

Dancer

Short story by Allison Fine

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They called him “Dancer,” perhaps because even as a small child he could dance his feelings. He danced a dance for every occasion and even when there was no occasion. One afternoon his grandfather died. His mother was standing at the sink, washing the dishes and letting her tears fall into the soapy water. He came into the kitchen, a mere boy of only four, and told her grandfather was going to make him dance. His mother turned around and saw her little dark haired boy whirling around on the kitchen floor, looking decidedly odd. After that, his uncles called him “Dancer.”

“He dances out his inner self, the energy of grandfather speaks through his moving,” said Uncle Frank, the mystical one.

“Oh right!” Florence laughed, a drink in her hand. She didn’t believe anyone. She never did. Carl really didn’t care; he was listening to the music that moved like lightening bolts inside of his body and made him nervous. He just had to dance; there was no way around it. No other thing would settle the moment; it was like a nervous tic or something strange. No one knew what it meant, least of all him. It might be it was grandfather. As he got older, people thought it was less and less strange and more and more a thing they admired. It interested them.

Carl was good at math and engineering and putting things together after they had broken, so he got into the family’s good graces. They were more amenable to his dancing when he fixed broken things, but it didn’t matter. He danced anyway. Girls loved it.

When he was fourteen he did not look like a boy. The man had already bloomed and his other uncle, the one that didn't come around much and had more of the money gave him a razor because he needed it. He started shaving. At school, girls would suddenly giggle and extend their bodies in his direction. It made him nervous and he wanted to dance for them. Sometimes, he would move a certain small way and they would stare at him in awe. It was a thing he had, he knew it gave him power and he respected it. He didn't dare abuse that power or grandfather would leave. He knew that, even early on.

One girl in particular noticed him. Perhaps he noticed her. It wasn't clear which. She had a secret beauty that hadn't been explored yet and she certainly was not aware of it. In fact, she was carrying the illusion that she was plain. Her clothes were not new or stylish--she was poor. He could tell that. He thought his family was on the poor side, although they claimed they were "middle class". He knew he was not as poor as her, the way young people do. They instinctively understand the class system even if they don't participate in it. His family could buy new stuff; they had a new Ford Bronco, his mother got him Doc Martins when he wanted them, they took ski trips once a year. He also felt he knew more than her because she looked as if she had not experienced anything. He liked feeling like a protector; there was a new kind of power in it he had never experienced before.

She was slightly ashamed of herself he could see that. He didn't enjoy watching her feel ashamed. It made him want to hold her in his arms and rock her like a baby and tell her the kinds of things his mystical uncle would say. He wanted to show her his

favorite trees and those spots in nature where he would go to dance alone. He wanted to dance for her.

He called her Lone Girl, but not to her face. She would have been hurt. Her name was Mary-something.

Mary caught the flavor of the dance. During school she would look at him, look at his back when he walked down the hallway. She watched the minute movements of his legs, the muscles in his back, his arms, his head, the entire process of his movement in life seemed wondrous to her. It seemed as if he were dancing all the time. Her friends knew nothing about her feelings, but she had heard that he was some kind of guy and a dancer. His family was Indian but not the poor Indian that lived on the north side. His father had a printing business and Carl was going to take the business someday. That's what she heard. He drove his father's Bronco sometimes.

Mary's father walked out of the house for days at a time. He would tell them he was going out for something and then there would follow those empty days afterwards. Her mother was beaten up by it all. Not physically. She just never looked as if life meant anything to her. She had had cancer but she was over it. Her skin turned gray afterwards and stayed that way. Mary hoped she would never look like her mother. Mary's mother noticed the beauty in Mary but never said a word about it. She figured it was better no one knew, she decided. Beauty was dangerous and often led to tragedy. Since Mary's father didn't think she would amount to much, Mary pretty much agreed. She "plained herself down" as her grandmother once said, and forgot about it. They never had enough money for good clothes anyway. Her skin was lovely and clear and had a glow so she didn't bother much about makeup. Some of the girls in school thought that if Mary did

something with herself she'd be a knockout. Maybe if she had more confidence. Mary ignored it all. The window of her soul was open to another place and she was anxious to get through with school and visit that place.

There was a dance at school. Mary didn't want to go. She wasn't friends with any of the girls and the boys ignored her. She was tired of the whole thing and tried not to think about it. Of course, Carl's friends kept asking him if he was going.

To his wonderment and dismay he was popular. He couldn't figure it out. He ran track and always came in second. He just didn't have the will to be the absolute winner all the time. He knew he could if he wanted to and that was all that mattered. His brother was younger than him, looked up to him, and wished he could be like him.

“Why don't you win, Carl—you could if you wanted to.”

“I got the Varsity letter---that's enough.”

“But winning is everything.”

Carl looked at him and smiled. Even at this age he understood the failure of winning.

“You just don't understand, Bill. Anyway, you're more like me than I am. You can be the winner for both of us.”

“Oh, that's just shit.”

“I'm serious. You can run faster than I could at your age, anyway. You got more muscles--everything. By the time you get my age you'll surpass me.”

“Right.” Bill smiled at his brother. He loved him in the way a small brother can love a big brother who moves in a different way—forges a different path. Carl was like a God to Bill. Bill was protective of him; but he also thought that maybe Carl was just a

little bit crazy. No one in the family ever talked about it that way because Carl was supposed to carry the torch of their grandfather—he was the spirit of the past; something good and above all this stuff. Not only that, but Carl was good in school, he fixed everything in the house and he didn't drink or do rebellious things. Late at night he would play all kinds of strange music and move around in his room--they could hear the floor squeak.

“He’s dancing for grandfather,” mother would say, as if it were normal or something. Bill didn't want any part of this. He would always defend Carl, however, if anyone even suggested he was a mighty bit weird.

“Grandfather’s dead,” Bill would say. Mother would look at him for a moment, one of the Uncles would clear his throat, and someone would get up and start doing the dishes or something. It was never a thing you could really talk about. Bill sensed there was some evil family secret hidden in the closet concerning grandfather and that was why no one would ever say anything. Carl never said anything either, except those nights he would dance. It seemed to go in spurts. Maybe it was because mother would never allow anyone to interfere with his creativity.

“You have an edge with women,” Bill said to Carl one day after school. Carl was pouring juice into two tall glasses. “Females think you’re sexy.”

“So what?” Carl set the glasses on the table and looked at Bill. Bill was only 15 months younger and already a few inches taller. Bill would surpass Carl in many ways; Carl knew it. He also knew that Bill would never dance. It just wasn't in him, and grandfather wasn't visiting both of them at the same time. That kind of energy was a once in a lifetime thing--some people had it and some didn't. Bill didn't really understand all

of this and Carl wasn't about to explain it to him. For one thing, Bill didn't care. And for the other thing, Carl didn't care to explain it. Therefore, it hung between them like a holiday bauble high over their heads--suspended, never to drop, and never to go away either.

Carl looked at Bill and realized their destinies were not the same. Bill would enjoy sex and marriage and money all the current Gods of life. Carl, on the other hand, was uninterested in these things. He had a question about the fate of the universe. Is it going to last forever? He would ask himself. He liked reading books on physics--books dealing with quarks, dark matter, black holes, and quantum theory. Was he a scientist? He didn't know. He only knew that particles were dancing all over the universe inside atoms and outside of atoms, there were quarks and tachyons and expanding universes and bending space. He knew that the revolution of life had to occur on a small scale, the tiniest scale possible. Creation was God and God was the subtlest, most intelligent energy Carl could conceive of. "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious", said Albert Einstein, and as Carl read this he felt he was an integral part of this mystery. The quest for energy and the reason why it danced, vastness, greatness, frontiers, smallness, infinitesimalness, it all made Carl feel wonderful inside. A warmth came over him when he imagined all this and then he would put on some music; Bill Evans or McCoy Tyner-- it was always jazz because one of uncles had played the sax and he was always instructing Carl about jazz. Jazz would play in his room and he would dance to it.

The jazz uncle once told him jazz was akin to death and God at the same time. He said snow fell and made more noise than the silent moments between the notes that Miles

Davis played. He said that Bill Evans was the wonderment of complexity and simplicity, that Louis Armstrong could cure cancer. This uncle was sad except when the music played.

Some nights Carl would walk out alone in the dead of winter. He could hear the heavy snow falling from the laden boughs of trees, watch the stars looking old and bright, hear his own steps crunching on the deep snow, the silence of all around him, a church bell from somewhere down in the valley, the womanly feel of the universe enveloping him in her womb of wonder. This he wanted to share with Mary. He had no clue how. She was not talking to him and he could not yet talk to her. She didn't seem to want anything and words failed him anyway.

One day in English class, two days before the dance, Mary came in late to class. She looked haggard and poor and old. This was not a thing a young girl of sixteen ought look like. People turned their heads away ever so slightly because she was a pitiful thing and because deep down they felt superior and disgusted at the same time.

Carl wanted her to do better, to overcome this vexing life that had made her so unappealing and aged. Carl looked over to her as she sat down and gave her his best smile. Her transparent blue eyes stared back at him, totally blank. He just could not figure her out. They were reading Emily Dickinson in class. Mary didn't even have her book. Carl leaned back and whispered to her:

“Where's your book?”

She looked at him and said nothing, looking down at some spot on the desk.

“Huh?” He insisted.

“Carl,” Mrs. Centarro spoke. “What's going on?”

“Nothing. I just--wanted to share my book with Mary.”

“Fine. Mary--push your desk over to Carl’s.”

And so it began. The most unlikely romance in the whole school. Carl August, the dancing, moving, sexy, long-haired boy wonder with this plain and cheerless girl. No one knew that deep down inside Carl felt they were exactly alike. She could dance--he knew it. She just hadn’t tried it yet.

One day Carl invited Mary over to the house for dinner. His mother was shocked. She didn’t sound like the kind of girl she hoped for Carl. But then, Carl had defied her hopes many times before.

“You having a white girl over here? Why can’t you invite a nice Indian girl or something?”

“What--you mean one of our cousins? There aren’t any Indian girls in our school mom, and besides, your racism isn’t politically correct.”

“Oh, I see,” his mother attacked the last dish in the sink and turned the dishwasher on. He could hear the swishing of the water.

“You are in love.”

Bill laughed as he grabbed the juice from the fridge.

“No--I’m not in love. I hardly know her. We’re just becoming friends.”

“Are you gonna get it finally?” Bill asked.

“”Getting it”, as you put it, is not the only goal of dating,” Carl said with patience.

“Bill--” their mother warned. “That’s not a way to talk.”

“Everybody in our school has sex except us.”

“You’re too young,” their mother laughed.

“I’m not.” Carl moved toward the dining room.

“Come back here,” she said.

“Come back here,” Bill mocked and followed his brother.

“Go away, Bill. Carl and I got to talk alone,” their mother said.”

“Shit.” Bill loped off reluctantly, standing quietly in the dining room for a minute.

Carl leaned out the kitchen door.

“Get lost.”

“Okay,” Bill jumped upstairs two at a time and went into his room. Loud music blared and the door slammed shut.

“He has no taste for music,” Carl said.

“Oh--you’re like an old man. You listen to the same shit Francis listens to. All that jazz stuff. I hate it. We grew up with it.”

“So what do you like?”

“Sit down--I’ll make you something to drink.”

She went over to the cupboard, pulled down some whiskey and a shot glass.

“Here--wet your whistle with this.”

“Is this legal, mom?”

“Shut up and drink!” She poured herself a shot and sat at the table across from him.

“My daddy had me drinking at a young age--you can too. All your friends--their parents never let them have any alcohol and then they go out and drink like maniacs at those parties--beer keggers and what-not. I mean--it’s okay to have a bit now and then, and realize that it can just be a small part of your life.”

“Right.” Carl took a drink. It tasted hot and burning and went down hard. He took another drink--his tummy started to feel warm inside, his eyes were seeing things brighter.

“Whiskey increases the intelligence,” his mother said as she poured herself another glass.

“You’re not going to become a drunk like your sister, are you?”

“If I was gunna become a drunk I would’ve already done it by now, son. Your dad won’t let that happen.”

He took another drink.

“So--is this girl something pretty?”

“She’s nice.”

“What does that mean?”

“She doesn’t flirt, she doesn’t play games, she has a hard life, I think.”

“You always feel sorry for everybody. Just don’t forget--you’re a Dancer. Never forget that.”

“I don’t. How could I? It’s something I just do.” He took a drink. “I really don’t like this stuff.” He pushed the glass away.

“Okay by me. Want some juice or something? Milk?”

She got up to go to the fridge.

“Milk.”

She poured him a large glass of milk and sat down again.

“When’s she coming?”

“Tomorrow night. I’m gunna share my notes on Emily Dickinson with her.”

He got up.

“That all?”

“Yeah.”

He walked out through the double doors leading to the dining room, his long black hair shining and swinging on his back. She watched him go with some kind of desire. If only she'd married that guy she met at the Pow Wow that summer instead of Stan. But Stan was a good guy and brought home the bacon, so who was she to complain? He wasn't handsome, he wasn't much of an Indian, really, except his mother was half Chippewa, and he wasn't that great in bed. Still, they had two kids and who was she to complain? Who was she to complain?

The next day after school Carl came home and saw Aunt Florence screaming on the front lawn. She was in one of her crazy drunk fits and he always knew the thing to do. Grabbing her by the waist, he picked up her body and carried her into the kitchen. His mother was standing at the sink, as always, trying to wash the same dish over and over, crying into the water.

“What the fuck's going on?” Carl placed Florence into a chair, which she slid off. Florence starting screaming in that high-pitched scream that made shudders go up and down Carl's body.

“Shut up!” he screamed back at her.

“Don't talk to her that way, son.” His mother turned off the water in the sink.

“I can't stand this screaming in the house. Why are you drunk? Why is she here?”

He pleaded with his mother. She shrugged and moved away from the sink.

“My Hughie--my Hughie!” Florence screamed over and over like a broken banshee.

“God--I hate this place.” Carl went out onto the porch, slamming the door behind him. His book bag was still on the lawn. He retrieved it and slammed it on the three legged table Uncle Hughie said he was going to fix over fourteen years ago. The table toppled over with the weight and all his books and papers slid out onto the porch.

“Shit.” He was long past worrying what the neighbors would think. A car pulled up and Bill stepped out. Carl heard girls voices giggling and Bill looked back, giving them one of his waves, flipping his hair--Carl knew the whole routine. It made him sick, especially right now.

“Where have you been?”

“What do you mean--I had practice after school.” Bill swung his book bag onto the porch. He saw Carl’s stuff strewn all over, the 3-legged table on it’s side, and heard the muffled screaming inside the house.

“What’s going on?”

“Florence.”

“Oh shit. Well, let’s get the whiskey and go upstairs. I know where mom keeps it.”

“So what--you gonna end up like her?” He pointed to the house.

“No--I just like to loosen up--unwind, you know.”

“Right. Forget it. My girlfriend’s coming over tonight.”

“That bow-wow is your girlfriend?” Bill knew this would be incendiary, he just couldn’t resist. Carl stared him down, with that look in his eyes. Bill knew it well; it

meant back off or die. He didn't think this was a good day to die so he skedadled, grabbing his backpack and running into the house, running smack into Florence who was deliriously wandering about the living room, knocking small things over as she went.

“Bill--Bill, my beautiful Bill--you know what happened to my Hughie?”

“No!” Bill ran into the kitchen and saw his mother standing with her back to the dishwasher, smoking a cigarette, drink in hand.

“Mom.” He took the cigarette from her hand, she had quit twelve years ago when his dad had had his heart attack, and he attempted to remove the drink as well, but she held on tight.

“Stop it Bill. I'm just trying to calm Florence down.”

“What's the matter with her?”

“Hughie ran off with that girl.”

“What girl?”

“His secretary's daughter.”

“His secretary's daughter?”

“She's only seventeen but she lied and told him she was twenty one.”

“Jesus. I got homework.”

Bill left the scene to Carl. Carl had the temperament for it.

Florence finally wound down and Carl helped her upstairs and she slept it off in the spare room.

“She's embarrassing,” he said to his mother.

“She's my sister.”

“I don't care. You got to draw the line somewhere.”

“Family’s family.”

“My girlfriend’s coming over tonight, remember?”

“So, now she’s your girlfriend?”

“Whatever.” Carl was ready to give up on the whole thing. He went out onto the porch, gathering his papers and books together. A small piece of paper flew out onto the lawn and he retrieved it as the wind blew further from him. It was the poem he had been thinking about recently. Shadows and light. That was the energy that came to him. He wanted to dance. It was the only way to release that pent-up feeling. He knew his mother would understand. Gathering his books and things, he slammed them haphazardly on the porch, went back out onto the lawn and danced to a tune only he could hear. Bill looked out from his bedroom window and saw his weird brother dancing on the lawn.

“Shit,” he said from underneath his bowels somewhere. “The dipshit’s dancing in broad daylight right in front of everything.” He closed the shade to his window and put on the loudest music he could find to drown out the thoughts he was thinking. Maybe he was afraid. Maybe he was jealous. Maybe he wanted to go out and dance with his brother too.

He came into the house just as his mother was setting the table.

“So when’s she coming?”

“I have to go pick her up. Can I take the Bronco?”

“Yes--keys are on the sideboard.”

He grabbed the keys and ran out. His mother continued to set the table, pretending she had not seen him dance. Whenever he danced she felt this strange sensation inside her

chest--as if her heart was being opened against its will, in spite of all the ache and pain.

Her husband walked in just as Carl was leaving.

“So, where’s he going?” Carl Sr. said as he took his shirt off.

“Pick up the girlfriend.”

“So--we caught a fish, eh?” He laughed, turned on the TV, and sat in his recliner, dead to the world.

She brought him his beer and a couple of chocolate chip cookies.

“I like these.” He kissed her on the cheek. She always felt better once he got into the recliner and watched TV. It made her world complete.

Carl grabbed his book of Emily Dickinson before he went to the car in the garage. He opened the book at random and read just as he turned the engine on.

I gained it so,

By climbing slow.

By catching at the twigs that grow

Between the bliss and me.

It hung so high

As well the sky

Attempt by strategy.

I said I gained it,-

This was all.

Look, how I clutch it,

Lest it fall,

In addition, I a pauper go;

Unfitted by an instant's grace
For the contented beggar's face
I wore an hour ago.

“The contented beggar's face I wore an hour ago,” he spoke aloud as he backed the Bronco out of the drive on the way to Mary's. He imagined her small undernourished face, with its wisps of blond hair in her eyes, looking up at him, wondering, slightly cynical, unbelieving, sad, scared--all those emotions floating over her seemingly bland features. He wanted to carve them out with his knife-eyes--make her see him as he really was, see herself as the granite-chipped eagle she really was. He just wasn't sure how to do this, or even how to put it into words. It was just a feeling, soaring high, like an eagle in the sky of his mind.

He came into the house, Mary following behind him. His mother looked at her. She was a wisp of a thing, poor looking and undernourished, small sad face and no-color hair. Could actually be pretty if she took the time. Florence was rooting around in the cupboards. Carl flashed her a nasty look and she flashed it back.

“Got any turtle wax?”

“What for?” Carl snapped.

“Never mind. Got any flour?”

“Other cupboard, Florence,” his mother spoke patiently. “So--”

“This is Mary, mom.”

“Hi.” Mary shrunk behind Carl. The brightness of the kitchen and the easiness with which everyone moved about overwhelmed her.

“Carl, that old dishwasher is on the blink again. Can you have a look at it?”

Florence was unloading the dirty dishes from it as she spoke.

Carl walked over to her, pinching her arm slightly, and had a look at the dishwasher.

“I can fix it.”

“Good. I hate doin’ dishes by hand.”

“Since when do you do dishes around here anyway?” His mother laughed. Just then his father came in from the den. He saw a bag of donuts on the counter and grabbed it.

“Anybody want donuts?” he said with his mouth full of donut.

“Not now, dear. Carl’s got a friend and we’re having dinner soon.” Carl Sr. kissed his mother lightly on the lips then spied Mary standing forlornly off to one side, trying to disappear as best she could.

“Hello. I’m Carl’s dad, Carl Sr.”

“Hi.” She held out a white transparent hand. Carl Sr. could see the blue veins showing through. Her tiny white vulnerable hand made him feel a certain longing inside, a feeling, long buried. When was the last time he touched the delicate hand of a woman that made his heart pound? Must of been when he and Linda first starting dating and that was two lifetimes ago. He took her hand gently, as if it would break, feeling the small bones underneath, the sweet smooth flesh, and the tiny fingers. It made his heart break. He felt the urge to kiss her hand.

“Oh for God’s sake, Carl,” Florence shouted in her half-drunk, ugly, whiny voice.

“He’s such a God damn romantic.”

“It’s old fashioned, but so what?” Linda laughed again.

Everyone looked at Mary. Her face began to show color. She withdrew her hand. It was burning in the spot where Carl Sr. had kissed it. She felt the kiss had gone all through her body like a shock. She looked at Carl Jr. for reassurance.

He was looking at the dishwasher.

“I can take this thing apart tomorrow.”

Carl stood up suddenly and gently grabbed Mary’s elbow, moving her away from the circle of family that had started to close in tight around her.

“Want to see my room?” It seemed to her he was just breezing by the whole thing. He thought it might as well be time for her to know how the whole family danced, and no mistake, his father danced more dramatically than all of them.

“We’re going upstairs.” He pointed to his books. “Homework.”

“You bet,” Florence said sarcastically as she lit a cigarette.

“Don’t light that in here.” Linda grabbed the cigarette from her mouth and threw it in the sink.

“Jesus.”

“Smoke outside, Florence. You know the rules,” Carl Sr. said as he left the kitchen. He was looking forward to the recliner, his drink, and the news, in that order. The small little den that served as the TV room was all for him, Linda made sure of that. The little bar at one end held the promise of a moment’s peace as he made his usual after work drink. He eased into the recliner, grabbed the remote, and lost himself in the flickering images before him. Switching, switching, from one channel to another. As the drink eased his energy he started to savor the fantasy of Mary’s hand and what promise it

held. That tiny little face, the body underneath the loose clothes. He would love to be the one to unveil that mystery, but it was Carl Jr.'s turn now.

Bill was in his room when Mary and Carl came upstairs. He wanted to peek inside but he was suddenly shy. This was the first girl Carl had ever brought home. Mary sat on the bed watching Carl as he brushed his hair.

“I love your hair,” she said simply.

“Me too.” he jumped onto the bed, making her rock. He pushed her gently back, looking at her a moment. She could hardly breathe. Her heart was pounding madly. He kissed her ever so lightly on the lips and broke away with sudden force.

“You like Emily Dickinson?”

“I don't understand her. Do you?”

“Yes. She felt things, went inside herself and brought out all that stuff. She danced, all right. She was a real dancer in the moonlight.”

“Danced?”

“Well--it's a manner of speech, you know. It just means--” he tried to reach for the kind of language she would understand, but had no idea what her language was. “It is a creative way to approach life. An energy, an expression, a movement of the outer body expressing what's in the inner body.”

“What are you--the Psychic Friends Network?” He shut up. Why couldn't she be as sensitive as he imagined her to be? Why was he the boy and she the girl? Maybe they should turn it around. It didn't seem he belonged in the world of masculine and feminine the way it was laid out. He grabbed the book and flipped over to a page.

“Well, you know there are things--never mind. Listen to this—“

He read:

“Much madness is the divines sense

To a discerning eye;

Much sense the starkest madness.

Tis the majority

In this, as all prevails.

Assent and you are sane;

Demur,- you’re straightaway dangerous,

And handled with a chain.”

“Now what do you think of that?”

“I just can’t stand poetry.” She picked at the colored threads on the bedspread.

“Well, you know--it’s just like life. Like dreams. Or thoughts. You don’t always think in complete sentences do you?”

“I don’t know. I try not to think half the time.”

He just couldn’t believe she was really this thick, so lacking in clarity. Was she hiding something, or was she just unable to communicate the deepness he felt moving inside of her? Perhaps all she needed was trust, and she would open up.

He laid his calm hand upon her leg, she let it sit there a moment, hardly breathing, waiting for him to remove it.

“This is making me uncomfortable.”

“I’m sorry.” He removed his hand.

“You can trust me, you know.”

“I know.” She continued to pick at threads on the bedspread.

“You kissed me a little too soon.”

“It’s just a kiss--not like I raped you or something.”

“I understand. I just can’t respond.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t feel like it.” There was such finality to her tone that he was stuck inside of his silence. Where to go from here? She was impossible. Maybe she was just one of those stupid people that didn’t dance and never would. How could his intuition have misled him so drastically? He had been mistaken that she was a possibility.

Something obstinate in Mary would not let her respond. It wasn’t like she didn’t have the sensitivity--it was like she enjoyed watching him squirm and get frustrated trying to reach her. She wanted him to reach her, that was for sure, she just didn’t want it to be too easy. She desired him like she had never desired anything in her life. The desire burned hot inside of her like hot liquid poured into her heart and her stomach. She just wouldn’t let him know. It was too sacred, this energy. It had to be there, sit there, fester inside of her. She was sure that all she had to do was adjust the lens a little, refocus, and everything would come tumbling into her like heaven and hell, and she just couldn’t handle that. Still, he was so beautiful; his hair made her want to cry. She smiled at him and touched his arm lightly, like the wings of a small bird flying by in the air. He looked at her puzzled, in pain.

Women! Would he ever understand them?

“What’s up with that?”

“Nothing.” She looked down, smiling incessantly, unable to stop. She loved the power she had, the power to cause pain, to make him tremble, to make him feel helpless.

She decided it was a power she intended to keep--this was one thing she would never give away.

“You can kiss me again.”

He looked at her as if she were insane. Maybe she was. Oh well. A kiss is a kiss. He put his hand on her chest, just above her heart. He could feel her pulse beating fast. He leaned closer, she closed her eyes, his lips met hers, she opened her mouth, he opened his, exploring hers with his tongue. She moved closer, breathing together, he holding her, she putting one hand behind her to keep from laying back. He removed her hand and she fell onto the bed, and he on top of her. He could feel her breasts against his chest and he couldn't stand another minute of it. He kissed her on the lips and abruptly stood up.

“We're supposed to be studying!”

“What's the matter, little boy?” She laughed. Boy, there was a lot more going on with her than he guessed. How could such a plain looking thing be so complicated? She was amusing, he rationalized. He might as well amuse himself with her. At this one instant both knew that they were caught in something that felt delicious, fearful, complicated and dangerous. Danger was the main attraction--who knew where this craziness might go? The young always fear boredom more than danger anyway. Who can tolerate boredom when passions rage inside of you? The anger, the heartache, the tension, the unknown--it was the crazy unknown path they both decided to tread at this one afternoon juncture of life.

Carl stood at his window looking out but not seeing anything. There were the trees, the sun beginning to lower down behind the houses. Mary walked up behind him

putting her tiny little childish arms around his waist. She could feel his heart beating, his hair smelled like wildness, cleanness and sweetness.

“Don’t take this so seriously. We’re just kids.”

“I don’t feel like a kid, ever since my grandfather died.”

“People die all the time.”

“That’s callous.”

“I’m callous.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Well, you more than make up for it, God you’re softer than a girl.”

“My strength is in my spirit.”

“Oh, God, don’t be pretentious, Carl, Jesus.”

He turned to look at her. She was so small it made him feel a pain right in the middle of his being. He wanted to protect her, he wanted to protect himself even more, from what he didn’t know. She was tougher than nails. He needed protecting. She was like a vampire with a razor, trying to cut him into shreds and lick the blood.

“I’m yours if you love me.” He grabbed her and began dancing around the room with her.

“Oh, whatever.” She leaned her head on his chest.

“Carl Junior! Dinner!” His mother’s voice yelled from downstairs. Carl and Mary kept dancing.

“Want to go to the dance with me?”

“You want to take me? Won’t that ruin your reputation? Oh, you’re beyond that, right? Above all that stupid, childish stuff. So, I am going with the most popular boy in class, what a crock.”

“Come on--why are you so cynical?”

“Carl, grow up. Everybody’s gonna ask what the hell are you’re doing with me. That quiet mousy nothing that’s always poor, has no clothes and sits in the back of class saying nothing.”

“You just love playing the martyr, don’t you?”

“I love being an outcast--it gives me a standpoint.”

“So why don’t you like Emily Dickinson? She was a total outcast. She lived alone, she wrote her soul down on pieces of paper--”

“Listen. I’m not attracted to people like that. I want to see how the other half-lives. I want to hang out with a winner for once and just see how you winners do it. I already know how losers do it.”

“You think you’re a loser?”

“Don’t you? Don’t you have this noble idea you’re going to sweep me off my feet and make me look beautiful in the eyes of everybody at school? You just want to save me.”

He looked into her hard blue eyes and felt shame. Was he this easy to find? Was it even true? He didn’t know. Sure, he liked to save everything. He also wanted to be saved. In addition, he understood that he was a loser too.

“We’re all losers, Mary--that’s the truth. Everybody’s a loser.”

“Oh, bullshit Carl. Bullshit.”

She sat back down on the bed.

“Maybe there’s this kind of group conspiracy to ignore that, or pretend that some of us aren’t losers. Group delusion, Carl. Let’s delude ourselves and think that a loser can become a winner by association. That’s crap. You can’t change me and I can’t change you.”

“You just don’t know love when you see it,” he said with passion.

“Carl! Dinner!” The voice was desperate now.

“Coming!” he shouted.

“Let’s eat,” he snapped at Mary.

Maybe she went too far. Oh well, she didn’t give a shit. He deserves whatever he gets. Her anger and bitterness at being rejected made her swell with pride. I’m better than him because I’m worse than him.

“Come on Mary.”

She followed him, putting on her meek mask and carefully replacing anger with humility. Wouldn’t do to rock the boat in front of his family. They walked down the stairs single file.

In the kitchen Florence was rooting around in the cupboards as usual. Linda was stirring something in the large soup pot on the stove. His father was back in his den watching and flicking the TV from station to station, drink in hand, recliner back so far it threatened to spit him out onto the floor, head first.

Bill loped in, looked at Mary, looked at his mother with raised eyebrows and looked back at Mary. Something was up but he could not tell what.

“All of you sit down in the dining room, please,” Linda said, smiling at Mary. Mary looked like a small breeze could made her fall over. Her face looked all forlorn, wispy, meek, but not a comfortable meek, a kind of angry meek, a kind of waiting-for-something meek. Mary Waits For Something, Linda thought and laughed to himself. She wouldn’t reveal this private joke anytime soon.

“Bill, go get your father.”

“Extricate him from the land of television.” Florence spoke in her husky, drunken voice.

“I thought you’d sleep it off, Florence,” Carl Jr. said under his breath as he passed her going into the dining room.

“Shut up. I’m a guest here.”

“Right--you’re about as much a guest as me.”

He slapped her arm lightly, she slapped him back. His uncle could keep her in line and so could he. Only his uncle ran off with somebody else and who could hardly blame him? Florence looked like better days had not only passed her by but never made a visit in the first place. The puffy skin, her bulging eyes, that over-processed hair that wasn’t any color anymore, her chunky brick-house body. Carl found her repulsive. Thank god his mother didn’t look like that. And never would, he mused.

They all sat down, his father at one end, Linda at the other.

“Pass the meat,” his father said peremptorily.

Mary hardly dared to look at Carl’s father. His father was solid, remote and a kind of man foreign to her. He actually showed up for dinner on time, and he was there in the house, a part of the family in some way. This was a new experience. Her father was

hardly ever around at dinner, and when he did show up he was mean and surely and went upstairs to sleep. Sometimes when he got ugly and mean she dared to shout at him anyway. He didn't notice much. When he was there he was too far-gone to notice anything. He spent weeks away from home. He said it was easier to sleep in a motel near the worksite than drive home every night. It suddenly occurred to Mary that he had other women.

“So, Mary, how do you like the August family?”

Carl's father smiled at her. She looked at him and smiled back. No answer required. How confusing. It was a strange thing to be part of something she had nothing to do with. It felt like a kind of safety she had never known.

It must be the way Carl feels all the time, she thought. That is why he could dance, she realized. Of course, she really didn't understand all this stuff about dancing. It was just a concept anyway, nothing real. For one thing, she hadn't really ever seen Carl dance, exactly, although his whole movement in life seemed like a dance.

The family talked and ate and laughed through dinner. Everybody had their story. When it came turn for Mary's story Carl Sr. looked at her intently.

“So--Mary. What's your story.”

She looked down at her plate and said nothing.

“Carl, leave her alone, she's shy,” Linda said in her defense, but secretly thought, *Mary Waits For Something*. The attention flew to Bill and his latest heroic deeds on the football field.

It seemed like a casual ceremony that somebody had orchestrated a long time ago. They were playing the notes as they had been written, riffing a little here and there,

and feeling quite comfortable resting on the knowledge that the score was there and they were competent players. Who was the composer? Some unseen dancing source that wove a sort of magic around their faces, all lit up like the sun had been dancing from their eyes from within. It was strange and wondrous to her to see this, to feel this, to know this, without being able to put words to it.

Carl looked over at Mary and saw that the family had embraced her in its energetic circle, just the way the Augusts always had. There was a healing process going on and it made him want to dance.

After dessert he looked at Mary.

“Let’s do homework.”

“I want to help your mother do the dishes,” she spoke softly. She wanted to be away from Carl’s intensity and his slate blue eyes jumping out at her and her body.

“No--me and Linda love to do dishes together. It’s the one time we remind ourselves we’re still married.” His father got his large body up from the table, walked over to Linda ceremoniously and kissed her loudly on the cheek.

“Oh, God, Carl,” Florence spoke.

“Sh-h-h Florence. You’re just missing Hughie.”

“Hughie isn’t no Carl and never will be. I’m going out to smoke.”

She got up to leave.

Carl Jr. pulled at Mary’s sleeve. She felt his touch electrically move through her shoulder into her chest and surrounding her heart. She felt claustrophobic--this family was too close.

“Okay,” she said with irritation in her voice. Studying Emily Dickinson was getting on her nerves.

“We’ll get this over with.”

She followed him back upstairs. Back into the room. He put on some early Miles Davis. She nosed around the room, peeked into the closet, saw her favorite red shirt of his hanging in the closet. The cowboy shirt. It made him look exciting and dangerous and cute.

“I love this shirt.”

“Yeah. My Uncle Frank got it for me in Idaho.”

“What does he do there?”

“Runs a feed store.”

“Oh.”

“Horse feed, cow feed, you know.”

“People have cows there?”

“Hell yes. They ranch.”

“Oh.” This seemed very foreign to her.

He was lying on the bed, stretched out. She looked at him. Something in her wanted to jump on top of him, something else inside of her wanted to ruin him.

“Do you think I’m bitter?”

“I don’t know.”

“And you aren’t?”

“No--why should I be? I have everything.”

He looked at her with those intense eyes framed with lashes as dark as night. She looked down. Yes it was true. She believed he had everything. But on the other side, she believed she had nothing and that made her hate him.

He kissed her again. They would never love each other. Whatever eagle that flew inside of her flew alone, unbeknownst to her. Whatever process she could participate in, was foreign to him. Maybe he was wrong about her. She could never dance.

Mary lay on the bed after the kiss, watching Carl as his hands explored her body. She turned to the side and looked into the half open closet. There was the red shirt, hanging there, all alone, waiting for the Dancer to claim it. Her eyes began to hurt. She stared at the shirt forever, while Carl's warm hand touched her belly, her breasts, her thighs, and sought to move inside of her vagina. A warm sigh crept all over her, like the night, like the flowers of spring still inside the ground. She felt a breath from somewhere move inside her head. It was Carl breathing into her ear. As she looked at the shirt the redness of the color became brighter and brighter. It was odd. She was sure that it was not her imagination. Carl moved inside of her, she could feel the heat as she kept her head turned away from him, looking, looking at the shirt. And lo and behold, she was absolutely sure that the shirt began to move. It danced. The shirt was dancing inside of his closet. And Carl was dancing inside of her.

This was the only dance she would ever know.

The End

