not stop herself. More like confession than conversation. Forgive me my son for I have sinned. I have gone away and left you. But I talk only of you. Her new way of enjoying herself. The least she could do.

A man took up a guitar and crossed his legs. He slapped his hand hard upon the cedar wood flank of the instrument and strummed out a summons to nailed shoes. A ripple of dark laughter. He increased the volume, sending out a more passionate cat call, unapologetic and ancient. Glasses were put down and dancers, old and young, male and female, positioned themselves. Chins were lifted, necks elongated and spines curved to the swell of the music. Arms were raised and slowly hands twirled at the wrists, producing a stiff finger-by-finger caress of the rich sound. A proud tentative welcoming. She turned a deaf ear. The music began to yowl and feet clattered. The music was peremptory but there would be struggle before submission. Even if she had known the steps she would not have joined in. She didn't like to be bullied and the betrayal would have been too great. She sternly repressed the flurry of temptation that sent its tremolo from her finger tips to her sacrum. *Por favor*. No. A yes no. Oh. No. No no no no. She should go. She flounced away from the party. Away to her bedroom, where she threw herself upon a bed that bucked beneath her. She tossed and she turned all through the discordant night but she didn't surrender to the salt lick sob of her body.

A group of guests went for a walk the following day, after Bloody Marys. She followed them along the uneven path, ignoring their vapid morning-after chit chat, dragging her heels and scuffing a cloud of red mica dust behind her. The landscape prickled with heat. Cicadas shrieked and she sweat sour dissatisfaction. The path steepened. She watched her step. Her muscles tightened in the tug of effort. The going was hard and she realised that she was out of shape. How had that happened? Out of shape. Out of sorts. The others stopped to catch their breath. She overtook them and continued alone. Hitting

a second-wind high she found her feet and became increasingly sure-footed.

The air was cooler at the top. She looked away into the distance and buried herself within the curves of the unknown, shadowy hills. She curtsied. The cicadas paused. Silence, potent and pregnant. Her limbs tingled with acceptance. Herself. Himself. Time stirred. Time flexed. *Her* time had come. She prepared. A formal beginning in first position. Legs straight, heels together, feet spread. She opened her chest and her ribs, lifted her elbows and gently straightened her arms through the heat. A fumbling reach outwards. Jerkily at first, she swished her right foot forwards and up. Swish back down. The left foot. Then *plié*. Arms in a gentle curve down and sauté up. Cicadas giggled and scratched. Restless. Encore. She gravely bowed her head and re-adjusted her position. Into second. Right through to fifth. Swish, through the dust. Swish. Swish. Then there were steps. *Enchaînements*. *Pas de chats*. Her limbs found their own rhythm, not dancing to someone else's tune. Coordination became less controlled as she flung *chassés*, *jetés* and *pirouettes*. Strong and glorious, she left grace behind her. Until finally she was spinning. A frenzied swirl of colour and power and will. Bursts of colour flashed across her retina. Her momentum took her right over the edge of the mountain side and far away over forests and sea, back to her boy. A furious daredevil leap of love into the tomb.

She was left scratched and bleeding and panting. She dusted herself down as best she could and caught her breath. It was time for her to go. She began her solitary descent with a determined step, impatient to show her son how *more* had become *the most*.

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