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I can march the heck out of anything, but I don't dance.

That's what I used to tell everyone, from my classmates in Journalism 101 at Mesa College to my employer in San Diego. They always laughed and shook their heads, and then they changed the subject. I should have known from previous experience not to boast so loudly about anything. After all, Fate loves irony. I realized that recently during a chance encounter.

"Are you a dancer?" asked a stranger as I passed him on the sidewalk outside of a storefront in my new home of Oceanside.

He cocked his head to one side as his eyes shifted quickly from my head to my feet and back up again.

"Yes," I replied, with only a slight hesitation.

I stood straighter and raised my chin slightly, aware that I had shed about twenty pounds and was wearing makeup. He smiled and nodded, then turned to continue on his previous route. I walked on as well, smiling to myself and wondering when I started calling myself a dancer.

The change happened innocently enough.

It began with a bus ride.

The 101 Breeze lumbered north on Coast Highway, a blue and green slug inching through the darkness of the winter night. I leaned against the open window and sighed. Cool air drifted in, smelling of salt water and exhaust fumes. I stifled a yawn and focused on the myriad of businesses flashing by the window.

Convenience stores, restaurants, and motorcycle dealerships flew by in a blur of color and light. A succession of unidentifiable stores followed a lot filled with used cars. The bus slowed as it approached a red light, allowing me to focus more clearly on yet another store, this one bathed in pale light beneath a sign identifying it as a liquor store. A hint of music drifted in with the exhaust fumes. Sitting up slightly, I peered through the window and tried to locate the source. Dark offices sprawled at the edge of the street, followed by

a wide expanse of brightly lit windows. The doors of this business were open, despite the chill of the evening, allowing the music to escape beyond the glass barrier. I stared through the windows into another world.

Two lines of people faced off against one another, stepping in unison forward, to the side, and back. They repeated the figure again and again, moving in time to the faint call of an unseen instructor. Suddenly, two new figures glided into view, swirling in such perfect symmetry around the others that I thought they were not two people after all, but a single entity flowing in time to what I now recognized as a waltz. My fatigue forgotten, I stared as the waltzing couple flowed beyond my field of vision, trying to see where they went. There was not enough time. The light chose that moment to change from red to green. The bus accelerated. The vision was gone, and the damage was done.

When the bus slammed to a stop a few blocks down the street, I lurched onto the sidewalk and hoisted my bag over my shoulder. Turning, I plodded uphill toward home. I tried to maintain my usual vigilance, but my attention was not on the dark bushes and dim streetlights around me. Delicate music haunted me. Visions of a magical world danced through my mind. Lost in the dream, I arrived at my apartment and groped in my bag for my keys. When I finally fumbled the door open, I staggered in and closed the door firmly behind me. My supper came from a can and I swallowed it absentmindedly, not caring if it was tuna or spaghetti. I set out my clothes for the next day, slid into bed, and stuffed my ears with my headphones. Dropping an Ozzy Osbourne cd into the player, I tried to block out the disturbing images, finally drifting into a sleep filled with fanciful dreams. At 0430, I rose and caught the 101 Breeze going south. At work, I focused on page after page of words and numbers and tried not to think of fanciful figures flitting through a fairy tale world. At 1600, I climbed aboard the first of several buses that began my two-and-a-half hour commute home and watched as the sun sank into the ocean, plunging the world into darkness once more. Again, I found myself staring through the window. Stores and dealerships flew by as I watched with increasing anticipation.

When I saw the sign of the liquor store, I pressed against the window and was rewarded once more by a fleeting glimpse into the other world. It was the same and yet different. The two waltzers did not flit through the vision. The music was trapped behind closed doors. Nonetheless, I was still deeply moved. I walked home in another daze and hit the rack, wondering why I felt haunted by something so trivial. Dance never interested me before. I've known since childhood that I didn't want to be a dancer.

I wanted to be a superhero.

My favorite television shows always had a hero or two. In my teens, I watched shows like "Airwolf," "The A-Team," and "Knight Rider." Before that, it was "The Justice League of America" and "The Hardy Boys/Nancy Drew Mysteries." Personally, I preferred the Hardy Boys over Nancy Drew and not just because of my soft spot for Frank Hardy.

“Nancy Drew always has to be rescued by her boyfriend,” I informed Mother one day. “But Frank and Joe Hardy fight when they get in trouble.”

She didn't roll her eyes at me, as she usually did when I expressed my opinion. She just stared at me with her mouth hanging open. However, she did indulge me, going so far as to buy Batman and Robin action figures for my birthday instead of another Barbie. I was ecstatic. My dynamic duo chased squirrels with me in the summer and fought crime in the living room during the winter.

One winter day while I recovered from a mild case of tonsillitis and Mother refused to allow me to play in the rain, I sat on the living room rug with Batman, Robin, and my stuffed lion, Leo. As Robin and Batman saved poor Leo from villainous Barbie, the typical Sunday afternoon programming changed to the finals of the Winter Olympics' ice skating competition. Seeking inspiration for my next adventure, I looked up and saw the ice skaters.

They were magical. They could have been elves or fairies from Middle Earth. Poor Batman and Robin sprawled on the carpet, forgotten, while I watched the skaters leap and glide across the ice. I even watched the results. For a few stolen moments I wished I could move the way those skaters moved. Skating was not possible, not in the small West Texas town where I lived, and I already knew I wouldn't be allowed to take dancing lessons. We couldn't afford it. When the program was over, I picked up my toys and tried to forget that brief dream. It didn't matter, anyway. In just a few months, I would begin playing the saxophone in my elementary school music class. That would transition into my time playing in the Marine Corps Band. From there I would eventually work for a library service in San Diego, and ultimately be tantalized again by that forgotten, and forbidden, world.

For a few weeks, I rode the bus, worked, rode the bus, and repeated it again and again. Each day I perked up as the 101 neared the end of its route, stealing another look through the glass into that magical world. Still I waited, not knowing what I was waiting for, until one typical Friday morning in late April. It was washday.

As usual, I arrived at my favorite laundry shortly after it opened at 0600. I washed the clothes, put them in the dryer, and tried to guess which shirt would land on top at the end of the cycle. That was when I realized that something had to change, and soon. I folded my still-warm clothes, stowed them neatly in my sea bag, and considered resuming my Tae Kwon Do classes. I even thought I could fit it into my tight budget. Planning my next move, I wandered through the door of the Laundromat and turned to the right instead of to the left. I realized my error when I reached the next intersection and faced a liquor store instead of the 101 Café. Pivoting sharply, I marched back the way I had come, looking at the dark windows as I went.

The businesses were closed, but one very wide set of windows caught my eye. I stepped closer to the dark glass and peered inside. Where desks and merchandise filled the rooms of the other businesses in this block, this room was open. A large expanse of wooden flooring stretched unhindered from one side of the room to the other. A sign above the doors announced that this was the Fred Astaire Franchised Dance Studio. Bright letters on the window offered an introductory lesson for \$10.00 and promised a variety of dances. Rarely one to do things on impulse, I took a moment to evaluate the situation.

My birthday had just passed with almost no recognition from anyone other than a quick text from my sons. It wouldn't hurt to give myself a small gift.

I needed something new.

Martial arts was familiar and chances were the martial arts schools would still be around next month.

\$10.00 was much less than I would pay for a martial arts lesson.

There was nothing to lose, except \$10.00 and part of an already dull day. I made a note of the normal business hours, 12:00 noon to 9:00 p.m. Monday through Friday, and decided to come back on my next day off. Just before 1:00 pm the following Monday, I walked to the studio and marched boldly inside.

The floor was as large as it looked through the window, with a narrow strip of carpet running around the perimeter. There appeared to be two small offices at the back of the building. The only people in view were three women to my left. Clad in softly flowing tops, tight leggings, and high heels, they were slender, graceful, and elegant. In short, they were everything I was not. I glanced down at my oversized t-shirt, faded jeans, and scuffed sneakers and thought of the words of a country music song: "What was I thinking?" Rejecting the thought of making a calculated move to the rear and through the door -- Marines don't retreat -- I considered the best route to find someone in charge without getting in the way of the dancers. I lifted my right foot and stepped to my right, planning to make my way around the perimeter and approach the office at the rear.

"Are you a new student?" A female voice called, much closer than I expected. She had approached me while I assessed my shabby attire and wondered about protocol.

I turned my body quickly toward her, to the left, with my right foot still trying to move to the right. I managed to catch myself and stumbled as opposed to falling, but I still felt foolish. I tried not to imagine what this graceful creature must think of me.

"Do you need to speak to someone?"

It was the same woman who asked me if I was a new student, a question that I still hadn't

answered. I stammered something about the \$10.00 lesson on the window and took one step back. She put an arm around me and drew me across the floor toward the rear of the room.

“Let’s see if we can find someone to talk to you,” she said soothingly.

We made our way across the floor without further incident. As my foot touched the carpet near the back, a door burst open. A stream of men in dark pants and black vests flowed into the room. In my agitated state, I could only compare it to the storming of the beach at Normandy, a comparison that was not too far off the mark considering that the owner of the studio, Kage Hart, had served in the Marine Corps. During a confusing round of introductions, I learned that the dance instructors came from a wide variety of backgrounds. I knew from experience this would increase my chances of learning, so I tried to answer all of their questions about my previous dance experience and my goals. In a matter of minutes one of the men said he would be honored to be my instructor. He then scheduled a 45 minute lesson on the following Friday.

I left, wondering what demon had possessed me. Other than a few times when my now-ex-husband dragged me to a bar, I never danced. I wasn’t even sure that what we did could be called dancing. Essentially, I supported his drunken deadweight as he dragged me around the floor. How neither of us ended up wounded was beyond me. Add to that miserable introduction into dance a multitude of injuries suffered after my 30th birthday, and one might understand why I never considered dancing as a pastime.

A broken bone in my left foot, sustained while practicing a jump-reverse-outer-crescent kick during my favorite martial arts class, healed well but forced strain on my other leg. My arm and neck were sore for months after being rear-ended at a red light. Soon after that, I fell on a concrete sidewalk, landing with considerable force on my left knee. The final injury occurred while my son and I rode bikes in a state park in Texas. That time I managed to either tear or sprain a large area around the big toe of my right foot. A little soaking fixed it for a while, but the pain in the toe bothered me for some time. When I finally landed a job that allowed me to go to school and provided insurance, I decided to have it evaluated.

“You’ve got a good case of Dancer’s Toe,” the doctor stated. He smiled and seemed to think that was good news. I thought he was being sarcastic.

“You’re mistaken,” I informed him. “I don’t dance. I do martial arts. I hike and ride bikes with my son. I am not a dancer.”

He shrugged and turned away, oblivious to the insult he had given me. I took a deep breath, ready to chastise him, until I realized that he was not just smiling: He was grinning from ear to ear. I pulled my socks and shoes on and gathered the rest of my

things in silence. Limping from the examination room, I barely paused at the reception area to verify that the exam was covered at no charge. Still seething, I limped to my F150 and hopped into the cab. I turned the key in the ignition and shifted the transmission into gear, favoring my foot and thinking about the time I had wasted that day.

“I can march the heck out of anything, but I do not dance,” I grumbled. The pickup rumbled smoothly into the street and through the intersection as I headed home. “I’ve marched in the Marine Band and in my high school band. I am only a few weeks away from my First Degree Black Belt. I wear hiking boots and still take a 30-inch stride. Dancers,” I think I actually snorted at this point, “Are graceful and wear silly clothes.”

If anyone had told me that a few years later I would be eagerly waiting for a dance lesson I would have told him or her, in my Mother’s words, to “take a long walk off of a short pier.” Fate loves irony.

I arrived 30 minutes early for my lesson. This time the perky office manager addressed me. She handed me a clipboard with a form to fill out. I asked when I could pay the \$10.00.

“I can take care of that right now,” she said brightly. I pulled out my wallet, she pulled out her receipt book, and that was that.

I sat down and read the form. It asked for standard contact information and information about the length of time I had danced. I whizzed through that part. I already knew my contact information and it doesn’t take long to write ‘a little waltz and a little cotton-eyed-joe’.

The third part was not as easy. It consisted of a list of dances from which I was supposed to choose what I wanted to learn. I recognized waltz, tango, and even foxtrot from various old movies, but some of the other names worried me. What in the world were samba and mambo? Wasn’t one of those a deadly viper in South America? I studied the list and marked almost all of the dances on the form, avoiding the ones that might require antivenin.

Just then, the gentleman doomed to be my instructor approached me. He looked suave, handsome, and impossibly young.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes,” I answered. I stood and he placed his hand close to his vest, with the elbow angled toward me. I stared, perplexed, before realizing what I was supposed to do. “Oh. Right.”

I put my hand on his arm. Pausing just long enough to reposition my hand slightly, he

smiled and escorted me around the studio. In five minutes I learned where the exits and bathrooms were, where the break room was, and that there was a second ballroom. He led me onto the dance floor and danced me through the basic steps of waltz, foxtrot, tango, rumba, cha cha, and swing. I was relieved to know that I wouldn't have to deal with a serpent just yet. After 30 minutes, he took me to a small meeting room at the side. I sat down, and he showed me the back of the form I had filled out earlier. This was the assessment. I waited, trying not to appear nervous.

"I have good news for you, Susie," he said, giving me a huge and slightly lopsided smile.

I waited expectantly.

"You are teachable. Your rhythm is actually very good."

I beamed.

"However," he continued, his smile growing wider as my face fell, "You do need to look up more and smile. I also want you to learn to follow instead of guessing what is coming next."

That confused me. My attitude is 'lead, follow, or get out of the way' and I do mean, 'Get Out of the Way.' My thoughts must have shown on my face, because he explained that the gentleman is supposed to lead and I, as the lady, am supposed to wait for him to let me know what to do next. I wanted to ask how I am supposed to know without guessing, but he didn't give me a chance to ask. He seemed to understand my concern.

"Don't worry," he reassured me. "That will come with time. Overall, I believe you will gain a lot from taking more lessons. My recommendation is that you start with our foundation plan, and at the end of that we can discuss what your next goals are."

"I want to learn more," I said promptly, surprising myself. "But I am on a very limited budget. I have to know what your rates are before I can commit to anything."

"I understand that," he said. "We all have tight budgets these days, right? Wait here. I will be right back with someone who can give you more details."

He practically bounded out of the room, returning in a matter of minutes with the general manager.

I repeated that I wanted to continue to dance and emphasized that I had a limited budget. I didn't want them to waste their time with a big sales pitch if I couldn't afford their rates. The general manager said he could work around that and threw a series of questions at me.

"Are you going to use your new dance skills at clubs or dances?"

“No,” I replied. “I don’t go to clubs.”

“So, are you interested in competing?” he asked intently.

“I’m not really competitive. Even in high school I competed against myself, not against other people.”

“OK,” he said, and thought for a moment. “Then have you been following ‘Dancing with the Stars’?”

“My roommate watches it,” I answered carefully, trying not to cringe at the memories of her yelling at the contestants as though they could hear her through the screen. “I really don’t watch it much. I’m not into the judging and criticizing bit.”

My instructor and the general manager exchanged glances. One seemed eager, and the other was doubtful. Clearly, they needed more information.

“I know it sounds odd,” I tried to explain. “I was going to start martial arts again, but I think that I need something else. I want something that will help bring balance to my life. If I can afford your rates, I would like to take more lessons. When I figure out what I’m missing, I’ll know what I need out of this and I can answer your questions.”

That seemed to appease the manager. After a little more discussion, we agreed on a schedule for lessons at a specific price. I also learned that I could participate in any of the group classes that were my level. Since my level was beginner, that meant I could attend the beginner class every weekday. It was more than I hoped for when I walked in. We rose and I extended my hand to seal the deal with a handshake, but instead found myself wrapped in a gentle hug. I learned later that everyone hugs there. I have never considered myself a person who hugs, and I wondered how well I would handle this new challenge. Oh, well. Adapt and overcome.

“Thank you for the lesson today, Susie,” my instructor said, hugging me out the door. “You have a wonderful walk home. I look forward to seeing you for our next lesson.”

I walked home in a daze. My feet struck the sidewalk in a steady heel-toe heel-toe cadence, but my mind still danced to the slow, slow, quick quick rhythm of the foxtrot. Instead of hearing heavy metal riffs from Ozzy Osbourne or Metallica in my head, I heard Frank Sinatra and Michael Buble. I couldn’t wait for my next lesson.

Over the next few months I learned how to stand and what a dance frame was, how to bend and straighten my legs for different kinds of dances, and how to turn without tripping over either my feet or my partner’s feet. I even learned how to follow the leader without trying to take him down, most of the time. Now I offer encouragement to other students as we waltz around the room, rising and falling in time to the music. The

anniversary of the day I started dance has passed, and I look back at my new skills with more than a little awe. Yet with everything I have gained from my dance lessons, at some point something was lost: Almost all of the pain in my toe disappeared.

Did I mention fate and irony? I had to become a dancer to get rid of my Dancer's Toe.