

A N A T O M Y O F A T A N G O

R E B E H U N T M A N

In my twelve-year-old imagination my mother's bedroom holds the most intimate secrets of womanhood: Her marble vanity lined with bottles of Evening in Paris and Estée Lauder lipsticks in twenty shades of red. Her walk-in closet with shelves for handbags and heels, each pair wrapped in tissue paper and tucked in its original box. When no one is watching I tiptoe down the long hallway that separates my room from hers, open dresser drawers filled with silk slippers and stockings, pick up bottles of perfume just to feel their weight in my hands. But tonight my mother calls me to her. She will be going out dancing with my father. Should she wear the lavender caftan with the gold trim or the turquoise paisley evening gown?

Outside this room my mother knows everything. Only here, among her own things, are choices less clear. If we choose the caftan the jewelry will be easy, a gold mesh necklace she bought with the dress in Morocco, but the shoes will be a problem. And if we go with the paisley she can wear her turquoise heels, but we will have a hard time finding jewelry to match.

Trickier still is the makeup. My mother's left eyelid droops and her lipstick is never even, its bright color bleeding into blurry webs around the edges of her mouth.

We decide on the lavender with the gold jewelry and tan heels. Close enough. Gold shoes would be perfect but she doesn't own any. I help her with her eyeliner and she is ready.

"Is it good?" she asks. I still remember it, the question not of a woman but of a girl.

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If you study the Argentine tango from a book, its basic steps will likely appear straightforward, even simple.

Lead (gentleman's steps):

Salida: Step backward with right foot, to the side with left.

Central figure/cruce: Take two steps forward, beginning with right foot. Close right next to left.

Resolución: Step forward with left foot, to the side with right; close left foot next to right.

Follow (lady's steps):

Salida: Step forward with left foot, to the side with right.

Cruce: Take two steps backward, beginning with left foot. Cross left in front of right. Lean into partner while balancing on toes.

Resolución: Step backward with right foot, to the side with left; close right foot next to left.

Of course, there's more to the dance. The word *tango*, likely African in origin, means "closed place," "circle," or "reserved ground"—any private space to which one must ask permission to enter. Those early makeshift dance floors where first slaves, then immigrants, closed off a ring of America and made it theirs. Look again at that central figure, the *cruce*. There, where the man makes room for his partner, invites her into his space.

Or the word may derive from the Latin root *tangere*, "to touch." There, where the woman crosses her left foot in front of her right, leans into her partner, offers her body to his.

"The tango is a listening of two hearts," my tango instructor, Paolo, tells the class assembled in his Rio de Janeiro studio. I've traveled five thousand miles to learn this dance so that I can teach it to the professional dance company I train in Chicago. At forty, a choreographer with my own dance studio and more than twenty years of dance training, I'm used to being the dance expert. Yet here with the Argentine tango everything is new: The way Paolo molds our bodies into their new dance frame—fingers laced, eyes closed. Chests drawn one toward the other, carving the empty space between us into the shape of a heart. "*El abrazo*" or "embrace," Paolo tells us, reminding us of the way we are to hold one another in this dance.

He teaches us to move through our first steps, the *caminada* more of a communion than a walk. We must keep our feet close to the floor, ankles brushing as one leg passes the other. Knees bent, as if crouching, stalking.

"Like an animal," he tells us.

Once we've mastered our basic steps, Paolo teaches us to complicate them. He winds our bodies in and out of *giros*, stops our action with *paradas*, layers our steps with *adornos*. The rest, he tells us, is improvisation. We change partners, re-arrange *figuras*, invent a thousand ways to move from one breath to the next. But no matter how elaborate our choreography, our steps always pass through the same three stages: The entrance, or *salida*; the central figure, or group of figures; the ending *resolución*. A tribute to the complexity of this dance, the word *salida* does not mean entrance but exit.

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My parents have been married over thirty years when my mother convinces my

father to take ballroom dancing lessons. Until now they've done it his way, my father improvising a self-taught jitterbug to whatever music happens to be playing, my mother doing her best to follow along. Now twice a week they drive to a Fred Astaire dance studio to learn the foxtrot and tango. How to create a dance frame that will hold them both in place as they spin counterclockwise around the ring of the ballroom—my father's left hand cupping my mother's shoulder blade, his right grasping her fingers gently yet firmly between his. My mother stepping into the space he shapes before him just for her.

At home, while I fill out college applications at the kitchen table, they practice in the living room. My mother shows my father their new steps again and again. It's not that he can't remember but that he won't. He's happy with the way he dances naturally. Still, he participates in the lessons, either because he enjoys the social environment at the studio, or because one of their pretty, young instructors already talked him into paying for a package of classes up front and he doesn't want to squander his investment. Or maybe he agrees to the lessons because he's finally found a way to make my mother happy. He has a history of letting her down, their three decades of marriage marked both by his inattention and infidelity. Still, they have somehow made a life together, waking up day after day in the same bed, raising four children, traveling the world. And now this. I catch my mother practicing her steps early in the morning when she thinks everyone is still asleep—on her face a smile I haven't seen before.

Her efforts double when they begin preparing a tango for one of the student recitals the studio calls a showcase. She buys a pair of strappy silver dance shoes and a wire brush she uses to keep their suede bottoms clean. On Friday nights she carries them in a cloth bag to the studio's theme parties where she and my father practice with instructors half their age they address as Mr. and Mrs. My parents come home, tipsy from boxed wine, with Polaroid evidence of the new roles they're enjoying: My mother in a crown, posing with Mr. McCullough against a background of construction paper jungle leaves. My father dancing with Mrs. King, an experienced enough dancer she can follow his improvised moves. Proof, in his mind, that he doesn't have to study the steps my mother insists he needs to know.

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“Stop leading,” Paolo tells me during our second day of lessons. I don’t get to decide the moves. I have to respond to his.

“You must find pleasure in the silence,” he tells me, an instruction he will repeat many times. The silence he refers to is an inner one. I must stop thinking, stop trying to anticipate what comes next. Settle into that empty, quiet space from which I might both sense and respond to any movement he initiates. In return, he agrees to place communication before desire. To build a solid frame with his body, master the art of touch that allows him to guide me clearly and safely across the floor. There are rules. He begins with his left foot, I with my right. He moves forward as I move backward. A grid of silent understandings that keep us in pursuit of connection, not collision.

“We must become one animal with four legs,” Paolo tells me. Synchronize breath and intention. Trust that if one allows her partner to lead, she will not lose herself in the following.

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Imagine those first women who danced the tango—the African slave dancing in clandestine spaces, the brothel worker kicking her petticoats, her own legs her best weapon. *We are lionesses!* A second teacher, Graciela Gonzalez, tells the fifty students who gather for her women’s workshop. She teaches us to whip one leg behind us, slice the air with our heel. A leaping! How to lock our eyes on an imaginary partner, disarm him with our stare as we swivel before him, our pointed toes carving figure eights into the floor. We practice our adornos in a mirrored room, our rehearsal partner a chair, a dance barre, a wall. Inanimate surfaces that hold us as we flex our feline muscles. We are languid, unfurling, feminine and round in one moment. Then staccato, biting, a gnashing of legs and feet. Messy, like life, which does not roll out in one direction but spins itself in circles.

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On the night of their tango showcase, I take my seat among the ring of students and instructors who gather around the dance floor. My parents make a grand entrance, my mother shining proudly in her silver shoes, my father in a black suit. For the first bars they follow the choreography they’ve prepared. I can tell because my mother looks pleased, my father stiff. Quickly he slips out of their official ballroom

hold and launches into his more comfortable jitterbug routine. The corners of his mouth lift. His blue eyes twinkle. He is not Rudolph Valentino but Mac the Knife. For the next two and a half minutes, he lets loose and entertains the crowd before him. My mother struggles to keep count, her face locked in the tango expression she's studied in class. Her body holding desperately to a dance frame designed for two.

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I'm still trying to lead when Paolo pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and ties it over my eyes. He wants me to let him lead me blindfolded through the room, our only connection the heat between my outstretched fingers and his heart.

This is a man who understands trust. He navigates Rio's mountain curves blindfolded on his motorcycle, feeling his way as close to the edge as he can without falling. He has shown me the bend in the road where he performs this trick. The city spread out below us—Sugar Loaf Mountain, Corcovado's Jesus opening his stone arms in a 125-foot gesture of assurance, the Atlantic stretching toward the horizon. The drop off the cliff too steep for anyone to survive the fall.

"I don't know how to let go," I tell Paolo. I want to give up, get back on a plane. Return home to the job where I choreograph every step.

"If I let go I'll look foolish," I say. "I'll make mistakes. I'll fall."

"There is no mistake," Paolo whispers. "Only imagination."

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My mother and I circle a red track in Arizona, each lap spinning into the next as we catch each other up on the lives we are for the first time living apart. I tell her about my college roommate and the boy I'm dating. She tells me about her move from St. Louis to Sun City, just one of the changes my parents have made since they found out about the cancer. My mother spent seven weeks in a St. Louis hospital, her two surgeries stripping her of yards of colon and intestines, ovaries and uterus, her chemo treatments wreaking havoc on her body's ability to repair itself. Now she and my father have moved across the country to be closer to a treatment center in Mexico that offers new hope. She tells me about natural treatments that nourish and detoxify the body. Giggles when she gets to the part about the five coffee enemas she has to administer daily to herself. How undignified she feels as she

lies on a bathroom mat with her legs in the air, waiting for the orange bag to empty.

We walk side by side, my eyes fixed on her feet, her pink Keds making a soft squishing sound every time she presses them into the track. As long as we keep moving, I tell myself, she cannot die.

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The tango promises everything, guarantees nothing. Just listen to its music. How the song begins so innocently—a single violin note winding sweetly up your spine before bursting into a fever of accordions. How legs and feet punctuate each change in tempo—a spiked heel stabs the space on the floor where only a moment before there was a partner's foot, a thigh. A dancer leaps into the air. A halt in the music as she freezes before landing in a split.

The ending is important. The music finishes. You return to your seat. Yet the dance is still with you, making its way under your skin and into your blood. It has been thirty years since my parents danced their tango and here I am still telling their story. How they made their grand entrance, my mother in her black evening dress and silver shoes, my father in his suit. How for the first bars they executed their choreography exactly as rehearsed.

This is the part of the story that is easy for me to tell. And if I had it my way I would tell you the rest of my parents' dance rolled out just as smoothly. That my mother was the only object of my father's attention. That he noticed the curve of her lips, the swell of her chest. I would tell you that my mother allowed herself to embrace the pleasure of owning the floor—the brush of toe against wood grain, the vibration of violin and accordion notes that held her in place.

But if I can't choreograph the story itself then I find myself wanting to choreograph my response to it. I want to wink at you, as if my father's failure to hold my mother were a joke, a mischievous prank that had no impact on either my mother or me. But because I too have experienced abandonment—both the kind where a sworn partner leaves you hanging and the kind where you forget to show up for yourself—I instead want to play up the betrayal, turn my father into a villain. Pin both my mother's and my own failings on him.

But the tango is not the dance of victor and victim. Nor is it a dance that whitewashes over the difficult or complex. It is a nuanced dance improvised

between partners—the blindfolded *tanguero* who leads both motorcycle and partner safely to the edge of the cliff. The couple who keeps showing up for each other, inventing their lives step by step.

Two years after my parents' tango showcase, my mother will finally get her dance. It will not look like the one she rehearsed. Will not take place on a studio dance floor but on the carpeted floor of the one bedroom condominium my parents share in Sun City. If there are violins, they come from a portable radio in the bathroom where an enema bag drapes the door. There are no stage lights, only the matching nightstand lamps that illuminate my mother and father as they read together each night before bed.

And the embrace? Since my mother's diagnosis my father finally understands the role he must step into. He wakes up at four in the morning to meet a plane that delivers fresh calf livers. Grows wheat grass in the window. Peels and prepares organic vegetables whose names he can barely pronounce. It's 1983 and my parents are among the first Americans to experiment with holistic medical treatments. There are no guarantees, only this new set of steps. They begin at the beginning—fingers laced, eyes closed. Chests drawn one toward the other. My father preparing to step with his left foot, my mother with her right.