Salsa Planet

At first steps were called out to us and our partners rotated frequently. It was easy to laugh at myself and try something new, to try and play the sparkly and easy-going American. The instructor told us that it was time to go downstairs and just *dance*. I realized then that I might be a muppet. Many went straight to the dance floor. I ran for a shot of tequila. Maybe if I could forget my creature-ness I could loosen up and stay with it. Every school lunch, every school dance was playing on tape in my mind. Everyone knew what to do, how to behave, where to stand, how to move, how to get close without being scared that someone might actually steal your soul. This was real life, and I wasn't ready for it. I wasn't ready for real bodies, real men all around me, ready and willing to dance with my body, which of course was really a muppet. I kept trying to hide the wires in my sleeves, but eventually I'd trip on my own strings dragging on the floor, and oh God if I looked anyone in the eye too long my felt legs would catch on fire.

I sat on the couch and tried my best not to look like a sad-sack in distress. I didn't want to come off like I was sorry for myself, because I wasn't. Just out of my depth. While I sat I thought about how I had slowly built my own tall tower to keep me safe and away from the unknown. All these people dancing… they were real. A short Londoner came to find me. He called me "Fine Arts". He tried having an honest conversation but the volume of the music and my discomfort made it impossible for me to be present. I don't even remember how he left or why. Almost immediately another guy came and sat next to me, a young guy from earlier who refused to leave me alone. He'd been tripping on my strings all evening. He kept yelling in my ear, every plosive and syllable blasting into my right ear with a mighty wind, telling me about the shitty clubs he's been to, telling me how close his place was, speaking horrible, flat unaccented french at me when I mentioned that I took it in high-school. I kept thinking to myself that I didn't want to treat him like he was annoying me, even though he was. When I couldn't take being the nice girl any more I found the beef-cake in a white tee and chain and asked him to rescue me with a dance, like how I imagined a real girl might. He didn't respond right away, but he took me onto the dancefloor anyway and said *Bonjuorno*. It took me a few beats to realize he wasn't being cute.

"Italian?"

"Yes." He was confident in leading me, like he really knew what he was doing. I hobbled along behind trying to feel my woman body and relax.

Do people really just… do this? They go out dancing? For so many of them it was so casual to exist. It was fun and flirty and sexy, but the dancing didn't *mean* anything. The sheer amount of will-power it took to ask, what was his name? Rick, I think. He was handsome, all salt and pepper with deep black-brown eyes. I asked him to dance. The panic in my heart and the warmth in my legs were deeply confused about what was happening. He was generous, somehow suffering through teaching me the bachata. At one point he spun me around to stand behind me, my arms crossed in front of me, his hands in mine and he was against my back. *Oh, God, how do I move? Am I too stiff?* I couldn't believe what was happening and that it didn't mean anything at all. Why couldn't I just enjoy it for what it was? Just exist on a dancefloor without being conscious of my stiff, over-tall body; every way it moves awkwardly, laughing too hard at my own jokes– the joke of course being that I am here in the first place.

I couldn't help but watch the girl who I came with, her striking, youthful beauty and confidence in navigating this space. It made me think that I was never really that kind of young woman. I was young and awkward, and then I was older and slower. She was so vibrant, her shirt tied just above the belly button and simple black jeans, her smile like a star. Her eyes were so intense, sloping upward with her eyebrows on her young and open face, the perfect paradox for enchantment. I ended up leaving early in an Uber, unable to take any more of this strange planet.