



Dancing in the Dark

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ABSTRACT

This is a story about life before, during and after military service, finding identity, and recovering from physical and mental trauma.

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I'd made my final delivery in West Wendover, and was an hour outside of Salt Lake City heading east on I-80. It was a flat stretch of prairie, covered in low brush with snow-covered peaks in the distance, that reminded me of my tours in Afghanistan and Iraq. Maybe it was all that time in the desert, where you were always on the lookout for tell-tale signs of buried improvised explosive devices (IEDs), that kept me driving at or below the speed limit. Unlike this asshole rapidly approaching my six. The other truck driver got within ten yards of my rear bumper, then swerved into the passing lane to overtake me.

"Fucking Earl," I growled as I recognized the signature grill at the front of the rig. It was a laughing clown's face that he'd bought off some carnny. I hated clowns. And this particular clown really seemed to have a hard-on for me.

I'd been driving trucks coast to coast for nearly two years, but was still considered a relative newbie. So, I was pretty much left alone by the other truckers, which suited me just fine. Unless my route crossed with Earl's. You know when you park your car in a parking lot, but you park far away from all the other cars so it doesn't get dinged? And then there's that one asshole who has to park right next to you and ends up denting your car when they open their door? Earl was that kind of asshole. He couldn't just leave you alone.

Just as his cab pulled alongside mine, Earl reached up to blast his air horn. That's when his right front tire exploded into a cloud of smoke, rubber, steel belts, and asphalt. With only one hand on the wheel, Earl's rig swerved violently right. Instinctively, I cranked my wheel to the right as well in order to avoid a collision. I heard the rumble strips and felt the truck start down the embankment. The cab started to tip over, and everything went black.

I awoke with a start.

I was on my back inside the overturned vehicle. My ears were ringing, and a mix of acrid smoke, fuel, and burning flesh filled my nostrils.

We'd been driving through the streets of Saab al Bour, a small urban city located eighteen miles northwest of Baghdad, to conduct a nighttime raid on a house suspected of containing a large cache of weapons and explosives. We were proceeding on a tip from a reliable informant, but loyalties seemed to change regularly in Iraq. The lead Stryker vehicle had rolled through the four-way stop without incident, but an IED had detonated just as my vehicle entered the intersection.

Doc was yelling in my ear, "McKenzie, how many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three," I yelled back.

"Close enough," Doc nodded as he moved on to the more seriously wounded.

I climbed out of the Stryker and into total chaos. My vehicle was lying on its roof in the middle of the intersection; its wheels continuing to rotate making it look like a turtle trying to right itself. Burning debris covered the road. The guys in the lead Stryker were firing into the darkness at an unseen enemy whose bullets ricocheted off the armored vehicles. Other members of my platoon were pulling the rest of the team from the overturned vehicle. We'd lose Nunez and Jones that night.

Disorientated, I tried to take cover behind the third Stryker vehicle in the convoy. But I couldn't seem to move, and my left leg began to throb.

Wait, that wasn't the way it had happened.

I fell to the ground writhing in pain. What the fuck was happening? And what the fuck was that beeping sound? IEDs don't beep.

I rolled over on my back and was no longer in the desert. Instead, I found myself at the bottom of a lake; my body slowly rising towards a light at the surface. I tried to kick to speed my ascent but my legs refused to work. Bubbles raced past my face as my body crawled to the surface; each exertion expelling precious oxygen from my body. My lungs were about to burst.

I broke through the surface and awoke with a gasp. I was lying in a hospital bed with an IV in one arm; attached to a heart rate monitor that gave off a steady beep, beep, beep.

I looked down the length of my body and thought, "Huh, that's weird." Exhausted, I lay back and fell asleep.

When I awoke again, I learned I'd lost my left leg just above the knee. Earl had lost his life. I still don't know how I feel about that.

After I was stabilized, I was transported back to Georgia. I stayed in a hospital there for another week and was released to recover at home. A nurse would come by a couple of times a week to change my bandages, deliver meals and encourage me to start rehabilitation. But that would come later. For the first month, I remained in bed, slowly cycling through the five stages of grief.

Denial.

Anger.

Bargaining.

Depression.

Acceptance. No, not acceptance. Not yet.

The depression I experienced following my medical discharge from the Army returned with a vengeance. Every thought was accompanied by a negative commentary running through my head.

What the fuck am I supposed to do now? It wasn't like you had a lot of options to begin with. Shut up. Maybe I should try dating again. Who's going to want to date a

cripple? I said shut up. I'll never dance again. That's gay. Shut the fuck up!

And on it went.

Nighttime was the worst. I'd lay in bed, unable to sleep, listening to the steady ticking of my wristwatch on the nightstand. Bells from a nearby church announced the passing hours. The darkness was interrupted by the occasional set of headlights reflecting off the walls of my bedroom. I'd lay there, replaying all of my life's greatest failures. A mistake as a child—something trivial that had happened when I was five years old—took on monumental importance. I had taken a star fruit from the local grocery store because I was fascinated by its shape and texture. When my parents found out, they made me return it to the manager who, while suppressing a smile, scolded me in front of the other customers. What an embarrassment I must have been to my family. And what about that missed touchdown pass that had cost my football team a victory over our rival high school? I recalled my first day of basic training where I kept locking my knees and almost passing out. And my medical discharge from the Army.

Failure after failure.

So, I would start to scroll through videos on my phone, inevitably finding ones of people dancing. I'd focus on the movement of their feet, and that just added to my depression.

Ever since, as a child, I'd seen a video of Nureyev dancing Swan Lake, I'd been hooked. I couldn't explain the attraction; not exactly. Against my father's wishes, my mother enrolled me in dance classes at the local YMCA. And again, in high school, our football coach had made the team take ballet classes in an effort to improve our agility on the field. My teammates had groaned and made homophobic remarks; but what do you expect from a bunch of high school students in the farmlands of Montana? I appreciated the grace, strength, and stamina it provided me on the field. During my time in the military, I'd lost interest in dancing. That's not true. I hadn't lost interest. A love of dance did not exactly fit the stereotype of an Army infantryman, and I had let cultural pressures prevent me from doing one of the things in life I truly enjoyed.

When sleep finally took over my exhausted body, my dreams were filled with images of empty deserts, explosions, overturned vehicles, chaos, dancers, and clown faces.

Ironically, the best nights were the nights when a storm rolled through the neighborhood. The fiercer, the better. The wind howling, the rain pelting against the windows, and the flashes of lightning followed by the deep rumbles of thunder, all had a calming effect and allowed me to sleep peacefully.

The problem with depression, as if there's just one problem associated with depression, is that it keeps you focused on the past. Fortunately, one of the things you learn in the military is how to keep moving forward—even if you don't necessarily know where you're headed. One foot in front of the other. Or in my case, one foot, one foot.

Little by little, I tested my mobility. First to the living room couch. Then around the kitchen. And finally, down the stairs and out the door of my apartment building for a loop around the block. I got tired of the same prepared meals or delivery pizza, so I ventured out to the grocery store down the street, where I ignored the looks of pity and the offers of assistance. I'd stuff as many items as I could into my old Army rucksack and carry the rest in plastic bags swinging from the hand grips of my crutches.

I continued to watch the dance videos, but I began to watch them with feelings of hope instead of depression. After returning to civilian life, and when my work schedule had allowed, I'd been taking ballroom dancing classes at the local American Legion. The older ladies eagerly awaited the chance to waltz, tango, or cha-cha with someone young enough to be their son. I enjoyed it, and I was good at it, too. And I vowed to myself that I would dance again someday.

Eventually, I scheduled an appointment at the VA rehab clinic in Atlanta.

ARTIST STATEMENT

I am a Navy Veteran as well as an avid storyteller, writer, and artist.

I have been interested in the arts my entire life. As a kid I always had a notebook and a box of crayons with me: drawing and writing about people, places, and things both real and imagined. And now, as an adult, I still carry a pen and sketchpad with me everywhere I go. My work is greatly influenced by my time in the military. I had the good fortune of seeing the world; and my art/writing reflects images and impressions of the places I visited, the people I met, and the many experiences I had during my travels. I enjoy using a wide variety of mediums: from short story writing and poetry to photography, drawing, and painting. Different mediums allow me to express different ideas and impressions.

In the spring of 2021, I was enrolled in a six-week fiction writing course offered by the Armed Services Arts Partnership (ASAP). This story sprang from a writing prompt on the first night and was developed over the next four weeks. It did not start out as a story about the Veteran experience. The story ended with the truck rolling over and

everything going black, but my classmates just weren't having it. Did James die? What happened to Earl? There was a bigger story to be told.

I began working for a non-profit Veteran Service Organization (VSO) that provides, among many services, vocational rehabilitation to disabled Veterans; and I attended my first National Veterans Wheelchair Games.

Over the past year, James' story evolved from one of pure fiction into a synthesis of the stories I heard from the Veterans I encountered; and covers many facades of

military/post-military service, including trauma, disability, depression, meaning, hope, and resilience.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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