

Dancing

by Michelle Cacho-Negrete

Today, driving down I95 in Portland, Maine, I heard Nancy Griffith's wistfully nostalgic song, "Dancing at the Five and Dime" on the radio. Ages ago, her words had transformed a low-income palace of necessity into an after-hours location romantic as a South Sea island. I drifted back to sixth grade and dancing with a friend after school, also at the Five and Dime, but in our Brooklyn ghetto, a different kind of island. Our single mothers were at work, and since nobody worried about where we were, we stayed at the Five and Dime as long as possible. The latest rock music echoed through the store when we swung open the door. We'd stand a moment admiring the cheap treasures lined up like offerings to the gods of want, then jitterbug down the aisles, immature bodies weaving together, hips shaking, fingers snapping, twirling each other as we mouthed the words or boldly sang out loud.

My immigrant mother always bought plants here, examining each leaf, holding up the plant to look beneath it before finally deciding. Periodically, she tried on lipsticks, though she always bought the same one, a Revlon bright red; I don't remember its name. We, however, examined *everything* as we spun past it: underwear, plain white cotton back then, make-up displays of powdery eye shadow, clumpy mascara, off-toned foundation, glittering jewelry, neatly stacked candy bars, toys we were contemptuous of now that we were graduating elementary school, brightly colored house dresses with varied designs, even cleaning products. We danced until the glare of the counter girls warned us they were out of patience, sick of worrying we'd bump into the counters and break something. We usually had a dime each, although it didn't matter as long as one of us did, and we boogied our way to the high stools and refreshment counter and ordered hot chocolate, briefly lifted from poverty by the rich dense beverage, the swirled whipped cream that topped it, but especially from swirling down the aisles, our worries briefly transformed to joy.

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My granddaughter Micaela danced as soon as she could walk. She greeted every day with the same arms-spread-wide twirl, her hair a curtain of light flying around her. Her love of dance was boundless and not limited by place or setting, though living in Chicago she heard wonderful music everywhere. Whenever we crossed the street, a spill of rock and roll from waiting cars evoked impromptu choreography. She stopped for every street musician, no matter how off-key, an appreciative hooper who drew an audience the music had failed to attract. Once, while visiting her, we took her to a Border's bookstore, one of those places where people from every walk of life are drawn together by their love of books, she caused a flurry of laughter and applause as she danced to Madonna played over the loudspeaker. Her flashing sneakers created a display of tiny strobe-lights that highlighted her complicated dance-steps. In blue jeans and red striped shirt, she was a whirling dervish of color. Micaela was born the summer of my first semester in an MFA program. My fellow writers, a United Nations of color and ethnicity, followed my daughter-in-law's childbirth progress through my son's hourly phone-calls. With news of his reports, I thought of a particular Hopi dance signaling the journey of a newcomer up through the three underworlds of fire, air, water, finally arriving at this fourth world where we live our lives. I imagined my grandchild dancing up that ladder. It was very hot that day, a thick, heavy heat peculiar to New England, where spring appears and vanishes overnight, and summers are short. I was coated with a slippery sheen of perspiration but bursting with joy at the final phone call: *girl...mother and daughter doing fine*. I slid into a hip-swinging grind from my teen-age years on the Brooklyn streets. How beautiful the world was, despite the wars, poverty, and hunger. Another student brought out a radio and, caught up in the universal celebration of a child's birth, we all danced on the lawn. The cook, alerted to the festivities, brought out a hastily decorated cake. We dropped to the grass to eat it, including the cook, and a few of us discussed dance as ritual. The Chinese student spoke about the dragon dance, used to drive evil spirits from the harvest. A few African students spoke of dances to commemorate an adolescent moving into adulthood. Two students from India spoke about dance as worship. I recalled a Native American dance in a dusty village reenacting the brutal conquering of their tribe by Spanish explorers. Dance, whatever it

commemorates, seems a universal response. The icing on the cake, a swirl of chocolate and yellow, created rich sweetness that ran down my fingers, which I licked with the open joy of a child and thought of Ram Das telling us of the only dance there is, the dance of life.

The California day was too warm to remain indoors for my husband Kevin and I, Mainers determined to take advantage of warmth and brilliant sun during a visit we'd wedged between snowstorms to that same granddaughter, now in college. While Micaela was in class, we wandered the streets of a low-income neighborhood so like my childhood one: rundown buildings, convivial rivalry between men playing dominos in front of stoops, children skateboarding or playing ball, careful to avoid tipping the domino boards and incur their parents' irritation. We were drawn to the sound of panpipes coming from a park that was edged with a homeless encampment. We wandered over to a bench to listen, surrounded by homeless men and women, some with shopping carts filled with their belongs, others with worn knapsacks, and still others who seemed to own nothing; people with faces ravaged by poverty, hard luck, drugs, or alcohol. The setting suggested desperation, a point of no return, But I knew from my own life experience, and from working with the homeless after completing a master's degree in clinical social work, that even in desperation there can be moments of joyt. Friends and I, with nowhere to "hang out" when we were teenagers, spent nearly all our free time in the streets, blasting a radio, dancing, often stealing food and eating it on stoops, not getting home until 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning. We'd never had live music, however, like this musician, the best I'd ever heard on the panpipes. His music rang through the amplifier like a mournful cry. He looked happy to play for whoever listened, shoulders swaying, feet rhythmically tapping. He couldn't have had a more appreciative crowd. Many of my fellow listeners were dancing, some perhaps stoned or drunk but all living inside the sound and motion, a blur of wild color and ragged edges like a woven shawl.

We spoke with a man who'd settled, with his lady friend, onto the bench beside us. He asked why we weren't dancing and I explained that I'd recently had a knee replacement that left me unsteady on my feet. I told him that if my granddaughter were

here, she would be in continuous motion He laughed and said something about the energy of the young then shared that he needed a knee replacement but couldn't figure out how to get one and even if he could, he lived in a tent under constant threat of being confiscated. Before I could reply, the musician swung into a song I'd considered an anthem, an invitation to gather together and change the inequality of our county, "Dancing in The Streets." Martha and the Vandellas were summoning us. *"The time is right for dancing in the streets,"* their call to occupy the streets of Philadelphia, Chicago, Baltimore, L.A., New Orleans, New York City; *"It doesn't matter where you are, just as long as you are there.* We did come out: we marched, we sang, we danced. Music and dancing have been the background, in my experience, to every major movement: the protest songs of Vietnam, the civil rights movement, women's rights. But they also signal celebration.

In this California park I watched the swaying the rambunctious twisty dance moves, the laughing faces and, yes, the joy. Years seemed to slip away from everyone and I thought of my granddaughter, currently taking a civil rights course, and of my own adolescence. Many in the crowd seemed to know the words, we were not a young group after all, and the voices rang out: *"It's time for dancing in the street."* The man beside us, leaped up and, taking the hand of his friend, turned to me and insisted, "You have to dance. The time is right," then held out his hand to me as well. I let him pull me to my feet and reached for Kevin's hand. The man smiled and twirled his partner while I moved stiffly, but gamely.

"The time is right for dancing in the street," the man sang as he twirled beside me.

The panpiper swayed to his music, this benediction to those who had so little, and joyously, hopefully, we all danced!



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