

LADIES OF THE DANCE

Melissa E. Stone

Your friend is your needs answered. He is your field which you sow with love and reap with thanksgiving. And he is your board and your fireside. For you come to him with your hunger, and you seek him for peace.

Kahlil Gibran

The evening was spiked with an unacknowledged loss hidden beneath the excitement and gaiety of the gathering. The rhythmic music quietly pulsated as the candlelight cast shadowy outlines upon the walls of the attic ballroom. Friends moved about like strangers and acted out their well-rehearsed roles of bartering for her attention. I got another drink.

The young woman graciously responded to their attention but quickly cast a pleading glance to me as I mixed my drink. I confirmed with a shrug of my shoulders and raised my eyebrows. Subtly shifting her weight on to the other foot, she returned her attention to a bearded, young man.

"How brave of you," he exclaimed.

"Your're exaggerating, Thomas. There's absolutely nothing brave about it," she replied irritably.

"Why, Beth, you're leaving us to start a new life in a strange place full of new faces. Now that's brave!"

"Nonsense. It's simply an opportunity I want to . . . to take advantage of," she said looking for a convenient way to end the conversation. "Oh, Thomas! I know that Marie would love to see you. Look, she's right over there at the bar."

As he lurched across the crowded room to me, I caught yet another glance from Beth. "Watch out. He's going to make it hard for you," her warning look implied. I quickly gulped down half my drink.

"Marie, what a wonderful party for Beth. I think that it's great she's going out on her own. Don't you think so?"

"Uh huh."

"Just between you and me, though, I think that there's a man involved. Why else would she leave us like this?"

"She's bored."

"Bored! Why, she's got her work, her family, and her friends right here. It's got to be a man."

"It's just too easy for her here."

"I don't understand. But I suppose you would know. It's extraordinary how the two of you are so close. You act alike, talk alike and even breathe alike! It's as if you're each a separate half of one person."

"So I've been told."

"What's going to happen to you, Marie? Why, I just can't fathom you without her."

"For Christ's sake, Thomas. Beth is not my soul. You make it sound as if I'll cease to be after she's gone!"

"No, I didn't . . ."

"Thomas, I'm sorry I snapped. I'm going to miss her terribly. But . . . hey, would you look at that! Beth's getting together a Greek Butcher's Dance. You go on over and join them. I'll be with you in a moment."

I turned to fix another drink. The previous two had taken effect, leaving me comfortably warm and light-headed. The large room had grown smaller with a golden aura, and I snuggled into an over-stuffed chair to watch my guests and honored friend.

As one corporate body, each dancer picked up first his right foot and then his left, all the while moving clockwise in the circle. The music's beat was slow, and yet the tempo gradually picked up. With the beat, each dancer's movements quickened until the entire circle was moving so fast that I could not discern individual faces. I closed my eyes and finally allowed the tears to spill over.

My thoughts fell like the tears. There are people and places I'll always remember, full of laughter and full of tears. Some are forgotten and some still remain. But of all these friends and lovers, I have loved Beth the best. From the moment we took our first steps together, to that time in high school when we both had crushes on the same football player, she had been my companion in adventure and friend in need. The thought of her absence was not hurtful. But her choice and distant manner left a nagging sting. Perhaps she was my soul.

As I opened my eyes and wished away the tears, the dancers stopped and I caught Beth's eyes. She saw my tears and turned away. She knew.

The record had been turned over and now the beat of the traditional Greek Mating Dance rebounded off the walls. Unlike the

Butcher's Dance, the dancers were paired and the music's frenzied beat slowed to a mellow hum. The women stood in a circle about the men, who surveyed the group for a partner. In turn, each man selected his woman. Beth was immediately selected, and the dance began.

My head pounded from the drinks. The room's golden smallness had transformed into a suffocating nightmare. I rested my head against the back of the soft chair. I closed my eyes, but instead of tears I saw flashes of red and orange against the gray backdrop of my eyelids.

My thoughts flashed like the colors in my head. Go, and beat your crazy head against the sky, Beth. Try, and see beyond the stars in your eyes. It's okay to shoot the moon. Because I'll be here when you come back . . . if you come back.

Suddenly, the flashing colors and thoughts became too great, and I forced my eyes open. The dance was over and each couple stood embracing, except for Beth. She stood alone, discreetly spying upon me. I silently acknowledged her. She would not come back this time.

The music rhythmically played on and my guests once again paired off. This time, however, they paired with a friend for the Greek Friendship Dance. This was a dance of endurance, with one dancer performing prescribed steps in different combinations. The other dancer was to follow the leader's movements. This continued until one of the dancers became tired and gave up.

The dance began and Beth was left alone without a partner. Drawing in her breath, she walked across the room and extended her hand to me.

"You lead. I'll follow this time," she said.

I silently agreed and slowly walked with her to the center of the room. The other dancers parted to let us in. I ritualistically raised my right arm and bent it at the elbow. With the other hand, I lifted my long skirt to my knees and kicked off my shoes. Beth followed.

I slowly started the prescribed steps in a simple triangular pattern. She followed. The music came faster, and my feet broke the triangular pattern falling into the more difficult circular pattern. She followed. The couple next to us dropped out. I glanced at Beth and her responsive smile glimmered with challenge.

I combined both the circular and triangular patterns to create a path of movement that led us around the room. The other dancers had stopped, leaving only the two of us and one other pair in the dance.

My heart pounded and I could barely catch my breath. But my headache was gone and my limbs seemed to move of their own will.

Sensing Beth's exhaustion, I bent over with every fifth step and slapped the floor with my hand. She followed.

The other pair had stopped, leaving only Beth and me. The party gathered around us while clapping their hands and stomping their feet. Through the damp strings of hair that clung to my face, I searched for Beth's eyes. Finding them, I silently formed the word "more" with my lips. She nodded. With this, I quickly spun around, completing a full circle after slapping the floor each time. She followed.

The saliva in my throat had grown thick, and instead of the music, I heard only a pounding in my ears. My muscles ached and my hand burned from hitting the floor. Sweat flowed down my body. I felt my legs give out and I tumbled downward. Beth followed. But we caught each other before hitting the floor, and through the applause, laughter and tears, she hugged me and said, "Lady, our souls will always dance together . . . no matter where we are."