

# Step Lively

Mamas, don't let your babies grow up to be nondancers.

**It's long past time** that I thank Texas—that I thank all the Czechs and Germans and Mexicans and cowboys, both real and urban, who made this the dancingest state in the union. Without them I might never have gotten married. While I'm at it, I should probably thank the heat as well. The hellish, hellish heat.

August. Austin. 1979. AC goes out in bachelorette pad. Roommate suggests vacating premises for Aqua Fest: giant drunk on banks of Colorado River where strangers—many of them members of fraternities—throw up on one another's feet. Could not pay me enough to attend. Varnish on furniture bubbles, and linoleum on floors melts. Aqua Fest becomes tempting alternative. More uncharacteristic behavior follows. Ask cutest boy in all of Aquafestlandia to dance polka. Boy maintains it's a waltz. Twenty-seven-year argument ensues.

An astute reader recently pointed out that my new novel, *The Flamenco Academy*, and my last one, *The Yokota Officers Club*, both featured introverted heroines transformed and released by dance. Well, duh. As a seriously shy—okay, borderline catatonic—high schooler, dance transformed and released me. Why wouldn't I let it do the same for my heroines? Why not let them discover that simply through the relatively rhythmic flailing of one's limbs, one could make contact with the opposite sex? But for dance I would have been Emily Dickinson. (Except for the part where she does Jell-O shots with Walt Whitman. What? You didn't cover Whitman: *The Party Years* in your American Poetry class?)

As with Isadora Duncan, the height of my terpsichorean triumphs was a two-week stint as a go-go dancer in Tokyo. (Now you're telling me that Isadora didn't work the cage?) I was the intermission act for a comedian who fantasized that he was Bob Hope entertaining the troops and I was Joey Heatherton. He was, maybe, a third-rate comedian. I was, maybe, a fourth-rate go-go dancer. Together we added up to a thoroughly seventh-rate act.

Sometime after my "tour," I returned to America to discover that the sun had set on the Golden Days of Dance. Long gone were the brand-name dances of my youth: the cool jerk, the funky chicken, the ecstatic tuna. All had devolved into a free-form hippie-esque grooving that consisted of slopping around the floor like amoebas, though not quite that structured. Barefoot girls swayed and waved their arms like seaweed in a slow ocean current. Boys executed maneuvers reminiscent of a tai chi master being electrocuted. Feigning copulation with a speaker was a guaranteed crowd-pleaser. | CONTINUED ON PAGE 270



**BEST FEET FORWARD:** As a seriously shy high schooler, dance transformed me.

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Fred and Ginger wept.

Imagine my delight then at ending up in Texas, which had not only a state flower and a state bird but also state dances: the two-step, the schottische, the cotton-eyed Joe.

Why the runaway success of TV's *Dancing With the Stars* surprised anyone is a mystery to me. Women love to dance. The other mystery is why men waste their lives on girl-getting gambits like accumulating vast wealth, fast cars, and astronomical scores on *Quake* when dancing is right there in plain sight. Guys,

do you dream of women falling into your arms? Want to tell them which way to go and how fast or slow to get there? Simple: Learn to dance. Is it an accident that so many wives run off with personal trainers of both sexes? No. And why? Because personal trainers have what dancing gives anyone: permission to touch. (Same deal with husbands and dental hygienists.)

Women almost always love to dance more than the men in their lives, who endure the activity only long enough to get someone to sleep with them. Far sadder are the guys who never dance at all. Perhaps they fear that dancing will cause them to appear as something less than a

towering stud. Not here in the great-state-of-Texas not only do men dance but the absolute manliest of men are the best dancers of all! Back (again) in bachelorette days, I ended up in Stamford for the Texas Cowboy Reunion. I stood on the sidelines at the dance that evening, astonished at how hydraulically smooth the couples gliding past were, when a real, true, calf-castrating, fence-mending, jeans-tucked-into-his-boots cowboy asked me to two-step. Fresh from years of amoebic slopping and sensing that cool jerking to "San Antonio Rose" was not going to work, I admitted that I couldn't "touch dance."

He sluiced his chaw a little deeper over to the side of his mouth and asked, "Can you walk? Cuz if you can walk, you can two-step." Then he taught me just the way his Czech mother had taught him back on the ranch after she'd cleared the furniture out of the house to make room for her and her many children to quick-quick, slow-slow, quick-quick, slow-slow. I hooked my thumb on Keith's belt loop, and just that easily, I joined the circle of couples waltzing counterclockwise across Texas.

But this doesn't mean that dancing is only for bachelors. Husbands, the words your wives most yearn to hear (aside from "Is anyone else chilly? Can we turn down the AC?" or "Here, baby doll, you control the remote." Or even "Give me that. Women as fine, fine, *fine* looking as you shouldn't be pushing around a vacuum cleaner!") are "Gosh, I've always dreamed of taking tango lessons." Salsa is also good.

Here's how desperate women are to dance: They pack into classes offering all the partnerless mutations of the real thing—Strippercise, Sweatin' to the Oldies, Cardio Hip-Hop, Yo! Yo! Yoga!, belly dancing, and the saddest of all the substitutes, tap. But the most extreme manifestation of a woman's unstoppable desire to get her groove on has to be the explosive popularity of flamenco. While researching *The Flamenco Academy*, I sat in—the operational word here being "sat"—on dozens of classes and watched housewives, attorneys, Department of Motor Vehicles clerks, and one nun from Gallup, New Mexico, stamping, stomping, and pounding their way to solo dance ecstasy. All of them no doubt dreaming about fiery Latin-lover partners. Except, of course, for the nun, and she was already spoken for.

All I'm saying is, Mamas, don't let your babies grow up to be non-dancers. Help them fulfill their Lone Star destiny. Clear out the furniture and teach them to dance. Get them ready for the moment when fate steps in and knocks out the AC in your future daughter-in-law's bachelorette pad.

Oops, gotta go. They're playing our song. El Hubbo, the Hub of My Universe, maintains it's a waltz. I'm pretty sure it's a polka. ♣