

THE QUARRY

Dancing shoes...

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Edges crumpled in triangles on two corners of a fading poster, plastered onto the door of the Rio Rhythmics Dance Studio. Proud vivid feathers stand at attention to the sky, mingling with shimmering sequined head dresses on bronze kissed women's heads, winking glittering bra tops, barely concealing nipples, exposed skin, silver navel ornaments falling to tasselled tenuous briefs. Arms outstretched, hips moving like some other force was in control, like the women were as artificial as they appeared, warming themselves in the adoration of men, 'Stepford Wives,' breathtakingly beautiful and robotic male creations.

Genève and I both saw it and looked at each other, and laughed. The same question on each other's faces; what were we doing here? A Latin beat and melody drifted down the corridor getting louder as we climbed the stairs. Reaching the top, we saw Juan the Dance Instructor, who smiled at us from across the room.

'Hello ladies. Come in, make yourselves at home,' he said in a dense Latin-American seesawing accent.

His body was like a muscular figurine, dark and well defined; through his brief singlet top most of his taut, hairless chest could be seen. His tight, black pants revealed a pert spherical bottom. He was the cliché of a Latin Lover/Dancer, walking over to his side of the room. He smiled at us, looking us up and down, what else would you expect?

'We'll make Latin dancers out of you girls, if it kills us.'

'It may do so too,' Gen said, laughing. I glanced at Gen, grateful she was there with me, as she always was.

Around the room, people were stretching, some were staring awkwardly into the middle, a middle aged couple looked like they were trying to rekindle their love, instead, they regarded each other awkwardly. A single mother and daughter, in school uniform, also stood uncomfortably looking at Juan. There were the two pulling up leg warmers, in tights and long t-shirts, their hair frizzed up and pulled back by white bandanas (what was this, an episode from Flash Dance or something? And it was a sizzling hot Brisbane summer, after all!)

Another middle-aged couple stood as if they were about to go on stage for a professional performance – their bodies held in the rumba position ready to launch into a routine. You just wanted to walk up behind them and say, 'Hey, lighten up.'

'This is a beginners class, isn't it?' I asked Gen.

'Supposed to be,' she said, also looking at the couple.

Juan called everyone's attention.

'Hello everyone, welcome,' he said, his white smile passed over everyone like a midnight beacon over the dark surging ocean.

A guy who would've been mid-thirties with dark curly hair, vibrant blue eyes with lines around them that reflected kindness and a delicate smile like a swallow, whispered to his blonde friend who was wearing board shorts, a t-shirt and no shoes. They looked how I felt; out of place.

'We'll start with the basic moves, and then later we'll get you to dance with partners.'

A drumbeat reverberated, percussion began to frenzy and the charango drove the rhythm of the music as Juan clapped his hands and moved his hips in circular motion, clicking his tongue and saying, 'Let's get moving.'

'Whoa, I hope he doesn't expect us to do that,' I whispered to Gen, watching his gyrations and referring to his clicking abandonment. She laughed quietly.

His body was a robot as his hips traced circles in the air, while his upper torso remained static.

'This is what we do in Latin Dance, the basis for all of our dances, this hip movement. Aussies find this hard to do,' he said, moving his hips from side to side in perfect formation.

'Move your hips, not your upper body...' We began moving and Juan walked around us, touching some of our hips, males and females moving them in the right direction. Then he got us walking around in a circle, while moving our hips. Most of us were struggling, the experienced couple were moving with precision. Genève and I looked at each other and laughed.

'Australians are so uptight they do not move their hips much, we Brazilians do it all the time,' Juan said, laughing.

After multiple circles around the studio and watching ourselves in the mirror, Juan allowed us to break. Some of the people were breathless and going various shades of light maroon. One lady was sweating and so breathless she could've been a candidate for a heart attack.

Gen and I retrieved our water bottles, chatting about how we were finding it when I suddenly became aware of someone walking towards us. I turned to see the dark man

with his blonde friend. Uh oh, I hated these awkward conversations, particularly with men. I was so out of practice.

The dark haired man introduced himself as Mark, looking directly at me, his smile lighting up his features, and the man with straw-coloured hair was David.

I introduced us and leant against the mirror behind me.

‘You guys done this before?’ David asked.

‘Nope, can’t you tell?’ I said.

‘You’ve been fine,’ Mark answered.

‘Gen’s got it down pat. It is going to take me longer because I haven’t danced since high school.’

‘Not really.’

Juan began clapping his hands and started calling out to the group. ‘Now is time for partner dance.’

Juan came towards us and paired up Mark and I, and Gen and David together. Then he continued on pushing together people in an authoritarian voice. We were told to stand in close proximity to one another, lacing our fingers together in a coat hanger like shape. This stance I hadn’t been in since my wedding waltz, which should be more aptly termed a wedding sway. And look how that had turned out. Six months since my marriage break up, but I still felt sick and adrenalin pulsed through my legs. It felt as if I was somehow betraying someone.

Mark and I faced each other. Awkwardness directed Mark’s limbs as he shifted his weight, and his eyes dropped every now and then. I avoided looking directly into his eyes that were both gentle and alluring, but seemed confronting to me. It was a strange feeling being close to another man other than Steve, and now, feeling jittery around someone. Then his words collided around my mind; ‘fuckin’ bitch,’ ‘slut,’ and I felt his hands around my neck...I hadn’t thought about Steve for a while, but every now and then these scenes played as a short film before me. Breathing in, I returned to the here and now. Mark looked at me in an inquisitive manner, questions clouding his face. Looking down

at my shoes, I sought to hide my emotions. My gaze turned to the middle aged married couple next to us and I smiled. They smiled back, then turned and glared at each other.

‘You okay? It’s not going to be that bad dancing with me,’ Mark said with a crooked cheeky smile.

‘Of course,’ I said, laughing, ‘I’m a bit nervous about how I will be as a dancing partner.’

‘You’ll be fine,’ he said, squeezing my hand.

‘Pull your partner a little closer,’ Juan called.

Mark’s warm hand rested on the curve of my lower back, he pulled me close and tightened the embrace. Adrenalin filled my limbs, how ridiculous I thought. Less air separated us now, our bodies close, I looked at the contours of his neck bones, his hands were large and somewhat cold from sweat, and his warmth touched my chest. Goose bumps rose tiny round mountains on my skin. His cologne surrounded me, strong and delicious like fresh wood shavings on a carpentry floor. His breath touched my neck and I wanted to relax into it. He looked into my eyes. I looked away. Faint lines around the edge of his lips formed a kind smile.

‘No really, are you okay?’

‘Yep, sorry about that. I’m elsewhere.’

Juan called out commands and we sought to follow. Mark was better than I thought and we moved well together. I focused on the steps, the movement of my legs and feet in unison with his, and the movement of my hips under his large hands. Shifting my attention from Mark, I honed in on Juan’s words to everyone.

Mark and I stumbled. Juan came over and corrected our positioning and movements. He positioned our bodies closer together, we started the Samba, which involved steps forward and backward, and was elegant. Then we moved onto the Rumba, which included a circular gyration of our pelvises and hips together, reminiscent of certain other human actions. Now that was not a little awkward, I was already nervous enough.

Alternating turns and being spun out from Mark and around, movements of our hips in sensuous unison, our cohesion didn't always work but was extremely humorous. We couldn't stop laughing, but sought to maintain composure when Juan looked over. Sweet strumming of guitars flamenco style, individual high-pitched plucked notes and honey harmonic male voices serenaded our steps. Juan kept telling me to look into Mark's eyes. So I did. Over the forty-five minutes my inhibitions dissipated. Gen and David were next to us, we all chatted and laughed as we sought to emulate the dance, but mostly made mistakes.

When Juan said, 'That is it for couple work tonight,' I was disappointed.

'Thanks, everyone. Give yourselves a clap, you did very well.'

I clapped sheepishly, glancing at Mark, chuckling as our stumbles replayed in my mind. He smirked back.

'Thanks Sade, you were a great partner.'

'Except for the bruises on your feet.'

'Yeah, except for that.' He winked at me and I smiled feeling self-conscious in a good way.

'How did you guys go?' Gen asked us. 'Looked like you had heaps of fun.'

'I did,' I said.

'Me too,' Mark agreed.

David and Mark said they'd see us next week. Mark turned briefly and caught my eyes, then disappeared. Gen looked at me, turning her head to the side, and said in a singing voice, 'He looked nice.'

'Yeah, he was.'

I drank from my bottle, trying to seem nonchalant.

'Looked like he liked you.'

'Don't think so. Even if he did, watch him run when he finds out about my life.'

'You're so cynical.'

‘Not cynical, just realistic.’

‘Uh huh.’ Gen rolled her eyes.

I pulled her into a hug. ‘You’re a great friend to me,’ I said, remembering the night I turned up at Gen’s house distraught and with my children, after I had left. She embraced me and took me in.

We walked towards the stairs and said our goodbyes to Juan. Descending the stairs, we returned to our lives again. Gen to her husband and three children, and me to my children and my veterinarian practice not far from here. The following week moved quickly: school drop offs, my daughter’s soccer training, my son’s art classes, my violin lessons, working and on the weekend brunch with Gen and Simone, while Steve had the kids for the day. I hadn’t let him have them overnight, didn’t know if I could trust him. He had taken them to the museum this time.

Stretching on the dance floor again, my senses became heightened as I noticed Mark across the room but no David. Someone was standing behind Mark. Then she appeared, tall, dark haired, and wearing black pants and a fitted yellow singlet. She was leaning in close to Mark, chatting and laughing.

Typical. Of course he wasn’t single. He smiled and waved. I waved back and turned towards the mirror, not knowing where to look.

‘Looks like we’ll have to get new partners, David’s not here and Mark has a new partner,’ I said, nudging Gen.

‘Yep, looks like it. Attractive, isn’t she?’

‘Yeah,’ I said, wondering why she had to rub it in.

Juan approached and paired us up with two guys standing nearby, looking lost on their first class. Peter, my partner, had ginger blonde hair, white skin with yellow tinges on the edges of his face, and garlic emanated from every pore. Dancing with Peter was like slowly receiving dental treatment with no anaesthetic. Juan intervened on many

occasions to no avail. After an eternity, Juan called a break, winking at me. I walked over to Gen.

‘Scott would be jealous of what I saw you guys doing,’ I said, patting her on the shoulder. A hand touched my arm. Uh oh, not Peter. Turning around, I saw Mark’s smiling face and his partner standing next to him.

‘Hey.’

‘Hello, how are you?’ I asked.

‘Great thanks. Hey, this is my sister, Therese.’

‘Hello,’ I said, feeling relieved and addressing her directly, ‘you guys danced well together. The talent must run in the family.’

They both laughed.

‘Yeah, we’ll probably dance with different partners next week. I was just helping Tess get used to the class.’

‘Such a nice brother. Though you looked like you knew what you were doing.’

‘I have done a little before,’ she said, surprisingly shy for someone so striking.

Mark explained David had the flu, and Gen said to pass on our regards.

Suddenly, Juan clapped his hands again. I sighed. Not back to Peter again.

Mark put his hand on my arm again and said quietly, ‘Hey do you want to have a coffee with me sometime?’

‘Sure,’ I said, managing a shy smile.

‘What about Friday at Café Tempo, 10:30am?’

‘Sounds good.’

‘Here’s my card if there are any problems.’

I looked at it – he was an Environmental Engineer for the Queensland Government State Development Department.

‘Okay, cool, thanks. Better get back to my partner, you know.’

Returning to Peter, an involuntary smile formed on my face throughout his pushing and shoving with me around the dance floor. Juan hovered close to us. He saw it was a lost cause.

‘I’ll match you with different dancers next week to compliment your skill level,’ he said, and smiled knowingly at me when Peter had turned his back. I suppressed a giggle.

My feet ached and I was pleased when Juan said class was over for the evening. Mark and his sister left pretty quickly, waving as they went.

‘See you on Friday,’ Mark called.

‘Sure,’ I said.

‘Ohhh, a date?’ Gen asked when he had disappeared.

‘We’re having a coffee.’

‘Really? Hmmm, well let me know what happens, okay?’ she said, raising her eyebrows and the tone of her voice.

‘Will do.’

Wandering along Vulture Street, I looked into Avid Reader bookshop as I passed, trying not to look ahead to Café Tempo. Then I saw him; sitting outside, his dark abundance of hair framed his face and his eyes focused on the newspaper below him. As I got closer he looked up and smiled. We greeted each other with a kiss on the cheek. I sat down at the table and a friendly waiter with blonde straight hair took my order and left. All I could think was Mark only likes who he thinks I am.

‘How’ve you been since Tuesday?’

‘Good thanks.’

‘Good to hear,’ he said, smiling at me in a contented manner, sipping his flat-white from the edge of the white china cup.

‘There’s something you need to know Mark.’

‘That sounds ominous.’

‘It is a bit.’

‘Okay, spit it out – all ears.’ He turned his face directly towards me.

‘I have two children and um...left an abusive marriage some months ago.’ I looked into my coffee cup. I hated pity or people knowing my business, but I had to be honest.

‘Oh. I’m so sorry to hear that. Are you okay now?’ His tone of voice quietened and held a tender inflection. He put his hand on my wrist and looked into my face.

‘Thanks. I’m going well now. It’s much easier than it was at first. I’m happier, stronger now.’

‘Must’ve been horrible. How are your kids taking everything?’

‘Yeah, pretty well, I think. I let them see him every second weekend in the day. They have told me they feel happier now than before.’

A cool change fell over our coffee date like a brooding grey sky and southerly breeze. A characteristic Brisbane storm brewing on the horizon had rolled in and now started to pour with rain. I couldn’t gauge his thoughts.

‘Mark, if you’re uncomfortable with this, it’s cool. I know it’s a lot to adjust to, before you just thought I was a single woman.’

‘Yeah, it is a lot.’

‘I don’t expect anything, I just like you...’ I felt vulnerable.

‘I like you too,’ he said, ‘you know that.’

‘I realise things are more complicated than us liking each other. It’s not like when we were young, hey? Sometimes I wish it was. I was hoping we could still get to know each other, but I totally understand, whatever you want.’

‘I’m not sure what I think, Sade. I’d be happy to get to know each other and see what happens.’

‘Sounds good to me.’

Mark finished drinking his flat-white. He asked me about my kids, what they liked to do, where they went to school, what they were like. I answered him, all the while

noticing his difference. Not cold, but changed. Who could blame him? It was a lot to absorb. After a little while, he said he had to go.

‘Okay, see you then,’ I said.

I watched him walk away. He had my business card and we agreed we would see each other at dancing. We’d see after that. The day was moving on, its hot breath becoming more stifling. Who knew what would happen? All I knew was I wouldn’t spend a lot of time dwelling on it. I was free now. I looked at the photo of my kids on my mobile phone. Closing my eyes I saw endless blue surrounding me.