

## **THE DEDICATED DANCERS OF THE GREATER OAKS RETIREMENT COMMUNITY**

“I swear to God, I thought me and Adam would make it to the holidays,” I say. “The fall went well enough. I mean he rented us a car so we could go apple picking upstate.”

Raymond nods handing me a blue and white cup that reads “We are happy to serve you” before turning back to the stove.

“You heard me right, he rented a fucking car in New York City. Nobody does that,” I blow on my coffee.

The whole car rental thing almost made up for Adam’s deep aversion to doing the grapevine and period sex. I decide against sharing this.

“I ended it this past Sunday. I couldn’t stand the sound of him cutting his toe nails while I did the crossword,” I say. “A woman has to have her boundaries, Raymond.”

He turns to me, wiping sweat from his brow. “So, he’s not going to bring Biscuit around?”

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"No, I doubt he'll ever cross the East River again." I'm hurt that he seems unmoved.

Sure, we only talk about men and food, but I like to think I'm a favourite of his. I'm consistent, here every morning.

I pick up a candle, encased in glass with an image of the Virgin Mary stamped around it and decide to buy it.

"Too bad, cute dog." He puts the lump of tinfoil and the Blessed Mother in a plastic bag with far too many napkins.

I take my bagel, leave the money on the counter and nod. "Yes Ray, his poodle was nice to look at."

Part of me wants to scream, but the next bodega is four blocks away and it took me six years to get this far; no way was I about to put this kind of work in with another man. But let the record state: even when there's a cute dog involved, I would still choose spinsterhood over the sound of a man's toe nails colliding with my wood floors.

I'm halfway out the door before Ray calls after me. "You know Mary was 33 when she gave birth to Jesus, same age as you, so you have some time!"

Oh, dear fucking God above. That is not how old she was. That's how old Jesus was when he *died*.

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Even with that Biblical blow to my ego I sashay down the block just to see how it feels to dance in the daylight. The upside to the demise of my and Adam's not-quite-love is that I can be with the Dedicated Dancer's. My routine is cut short when I have to avoid a pile of dog shit. Or human shit. One can never really be sure here.

It's because of those toenails that my flight home cost double. I figured I'd be heading West, to North Dakota of all places. I was moderately looking forward to sharing a carry-on with someone and saying things like, "Babe, did you pack the tiny toothpaste?" I was going to bake a Pistachio Raspberry cake, the one I reviewed at Le Bernard that the whole city was raving about. I even re-did the recipe using all vegan ingredients, so his sister Diane wouldn't complain. I didn't even know Republicans could be vegan.

Honestly, I can't do red states so let's call this another bullet dodged. Instead of watching Adam herd cattle while cradling a cup of warm coffee on his front porch (or whatever else people do in North Dakota) I would be back in a poorly lit dance studio in Florida, with plenty of dollar store toothpaste in my parent's medicine cabinet.

It's possible that I'm the last of my kind: an adult woman who spends the holiday's third-wheeling with her parents. My city friends starting meeting husbands on the internet or, by the grace of God, through a friend of a friend at some pop-up in Chelsea. They slowly started disappearing upstate into small towns with fake sounding names like Sugarloaf and Little Falls. I blame the trees, the fresh air; it gets so many of them. But I

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was still here. Who would give up a studio with a washer/dryer in unit? Not me, that's who.

Once I'm back home, I check my phone which I left under the pillow. No messages. I think of my fellow dancer, Helen, who checks her mailbox twice a day, looking for a card from her grandchildren or a nice note from a loved one but finding nothing. I promise myself to start sending more postcards down to Florida, which just means I need to go somewhere worthy of a postcard. I eat alone at restaurants five days a week for work. Surely, I could do this abroad for pleasure.

I decide to call Tara. Maybe she'd provide more solidarity than Ray.

She answers on the second ring.

"I have called to inform you that Adam Krazenburg is no longer a topic of conversation in my life," I say.

"Lower your standards, Piper."

"They are low. I had to take two trains to get to his place."

"You know what I mean."

"I don't."

"You could always come stay with me and Gregory."

God, no.

"Thanks, but I'm okay. I already booked my ticket to Florida. I leave tonight." Examining my hair in the mirror I spot several greys.

"Why do you like it there so much? Everyone is old and dying."

"Tell that to the Dedicated Dancers, Tara."

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"Fine, tell Mom and Dad I'll see them next month for Hunter's party," she says. "He's turning five, you know."

Shit.

"Sorry I can't make it to that. I'll be in the Azores."

"What?"

"The Azores, you know that island off Portugal." I'm unsure if I'm pronouncing it correctly but confidence is key.

After we hang up, I pluck six grey hairs from my scalp and cringe knowing our conversation barely passed the Bechdel Test. Then I Google the Azores, which I know nothing about other than the fact that they're advertised in the subway. The poster says something like "Your friends are buying houses and having babies, but you're on the way to the airport!" In small print below, it reads, "Travel groups for singles in their 30s and 40s." Call me a bad Aunt but I did say I needed to go somewhere worthy of a postcard.

Besides, spending any kind of holiday in Jacksonville with them? No thanks. I'll choose the Greater Oaks Retirement Community, and apparently the Azores, over that mess. I mean, how do you tell your baby sister she married an absolute douche? I may never get to put that waffle maker I want from Williams Sonoma onto a wedding registry, but it's better than being with a Gregory who refuses to be called Greg. Enjoy your

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Christmas green beans, Gregory, but I have no use for you or your opinions on Iran or car engines. I do not own a car.

Even their kid freaks me out. Once when we were playing with sidewalk chalk, he demanded I make him a sandwich. Certainly, he couldn't be hungry, I thought, we'd just had frosted flakes. I decided he was on a power trip, like father like son stuff going on. So, I drew one on the sidewalk. Not a fancy one, just a butter sandwich. He licked the whole thing off the cement. Didn't even say thank you. Things have been cold ever since.

Striking a match, I light my new candle just as the flame is coming to my fingertips. Living on the edge, so unlike me. I place the Virgin Mary on the window sill and get to work, I have six hours til my flight to scrub my apartment clean of him. With Ace of Base's "Don't Turn Around" on loop I clean the wooden floors. I sweep while doing the V-step, mop while doing the mambo. Makes me think of another dancer, Doris. I wonder if she'll still be able to move or if her body will be too frail after the chemo. I wonder if she'll wear her trademark hot pink headband or if there will be any hair to keep it in place.

My trip to the airport is uneventful. Usually I don't want a chatty Uber driver; I prefer the silent ones. Just let me sit in the back of your Toyota Camry and *not* enjoy this scenery. The Brooklyn highways are absolutely where sadness lives. But today I want to chat, so I tell the woman I'm going to Florida. This always gets people going because when you

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hear Florida, you only think of a few things. The good things are alligators, NASA and Will Smith's "Welcome to Miami." The not so nice things are lines at Disney World, the retirees who still drive and people eating strangers faces while on bath salts.

"I have an Aunt who lives down there, in Saint something," she says.

"St. Augustine, St. Petersburg, Port Saint Lucie? I could keep going."

"Uh that's okay, it's one of those."

"Does she dance?"

"Does she what?"

"Dance."

"No, I don't think so. She's 82," she says like it's a disease.

I'm stunned, hoping her eyes will meet mine in the mirror so she can see my judgement.

Eighty-two is a perfectly reasonable age to dance at. The car was silent after that.

Before I closed the door, I told the Uber driver to let her Aunt know that the grapevine was a great thing and she should try it.

She says nothing, not even "have a safe flight."

People hate thinking about old people doing the grapevine, which is sad.

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Our pilot is in an extra chipper mood as he makes his first announcement after take-off. "We are pleased to have some of the best flight attendants in the industry.

Unfortunately, none of them are on this flight." All three of the female flight attendants flare their nostrils in a beautiful synchronized union, just like when Doris, Mom and Helen box step together.

"Don't worry, if he manages to land this thing, I won't clap with the rest of them," I tell the flight attendant.

She clutches the cart a bit tighter, "Did you want a single or double ma'am?"

"Let's go with a double Beatrice," I say reading off her name tag.

I settle into my seat and press play on Lionel Richie's "All Night Long" wishing I could stand in the aisle and practice my switch leaps. Mario's going to notice if I look rusty. When we touch down two hours later in the Sunshine State, my hands stay firmly planted in my lap as the rest of the plane erupts. Fools.

Mom and Dad live in Building 2, above Frank, his long-time "friend" Randall and a pet iguana named Cornflake. I make sure to turn the headlights off on the rental before pulling into my spot; don't want to upset any of the community members. It might only

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be 8:00 p.m. but that's bed time for these guys, and after a few days I'll adopt their schedule. Up with the sun and asleep with it as well.

After grabbing the key from under the palm tree welcome mat I let myself into the tiny apartment occupied by my sleeping parents. By the smell I know Dad's made his famous creamy artichoke lasagne. A note is waiting for me on the table. "Dance at 8am, good to have you home. Love, Mom." I go to fridge and heat up some dinner, then sit in my Dad's La-Z-Boy and eat every last bite. I brush my teeth with a full tube of toothpaste and fall asleep in the guest room to the sound of both my parents snoring.

When I wake up they're gone. Dad at golf, Mom already in the studio. Ray's coffee is number one in my heart but Dad's runs a close second. He's left out my favourite mug, the one with a ballerina giraffe lifting an elephant over its head. So inspiring.

My parents have a drawer for me, at the bottom of the dresser in the guest room. Don't you dare read that and feel pity for me. Blame my immense success for my spinsterhood, but I blame the patriarchy. "Raise them better!" I put one leg into my purple unitard. "Only 18% of women orgasm with *just* a penis Adam!" Here goes the other foot. "Please find your way to my clitoris!" I pull my hair into the highest ponytail I can manage. As I place the scrunchie around my thick curls I feel as if I'm coming back to my body. I also have a headache.

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The Community Centre is just across the parking lot and I'm sure to stay on the sidewalk the whole time; you never know when a Cadillac could run you right the hell over. These people can't see and Florida isn't taking away anybody's licenses. Other than their undesirable driving skills, the elderly are my people. Give me stale crackers, a pool floaty and an afternoon shuffle board game any day of the week. The best part of this place? The women. Most of their husbands are dead-they've been dead for years-so the sisterhood is strong.

Helen's husband died decades ago. She says she can barely remember what a man feels like but God does she love watching Jeopardy without him getting all the answers wrong and then claiming he was "about to say that." There's something soothing about female friendships that will be undisturbed by a man. There's no way Helen's going to ditch dance or invite me to her bachelorette in Vegas that I absolutely will not attend. All of my female friends are now over 50, and I'm keeping it that way.

The studio is dark when I walk in. No one's inside, but I can hear the Marky Mark's "Good Vibrations" playing softly from the CD player.

"Mario? Are you in here?"

"Yes, hunny!" he calls out from behind the folding wall separating our class from the chess club. "Just wait there!"

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He pops out from behind the partition wearing his signature black unitard, his black hair greased back and his microphone taped to his cheek. Mario's an outsider like me, he's only 47 but he has an elderly spirit.

"Piper, hunny babygirl, welcome home." Skipping towards me he plants a kiss on both my cheeks.

"It's good to be home. Where are the DDs?"

"Take a seat over there." He brings his hands over his mouth to cover the giggles.

I take a seat on the plastic chair against the mirrored wall as Mario turns up "Good Vibrations."

"Okay ladies, she's ready for you!"

As the chorus builds Mom struts out from behind the partition, dancing to the rhythm, 5lb weights in each hand. She's followed by Doris who is frail but still manages to mambo, her hot pink hairband sitting on her bald head. Then finally there's Helen, whose back has begun to hunch but still looks magnificent as she begins to chassé across the floor.

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These bitches still got it.

More women shuffle onto the floor as Mario takes his position at the front of the room. Mom takes both of my hands and squeezes them leading me to the front. She puts me between her and Helen, and we all begin to step touch with a clap, waiting for Mario's next instruction.

"This next one goes out to our youngest Dedicated Dancer Piper James!"

The women applaud. It's slow and to others it may sound pathetic, but I hear the love from their frail, crooked fingers.

"I need to see knees lifted high and big smiles ladies!" Mario says while Whitney Houston's voice fills the room.

I look at Helen, who's barely lifting her feet from the ground, her rainbow visor fastened around her head as usual.

"Okay DDs let's go, I need more!" Mario booms into his microphone.

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"Back to the step touch. Pick it up Doris!" shouts Mario, "I swear to God you can lift your knees more honey child, I believe in you!"

No mercy is given to the women in this room: Mario expects fierceness and we deliver.

Doris wipes the sweat from her wrinkled face, her white Keds moving faster to the beat.

"Move it to the left, 3, 2, 1, clap!" Mario says. "Then back to the right."

By the time Whitney is to the chorus of "How Will I Know" we don't miss a beat. When he says V-step, we do it. When he says Charlie Brown, we begin moving before he can tell us to pick it up. We're not even thrown when he has us cha-cha with knee ups. The fluorescent lights flicker above and I'm not thinking about toenails, I'm thinking about my jazz hands.

Every December when I come home this group gets smaller, but the music is just as loud, Mario's jazz squares just as spectacular. When we begin to grapevine, the room is electric. Helen travels across the whole room while Doris cheers. Mom's heel turns are on fire and I wow the women with my energized box step.

In that room we are unstoppable. Together we're the Dedicated Dancers of the Greater Oaks Retirement Community, and we are glorious.

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