

THE MERMAID'S TALE

人魚紀

- * 2019 Mirror Weekly Book of the Year
- * 2019 Kingstone Bookstore Book of the Year
- * 2020 Taipei Book Fair Award

Two ballroom dancers – a young urban woman and ambitious gay man – invest the time and energy of their best years looking for a partner. Lee Wei-Jing's posthumous magnum opus retells the fairy tale of the mermaid's dream of walking.

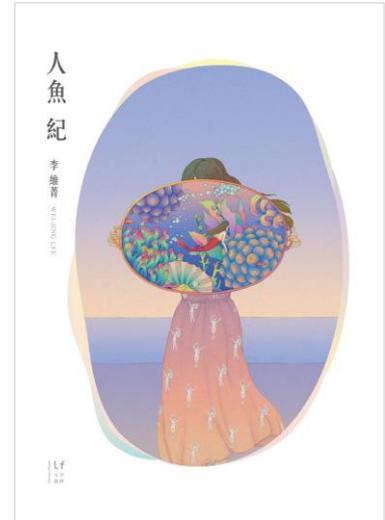
Summer is a young, single woman living in Taipei who dreams of becoming a national ballroom dance competitor. Yet her search for the right partner – that magical key to dance – drags on endlessly. Dancing with her female classmates feels like stealing their time; high-school age partners bring harsh parental scrutiny, while dancing with men whose partners are gone only sets her up for heartbreak.

Summer's teacher, Donny, can empathize with her plight. Though tremendously talented, he cannot keep a partner long enough to make it to the great stage at Blackpool. Even after he puts aside his own sexuality so he can offer to marry and care for the right partner, every woman he dances with eventually leaves him to find love elsewhere.

Lee Wei-Jing's bitter yet scintillating novel, which the author finished from her deathbed, rewrites the fairy tale of the mermaid dreaming of walking on two feet in a way that pulls us closer to the true motivation behind it – not love, but freedom.

Lee Wei-Jing 李維菁

Lee Wei-Jing was an author and cultural critic, known for her collection of stories and poems *The Importance of Old-School Dating*. Lee's first book, *My Name Is Hsu Liang-Liang* (2010), won the Taipei Book Fair



Category: Literary Fiction

Publisher: Thinkingdom

Date: 5/2019

Rights contact:

booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com

Pages: 232

Length: 70,000 characters
(approx. 45,500 words in English)

Award and established her as one of the most important writers of her generation. Her first novel, *La Dolce Vita* (2015), was made into a movie in 2017.

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By Lee Wei-Jing

Translated by Darryl Sterk

01

Every morning, right before dawn, I long to step into the expanse of blue and vanish at the margin of sea and sky.

But I just stand there. I stand unmoving, every time. I've never really gone in.

I had a severe allergy attack today. I dug the hive-speckled soles of my feet into the fine white sand, like a plant's roots when it is transplanted to a thin layer of soil. Itchy all over, I scratched several spots until they bled. It started the day before yesterday, when I woke up to find I'd broken out in a rash overnight. I was literally covered in blotches. From my scalp, my forehead, my face, my neck, my armpits, down to my private parts, the rim of my anus, groin, and even the soles of my feet were covered in a red rash.

I often get allergies, but I've never had a full-body flareup like this before, a rash that covers every inch of my skin. It's so itchy it hurts. I feel feverish.

When my landlord rang my doorbell first thing in the morning, I was still in bed. I'd been woken up but I really didn't want to get up. Actually I'd woken up three hours before, but I'd been lying there, not wanting to move. Now, forced to listen to that exasperating doorbell, I lost it. It was like a ghost had come to howl hysterically at me, trying to shake me up. I couldn't think of anything I'd done in my rotten, uneventful life to deserve this. Maybe I hadn't done anything right, but I hadn't gotten myself mixed up in anything really bad, either. I really couldn't think of what I could have possibly done wrong to merit such reproach, or what would give anyone the right to harass me and invade my space like this.

He wasn't going to let up. He kept jabbing his finger into the buzzer so stubbornly that I could sense in the sound of the buzzer the increasing intensity of his truculent rage.

So I gave in. I got up, hair an absolute mess, and shuffled around with a slipper on one foot trying in vain to find its mate. Then I hurried onto the balcony to answer the door.

My landlord spat: "Why the hell didn't you open the damn door when I pressed the buzzer? Lazy piece of shit! Do you know how long I've been standing here? If you can't make rent you can tell me. Just let me know and I'll come again in a few days. Just don't keep me waiting on your doorstep! Didn't want to open the door, did you? How can you be so insensitive?"

All the resistance and fury that had built up in me as I tossed and turned in bed instantly turned to shock at the sight of my old landlord. I started to tremble. My throat was so dry I couldn't speak.

He had a half dozen pastel butterfly clips in his close-cropped white hair and clip-on

purple shell earrings on his earlobes. From his neck hung three necklaces of pearls and shells that sparkled purple, silver, and white. His fingers were covered in rings ornamented with pearls and shells. He'd even fitted the frames of his glasses with purple lenses. But he had matched these ornaments with an old man's white undershirt, shapeless shorts, and sandals.

I tried to get a hold of myself. I didn't want my surprise to show. I was afraid I'd hurt his feelings.

I wanted to tell him I had money to pay the rent, I just didn't want to have to get up so early.

"Please don't show up at my door first thing in the morning without letting me know in advance," I wanted to say. "I keep late hours. If you really have to, please come in the afternoon. I'll open the door right away."

But I didn't say anything, because I doubted it would make a difference. Nothing I could say would have gotten through to an old man decked out in purple women's accessories. My sentences could have been strings of shiny shells and they still wouldn't have registered over the anger ringing in his ears.

So I stayed silent and let him yell until he felt satisfied.

"I haven't withdrawn the money yet. I can drop it off downstairs this afternoon."

"Piece of shit, you could have told me, at least!" When he yelled at me, the purple shell earrings swayed slightly. "I could have given you a few days' grace if you'd just let me know beforehand..."

His diatribe over, he turned and began teetering down the stairs. Suddenly he stopped to scratch an itch on his cheek, then to toss his head and tuck his hair behind his ear. He didn't have hair that long to begin with. I saw him flash a girly smile, shy but coy, as if flirting with some invisible presence in the air. Finally, supporting himself on the handrail, he took that coy smile of his with him slowly, step by step, downstairs.

I closed the door and collapsed into the sofa, at a complete loss. It took a while before what had just happened sank in. Then I shuddered.

I couldn't say what was so disturbing. My landlord was adorning himself in shells and pearls and striking bizarre effeminate poses. There must be something that I wasn't seeing or that was simply beyond me – some mystery. That was what was truly disturbing.

When had he started wearing jewelry, I wondered? Had there been any sign?

Last month when he pressed the doorbell to collect the rent he was already wearing the purple shell necklace. I remember because it clashed with his white undershirt. I assumed that maybe a grandchild had bought it for him on an island cruise. I didn't think much of it at the time. But now that he'd turned up covered in pearls and shells, yelling and trying to flip his hair like Beyoncé, it took on a special significance.

Perhaps it was just a thread that had come loose in life, a thread that the trundling Wheel of Time would roll into the tumbling procession of the everyday. It was deviant, but deviations are temporary. It couldn't be considered a part of the regular rhythm of life, and wasn't so destructive it could blow up the logic of everyday normality. So what if it was deviant.

I suddenly felt a bit chilly. Not wanting to get up off the sofa to go find the little comforter, I could only curl up like a shrimp, snuggle into the sofa, and have a snooze.

I wasn't exactly exhausted, but I couldn't shake off that annoying lethargy.

I'd spent the previous night lying sleepless in bed staring up at the ceiling. At about four in the morning I heard a woman cry out in pain. Her cries got louder and louder, clearer and clearer, so loud and clear that it didn't seem like she could be very far away. She was loud enough that I felt pretty sure that she was in one of the buildings in this apartment complex. A number of times I heard her so clearly that it sounded like she was right outside.

Alarmed, I got up, opened the window, and looked around outside to identify where the poor woman might be. If necessary I'd report it to the police. Not wanting anyone to see me moving around inside, I instinctively turned the light off and peeked out. The woman's cries got more and more distressing. She was so loud now it was surreal. By this point many lights in the complex had flared on, and there were even bare-chested men in striped shorts standing on the balcony trying to figure out where the screams were coming from, what exactly had happened, and whether there was some crisis that they needed to deal with right away.

The woman was shrieking now, as if she was getting beaten, and then there were choking sobs mixed in. The men standing on the balcony and their nightgown-clad wives leaning on the windowsill got more and more anxious. At first her shrieks and sobs seemed to echo all around, but after a while they seemed to be coming from the seventh or eighth floor of one of the towers. "Is she in one of the flats in that tower to the left?" one man asked his neighbor. "Should we call the cops?"

But then the woman's voice suddenly changed. She breathed a lingering, flirtatious sigh, almost like a moan. The many men and women who were standing vigilant on balconies or by windows were caught off-guard by this new quality that had appeared in her latest shriek. Was that what they thought it was?

While everyone was waiting in astonished silence, the woman cried out again. This time, everyone could tell she was moaning.

Yellow lights that had come on in the dark suddenly flicked off, one after another, as what began as a neighborhood suspense thriller turned into an absurd farce. "All right you two, give it a rest and go to sleep," a bare-chested man on a balcony yelled sternly into the darkness. "You've woken up enough people for one night."

Kneeling by the window, I'd been chuckling for quite some time. I laughed until I started to wheeze. What a dramatic night! I was on cloud nine.

Unable to get over it, I felt my way back to the window and looked out. In no time everyone had turned off the lights and gone to sleep.

I felt a bit lonely. But I couldn't stop laughing. I should try to go to sleep, I thought. I had a dance class tomorrow. I needed to get a good night's sleep.

That's what I enjoy the most in this insipid world: dancing.

A ballroom dancer's fear of being without a partner never really goes away. Most dancers are like me. They dance a while without finding their own partner. In group class they have no other choice but to join hands and dance with a random, straggling stranger, perhaps some unlucky wretch whose partner is absent that day. You wouldn't want to dance too many times with them if they aren't any good, for fear that they really would become your regular partner. However reluctantly, you might end up paired up with them in your classmates' eyes. The only major expense in my life was dance lessons. I practiced regularly with my teacher. Under Donny's instruction, I hoped to become a decent dancer, someone with solid basics and the right idea of the partnership that ballroom dancing requires. If I could get my fundamentals up to snuff, and got lucky, I'd find a partner of my own.

So I spent a lot of time learning dance from Donny in the ballroom studio where the competitors gathered to train. He worked with me on the basics. Even getting the fundamental footwork right took over half a year. According to Donny, you practiced the basic steps every day for life. At the same time, Donny was also teaching a class for "aunties and uncles". Some were pretty good. Donny didn't hold anything back, but gave the aunties what they wanted by teaching them the fancy moves that were popular with the top competitors in international competition. The aunties figured that learning new moves meant they were getting their money's worth. Donny wanted me to pick up new sequences and steps in group class and refine my technique in the individual lessons. Then it was up to me to practice at home.

Donny said he'd watch out for me to see if anyone in the dance studio was looking for a partner. But he didn't need to tell me the chances were slim. Those studio dancers mostly had their hearts set on competition, and I was too old and had taken it up too late to be competitive. Don't worry for now, Donny said, just keep practicing. Alternatively, I might find a partner in the aunties and uncles' class. The strength of Donny's reputation as a dance teacher had attracted a few younger students as well.

I'd seen a lot of cases where the student didn't get the attention he or she needed from the teacher, never ended up finding a partner, and couldn't keep training. In a dance environment, in which two is the basic unit, it's hard to watch all the pairs dancing to the music when you're alone. After a few times, the staunchest soul would wilt. Everyone else is too busy practicing their own thing and building rapport with their partner; nobody has time to show concern for those classmates who have wound up by themselves. After a few sessions, unpartnered dancers end up losing interest. Feeling embarrassed and excluded, they don't continue. They come for a month or two, lose hope, and quit dancing.

A teacher who counted quite a few celebrities among his students once said in an interview with the media that finding a dance partner is the same as finding a life partner. Things will just click when the right person appears. The thing is to make sure you're ready when the time comes.

To a lot of my classmates, it was the gospel truth. To them, the fantasy logic in articles

about the sexes was really applicable to the world of partner dance. All it took was enough preparation, perseverance, and patience, and eventually the right person would appear.

Yes and no. The real world has space for singles, for those who never manage to enter into coupledness, no matter how lonely they are. But in the world of ballroom dancing, a partner is the only ticket through the door and onto the dance floor. If you don't have one you can never be part of that world.

But I wanted to believe that as long as I kept working at it, I would meet a suitable partner someday, and we would practice together. We would improve and refine our craft like true competitors. We could compete in the amateur arena even if we couldn't go pro. Donny would be happy for me, for sure.

But you've got to be realistic, I told myself, no matter what. You can't not practice. You can't just wait for a partner to appear before taking the first step.

At the most intense point in my training, I took dance classes four days a week. Two days I went to the professional dance studio for an hour-long individual class with Donny. The studio was full of the youthful odor and energy of the competitors. When I walked in the dancers would be spaced out along the barres, stretching or practicing in front of the mirror. Every one of them was focused on his or her body – the reflection of the body in the mirror would tell the dancer where he or she had gone wrong.

"The mirror is a dancer's best friend," because it shows you where your problems are. I was surrounded by serious dancers practicing specific steps or their entire routines. They were all poised and primed with the exuberance of youth.

"Most people can't even see themselves when they look in the mirror," Donny said. "If they can't see what's wrong, there's no hope. If they can, they've got a chance to get really good. Or they just go nuts."

The other two days I went to the three-hour aunties and uncles' class in a rented activity center. As I later learned, the class's renown wasn't just because of Donny, but also because those aunties and uncles had been getting together to share their passion for dance for over a decade, without a break. They were passionate, yes, but they sure didn't smell like the competitors in the studio. In a group class, most people, no matter how much they like dancing, only pursue it as a hobby. For students like that, a lot depends on how good the teacher is. Donny was good. He'd answer any question with a step-by-step demonstration. His sincerity warmed the hearts of those older students, some of whom were over fifteen years old in dance years. His class was fun, and Donny got his students to care about their art.

I would sweat so much in practice my underpants would still be soaked through when I got home.

The other three days I'd train at home, practicing the steps or sequences I'd learned in class or miming the fundamental footwork to videos on the computer. I also had to train my core and stretch my limbs every evening, all to give myself a dancer's body. Although I'd started too late to have a hope of being a professional competitor, I still wanted to get a bit closer to perfect dancing form. I still thought I had it in me to be a true dancer. I wanted to dance like an

international competitor, not just someone who did social dance as a pastime. If all I needed was a way of passing the time I could just take up folk dancing.

I wanted to dance well – so well that someday my dance form would take people’s breath away. I’d practice whatever Donny taught, wherever he thought I fell short. He was my favorite person, the one I depended on the most. I was all by myself, alone at sea in the world of partner dance, and he was the only piece of driftwood I could find to keep myself afloat.

I hadn’t chosen Donny blindly. Before him I had studied with a few other ballroom teachers and visited famous masters with a couple of my girlfriends. But I always ended up disappointed. Asking around, I found that a lot of students felt like they’d been swindled out of their money by some teacher or other. It was only because I’d been around the block in the world of ballroom dance that by the time I met Donny I could tell from his body that he was a true dancer. I could also tell that he had the zeal and charisma of a true teacher. He was a good dancer and a good teacher. I was blessed.

Of the ballroom dance teachers I’d studied with before Donny, a few were active competitors; a few had retired and were only teaching to pay the bills. Some weren’t even that good. However good they were, they always regarded students like me with disrespect or even contempt. They made me feel deeply frustrated, like I was a second-class citizen in the world of ballroom dance.

They didn’t take teaching seriously. They didn’t try to hone your dance movements or work on the fundamentals. Sometimes they would just show you a few dance steps, put the music on, and dance you in circles until the end of class. That’s what partner dancing is like: if it’s a social activity, the woman can just relax, let the man lead, and dance the night away happy as a princess. That’s all those con artists did; they spun you around until the hem of your dress flew, and you thought you could actually dance. But when the clock struck it was time’s up, class dismissed. Even though it seemed like you had danced an hour, you had nothing to show for your trouble but an inflated ego. Some ladies would end the class blushing, their hearts pounding. Numb with excitement, they would hand over the pricey hourly fee and head out the door. If a student stuck around after class, the teacher would mostly ignore her and chat with his peers.

Teachers from a competitive background cared more about dance than about making money. They cared about fellow dancers, their friends through thick and thin, their rivals in competition. When a teacher like that accepted you as a student, he was sure to ask you whether you’d majored in either dance or physical education in college, whether you’d studied dance at all. If you hadn’t he could conclude based on your age that no amount of training would turn you into a competitive dancer. If you had any ambition, and he thought you might even have the talent and commitment necessary for a competitive career, then he’d address you as a fellow artist, hold you to the highest standard, and get you into shape. If on the other hand you had no hope of such a future, he’d start thinking: Can you help support me financially? Do you have what it takes to be a walking ATM?

If you’re unlucky, you might meet a slick-haired mercenary who half-asses his way through the world of ballroom dancing shopping himself around to rich older patronesses. When

he finds one, he'll string her along, coaxing and coddling her, because knows he's got a vault in his embrace, or a permanent meal ticket, and he wants to keep it there.

I didn't get stuck with either kind of teacher, because I wasn't going to be a competitor and obviously I wasn't a rich lady. Those teachers soon realized I wasn't part of their circle, and I smelled a rat. Teachers like them were haughty and nasty to wannabe dancers like me.

A girlfriend of mine who knew about my fruitless search for a suitable teacher wanted to take me to try Donny. Donny was the teacher of a friend she had met while traveling. She'd already been to that "aunties and uncles' class," and wanted me to go observe it so I could see for myself what Donny was like as a teacher. Then we could decide whether to join. As soon as I heard it was a group class for a couple of dozen "aunties and uncles," I figured it was a social dancing class taught by a charlatan, and not worth my time.

Give him a chance, she told me. At least go and have a look. When I did, I'd know why she'd recommended him.

Two or three months later, I still hadn't found a teacher. So I went to see what that group class was like.

I was blown away the moment I walked in. Several dozen pairs of poised, self-assured dancers were strutting their stuff. At first, I was so deeply impressed by their seriousness and swagger that I didn't even notice they were middle-aged. They had a physical confidence, and an energy that raced through the space like wildfire. Then there was the teacher, Donny. Beat by beat, bar by bar, he demanded perfection, making meticulous corrections. His earnestness was infectious, and his passion fairly gushed out of him, stirring every student and flooding the room with charged particles. The place was humming. I couldn't take my eyes off him.

Even as he stood there marking time, Donny exuded the strength and solidity of a true leader.

Then I saw him demonstrate a sequence. I observed that no matter how his muscles flexed and extended, his center of gravity and lower body remained steady. Stability, it turned out, was at the foundation of all his fast and fancy footwork. I was beside myself. I was responding to the way he moved his body. This is a dancer! I thought. Moreover, he was infallibly polite, taking every student seriously, demonstrating that he really did care about dance. He obviously wanted to share his knowledge of dance with every student, no matter what level he or she was at.

In other words, this guy was passionate and idealistic when it came to dance.

I stood there all through that class. With his resonant voice and his youthful vitality, Donny hollered at the aunties and uncles like they were contenders. I was particularly struck by his attention to detail. He taught the finer points of every transition with exceptional clarity. He told students to "dance every last detail." Apparently, a few of these aunties and uncles were themselves teachers at local dance halls, and the rest had been at it for over a dozen years. Their will to better themselves had been summoned up by this bright young man. They didn't dare cut corners.

I was taken with him, a person who could really dance, a guy who loved to dance. Every movement came from within him. Bar by bar, inch by inch, his body and the music were in

harmony, each interpreting the other. Heart and gut drummed a beautiful rhythm, as a smile played at the corners of his mouth.

Donny spun around and stopped. I finally saw him from the front. Narrow eyes, pale skin, square jaw, a body strengthened by training, with prominent bones.

He wasn't good looking, but when he started dancing he was a superstar.

I looked back at my girlfriend. Let's start next week, I said. She was delighted.

At first my friend, Sang, and I partnered up. We were new to this group class, and over a decade younger than most of the classmates. In the past I'd had no respect for older amateur dancers like them, but now I knew they were "crouching tigers and hidden dragons." The steps Donny taught were quite complicated, actually. What he demanded of the aunties and uncles went well beyond social dance.

Even more important and surprising was the passion and dedication the whole class displayed for dance.

So what differentiated these dancers from true competitors? It was in the fundamentals. The aunties and uncles had not made the effort to master the basics, the part of training that appears the least rewarding and the most tedious. They thought they already knew the basic footwork, so why practice it over and over? They wanted Donny to teach them the latest steps, the most difficult and intricate moves, the ones the world champions were dancing. But unlike the world champions, the aunties and uncles didn't do sit-ups and squats. They didn't have a stable axis to turn around, so they couldn't stay upright while dancing. They couldn't funnel force through their cores, and seemed strangely insubstantial.

A body without a core is like a tree without a trunk. It's like playing the piano. Scales are the most important, and exasperatingly monotonous, part of practice. Everyone wants to learn new and difficult pieces, but if you don't keep doing your scales, learning more pieces is no use.

That said, I was still amazed that the aunties and uncles were dancing at such a high level when they were two (or sometimes three) decades older than I. That helped me find my fighting spirit. I took the class for two months, then went to tell Donny I wanted to take an individual class with him. I wanted to experience the atmosphere in the professional dance studio where the competitors trained.

I told him I wanted to go back to basics, to do things step by step. I told him the basics were the hardest to master. I wanted to let him know I understood. I didn't want to start with any flashy moves. I wanted to go back to square one and work on my fundamentals.

"Teach me like you would a competitor," I burst out, blushing.

Donny was non-committal. He looked at me out of the corner of his eye. I realized that in addition to the brightness and forthrightness he'd always displayed in class he also had an edge to him, and wasn't above posturing. But seeing that I wasn't going to give up he told me to come and do a trial class. "If it feels right, and you really want to, then we'll see."

I didn't care that he had reservations. After the first class I insisted on a second class and then a third. I wanted to prove my commitment to him. If he really had the faith in dance that I felt the first time I saw him, then my passion and sincerity would touch him, too.

That reminds me: In our first few classes, Donny kept hinting he wished I would stop coming, or find another teacher. I didn't take the hint. I just kept plowing ahead at full tilt, scheduling individual classes with him that were extremely costly for a pleb like me.

I forget how much time I spent proving myself before Donny really accepted me as a student and as a friend. Maybe he finally realized that however awkward and distant I seemed, I was actually a warm person, if a bit thick. More importantly, he discovered that I had an amazing innate feeling for dance. I was very observant, and had good judgment. I just learned really slowly. I had a keen eye and a keen ear, but it took me forever to get the steps by heart, and I needed a long time to digest what he taught. But once I grasped something, I never lost it.

I would go home and keep practicing, so hungry that even a competitor like him was surprised. I improved by leaps and bounds.

"If you'd started when you were younger you'd be an amazing dancer by now."

"How can you tell?"

"You've got the qualities of a good female dancer."

"What qualities are those?"

"Bad temper, dedicated, hungry, and intuitive."

Once I got on Donny's good side, he admitted that hadn't wanted to teach me at first because he thought I seemed odd. I mostly looked timid, but then I'd start staring to the point of rudeness. And though I was long-limbed, I looked gawky when I turned.

The main thing was that he just didn't think I fit in.

I didn't have a job; I just led a simple life. If food is your only expense, you don't need much money. Before dance became a part of my life, I often felt like a bubble that might suddenly pop at any time and vanish from the earth. Before then I would drift along in the ocean. When big fish swam past I hid behind the coral, and when little fish swam by I followed them for a thrill. Leaping and jumping, here a glimmer, there a current, I saw what there was to see. So what if I was small? My eyes were bright, and I got to see the sights. Sometimes I felt I should go with the flow of the waves, float up to the surface, and try to refract the sunlight into a faint rainbow. Disappearing like that would be fine with me.

But the intrusion of dance into my life changed everything. I found commitment, desire, and ambition.

I started off wearing soft flat-bottomed practice shoes; eventually I could wear two-and-a-half-inch dance heels.

When I could follow the steps that went too fast at first, I started to fine-tune my physical expressions. I sensed the unity of body with tempo and tune. I felt an instinctive joy. Next I was obsessed with the idea that I had the right to control my body. I wasn't so helpless after all. I had the power of self-control.

What's more, another secret might have been the rapture I felt when my body, which hadn't been touched in years, was able to coordinate and connect with another body. It felt like soaring on the air, like being uplifted by a warm, tender wave. With a partner, you could create incredibly expressive forms and enjoy intimacy. You couldn't do any of that solo.

“Men lead, women follow? Sounds like a chauvinist dance to me,” I complained and sighed.

“Yeah, but those are the rules. If you want to dance, you have to follow the rules. I have to follow them, too.”

There are two styles of ballroom dance, with ten dances in total. The standard ballroom dances are the waltz, tango, foxtrot, Viennese waltz, and the quickstep; the Latin dances are the rumba, cha-cha, samba, pasodoble, and the jive. In terms of attire, the difference is simple: the woman’s skirt is below the knee in the standard dances, above in Latin. Standard dances are slow and smooth; Latin dances are hot and bold.

I just learned the five Latin dances, not the standard dances, because I didn’t like them.

Donny didn’t dance standard, either. “For the waltz and the rest, you have to keep your lower body pressed against the girl’s. I don’t want to.”

The rumba is sultry. It’s the dance of passionate love. The cha-cha is playful and lively; it’s all about pursuit and flirtation. The samba is like a pageant, in gorgeous color. As for the jive, you can think of it as more than friends but less than lovers; the point is having fun.

“What about the pasodoble?” I asked Donny. Literally the “two-step,” it was originally a quick military march, but later it was adapted for the bullfight and eventually the dance floor. Of all the dances, it was the one I found most awkward. There are only two kinds of music to dance to, and the interaction between partners is different from the other Latin dances. For me it was the most frustrating to dance correctly. There are two role assignments: either the man is the matador and the woman is the matador’s fluttering red cape, or the man is the matador and the woman is the bull.

The interaction between the partners lacked the back and forth of lovers or the alternating tension and relaxation of a bounding yo-yo. There was no sense of an inexorable magnetic field by turns attracting the partners and pushing them apart.

There was only the matador and the bull. Both the interaction and the outcome were certain and unchanging: the bull dies.

“Why?”

“There’s no why, those are the rules.”

Those are the rules of partner dance. They have been set and can’t be changed, bent, or stretched. If you want to dance, you have to follow them.

The first rule is that it’s partner dance. A single person can’t do it; no odd numbers are allowed.

Next, the power relation is fixed: men lead and women follow.

The more progress I made the harder I found it to dance with Sang. In particular, now that Donny had whetted my appetite in individual class, I had some idea of how the leader and follower are supposed to interact. I had a sense of precision and efficiency. I found her slapdash amateurishness harder and harder to stand. With her it was just holding hands and pushing and pulling each other. After class I’d feel somehow dirty, like someone had been rubbing up against me.

I didn’t want to keep partnering with her in class. But the truth was that I had no other

choice.

Sang's poor sense of rhythm always left her a beat behind. And she never memorized the steps. With only the gist to guide her, all she could do was wing it. When she made a mistake she started giggling. She was happy no matter what, and always fooling around in class. Surrounded by ladies twice her age, she felt self-possessed. What really pissed me off was how she reacted when we got out of sync. I'd bite my tongue, force a smile, and ask: "What went wrong just now? Why weren't we on the same beat?"

I was hoping she'd reflect on her mistake, but she didn't. "Hey," she said to the auntie next to her. "Summer says she can't dance that thing we just did, can you show her?"

Obviously it was her, but she didn't think she had done anything wrong. She thought I was the problem. I was speechless. If she didn't know her rhythm was off and couldn't see she'd failed to follow the sequence – if she really couldn't see that – then she was doomed. It didn't matter how she practiced. No, the problem was she was just there to have fun and laugh—dance was just a chance for her to show how pretty she was.

I would never improve if things went on like this. She would hold me back.

I wanted to dump her.

When I told Donny, he said to wait until the time was right. Sit tight, calm down.

"Have you seen anyone in the group class you'd like to partner with?" he asked two days later. "If so, then we'll figure it out."

I actually felt guilty. It was Sang who introduced me to Donny. I wouldn't be there if not for her. And if I ditched her, who would dance with her? Most of the couples in class were husband and wife. A few younger dancers had come, but in pairs, not as singles. Most women don't want to dance the man's part, because they would rather be the flower put on display during the dance. And if you're ambitious about dance and want to compete, you dance the girl's part if you're a girl. There's no future for a girl who dances as a man.

When Sang first partnered with me, she offered to dance as the man and let me dance as the girl, out of friendship. I was skeptical and sorry, because she was the more feminine of the two of us, and she liked to display her femininity; yet here she was, willing to dance the man's part for my sake. There were lots of interesting things happening in her world, while dance was the only thing in mine. She'd go out to a movie with her friends and come late to class, and I'd be fuming by the time she arrived. She didn't care about mastering the details. She gave herself a pass when she got it kind of right, while I wanted to get every bar and every movement exactly right, counting every half beat.

There was this unmarried couple in the group class who were about the same age as I was. They'd joined the class before me, and were also taking individual classes with Donny. The man was big and strong, and the girl petite, but their features were similar: they both had small, straight noses and small mouths, and with their round faces and round eyes, they were "big round" and "little round." Their eye bags bunched up into winsome crescent moons when they smiled. They laughed like a pair of innocent kids. This young couple had won the hearts of all the aunties and uncles in the class.

The fiancée, Meixin, was a computer engineer, and would often work overtime and come late to class, leaving her fiancé on his own. He didn't take the initiative to pair up with one of the singles, because his partner would soon be there, and I never asked him – until one day, when I got up the courage to walk up and take his hand. We practiced together, advancing and yielding in turn, but speechless the entire time. Only our bodies were paired.

What a pleasure it was to dance with a partner who knew how to use his body properly. He never jerked me because he was off balance; he never wobbled. When your partner uses his body properly, he gives you a steady lead and support, and your body will actually gush with warmth. It's a tingling sensation, like a jolt of electricity. To encounter a good body in partner dance is so precious.

Donny often said that the main thing in Latin dance is to stay low. You press your feet deeply into the floor, and keep your center of gravity as low as you can. That was the feeling I got from Meixin's fiancé. A man who uses his body correctly doesn't need to control the woman, he just has to give her clear directions with his hand and she will respond beautifully. He doesn't have to force anything.

Dancing with him felt so good I almost started crying.

Less than fifteen minutes later, Meixin showed up. I immediately let go of his hand and made myself scarce. Smiling, she took her future husband's hand, and they danced. By now, he was smiling; he'd been expressionless before.

Sang was full of herself. It never occurred to her that she wasn't any good. I got into the bad habit of stepping ahead of the beat by about a quarter note, so that when she got behind it wouldn't seem like it. In doing so, I took over the man's work of leading, instinctively pushing her along. I knew that the longer this went on the worse I would dance. My bad habit would ruin everything.

In the ideal partnership, the man is ten to fifteen centimeters taller than the woman, so he can lift his arm high enough for her to do an underarm turn or an alemana easily. That's hard when he's the same height, imagine what it's like when he's shorter. I'm almost 165 centimeters tall – well over 170 in two-and-a-half inch heels. It was going to be difficult for me to find a partner among the gentlemen in the group class who was tall enough, let alone someone who had a high enough opinion of me to want to train with me. I could forget about the guys at the studio. They were all bursting with youth, rippling with muscle, and really competitive. All of them would be looking out for a partner who could increase his score and raise his ranking. There was no way they would ever consider me.

How I longed to meet my match! I wanted to climb higher, to advance towards the core of dance and to reach my peak. I was desperate for a partner of my very own, a partner I could train with long-term. Over time, we'd get to know each other's bodies and develop coordination and chemistry.

The first time my cousin attempted suicide, my mother took me to the hospital to see him.

He'd taken a vacation from his mandatory military service, locked himself in the bathroom at home, and drunk a bottle of Drāno. The emergency room doctors saved his life, but his esophagus had sustained terrible burns, and he could neither eat nor speak. It would take him a long time to recover. The doctors decided to do a resection – grafting a piece of his colon into his throat – in order to reconstruct his esophagus.

He was still under observation in the post-op ward when we went to visit.

We went at noon on a muggy summer day. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, or even a breath of wind. It was as if my mother and I had spent forever in the car, swaying from side to side. I felt disoriented.

My aunt met us in the hallway and led us into the ward. She and my cousin were both extremely good-looking. They had big eyes with pronounced double eyelids, and high-bridged noses accentuated by narrow faces. They had movie star features, except that they were both quite short.

My mother also had big eyes; it runs in the family. Mom took it upon herself to guide my cousin through this rough patch because Auntie was a widow, and in my mom's opinion she was too mild-mannered to say what needed to be said. My mom thought it was her duty to help bring her elder sister's wayward son back on track, especially since she'd taken care of the handsome boy so many times when he was a baby. But all Mom did was talk – not to console him, but to lecture him like a preacher, with an endless stream of instruction. She was going to give a kid who'd lost his will to live a correct understanding of life. Now that the doctor had reconstructed his esophagus for him, she would reconstruct his mind. My mom thought that any personal failure was due to a lack of trying. A man who took his life into his own hands must not be strong or determined enough. How else could you explain why he'd tried to do himself in on vacation from military service when his elder sister had gotten into medical school and when the two of them had grown up under the same roof and suffered the same loss when their father died?

My mother was getting really worked up. "You could still make a living as a grease monkey! Even small fry can fight!"

He was still unable to speak, and he didn't even look at her. His gaze floated past her out the window. I was standing by the window behind my mother, rocking back and forth, so that I could see his face over her shoulder. His eyes met mine.

I smiled. He stared at me, then looked away.

My mom was still holding forth, and because he wasn't listening she injected more drama to try to get him to pay attention and identify with what she was saying. Auntie had had enough. She hustled my mother out of the room, and the two of them went out to buy something to drink.

This left my cousin and I in the room. I looked at him, my head cocked to one side. He met my gaze and held it.

I slipped round the tubes that were stuck into his body and the machines that monitored his vital signs and smiled. "Since you're still alive, just try to survive!"

"People can be terrible, really awful, I hate them, too. We will survive—we can do it together. Someday it'll be our turn to show those assholes, they'll see."

My cousin smiled, including with his eyes. He looked so handsome when he squinted like that.

My mother and aunt came back in and the smile disappeared. He went back to the same wooden expression as before.

A few days later Auntie called my mom and said that the only person my cousin wanted to see was me. He wanted to listen to me talk.

She hoped my mom would let me go visit him again.

Filled with self-righteous zeal, my mom said she'd go the next day to have a chat with him and set him straight.

Auntie said: "No, not you. He only wants to listen to Summer."

Mom didn't give me permission to go see my cousin.

In fact, she went herself to see him a number of times, but she never let me go along.

I haven't seen my cousin since. It's been over twenty years.

After he recovered physically, he went back to the base to continue his service. But he had to face military discipline.

All I know is that he did it again, he drank Drāno a second time. The doctor gave him another esophagus, but the reconstructive surgery didn't go as well this time.

My mom never really kept me up to date. But I gather that he spent the rest of his service in the hospital.

After he was discharged, he went home and drank Drāno once again.

It still didn't kill him.