

BaLlroom dancing in ((Cell Block)) 4 (four) . . .

. . . BY Steve Carr

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... Steve Carr will let you know that he has over 520 stories published in the last five years. As it is important, I will let you know that his story, in Fleas on the Dog, "Ballroom Dancing in Cell Block 4," could be number 521 or higher at the time of publication. We've all got to have goals.*

*I cannot make any judgments, confirmations, or assumptions about Carr's jail time if he has had any at all. I can tell you that I don't think that he has, but I could be pleasantly surprised. I only know what I've seen from Oz, Shawshank Redemption, American Me ("shit on my dick or blood on my knife," the classiest of rape scenarios), and etc. or of other ilk.*

*What this story has is a grime to it.*

*It oozes the need to be bad and then will do what every convict who doesn't want the death penalty does: tell you a story long enough that you live.*

*The best part, and you will read this in the author's note, about Carr's story is that he combined the concept of prison violence and ballet as being a way in which the reader can see the dance prisoners have to do to not get raped, beaten, raped again, beaten again, or have to explain themselves to a prison full of just as terrible people as the one you're reading about. It is the jail time story you tell to another human that could or could not possibly rape you – let us all presume that none of use want to be raped.*

*Why did Eddie die? Why did the Pattersons die? Why are prisons run so badly? Why is rape a thing where humanity has always used it against weaker humans no matter what hole you abuse? You will soon find out (except for prisons being run so badly that there aren't many solutions to the problem apart from abolishing the concept of convicts being used as slave ("private") labor – good luck...and, as the painting is painted, they will get fucked...hard...ending without solutions).*

*Carr's prose is hard, and, by that, I don't mean bad – it is a harsh subject. While a bit heavy-handed, he has managed to juxtapose the dance done in prison to survive with the language used to describe dancing.*

*There is violence within this story, there is intrigue, there is the who-dun-it that keeps us reading. Carr's "Ballroom Dance..." exists to create a picture of those who dance because they have to as they've fucked over the rest of the world, and, in that sense, creates a picture of "well, I'm only reading about you getting raped because it seems like that is the only justice to be offered by our justice system (if I ever go to prison, I'm sure that that story will change, but, things being how they are, I'm good on going to prison) sort of picture."*

*"Ballroom Dancing in Cell Block 4" is exactly that, a dance, and it is your choice whether you would like to waltz through it.*

*I would suggest that you decide to do so.*

## QUALITY QUOTABLES *(for the love of language)*...

That night when I saw him for the first time, even in the dim light that shone into the cage from outside, his facial features appeared to be that of a madman. Even more disturbing, was that his body was nothing like that at all. It was like a troll's head had been transplanted onto a dancer's – a ballet dancer – body. He strode from the door of the cell to the toilet as if giving a performance. Even with his orange prison uniform on, I could see his body was lithe, sculpted like a dancer's. With the right training, he would have made an amazing ballroom dancer. He glanced at me once before standing at the toilet and removing his uniform. Naked, he pissed into the bowl, and then when finished stood there for several moments, obviously masturbating. Then he turned, showing a huge erection, and smiling at me in a way that sent chills down up my spine, and said, "Now, you get fucked."

### BALLROOM DANCING IN CELL BLOCK 4

by

Steve Carr

The closing of a prison cell door has a sound all its own, a noise that once heard from inside a cell can never be unheard. The soft grinding of iron followed by a metallic click is an echo that has resounded in my mind long after I walked out of the prison for the final time. The eight hours shut in the cell each night were the most harrowing part of every 24 hours I spent in cell block 4. It was the time I laid awake for most of the night thinking about what might be in store for me the next day if I didn't stay on my toes and keep my eyes wide open.

I was 24 the first time I was escorted into cell block 4 by two guards – the screws – one on each side of me, their meaty hands tightly gripping my arms. I had shackles on my feet and my hands were cuffed. I had spent time in county lockups a few times going back to my late teens for minor offenses, but this was my first time in a prison; in a maximum security unit. No one believed that I didn't murder the Patterson family who lived on an isolated farm where I sometimes worked. I was sentenced to life

in prison, spared being sent to the chair because the evidence was mostly circumstantial, but my fingerprints were all over everything, including the wood chipper where they had been ground to pieces, and that was all the jury needed to know.

As we walked into the unit, every prisoner on the floor turned to watch. In an instant, most of them sized me up, projecting on me their anger, fears, assumptions and lust. I had the build of Adonis from working two years on the Patterson farm bailing hay and tending to livestock, and the looks of a young Brad Pitt. I kept my eyes down, my mouth shut. After the screws removed the cuffs and shackles, my cell on the second tier of cells was pointed out to me. I walked up the metal stairs with a guard following behind. It was the middle of the day. I placed what few things I was allowed to have along with a sheet, blanket and pillow on the bare mattress on the bottom bunk bed.

“Play nice with Eddie and you’ll have fewer problems,” the guard said as he stood in the doorway watching me.

“Who’s Eddie?”

“Your cell mate. Your father, mother, brother, sister, wife, child, boyfriend, or girlfriend,” the guard replied. “You guys will figure that out on your own.”

“I’m innocent and don’t belong here,” I said.

He guffawed. “Man, with that line and your looks you’re going to be eaten alive in here with all the other innocent prisoners.”

I started to sit down on the bunk.

“Not yet, sweet pea,” he said. “You need to go down and meet your dancing partners.”

From that day on, from the very first day in cell block 4, I imagined I was participating in ballroom dancing, the one thing my mother had taught me before she blew her brains out with my father’s gun right after she taught me how to dance the Paso Doble.

I left the cell and walked down the stairs as the guard remained on the second tier, leaning on

the walkway railing, watching me, watching those watching me.

Three prisoners sitting at a table, holding playing cards in their hands, with the remainder of the deck stacked in the middle of the table, summoned me to where they sat, using their hands to signal me to come to them. Their leers were salacious and dangerous. One of them flicked his tongue like a snake. I walked on, found a seat at the back row of chairs lined up in front of the television, and sat down next to an inmate with snake tattoos that curled around his neck. I quietly watched the game show that was playing for ten minutes before he leaned over and whispered, “Beware of Eddie,” he said. His breath smelled of rubbing alcohol and orange juice.

I was going to ask him about Eddie, but the gates to the cell block opened and the evening meals were brought in inside large metal food carts. The inmates rose from their chairs, took a tray of food handed to them by prisoners from other units who worked in the kitchen, and returned to the tables and began to eat. I got a tray and took it to a table where no one else was sitting and stared at what looked like a portion of diarrhea and a pile of yellow, lumpy puke, and a slice of stale bread, until mealtime was over, and then I returned the tray to the cart, having not taken a single bite of the food.

Throughout the meal and until I returned to my cell that night before lights went out I scanned the faces of the other inmates, trying to imagine which one was Eddie. Other than vulgar asides and offers to be their protector, none of the other inmates talked to me and I talked to no one.

I learned from my time in several jails, never ask questions. In prison and in cell block 4 this seemed a wise decision.

I went to my cell just before lights went out, made my bed, and put my soap and toiletries on an empty shelf among the four of them built into the wall next to the square of tin affixed to the wall that served as the mirror just above the sink. I took off my shoes and tied them together and placed them under my mattress and got into bed, fully dressed.

Eddie entered the cell just as the lights went out. The cell door shut automatically a few

moments later.

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My cellmate for most of the time while I was in the slammer, after Eddie of course, Waltzes, a name I gave to him because he waltzed around the truth like a pro dancer, compared being shut in the cell to lying in a coffin with a locked lid. But being locked in didn't bother him, in fact he used it to his advantage. He convinced the prison psychologist he had claustrophobia resulting in him being given a handful of anti-anxiety drugs each night by one of the screws just before the cell doors were locked and lights went out. He sold each pill to one of the other prisoners the next day.

The guard known as Hammerhead handed Waltzes his anxiety pills while standing inside our cell. "You ain't foolin' anyone who knows ya with that claustrophobia crap," Hammerhead said. "Take 'em right here and now so that I can see ya doin' it."

"Sure Hammer," Waltzes answered and then popped them in his mouth.

"Open your trap," Hammerhead said as he stepped closer to Waltzes and flipped on his flashlight and shone into Waltzes' mouth.

Hammerhead looked in then flipped off his flashlight, turned and stomped out.

The lights went out and the cell door closed. Waltzes spit the pills into the palm of his hand.

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During breakfast, while staring at the small mound of greenish scrambled eggs on my tray, Quickstep sat down across from me. Nineteen and as thin as wire, I had never seen him eat anything in the eight months he had been on the unit. Who could blame him? He subsisted on something but damn if I knew what it was, but I wasn't curious enough or cared enough to ask. That thing about not trusting someone any further than you could throw them? I could have easily tossed him across the room and still didn't trust him one bit. That dance move in the quickstep known as the reverse spin defined saying anything to him. I made the mistake of telling him in confidence that my first cell mate, Eddie,

raped me the first night I spent in the cell with him, so that he didn't feel bad when it happened to him, repeatedly. Within fifteen minutes after he walked away, that news got all over the cell block. I was considered untouchable until then. It was yet another lesson to never trust a con.

It was known that he blabbed to the guards and administration every chance he got. What he got in return was anyone's guess.

"Can't you get your cell mate to sell me one of those pills?" he said in a whisper.

I stared into his beady eyes. "What pills?"

"Aw, geeze, man," I can't sleep at night," he said. "Can't you help a pal out?"

"You ain't my pal."

He looked down at my eggs and turned the same shade as they were. His large Adam's apple looked like it was going to be ejected from his skinny throat. He looked up at me, his eyes squinted. "So what did happen to your first cell mate, Eddie, I think his name was. No one vanishes just like how I heard happened."

I poked a fork into the eggs and then bravely shoved a forkful into my mouth and swallowed. "They cut him up and still serve his body parts for breakfast," I replied.

His face went ashen. He slapped his hand over his mouth, rose quickly from the chair, turned, and ran toward the bathroom.

Eddie has been gone for six years, and they were still looking for him. I had been involved in more investigations into his sudden disappearance than the number of times ol' lady Patterson cornered me in the barn, demanded rough sex from me, and got it.

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I was in the shower when Cha Cha stabbed me in the lower back with a shank made from the sharpened end of a toothbrush handle. The king of doing the side step to keep from being accused of anything he did, he waited until I whirled around and then stuck the bloody end of the toothbrush

handle to my neck. “This is a message from Palmeroy. It’s time to tell him what you know about Eddie.”

“I know nothing,” I stammered. “He disappeared years ago.”

“Tell it to Palmeroy,” he replied. He held the shank under the spraying water and then fled the showers.

Palmeroy – “Jive” – could send a fellow cell block inmate from this earth to his grave faster than a hip bump, without anyone asking questions afterward. From my first day in the cell block it was apparent he was the most powerful, and feared, prisoner in the unit. He had asked me only once since Eddie went missing what I knew where his “friend” had gone. Jive didn’t usually have friends. He had prisoners who he kept under his thumb. I had only had two conversations with him the entire time I had been in. Both were about living on a farm. He had grown up on one.

With blood running down my backside I wondered why Palmeroy was suddenly interested in Eddie. I stepped out of the shower and suddenly hit by the intense pain from the wound in my back, I fell to the floor.

I woke up on a gurney in the infirmary a few hours later. Waltzes was standing beside me.

“You in pain?” he asked.

“Yeah. Who let you in here?”

“I have friends in high places,” he said with a laugh. “Give me whatever pain meds they give you and I’ll give you a share of whatever I make off of ‘em.”

“Palmeroy sent me a calling card,” I said as a streak of pain went up my back. “You know why?”

“What would I know?” he replied. “I give Palmeroy free pills whenever he asks and stay out of his way otherwise.” He paused and then said, thoughtfully, “He’s up for parole.”

“He coulda just asked to talk to me.”

“Palmeroy never asks anything. He tells.”

I rolled onto my side and showed him my back. “They put stitches in me?”

“Yeah, but I was told you’ll be back in our cage tonight.”

#

Hammerhead was the screw on-duty. He refused to give Waltzes the pills. It took me holding Waltzes back to keep him from punching the guard in his big, ugly face. Waltzes took most things in stride, but being in stir nearly drove him insane. He didn’t handle being isolated very well. He was a ballroom dancer that needed to be around other dancers. Not having the pills hurt Waltzes in two ways, loss of income and possible anger from his “clients.” When Hammerhead left, with a huge, sadistic grin on his face, and the lights went off, Waltzes stripped off his clothes, climbed up to his bunk, and mumbled curse words aimed at the screw until he fell asleep.

I laid awake wondering what it was that Jive wanted with Eddie now. No one, not even a family member or anyone outside of the prison had asked about him since he had disappeared.

Let me tell you about Eddie. Evil was written on his face. That night when I saw him for the first time, even in the dim light that shown into the cage from outside, his facial features appeared to be that of a madman. Even more disturbing, was that his body was nothing like that at all. It was like a troll’s head had been transplanted onto a dancer’s – a ballet dancer – body. He strode from the door of the cell to the toilet as if giving a performance. Even with his orange prison uniform on, I could see his body was lithe, sculpted like a dancer’s. With the right training, he would have made an amazing ballroom dancer. He glanced at me once before standing at the toilet and removing his uniform. Naked, he pissed into the bowl, and then when finished stood there for several moments, obviously masturbating. Then he turned, showing a huge erection, and smiling at me in a way that sent chills down up my spine, and said, “Now, you get fucked.”

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The morning that Eddie disappeared his absence was noticed the moment that I walked out of my cell and stood outside the cell for headcount. No matter how many times the screws working that day screamed in my face or punched me in the gut, I had no answer as to what had happened to him. Oh, I knew alright, but I wasn't sayin'. You see, I had learned while working on the Patterson farm what it took to stomp down hay or to crush a rabid dog using just one booted foot, and that is what I did with Eddie. By the time I was done with him, every bone in his body was broken into small pieces, and as a dancer trained how to control the balls of my feet and the heels, I knew how to do it so that little blood was spilled. He was a skin-sack full of bones by the time I was done. I ripped open my mattress, hid his flattened body in it, and then made my bunk. The guards looked under our bunk and one even sat on my mattress, but not a single one thought to look "inside" our bunks.

Over the next week I tampered down the stench from his dead body by dousing the mattress with soapy water and filled the cage with an air freshener I made from roll-on deodorant and mint toothpaste that I smeared on the walls of the cell. Every night I flushed his body, bit by bit, bone fragment, patch of hair to broken tooth, down the toilet.

How Eddie "escaped" from prison by getting out through his locked cell during the night became a thing of legend and lore.

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At breakfast the word got around fast that Hammerhead had been fired when a large stash of drugs and pills had been found in his locker. It seemed a stupid thing for a guard with Hammerhead's experience to get caught with, but we didn't really question. Criminals, and stupid screws, aren't what or where they are because they're geniuses.

Hearing the news, Waltzes was beside himself with unbridled glee. One day of not having "product" to sell wouldn't be a problem to manage. Everyone liked Waltzes and one minor hiccup wouldn't cause him any lasting problems. During breakfast he chattered on like a wild monkey.

After breakfast I went to Jive's cell where he sat on the top of the bunk beds with a half dozen other inmates sitting on the floor staring up at him, seeming enthralled with what he was saying. He was the only inmate allowed by the screws to be in his cell during the day. As soon as I entered, he shoed everyone else out.

"Okay, pretty boy, time to tell me what you know about where Eddie went."

"You mind if I ask why you're asking me now?"

He squinted at me for a moment – as if examining me through a microscope – before speaking. "He and I were pals on the outside before we both landed up in here. He knows things I wouldn't like to get out that would definitely would throw a bucket of shit on me getting a parole. If he's out there somewhere, I need to know where and how much I got to worry about it."

"I see."

"So where'd he go?"

"Down the toilet," I told him. I then told him everything.

#

I don't know what role Jive played in my verdict being overturned, but six months later I danced out of prison remembering him telling me after spilling my guts about Eddie, "I owe you for your honesty."

I thought about going back to see what had become of the Patterson farm to dance on their graves, but haven't. That entire family, father, mother and two adult sons, were sick in the head and deserved being chewed up in the chipper. Not everything I've done needs to be talked about.

The End

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I have acquired this habit of writing a series of stories that generally have nothing in common other than a specific action or setting, a form of generating my own "prompts." In "Ballroom Dancing in Cell Block 4" I combined two of my more recent prompts, prisons and dancing.*

*The development of a story that integrated the terms used in an art form, dancing, with the violent world of a maximum security prison appealed to me. Thematically, the idea was to show that even in the worst circumstances, the concept of artistic expression still exists, even if only in the mind of a character. Because I have had over 520 stories – new and reprints – of almost all genres published in the last five years, my exact style varies greatly and would be hard to pin down. I read many short stories written by my peers, but try not to allow their “voices” influence my voice, but comparisons to some of them wouldn't be impossible to do, but also wouldn't be easy. My earliest writing influences are a varied mix that include W. Somerset Maugham, Joseph Conrad, Willa Cather, Frank Herbert and Zane Grey and the playwrights Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller.*

**AUTHOR BIO:** Steve Carr, from Richmond, Virginia, has had over 520 short stories published internationally in print and online magazines, literary journals, reviews and anthologies since June, 2016. He has had seven collections of his short stories published. His paranormal/horror novel Redbird was released in November, 2019. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize twice. His Twitter is @carrsteven960. His website is <https://www.stevencarr960.com/> He is on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/steven.carr.35977>