Dancing in the Dark

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I took Will, my boyfriend, to see *The Burial of Atala* when it came to the Met two summers ago. I sat in front of my mirror before we went, thickly layering gold liquid on my eyes, self-conscious that Will was asleep on the bed across the room, waiting for me. In high school, I was famous for smearing my face with tubes of colored paint, hiding the contours of my skin, pocked with adolescence, beneath mascara and glitter.

Will hated my makeup. He felt I was hiding something, being fake. He much preferred me when I was barefaced, able to kiss him without staining his mouth a bloody red or streaking his cheeks with glitter shed from my lids. Still, he was one to talk about wearing a mask. He shrouded himself in angry music and black clothing more than I ever did with my gold eyeliner. I wore my glitter because I liked the attention. I also wore it because I didn't find myself interesting enough without it. I was shocked when Will called my plain face beautiful.

Girodet's painting, *The Burial of Atala*, features a girl lying in the center of a grotto. She is pale, bright in the sunlight, unblemished and quietly serene. Her feet are clutched by a young man darker than she, earthy and muscular. Her shoulders are supported by an old man shrouded in great folds of dark fabric, his head bowed as he lowers her into the grave below. She is Atala, a Christian nun and missionary to the New World. She fell in love with Chactas, the Indian lover who now mourns at her feet, and, ashamed and fearful of breaking her vow to God, subsequently killed herself to remain chaste.

A common remark on Girodet's work is the sadness of it all, the purity of Atala, her untapped sensuality displayed in the brilliant sunshine. The harsh physical light gives her decision a transfixing transparency. Her love for her god is simple and unapologetic in the glare of the setting sun. She is illuminated, both inside and out, a saint for her self-sacrificing deed.

My father has always expected more of me, always more. He is encouraging and loving, but no report card is ever quite perfect. After my first semester at college, when I brought home three A's and an A-minus, he was congratulatory, but promptly asked, "So what happened with that last mark there?" As a child, I would cry in my room for hours, baffled as to what I was doing wrong. Now, it's easier to hide such feelings of inadequacy behind passive indifference. I curtly responded, "Nothing happened," and changed the subject.

When I was young, Dad would take me Dining and Dancing on Nantucket. It was his invention for us, a rare father-daughter event. We would dine at the Jared Coffin House. It's an old mansion *cum* restaurant in town, with dark, wood-paneled walls and a brilliant chandelier. The grand staircase is high and smartly carpeted, with a white banister running all the way up. We would eat on the outdoor patio, our faces flickering in the light of luminaries nestled in cut crystal dishes.

I have no memories of dancing with my father. I wish I did. I can easily create a fitting scene. It would have to be half-shrouded in darkness, fuzzy and noncommittal, dreamlike and perfect. There's me, balanced on Dad's feet, squashing the toes of his shiny black shoes as we gently sway. We're dancing in the library garden, a block's walk from the Jared Coffin. (I do remember the garden; that part would be hit with a spotlight). It's night, when evening dew collects on the garden's shadowy, plush carpet, dyed forest green hues by the dusk. For effect, I'll add lots of stars to wink through the cheery white and yellow lights of the boats bobbing on the harbor or moored at the docks—a proper memory, fashionably hazy, but stuck with enough bright pinpoints to make it look truthful.

Bright light, illumination to aid the naked eye, isn't uncommon today. Thanks to Thomas Edison, we don't have to wait for the sun or the stars to guide our path. Light today is cheap, expendable, and omnipresent. Our lives are ablaze with television sets, Ipods, laptops. Electric lights adorn every street corner. Times Square is blinding. No camera could ever hope to capture all that brightness; a painter would lose his sight. In our transient culture of flickering commercials and shiny magazine pages, we've lost our need for static reminders of simple truths. Amidst all this illumination, we are still in the dark.

The one genuine memory I have of Dining and Dancing is just as murky as the one I invent. Dad and I were walking down Federal Street, my hand in his, the hem of my grapefruit-hued dress ruffling gently in the warm salt breeze. I heard laughter and the clink of beer bottles from behind the garden hedge, muffled in the dark. Through the tiny, glistening leaves, I could just make out a group of teenagers, huge to me. Their raucous voices pierced the night. Dad deftly steered me away, drove me home, and put me to bed, without ever letting on if he was hurt by the intrusion of our private spot. I still don't know how he felt that night.

Such a memory should be charged with heightened emotion: rage, pleas, fathers triumphant. It should be lit with spotlights striking every horrid angle, exposing the truth of those villainous teens, vindicating my triumphant father as he lifts me aloft in his rugged arms. It should be worthy of a painter's brushstrokes. I don't know if such scenes exist anymore, or if they ever did. Can anyone really live so brilliantly without disintegrating? Girodet's canvases were saturated with immutable truth and poignancy. My memory includes a puff of cigarette smoke and an SUV clumsily bumping over cobblestones.

It is not easy to illuminate. Edison himself admitted defeat many times in his attempts at illumination. In the September 1932 edition of *Harper's Monthly*, Edison quipped, "Genius is one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration" (qtd. in Rosanoff 406). It may take a tungsten wire filament to illuminate a room, but it takes courage, patience, and a good deal of self-respect to illuminate a life. To reject all hypocrisy and act according to one's conscience, regardless of the opinions of others, is one of the hardest, and most rewarding, things a person can do. Fearing those ninety-nine percentage points of perspiration, we paint our faces and put up our defenses on the city streets, shield our ears with our cell phones, shut out the judgments we assume others make of us every day.

Perspiration was required at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy. We actors spent months emoting and belting and tapping our feet, trying to prove that we were indeed the prettiest and the brightest and the best. We squeezed ourselves into leotards and three-inch heels, slathered lipstick on our mouths, and smiled till our jaws ached. We were desperate for the approval of others. We were never good enough. We wanted to be brilliant.

Dreams, once you've invested in them, die hard. By the winter of 2006, I was sick of dancing every day, of analyzing how much better the other girls were. They knew how to stand, how to put on blush, how to dress and fix their hair. The painful decision to quit show business, finally confirmed after months of tearful nights on the phone with my mom, terrified me. I had never existed outside the world of musical theater. I felt vulnerable, exposed. Most of all, I thought my peers would judge me for my choice. I hid my decision, bottling up my confusion and smiling with the best as I tried to keep up in dance class.

When I told my parents I wanted to leave school immediately, Dad rushed to New York to see me. As usual, he had created a booklet of spreadsheets, charts, lists of my current options and analyses of what I should do with the next six months of my life. We sat on a wet bench in Central Park, and he lectured to me. Mostly, though, he talked about his own experiences—his failed attempts at writing in California, his parents' judgments of his career change, his fear of his father as a young boy. At one point, he started to cry.

In that moment, as I stripped off my mask of musical theater and a dream of Broadway, my father chipped away at his mask of strength and distant affection. He had never opened up to me like this before. In that moment of vulnerability, I loved and respected him more than at any other point in my memory. I was no longer alone in my confusion. We were simple, exposed, confused in our truth but steadfast as well. The watery sun shone through the bare Central Park branches and illuminated our little scene, etching it into my memory with diamond-cut precision.

I recently attended a concert in Madison Square Garden. During the second half of the show, the audience became restless and shuffled impatiently in the pitch black of the bleachers. Then out of the blue, the lead singer announced that for the next number, the audience would be the light show. "I want everyone to pull out your cell phones, your Blackberries, your pagers," he called to us. Immediately, the crowd was electrified; buzzing with excitement we scrambled for our pockets and purses. Dots of brilliant neon overtook the Garden in a wave, each one a tiny beacon reaching out to the unknown. I dug into my bag for my phone and Palm Pilot, grasping at their edges in the dark. I flipped them open over my head, triumphantly adding my two lights to the thousands of others bobbing along in time to the music.

As cynical as I am about the pains our society takes to shield itself from judgment and ridicule, the scene in the Garden clearly shows that there are other forces at work. No one was too cool to join in. The glare from those little electronic boxes that both connect and disconnect us were reflected in the glitter on my eyes, the red on my mouth. We were not lit by a sunbeam or the glow of the moon, and we did not hold any eternal truth. We were just people, doing the best we could in an unforgiving world that has no time for quiet introspection. We took what we had, and we used it. No longer strangers in our strange act, together we lit the night.

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