

Dance Lessons

I'm sitting in a gas station that's been converted into a church of sorts, the Inner Space. It doesn't smell of gasoline and diesel now; it smells of jasmine incense and Carpet Fresh. Irma, the housewife from Jasper, and Clark, the DJ from WJAQ, sit on either side of me. Lena is in the middle of the circle, getting her head shaved, and we're chanting in monotone voices, saying "Ommm ... ," like people do when they joke about meditating.

Candlelight dances across the wall, and the shadows of our heads bob and weave, like helium balloons attached to stringy necks. Darkness covers Lena's face except for the glow of light encircling her head.

I watch Jacob pass the electric shaver over Lena's head slowly, and black waves of hair fall to the ground in clumps. Lena's eyes are closed, and it seems she could sleep if we would let her. Her hair is her pride and rightfully so—beautiful drapes of black cascading down her back. Pride is sinful. Humility is Jacob's goal for Lena, and what woman wouldn't be modest with a shaved head?

I could never shave my head. My curly red hair is the only biological thing that points directly to my mother. The curls she wore under her nurse's cap—my own ringlets that I pull at and twirl unconsciously when I am nervous or bored. The shaver makes a final hum, and Lena looks down at the black mounds of pride.

Jacob, in his white robe with short cap sleeves, crosses his thin arms and asks how she feels, and she says, "Wonderful." Lena's dark almond eyes capture mine, and she smiles. Her honey-brown skin luminesces as if some ethereal spirit inhabits her being.

On the drive home, the engine hums and she talks about how light her head feels, and why didn't she do this sooner; maybe she'll never let it grow back.

I drop her off at her place and watch her as she climbs the stairs to her second-floor condo. I touch my hair and twirl a curl around my finger.

Lena's thinking about going to Scotland to live on a commune with Jacob. And I thought moving to Atlanta was huge.

I met Lena my first day at work. She walked toward us wearing yellow stockings and a black suit. I noticed her bouncing, braless breasts through her yellow silk shirt. A black-fringed bag dangled at her side. Gary and I had just left employee orientation and were standing outside my cube drinking coffee. I felt stiff in my navy pinstripe suit and white shirt.

She disappeared into the cube next to us. "You must be the new guys," she giggled. "Welcome to Shangri-la." The music of flutes and chimes drifted over the gray fabric wall.

She poked her head out and looked at Gary and me. "Hello," she said. She wore minimal makeup, eyeliner and mascara, nothing else. Her long black hair pulled into a ponytail brought attention to her smooth skin, a peaches-and-cream complexion mixed with caramel.

Gary leaned against the wall, put his hands in his pant pockets, peered over his bifocals, and asked, "What are you?"

Her face didn't register surprise, but I felt like I drank spoiled milk.

"Your worst nightmare," she said in a calm voice.

Gary laughed. "That's fair. I deserve that." He pulled a cigarette from the pack in his shirt pocket. "Smoke?" he says.

I shook my head no and Lena said, "And neither should you."

"Oh God. Not another righteous one," Gary said, walking away.

"See you chicks later."

Lena, like Atlanta, was different and new. Before I moved, I lived in Reform

with my dad, working for an accountant, making very little money. After work, I would go home and cook dinner, cleaning the dishes while Dad watched TV from his plaid recliner. Evenings ended with his snores drifting through the den and my waking him to say good night.

In Atlanta, Lena introduced me to exotic lands. After work, we ate dinner at foreign restaurants where she'd help me order. I learned to love Indian food, even though I coughed when I first tasted the spicy lentils rich with curry. She took me to Little Five Points, a section of town where people with passion fruit hair and bandanas made me look strange in my jeans and T-shirt. Lena's world seemed foreign to me, an odd place where unusual was cool and ordinary was not.

Soon after I met Lena, we were in the Dekalb County Farmer's Market buying organic vegetables and fruit. As she put a head of red leaf lettuce in a clear plastic bag, she told me that her mother was black and her father was Puerto Rican. "I get that kind of thing all the time," she said. "*What are you?* I have a stock of answers: woman, earthling, glee club coordinator."

I never thought of my ancestry in terms of what, but rather who. My father is white and my mother is dead. She died in a car accident when I was six weeks old. She was 23, a year younger than I am. I have pictures of her, old black and whites; she's wearing a white pointed nurse's cap on dark, curly hair. I have her annuals from nursing school. In the last year of nursing school, the seniors wrote personal mottos to go under their pictures. Hers said: "Why do we have to learn all this stuff when we're going to die anyway?"

When I was younger, I was the spitting image of her, but over the years less of her appears in my face. I wonder how I'll age, how she fell in love with my dad, what it was like to carry me in her womb.

While walking down the bakery aisle, Lena told me about the Inner Space. She saw an ad in *Creative Loafing* about forgetting your stress through meditation and asked if I wanted to go. We went the next night.

I didn't really get the complete philosophy of the Inner Space. It seemed to center on the Golden Rule, communism, the seven deadly sins, crystals, and things that Jacob would come up with on the fly. I could buy the Golden Rule and the seven deadly sins, but I was a capitalist with a 401(K) invested in stocks, and the crystals just looked like rocks to me. To Lena, it *all* seemed to make sense. She would nod her head in agreement with Jacob's many postulations.

In between meditations, Jacob talked about God living in us and our possibilities as humans. He spoke of reincarnation and karma, reminding me of the séances of my childhood held in the basement of my dad's house. Lit candles dripping with wax, my eyes closed tight, waiting for a sign. When the séances failed, I resorted to Ouija games with friends and prayers to heaven. Preacher Johnston never talked about reincarnation at the Church of Christ in Reform. According to him, the best I could do was to live a Christian life to guarantee my passage to heaven.

Gary and I are in the break room bitching about work when Lena walks in with her shaved head and big gold hoop earrings. She's wearing purple stockings and a white suit.

"Oh my God," Gary says.

"Good morning, Gary," says Lena. "Want to touch it?"

Gary says no way and rolls his eyes. He pours his coffee and tells her he wants the story later, but he needs caffeine first. He walks out and leaves us "chicks" alone.

Lena says, "I've decided."

"Decided what?" I ask.

"I'm going with Jacob to Scotland."

After work, I go home and turn on the news. Depressing stuff about recent murders, freeway deaths, and the ozone layer.

I place a sandalwood incense stick in a wooden ash catcher with a gold-embossed yin yang symbol on the end. Lena gave me the ash catcher for Christmas. I sit on the floor cross-legged.

I close my eyes and breathe in, deep, taking in the scent of sandalwood. I blow out and imagine all the tension from my rush hour commute escaping with my breath. I concentrate on my breathing. In ... out. In ... out.

Lena's bald head appears in my mind. I pop it with an imaginary pm.

In ...

Gary rolling his eyes. Out.

Newscaster talking about smog.

In ...

Jacob saying, "Concentrate." Out.

I stand up and say, "Forget it."

I pick up my sketchpad lying in the corner and draw Lena's face with heavy lines of charcoal to make the almond-shaped eyes. My dad told me that Mom liked to sketch too. In Lena's face I sometimes see my own. It's something in the eyes that I catch every now and then when she's not looking. Sad and deep behind dark lashes.

My father started giving me art supplies for Christmas when I was ten. "You have your mother's talent," he said. "You should cultivate it."

I opened my first sketchpad and charcoal with mixed emotions. Happy to have it, but afraid of it at the same time.

"Who knows, you could be a great artist," said Dad.

"Sure, Dad." I walked across the room and kissed him on the cheek.

Dad wanted me to take art lessons when I was twelve, but I wanted dance lessons instead. "Why dance?" he asked. "You can learn to dance with your friends. Wouldn't you rather learn to draw? Use your talent?"

I thought my talent was dancing; at least it was more fun. Drawing was OK, but I felt clumsy when I did it. I felt like a bird when I danced. I would spin in circles like a ballerina in my bedroom mirror, act like I was at the barre, arms above my head in graceful arcs.

I never took dance lessons.

Lena is having a garage sale tomorrow, so we start organizing her stuff. She has to sell everything. The commune doesn't allow material possessions.

"I'm going with Jacob," she says. "Even if can't sell this place."

"Have you had any lookers?"

"Just a few, but there's always something it doesn't have. At least that's what the real estate agent says. Screw it. Let them foreclose," she says. "Who needs credit at a commune?"

Her black, silky stubs are starting to grow out a little. "Can I rub your head?" I ask. "It looks so soft."

"Sure," she says. She bends her head down in front of me. It feels like worn velvet.

"You've got guts," I say.

"Just foolish sometimes."

"Regrets?"

"No." Lena pauses and looks at me with her almond eyes; gold pear-shaped earrings dangle at her jaw. "It's how I learn," she says.

I had offered to keep some of her stuff for her, just in case. She turned me down flat; if she was going to do this, she was going to do this right.

She pulls out a Chanukah menorah and says, "Guess I won't need this."

"Are you Jewish?"

"No, but I dated a Jewish guy once. Leftover stuff from the relationship."

I remember at Lent that she gave up sweets and wonder if she dated a Catholic guy, too.

A slight tap on the front door interrupts us and Jacob enters. "I see you're almost ready. It's time to give up the Bolshevik lifestyle of the United States. Live amongst nature with our fellow man." He speaks as if he is filled with some revolutionary spirit. "You should come with us," he says, looking at me.

"Would I have to shave my head?"

"No. Your hair doesn't seem to be your problem," he says, and I wonder what's wrong with my hair. "Your sin is fear," he says.

"Fear?"

"Yes, fear. You'd know this if you look deep into your heart." He walks across the room and kisses Lena on the forehead. "I'm looking forward to going with you," he says, as if he is ready to make love.

I start feeling like a third wheel, so I pick up my purse and say, "I need to go. I have errands to run."

Jacob looks at me like he knows some deep inner secret that I haven't shared. "Remember what I told you," he says. "You have the answer."

Lena looks up at me like she knows my secret, too.

"OK," I say, walking out the front door and closing it behind me. I want to open the door and go back in, to tell Lena not to go.

I go home and the phone rings as I enter my apartment.

"How are you, gal?" My dad's voice booms, like thunder from a lighting strike just short of your feet.

"Fine, Daddy. I just walked in the door."

"So you been out gallivanting?" he asks. I don't tell him about Lena's trip to Scotland and my efforts to help prepare her. Instead, we talk about my work, something he can't comprehend. "Never understood them computers. Seems like they just make things more complicated. You still drawing?" he asks.

"Sure am."

"You should have gone to art school," he says. "Your mother would have been so proud."

It's an endless refrain.

The next night, I go to the Inner Space with Lena. The smell of Carpet Fresh is heavier than usual.

"Brothers and Sisters, we are gathered here this evening to say farewell. First, I want to congratulate my precious Lena. Lena should be an inspiration to us all. She is giving up the ways of the capitalist society. She is forsaking her wealth, her possessions, for the sake of all mankind. It is only collectively that we live. I am proud of Lena; she is a true revolutionary. She is a child of Marx, helping us to reach the utopia of our future.

"As proletarians we must free ourselves from the bourgeois patrons, abandon their influence. Our lives are to be lived not for the sake of money, but for free love. Because Lena is on her way, she will receive the Atlantean Crystal Headband."

Jacob holds out a brass tray with a velvet drape. He raises the red velvet and underneath is a copper band with a rose quartz crystal in the middle. He walks toward Lena and puts the band on her head cautiously as if it were filled with thorns. The headband slides down a few inches and rests precariously above her eyebrows.

Jacob's black eyes are growing intense, while my plastic seat is sticking to my behind. Sometimes I wonder if he smokes something before our meetings.

"I know you're wondering," he says. "Is this a crown? No, we do not crown Lena. To do so would be to place her above us. Rather, this is a headband that will allow her to transmit her thoughts to all mankind. We influence others with our thoughts, and because Lena's thoughts are pure, she will influence us all. Let us celebrate Lena's purity."

The rose quartz is looking heavy. The headband slides a little and stops on Lena's nose.

"Perhaps we need to tighten the headband," says Jacob.

Perhaps we need to tighten that screw in your head, I think.

After services, I hug Lena and Jacob and say goodbye. Lena proudly wears her Atlantean Crystal Headband, which now fits. She looks like a New Age princess standing next to her king.

"I'll miss you," she says to me, and a fat, lonely tear rolls down her face.

"I'll miss you, too," I say, thinking of the music floating from across the cube wall.

That night they leave for the airport and the grassy knolls of Scotland. I go home to my sketch of Lena and trace the eyes of charcoal.

Next to her image, I sketch my mother's face with fine bones and dark, curly hair. Lena and my mother's face look back at me, both mouths turned up slightly with a Mona Lisa smile.

Two days later Dad calls again. "When are you coming home, little girl?" he says. "You haven't been home in a month."

"I'm not sure, Dad. Things are pretty hectic here," I say. I'm between projects at work and actually have some vacation time I could take, but I don't tell Dad.

"You know I was thinking about coming up there to visit you," he says.

Dad arrives three weeks later on a bus on a Friday evening. He likes to let Greyhound do the driving. He's standing outside wearing his tan Members Only jacket and baggy blue jeans. "I haven't been in Atlanta in twenty years," he says. "Good God. Just look at this place, crawling with people."

We sit in bumper-to-bumper traffic on I-75 North. He's got his hand in his hair, twirling a black lock above his head.

"How can you stand this?" he asks.

"Sometimes I wonder myself," I say, "but I like all the energy. It makes me feel alive."

"Makes me feel like I'm going to have a heart attack," he says.

When we get back to my apartment, I put Dad's suitcase in my room. "You can sleep in here, Dad. I'll sleep out on the sofa."

"You don't have to do that," he says and sits down on the bed to take off his suede shoes.

The next day, I make Dad pancakes for breakfast. He eats them with a big grin on his face. Pancakes are his favorite. I take him to the Dekalb Farmer's Market, and his eyes get big and round like a child's. People speaking all sorts of foreign tongues, aisles and aisles of fresh produce from all over the world. He stops in front of a big fish tank and points at a catfish.

"We have to catch 'em at home if we want them that fresh," he says. "This is like being in some foreign country."

An Indian woman passes him, and he stares at the turquoise silk wrapped around her body.

I take Dad for lunch at Little Five Points. We walk alongside the shops on the sidewalk shaded by trees. A boy with frizzy hair wearing a sleeveless Nine Inch Nails T-shirt passes us. Ink-stained ivy curls around the thin arms that swing at his sides.

"These people look like hippies," he says. I don't tell him about my own tie-dyed T-shirt and the tattoo of Winnie the Pooh on my hip.

Later that night, Dad emerges from my bedroom with the sketch of Lena. "Who is this?" he asks. "How come she doesn't have hair? Cancer?"

I explain that Lena shaved her head and moved to Scotland. "Oh," he says and looks at me quizzically. "Are you going to shave your head and move to

Scotland?"

"I don't think so, Dad."

"Good, I'd hate to see you lose those curls," he says. "It's a good sketch of your mother." He fingers the drawing of my mother's face next to Lena's.

I'm sitting cross-legged on the floor, picking at the beige carpet. "You should have gone to art school," he says. "I'm glad you have your mother's hair." He traces the sketch of my mother's curls with his thumb.

There's a pressure in my throat, and I want to say something, but I don't know where to start.

"I'm getting sleepy, Dad."

"Oh," he says. "I guess you'll need to make the sofa." He walks out of the den, holding the sketch in his hand.

Sunday morning I put on my tie-dyed T-shirt and pull my hair back into a tight ponytail. Not a curl in sight. I let my hair down and shake it out. A mass of red curls fall to my shoulders.

"You look like one of them hippies," Dad says, when he walks out for breakfast. "But you're cuter." He kisses me on the cheek, while I stand over a frying pan at the stove.

Bacon sizzles in the pan, and I breathe in, then out.

Sunday afternoon I take Dad to the bus station. People sit on hard benches reading their newspapers and eating cheese crackers from the vending machine. The smell of exhaust fumes mixes with Dad's electric shave. He squeezes me tight and whispers, "I love you," in my ear. "I'll see you next month?"

"Sure, Dad. I'll bring you some fresh catfish from the Farmer's Market."

"Make sure you wrap it in ice," he says. "Otherwise, that fish will be stinking in your car."

I continue my monthly visits to Reform. Dad remarks on my curly hair, hugs me, and before I leave to return to Atlanta, the conversation turns to my mother. "Your birth was the happiest moment in her life," he says.

I save the postcards I receive from Lena. They talk about how "blissful" her new life is. Then the postcards stop.

Months pass, Christmas comes and goes, and Lena returns to Atlanta with a bob of black hair and a profound hatred for Jacob. Last week, I drove by the Inner Space, which is now a pizza joint. I never did learn how to meditate. I'm still a computer programmer, but during the week I take Swing lessons at a local club. I'm not up for the Swing gymnastics, but I love dancing with the tall instructor who tells me I'm a natural.