

The Dancing Girl Next Door

by Claire Tollefsrud

You get home later than normal, after dark. Your mother doesn't notice; she's in the kitchen, on the phone with her sister, like she always is on Tuesday nights. You quietly creep past the kitchen doorway and scramble up the stairs to your room, head slightly fuzzy. Your mouth is sour from the taste of cheap beer.

As you ease your door shut there's only one thing on your mind; you kick your way through the mess of dirty clothes and schoolbooks on your floor, and stand by your window. You raise your blinds too fast, and the strings catch and you have to spend an extra minute trying to fix the damage. By now the need has risen so hard in your chest that you're almost panting, feeling excitement building like bubbles under a cork. You look outside.

And there she is, as usual, in her backyard. She's doing what she's always done—she's dancing. She's twirling, and prancing, and skipping about, her head flung back, her loose white dress swirling through the air. In the darkness she looks like a fluttering bird, or a butterfly. Ethereal. A force of nature.

You forget to breathe.

You're stuck there, standing by your window like an idiot with a relieved, half-forgotten smile on your face.

Some people watch TV or read romance novels to escape the harsh, fast-paced outside world; everyone has to get away from the people and expectations and the ever-present, terrifying future. But here's the thing; you don't need TV or romance novels. None of that seems real enough, not compared to these moments at your window, watching the dancing girl next door. This is where you escape. This is where you belong.

You have watched her since the first day you saw her. You were very, very young; this was when you had just moved in, when everything was new and frightening. You were in third grade then and she was a year older—a potential friend who you never had the bravery to meet. While everything else in the world sped up, got complicated, and stressful, she stayed constant. All except for small changes, tiny things that probably only you noticed.

Once she had a bright red ribbon in her hair. She wore that for a whole week in middle school, and you spent hours in class and in bed before sleep, wondering where she had gotten that ribbon. Had someone given it to her? Maybe she found it at the edge of the road, all muddy and thrown aside by an inconsiderate passerby; she picked it up like someone taking in a lost puppy or throwing coins into a street musician's tin. Or maybe she saw it in a store, all dazzling and new, and convinced her mother to buy it...or maybe her mother wouldn't buy it for her so she stole it, stuffed it in her pocket and walked quickly out the doors. No, that wouldn't happen. Not your dancing girl, and besides, thieves don't frolic in the moonlight every night—at least, you don't think so.

Every day that week in middle school you anticipated your nightly sighting of her—would she wear the ribbon? Friends asked to come over and you made up excuses to be alone; your social life didn't matter, all you cared about was the dancing girl and the unfamiliar flash of red. Day by day you counted the ribbon's appearances. Then, on Sunday, she stopped wearing it. At first you were glad, because everything was back to normal, but then you found the absence haunting. Why had she stopped wearing the ribbon? Had she lost it? Had someone stolen it? Had she decided she no longer liked crimson? These were the thoughts that kept you up at night for nearly a month in seventh grade.

This process has repeated throughout the years; when she wore boots instead of dancing barefoot; when she braided her hair in a crown around her head; when she wore coral lipstick freshmen year. Each mild change has thrown you off-kilter, as if you were the moon orbiting a planet that occasionally changed its gravitational pull. Nothing has ever fascinated you like the dancing girl.

Why does she dance? This question has ricocheted through your mind since third grade when you first saw her. You find the query constantly on the tip of your tongue. Does she dance because she wants to, or because she has to? What if she's dancing for you? Or against you? Or despite you? Or without you?

The incredible mystery of it all has entertained you for years.

Watching her has become your ritual, your sanctuary. She has always danced outside after dark, just like the sun has always risen and spring always follows winter. You have charted her appearances in your mind like the very first astrologists mapped the heavens.

You cringe a bit and lean against your windowsill with a sigh—now you sound like a creep, but it's not like you watch without her knowledge. The girl usually sees you. Usually she waves. She beckons you to come join her, and you always shake your head and lower your blinds, slightly embarrassed at being noticed, and slightly ashamed at your own cowardice. The temptation to dance outside with her has always been there, itching at your fingertips and making your heart flutter, but your feet always turn to lead and you never follow through. Somehow this has become your routine, one you created in third grade and have never changed.

You dream about dancing with her. On similar nights you stand by your window for hours, coming up with a thousand fantasies in your head, dreams of how those meetings would go. At the back of your mind there is a niggling fear that the dancing girl is only a figment of your imagination. So what happens if you go outside and the back yard is empty and she has never existed? Your life would fall apart. But what if she is real, and more amazing than you could ever imagine all by your lonely self in your bedroom? Isn't that worth being brave enough to go outside?

You're a coward. You always stay in.

If you go outside and find out there's never even been a dancing girl, well, why take that risk? Better to believe from afar, and let your imagination take care of the distance.

Tonight is different though, and you know it. The dancing girl next door is sad; Her brows are drawn up, and the corners of her mouth pull down. You find her face so expressive that you feel tears gathering at the back of your throat, and the sore knot makes it hard to

swallow. You shiver, and want to cry. Never do you feel so much for people, but the girl next door has never made you feel normal.

She does not wave; perhaps she does not see.

Your gut clenches, because now you remember why you have been out with your friends instead of at home. You remember why your mouth tastes of beer, and why you've been avoiding your window lately. You're ironically trying to elude the only escape you have in the whole world, and already its absence has started driving you insane. It was foolish to think you could stay away, but regardless there's no point to escaping the facts any longer.

The girl next door is leaving tomorrow. Her family is taking her someplace new, maybe someplace warmer, maybe someplace with mountains instead of cornfields, or seashores instead of lakes. Not here.

This thought pierces your gut like a sword, cutting flesh and spilling blood, unavoidable pain freezing you in place. This could be the last night. Tomorrow morning there will be moving trucks and workmen, and when you get home from school tomorrow evening she will be gone without a trace, gone forever.

But that's ridiculous, she wouldn't leave like that, she wouldn't leave without saying goodbye.

Wouldn't she? You don't even know her name. You have never spoken a word to her; you've just watched her from your window for ten whole years. It would be easier if she went to your school, and you had classes together—you hoped for this for many months after seeing her for the first time—but apparently she goes to some special academy or something, which is a shame. Seeing her in class might have made her real, might have made you talk to her. And now she is leaving and why should she say goodbye to you?

That isn't acceptable. This girl is your caffeine, your drug, your happy place, and your perfect memory. This girl is your clarity, your one constant, the only thing that keeps you sane, and she's about to be ripped from your life like an old Band-Aid over a wound that will never heal.

At the moment you aren't seriously intoxicated, but the beer has placed you in that bubbly, fuzzy place where movements flow easier than words, and you consider your next move. Here you are, at a crossroads. Different paths sprawl out in front of you like so many tangles of yarn, hopelessly dark and hopelessly chaotic, and hopelessly unavoidable. Standing here at your window, the entire world is your sandbox, so what do you imagine? What do you choose?

Maybe you decide that this is the moment that your entire existence has led up to, so you take a deep breath and decide to be brave. The trek down the stairs is surprisingly easy. Or maybe it's hard because your muscles feel like concrete and your stomach is filled with rocks. Each footfall feels like it will topple you through the thin eggshell of earth's crust into molten lava.

Your mother is still talking on the phone in the kitchen, so you slip unobtrusively to the side door near the foot of the stairs and go outside.

The night is nice and clear, the moon hanging like a lantern above the trees. That would certainly be the most romantic possibility. Or perhaps there are clouds covering the moon and the sky looks almost brown from the glow of light-pollution. The air is completely still and crickets play symphonies in the bushes. Or maybe the wind cuts through your jacket until you shiver.

Rain is another good option. Yes, it is pouring. Maybe this is why you shiver, or perhaps excitement is the cause, or fear, or all of these things. Either way, you briefly wrap your arms around yourself, clamber over the fence at the edge of your lawn and go to her.

The girl's hair (earthy brown, or yellow, or fiery red) is plastered down her back from the rain, and her mascara is running. In the dim light cast from the bulb above her garage you can't tell if she's crying or not. She sees you, turns to face you, and silently extends her hand.

Now is another choice.

Maybe you dance with her. You have wanted to dance with her since the first time you saw her from your window. You have wanted to be that free, that careless, that overwhelmed with child-like fun. Finally your wish is granted. You take her hand and the two of you twirl around and around, so fast that you feel as if you've grown wings. The two of you are like fluttering birds, or butterflies. Ethereal. Forces of nature.

Naturally, you kick off your shoes. The grass beneath your feet feels like feathers, and you wonder why you don't go barefoot more often. You jubilantly splash through the muddy puddles where the rain has gathered. The dancing girl holds your hands, and she reminds you of a bird, the way she flits and twirls about the yard, her white dress billowing out behind her.

When you're out here it's easy to imagine that time stands still, that change will never come, and that everything will continue as it always has, safe and familiar. The yawning dark windows of your two houses gradually feel less like prying eyes and more like a welcome audience; after a moment you forget that you have never danced out here before, because the steps come as easily as breathing.

You dance until dawn finally caresses the horizon with butter-colored clouds. Then she kisses you on the cheek, and whispers her name. That admission makes her real; turns angel into girl. For once her coming disappearance doesn't mean you can never find her again. She returns to her house as the moving trucks come, and you hear them pull into her driveway as you slip back through the side door. The tires against the tarmac sound like the grinding of Fortune's wheel as luck turns sour; like end of all things.

No. That hurts too much, just thinking about her leaving your life.

Maybe you take a different path, and when she extends her hand that night you are overcome with passion. Maybe you pull her into your arms and kiss her. She kisses you back fiercely, and her lips against yours make thunder in your bones. Your blood sings, and you cannot hear or smell or see. There is a great need in her hands, which pull you against her, and you readily respond, her body fitting closely against yours, perfectly, like this was destiny.

Standing by your bedroom window you smile ruefully. This isn't the first time you've imagined interactions with her like this. Ever since freshmen year of high school when your voice dropped and girls were suddenly desirable instead of annoying she has been on your mind. You allowed yourself to think about more than just dancing with her. Isn't that the classic

teenage fantasy, the girl next door, and all that? This is the ending everyone is taught to seek out, the 'perfect' and 'most desirable' way for things to go.

Maybe this kiss is where it ends. Maybe you draw away, look into her eyes, and then go home. When you're back in your room you look outside, and there is no glimpse of a girl in a white dress; she is gone, and all that remains in the yard are shadows and mysteries. You feel that your paths have finally parted, forking into the unknown. Moving trucks come. Sadness weighs on you like stones in your pockets. You become an empty shell sinking quickly under the waves, even with that last memory of her lips locked away until you are old and gray.

So when you're holding her, maybe you can't let her go quite yet. Right now is everything you have ever dreamed of and more, a wish upon a star that has somehow come true against all reason and sense. And she's holding you closer, clutching you, demanding more with her eyes, with her grip, with her very being. She needs you right now almost as much as you need her.

So you hoist her up, and her legs wrap around your waist. You carry her, half-blinded by her lips and the rain, into the little shed with the old lawn mower and rusty gardening spades. The darkness presses comfortingly around the two of you like closed eyelids. You feel clumsy and nervous and handsome and alive.

She unbuckles your belt; you stand still, unsure of what to do and not wanting to be rude, but she guides your hands to the hem of her dress. So you sink your fingers into the soft, billowy fabric and guide it up, up, up over her head, and there's so much skin that your head swims. You cast the dress aside, and she's there in your arms again, kissing you, taking off your shirt. Cold air hits your bare chest but your skin feels very warm, and the dancing girl is pulling down your jeans, and your hands somehow undo the hooks of her bra. The darkness melts around you like hot crayons and everything pulses with heat and lust, and you finally get out of your head so you can do what comes most naturally. Your hands are in her hair and on her rosy breasts; her lips press into yours, and every vein in your body seems to be pumping straight down into a heartbeat at your crotch. Right now time has no meaning. You're just two people, two live wires that send up sparks like fireworks when they meet, so that even the darkness is brushed aside.

Your clothing is strewn beneath you like old autumn leaves; hands grasp pounding flesh; mouths breathe in darkness and gasp out creation, like the songs before the dawn of the universe. This is the second time you've had sex; the first time was with your girlfriend sophomore year, the girl who wouldn't take her bra off, and barely made a sound—back then everything was awkward and regrettable. Here, in the dim shed with the dancing girl you think you know what it is to truly make love.

In the dark calm afterward, you whisper that you love her. She kisses you on the cheek, maybe whispers some sweet nothing, or maybe whispers her name. There's that chance, that possibility of finding her again in the future, and you hold onto it like a life raft. Then she leaves you lying next to the old lawnmower. You throw on your clothes and by the time you emerge from the shed she is gone without a trace, as if she has never existed, and this is the last time you see her.

Oh God, what good is a name? You don't want her name, if it means she leaves. You just want to watch her dancing for the rest of your life. Is that too much to ask?

Okay, so you grab her hand before she leaves the shed, and pull her back. Somehow you try to find the perfect words that will make her stay, make her be in your life forever... But what are those words? When have you ever been able to think of the perfect things at the perfect times? The dancing girl smiles at you sadly; it doesn't matter if you spout nonsense or poetry, if you sing her praises or recite quotations or expound the mysteries of the universe; she still leaves.

Reality jerks you back to the cold window—here your imagination always fails. The dancing girl is too majestic, too sensational to stay in your life just because you need her to. There is no way—and you have thought of this many times—to make her stay. So the moving trucks come, and the wheels grind against the driveway like fate, like the end of all things, and you sink beneath the waves, for there is a hole in your soul where the girl once danced, and you will never be the same again.

Paths of possibilities are full of surprises, and sudden turns though, right? Maybe that last bit of the story isn't entirely true; you do see her many years later, after college, when life has lost much of its sense and most of its imagination. Your arm is around your current girlfriend, and you are at a fair, or a farmers market, somewhere with crowds and laughter and greasy food. You girlfriend has brought you and you're trying to look excited, even though your feet hurt from walking all day and the sun is too hot.

You are absently looking at faces in the crowd when you see the dancing girl standing hardly three people away. She's wearing a large sunhat, and her skin is golden and healthy looking. She appears younger and older all at once, not quite the girl from the shed, but almost. She's a mix of someone you've watched grow up, and the woman you've missed since that final night in high school.

Next to her stands an impatient young boy, bouncing on the balls of his feet, and stuffing a handful of blue cotton candy into his mouth. He is small, with traces of baby fat still lingering around his cheeks, but he somehow looks almost exactly like the dancing girl, *your* dancing girl. All except for the hair, which looks darker, a shade as familiar as your own face in the mirror.

Your stomach drops. You start to count the months, the years, and get so flustered that you lose track and have to start over again. For a moment the little boy sees you and you lock eyes. Blue coloring from the cotton candy has smeared under his nose, like a little fake mustache. You probably only hold eye contact with the little boy for a second or two but it feels like an eternity, just like you sometimes felt watching the dancing girl when you were younger, and after a long moment the boy smiles and waves. Perhaps he thinks you're an old friend that he didn't recognize right away. Instinctually your hand rises as well, and you wave back. A bubble of excitement leaps to life in the dead part of your chest, and for a moment you think the time has come to be whole again.

Then your girlfriend tugs at your other arm, trying to make you look at something—the connection snaps and you look away. The crowd shifts. When you finally glance back, the dancing girl and the child are gone, swept away by the tide of life. You never see her again, and it is final this time, although you find that you search the crowds more. You're always hunting for that familiar and strange woman, maybe in a sunhat, with a growing boy hanging nearby.

But that's ridiculous, that could never happen. You shake the thoughts free from your head and run your hands through your hair; you're scared. You want to pace; you're jittery as if ants are crawling up your spine. Standing by your window imagining different things won't change the fact that she's leaving tomorrow, won't change the fact that after tonight you won't have anything to watch in the backyard. Grinding wheels and the end of all things might be inevitable.

Right now the girl of your dreams is dancing outside in a white dress, like a fluttering bird or a butterfly. She prances slowly in a circle around the yard, her arms held high and her head flung back; most nights she pirouettes so energetically you are exhausted just watching, but tonight is different. Her pace is stately and dignified and mournful.

There is no dramatic rain, just a crescent moon covered in light clouds. The grass is crunchy and yellow, and the air is cold because it's autumn—the reality of these things thuds into your bones. It's getting late, almost eleven, and you've wasted time absently making up stories in your head when you should be focused. If you don't take action then this really will be last night you will ever see her.

The dancing girl next door will move on, keep living her life, and you will only be the neighbor boy, the one who watched from a window while she danced, too scared to join her. You aren't the main character in her life, not even a side character with dialogue or a pleasing backstory. You are an extra. You are scenery. What right do you have to invade her final night here?

Should you take the easy road, accept these thoughts, and give up? Maybe you bow your head, lower your blinds and fall onto your bed. You prepare for a moving truck and for the end of all things and for coming home to see no one in the neighbors' backyard each night. People come and go all the time, you think. Change is part of life. Why fight it?

Or maybe you feel like you've been an extra for too long. You're tired of being the watcher and never the participant. You aren't ready to let something so fantastic, something so constant and so comforting slip through your fingers.

So you muster your courage and go downstairs, past your mom in the kitchen, through the side door, into the back yard. The chilly air makes you shiver, or maybe you shiver from the cold and excitement.

You approach the girl, wondering at her white dress, and marveling at how her hair (earthy brown, yellow, fiery red) falls across her shoulders. The crescent moon hangs in the sky, and the yellow grass crunches under your stocking feet; you shuffle, unsure of what to do now. She notices you. She extends her hand and you take it firmly, and introduce yourself. You ask for her name, like you've imagined doing every night since you first saw her ten years before.

And maybe the fates are kind. Maybe she tells you.