

Squeeze

It starts like this. Your first time dancing you're clumsy, self-conscious. All corners and no center. You try to think your way through it, like a game of chess. But it's a feeling game.

Close your eyes.

The song they're playing is in your hips, not your head. Feel the places where you're solid. There, in your pelvis. There, where your partner's one hand cups your shoulder blade and the other cradles your fingers, the rest of you disappearing into sound. Like flying.

Later you'll discover there are rules. Falling is frowned upon.

The suffocation begins.



There's an order to ballroom dance competition. Arrive at the hotel. Check in. Hang your competition clothes in the closet. Put on your practice clothes—the cool, sexy ones you paid too much for and ordered from Italy but still look casual, like you threw on whatever you could find.

Locate the ballroom and practice. Look for any slick places on the floor, any crack that might catch a heel. Get comfortable with the size of the room. Re-think your choreography so you'll execute your best moves in the direction of the judges. You can test the floor any time, but it's best the night before, when the ballroom is less crowded. By morning the air is charged. Dancers on edge, more desperate as the hours before competition dissolve into minutes.

My partner Peter and I were familiar with the formula. On February 22 we checked into our hotel in Louisville, hung our competition clothes in the closet, and began our final preparations for the Latin division of the 2003 Regional Ballroom Championships. If we did well we would qualify for Nationals.

Rule Number One: Be like everyone else, only better.

Ballroom dancers have a look—tanned skin in any season, acrylic nails, hair some version of bleached or black, red or striped. Anything to stand out among competitors. There are the rock stars—young couples who move in the top echelon of professional ballroom finalists; a second tier of professional hopefuls; amateurs, some as good as the professionals; and the partnerless—some young, most not—who compete with their instructors in the Pro-Am Division. Some of the older women are elegant in spite of age, but too many try to imitate the skin-baring look of the young, packing their exposed parts into a jiggle-resistant, flesh-toned fabric called Illusion. They may work out as hard as I do—but still they jiggle. If not for Peter and a few years, I could be one of them.

At the other end of the spectrum are the children. Some pudgy and undisciplined. Others, with more ambitious parents, fierce. At age ten they've surpassed many of us in technique and rehearsal hours. And they've mastered the look—exaggerated hips, studied winks for the judges, orange tans painted on where they should be brown from playing in the sun.

The obsession of the ballroom begins long before competition. Find a Partner. Hire the Best coaches. Work out five times a week. Practice every day. Get a job that will finance the habit. Not one that matters, as long as it will cover the cost of coaches and entrance fees. It's a fantastic, all-consuming addiction digested in small bites. Delicious until the day it becomes tedious. Enormous until it closes in on you. Get a haircut that will look sleek on the floor. Design a costume more wing than dress—so it will fly across the floor. Learn the culture—where to buy twenty-five millimeter Aurora Borealis rhinestones in bulk, which shoes the champions are wearing this year, how to dye

them with the right mix of tea bags, coffee and chocolate. How to use eraser tips from number two pencils to secure earrings so they won't fly off during a spin. How to choose between tanning beds and creams so even a glow-in-the-dark German complexion will appear vaguely Latin. It is important to APPEAR LATIN.

Appearance matters.

Once, while daydreaming about a competition gown I was making in red velvet, a police officer pulled me over for running two stop-lights. "Were there lights?" I asked.

The dress was everything. The more stones it held, the more brilliant I felt. The lighter its fabric, the higher I could fly.

The dress I brought to Louisville was new—thin Lycra the color of the Caribbean, set with heavy bands of white, twenty-five millimeter rhinestones across its one shoulder, neckline, and hem. On the hanger it held its shape without me—triple-padded bra cups pushing outward, darted fabric folding in at the waist, loosening at the hip—as if a body were already stuffed inside, more voluptuous than my own, yet oddly angular and stiff.

I was afraid to try it on. The dress had been sewn to my skin to fit perfectly at my 132-pound competitive weight. I had eaten myself to 137, the first time I hadn't been able to control my weight before a competition. Peter and our coaches worried the judges would notice.

Thin is good. Flesh is unthinkable.

Yet I was hungry. We had been working on the same ten minutes of choreography for almost a year—a perfect two minutes each of five dances: Rumba, Cha Cha, Samba, Paso Doble, and Jive. Our performances had to be flawless—every movement rehearsed, coordinated, tweaked, refined—connections seamless, passion timed to appear spontaneous.

For the ballroom I made myself neat. Compact. Like a jaguar, a Latin thing. Electric rollers and hair spray—not the regular kind but the hard stuff, like cement in a can. Eyelashes edged in tiny rhinestones. Press-on acrylic nails. Black lip liner. Body glitter. Fishnet stockings Danskin called Suntan but someone who knew better might call orange, like my skin.

I soaked in hot baths to prepare my muscles, meditated to get my mind right. I pictured the flutter of blue fabric, the curve of an arm, an elegant wrist gesturing toward First Place. I talked to myself, read out loud from Post-its taped to my bathroom mirror. "You are beautiful. You are worthy."

Outside my room hotel corridors buzzed with Everything Ballroom. Dancers whirling into character. Vendors hawking costumes, practice skirts, ballroom CDs and videos. Rhinestone studded lashes, jewelry, sunglasses, barrettes, belts, gloves. Danceshoes—Champion, Capezio, Supadance, Freed's of London. Even street wear for the chic ballroom dancer. A blue denim fitted jacket with a fluff of blue feathers around the neck caught my eye. I was certain it would be just the thing to wear to the grocery store.

Without the stuff, how would you know who you were?

The announcers introduced us as Pantelis Liatos and Rebecca Huntman. They never pronounced Peter's Greek name correctly, but Pantelis, who was Peter the rest of the time, insisted on entering the ballroom with his more exotic title. We strutted onto the dance floor, inside hands clasped and held straight in front of us, outside arms opened forty-five degrees to our sides so that together we formed the shape of a V, like Victory. We claimed it before the music began.

There would be five dances, each ninety seconds long, giving us exactly seven and a half minutes to show off our months of practice. Of those minutes, the judges would watch us for a total of fifteen or twenty seconds, depending on how many other couples competed for their attention. They would identify us by a number pinned to Peter's back. Our first dance was the Rumba.

Peter and I spun to our places on the floor, bowed before each side of the ballroom, and waited for the music to begin. On the second bar I lifted my left arm, fingers trailing the length of my torso. Each gesture unfolding exactly as we had rehearsed.

We didn't make a single mistake, and yet everything was wrong. My lashes were too heavy. My fishnets too tight. I was an eighth of an inch off center, and there was nothing I could do to

bring myself back. Somewhere between the Cha Cha and the Paso Doble I realized I was no longer on the floor. The dress was still dancing. I had floated to the ceiling.

Below me a swirl of couples followed each other counter-clockwise around the floor. Red

dresses. Orange. Yellow. White. Black. The blue one with the twenty-five millimeter white crystals across the shoulder. Five dances, each precisely ninety seconds in length. Judges wrote down numbers on score pads.

The blue dress curtsied and left the floor.

