

Swing



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You might not know it by looking at me, but I'm a pretty good dancer. No joke! And I'm not talking about clubbing. Or Grinding. Or break dancing. Or whatever it is you crazy kids do these days. Me? I'm a master of swing. I've done it my whole life. That is, I did until a bad experience at a club in Dayton, Ohio during my third sophomore year of college. It shook me to the core and, rest assured, I'll revisit that experience with you in a minute.

But, before I tell you about any of that, I'd better tell you about Swing.

A friend of mine once said that swing dancing is an activity for classier nerds who want to pretend they aren't really nerds. You'll get no argument from me, although I think that misses the point. Swing dancing is fun, that's the point. And at least with this you're out doing something, interacting with women instead of hanging out in your parent's basement playing video games.

When I was a kid, my sister and I used to stay with our Grandma while mom and dad were at work. Grandma didn't have a television so we had to invent other forms of entertainment to pass the time. My favorite activity involved tossing water balloons at passing cars but, since my sister didn't enjoy such things and since Grandma couldn't quite throw a balloon that far, we had to come with other ideas. One of these was swing dancing.

Grandma was a Big Band devotee in her younger years and she kept her old records in a cardboard box at the back of her living room closet. Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Benny Goodman. She had all the greats. Benny was always my favorite, especially his rendition of "Sing Sing Sing." It was those first few seconds of Gene Kruppa back beat that did it, that driving kick-drum rhythm that shook the room and made it

so you *had* to dance. You didn't have a choice. In fact, it was because of this song that I now have such an affinity for what has otherwise become a lost art in my generation. The art of swing.

So, like I said, I used to go dancing at this club in Dayton. It's a small place on the south end of town next to what used to be a large warehouse. The outside iss a little run down but, once you go in, everything changes. Immediately its 1940, the Big Band era, and all the old relics are there.

The bar sits in the corner opposite from the door, its multi-colored bottles of top shelf drinks reflect the dim light, mixing with ambient cigarette smoke to create a warm sense of acceptance and familiarity. The glow of the light on the hardwood floor highlights spectators and dancers alike, who move around the room in intricate, seemingly choreographed steps. This glow, this yellow-white light, darkens as it recedes to the high-top tables, which are bathed in pools of amber from the candles that reflect the hopeful glances of those who stand in the background, watching the action from afar.

And the music! The music is golden. Horns and pianos. Light guitars, smooth voices. The music envelopes you as you walk it. It permeates the room, soaking into the walls, soaking into the souls of everyone in attendance, welcoming you to enjoy, if just for a moment, this tiny bit of happiness.

On the night in question, I went to club with some friends. Everyone was dressed for the occasion, wearing zoot suits and penny loafers, long red dresses with polka dots and wide hats that covered their faces. Like I said. Nerds pretending not to be nerds.

I was the exception, having chosen to wear cheap, muddy tennis shoes, a pair of ratty blue jeans, and an old polo shirt with a spaghetti stain I had acquired earlier that evening. It's my belief that there are few stations in life which require fancy dress and excessive preparation. I've given up on a lot over the years, but never this.

We kept to ourselves at first while Amanda, a dance major from the dorms two floors up, taught us a new move. It involved several elaborate turns followed by a spectacular toss where the man throws the woman into the air with one arm, catches her with another and then both dancers throw their arms in a wide arc like a magician performing his best trick. I didn't have a problem with the turns but the toss was

another story. I almost had it a couple of times but, more often than not I sent the lady sailing over my head. Nobody likes being dropped so we didn't practice this for very long.

After a few fast numbers, the couples went off by themselves and I leaned against a post in the background, settling in to watch the action. Halfway through a boring Glenn Miller song, I heard a small voice from behind.

"Excuse me," the voice said.

I turned and, standing next to me, looking directly at me, was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She turned her head and her long, dark hair fell over her shoulders and back like the slow waves of the pacific. She blinked against the haze of the club and you could eyes as deep and as blue as late autumn evenings. She smiled and it was, I imagined, the exact form of beauty that moves men to poetry. And, throughout it all, she wore this amazing red dress that, while far from being obscene, flattered her in all the right places.

She continued speaking. "Would you like to dance?" she said.

"Is she talking to me?" I thought. "Is she drunk? Did she lose a bet?" Having seen no evidence of either inebriation or coercion, I decided that, for whatever reason, she had asked me to dance of her own free will. She may indeed have been crazy to do so, but I was quite willing to put up with a bit of insanity because how often to geeks like me get a chance like this? Not often, I can assure you. I accepted, and we went to the floor where we caught up with an Artie Shaw tune already in progress.

Her name was Kelly. She was an English major from the University of Dayton. She'd lived in a small town most of her life and she planned to be a teacher when she graduated. Secretly, however, she hoped to get a job writing for a small magazine in New York where she could meet lots of interesting people. She said she liked "cool" guys, and she'd asked me to dance because she thought I was "cool."

She obviously hadn't seen the spaghetti stain.

We continued to dance and talk as the music played, and I was lost in the moment. That state of male stupidity that hit me at first glance never left. In fact it deepened and mixed with a burgeoning belief that my amazing luck was actually an inner strength that attracted many. I

felt I could do no wrong. This is probably why, when the DJ announced that the club was having a swing dance contest and Kelly excitedly asked if I would like to participate, like an idiot I agreed. And I joined her at the center of the floor with all the assuredness and courage of General Custer riding into Little Bighorn.

You know how, with car accidents, you can sometimes just sense that something bad is about to happen? It's like you can see the crash coming, but you're powerless to stop it. As Kelly and I stood there, arms locked, I had one of those moments. I sensed a crash. All I had to do was say, "I'm not too sure about this," and walk away, but before I could that, the music started. It was that Gene Krupa back beat, that driving, kick-drum rhythm. It was the old Benny Goodman song, my song, and I had no choice. The music erased all thought, as it always does, and we moved with the crowd.

The judges slithered between us like mad weasels in search of the tiniest mistake. A hippie couple to our left went down first, and a mean smell of patchouli and old marijuana wafted in our direction as they passed. Next, the judges dismissed a very large woman who had been flinging a very small man around the room like a rag doll. You could see the sad determination in the woman's eyes as she stomped away, that quiet rage that said she would have been willing to do whatever it took to win, even if it meant ripping out one of her boyfriend's arms in the process.

All around us the couples danced, the lights flashed, the music played, and the crowd cheered. The room was alive. It jumped. I saw the faces of my friends spinning around me, and I felt the constant *Boom Boom Boom* of Gene Krupa's driving rhythm beating the heart of the room ever faster. All the excitement, exhaustion, elation, and luck went to my head in the form of a crazy idea.

The move.

In the short moments before my friends and I broke apart for the evening I was *this* close. If I could end with this move, we might have a chance. If I could pull it off just this once, I might actually be the kind of cool Kelly thought she had seen when she asked me to join her on the floor.

I started spinning and Kelly caught on quickly, matching my step. The rush of the crowd and the beat of the music intensified as Benny ended

his fantastic solo and the orchestra hit its powerful stride. The trumpets blasted, the crowd cheered, and excitement flooded our veins. The move was going to work. We were going to win. I could feel it.

As the song reached its zenith, I grabbed Kelly's waist and threw her into the air. Time stood still. Lights flashed slowly in the background. I smiled, raised my hand, and watched as her face changed from expectant joy to abject horror. The crowd gasped as she sailed past my hand; twisted once, twice, a third time; and then landed on the floor in front of me with a thud.

Silence. Loud silence.

I knew it before the last notes evaporated into the surrounding walls. I had blown it. I ran over to her, tried to help her up. But she screamed obscenities at me and ran away. The crowd closed in. My fellow competitors, the surrounding onlookers, even my friends looked at me with mean ugliness and sharp disdain. Needless to say, we didn't win.

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I only went back a couple of times after that. For me there was no way to top the night, despite its awful ending. Plus I was scared that Kelly might bump into me and try for a bit of revenge. I'm not a big fan of pain and, as the saying goes, hell hath no fury like a woman dropped on her ass in front of a large audience.

By the end of the year, we stopped going all together, and when we came back to school in the fall the swing fad had passed and our old club had switched to a goth/techno format. We tried it once, hoping to run into a few old acquaintances, but when I met a girl sporting freaky tattoos and surgically implanted fangs, I decided enough was enough and gave it up for good.

Later that year I ran into an old friend from high school. He'd found a new club on the north end of town that had swing dancing on Tuesdays. He said I should join him. He said I could meet his new girlfriend, whom he'd met at the club.

"You'd love her," he said, "She's a beautiful brunette with deep blue eyes, and she wears this amazing red dress whenever we go dancing."

I declined. It was probably for the best.



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