



Sometimes,
grace comes
from within.

Dancing queen

How a onetime wallflower finally found her body confidence—and got her groove on **By Paula Derrow**

Throughout my life, I've dreaded the moment when the music starts, everyone pairs up and people begin moving and swaying and enjoying themselves. I've always been a terrible dancer, an all-around klutz, and I'm not being charmingly modest. My lack of grace was evident early on: I've tripped on my shoes heading off the dais at my younger sister's bat mitzvah, in full view of tsk-tsking relatives. I've stumbled on hikes, sailed sideways on first dates and even tipped over on my bicycle while attempting to dismount. And although I've never required stitches, I've suffered my share of injuries: a busted nose; skinned knees and palms; and, in one memorable tumble, a fat lip and black eye (incurred after—not during—a vigorous run).

Dancing is the least of my problems. Over the years, it has become abundantly clear that I don't walk quite like anyone else, either. I bob and tilt from side to side, which makes strolling

arm in arm with a beau a bit of a challenge. Things get even worse when I speed up to a run and my legs splay behind me rather than lining up neatly with my spine. Back in kindergarten, my very young, very pretty teacher first made me aware that something about me was, well, different. My deepest desire was for her to invite me to sit on her lap the way she did with some of the other girls in our class, so when she motioned me over at the playground one afternoon, I was hopeful that I'd finally get some of her affection. As I shyly approached, I imagined sitting on her knee, her long dark hair brushing my cheek, as the other kids watched with envy.

"Paula, run for us," she said, shooting the teacher next to her a smirk. I galloped furiously forward and back, then looked up eagerly to see them dissolve in laughter. As for me, I went home in tears.

After my parents gave that teacher a talking-to, they decided to take a few countermeasures, hoping they could help me acquire some physical skills. They signed me up for tap dancing and ballet lessons, where I reveled in the foreign-sounding words (*arabesque! plié!*) and the feel of the long wooden bar beneath my palm. In my mind, I was executing pirouettes with ease.

But when I gazed at my reflection, I was struck by how different I appeared from the image in my head: My tummy and backside stuck out in a decidedly unballetic manner; my legs and neck wouldn't straighten like beautiful long stems. I couldn't seem to let my body move the way the other little girls did—with abandon—and the teacher's admonishments to "hold in your belly!" didn't help matters. Soon, I began getting stom-

achaches before each lesson, until my mother took pity and pulled me out. My father, for his part, said he'd be happy never to sit through another dance recital.

Yet he tried to do what he could to help as well. It was only by the sheer force of his determination that I learned to play tennis, competently and from a young age. It felt good to have a sense of command over my arms, legs and the rest of my body—a relatively rare feeling for me—and it felt even better to have my father's undivided attention. "Get your racket back earlier!" he'd bark from the other side of the net, and I did, listening for the satisfying thwack when I connected with the ball right in the center of my Billie Jean King racket.

When I got older, my parents sent me off to a sporty sleepaway camp, where I somehow managed to land in the middle of the pack when it came to athletics, mostly out of sweaty effort driven by my fear of being chosen last for the teams we picked daily. I was

➤ wildly unpredictable on the field, yes, but by some miracle, I wasn't the worst, and I got extra points socially by cheering for my bunkmates until I was hoarse. I lacked physical talent, but gradually it dawned on me that I had other abilities—a knack for drawing people out, for singing, for comforting others. Who cared if I preferred to hug the wall during the occasional camp dances, distracting myself with extra chocolate from the camp canteen?

It wasn't until my 20s, when I started going to the gym regularly, that I felt my first glimmer of true body confidence. Some days, after a run around the Central Park reservoir before heading to work, I felt downright athletic. Men noticed. After a late start, I began dating in earnest, then, at age 28, fell in love for the first time with a warm-hearted writer who was as romantically inexperienced as I was and equally eager to learn. I discovered that my body, which I had long ignored, could actually bring me pleasure.

The pleasure of dancing, however, eluded me. At friends' weddings, which were occurring with increasing frequency, I continued to seek refuge in the bathroom at the first hint of bass. And after I'd had my heart broken a few times—by the writer guy at 29, a live-in love at 36 and a charismatic but inconsistent divorcé at 43—I began to fear that moving in concert with another person, sexually, emotionally and on the dance floor, would never come easily to me. After all, feeling desirable has everything to do with being relaxed in one's skin, and for years, I'd felt anything but. Despite my efforts in the gym, my curves were unseemly, my backside too big (it continued to stick out, the way it had in ballet class). If I let myself move without inhibition, I worried I'd shock a would-be lover with my rampant desires, not to mention my physical imperfections. So, ever mindful of my dignity, I was circumspect when it came to confessing what I truly wanted, especially in the bedroom. Instead, I went along with things, more concerned with pleasing than being pleased, keeping the unbridled side of myself hidden, just as I'd agree to hit the dance floor only when shielded by a thick scrim of trusted friends. I might imagine swinging my hair around and seductively wriggling my hips. But in real life, I felt too self-conscious to do much more than step gingerly from side to side, issuing the occasional finger snap, a forced smile on my face. Whatever the circumstances, I figured the less I moved my body, the better.

It wasn't until a fourth date with a kind, energetic, music-loving man who seemed to think my quirks (including my penchant for stumbling) were "adorable" that I found myself being pulled off his living room couch, one of my hands clasped in his. I had been watching him sort through his vast collection of CDs and had let down my guard. There was a roaring fire and an open bottle of wine. I'd assumed he was looking for some



Derrow (right), 8, and her sister before their first—and only—dance recital.

“Let yourself go loose,” he instructed in a tone I simply couldn't ignore. “Follow me.”

all about my leading you. Trust me.” That's when I realized he wasn't asking me to dance, as in move in a random pattern to the music. He was asking me to dance *with* him, using real steps and turns. What he didn't know is that for me, at this not-so-young point in my romantic life, trusting was the one thing that felt more difficult than dancing. He merely grabbed my other hand, took a step back and started swinging my body out, then in, his intense, dark eyes never leaving mine. “Let yourself go loose,” he instructed in a tone I simply couldn't ignore. “Follow me.”

So I made like a rag doll, letting him rotate me a few times. Maybe I can fake it, I thought. But I didn't have to: Within minutes, he was spinning me, then drawing me close, and I was returning the favor. “See?” he said, when we were breathless and seated back on the couch. “You *can* dance!”

On the dates that followed, we danced more—at his place, at mine. I began to like it, the way my body unconsciously mimicked his movements, how he'd surprise me with a sudden dip. It was fun. It was sexy. And it was freeing to give myself over and crack open the door to my bruised heart. Discovering that I could dance made me wonder what else I might be able to do, what secrets I might safely reveal, what physical delights I'd been unnecessarily denying myself. Maybe, finally, it was time to find out.

I'm not headed to *Dancing With the Stars* anytime soon. But these days, when I'm home with my very own Fred Astaire, sometimes I'm the one who suggests we cut the rug. Or even go to bed. I could say my new proclivity is about having found the right partner, one who is able to look past my awkwardness to the grace hiding within. But it's more than that. At 46, I'm discovering who I am and who I can be: an athlete, a lover and, yes, even a dancer. I'm moving to the rhythm of life, soaring and twirling wherever my feet take me, moving my body in plain sight.

suitably romantic or seductive musical accompaniment to the evening.

I was wrong. He wanted to dance. “No!” I protested with genuine alarm as I realized his intention. I liked this man, liked him very much, but I wasn't ready for him to see me so far out of my comfort zone. Other than the occasional clumsy moment, I'd done a good job of presenting a composed, if not coordinated, version of myself. I wanted to keep it that way.

“You won't dance with me?” He looked surprised and disappointed.

“I can't dance. I mean, I'm not good at it,” I stammered as I attempted to extricate my now sweating fingers from his.

“Come on, try it,” he cajoled, with a smile. Seeing my reluctance, he paused to explain: “It's

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