

SKINNY DUGAN

Corey Mertes

THE END

The final time I entered the casino my pockets were empty except for keys and a hundred and fifty dollars I'd stolen from Party, what everyone called my then-wife Partridge, whose real name was Jane. A roar greeted me at the entrance—the roar of hot dice.

A gambler's superstitions are sacrosanct. In craps, it's bad luck when a player gets hit by the dice because he's bending into the layout to pick up chips or to make a bet while the dice are in the air. Just as bad is a shooter who can't consistently get the dice to the end of the table. I also believed—with considerable anecdotal evidence to back me up—that you don't enter a game in the middle of a good roll.

“Fifteen-minute roll, Felix. You getting in?”

I knew most of the dealers, most of the addicts. But the players on this game were unfamiliar. Poker players sitting out a string of bad cards. A couple out for a night on the town. The shooter, a bald man wearing a Members Only jacket, took his time, set the dice carefully, and lofted them each throw with an identical arc.

“Six, a winner,” the stickman declared. “Nothing but winners.”

Twenty more minutes passed, number after number, the same precise ritual from the shooter.

“Felix, you’re not going to sit out this whole roll, are you?”

Fucking dealers, my God.

“One-thirty-seven across,” I said, finally giving in—and, significantly, announcing it while simultaneously leaning over the table to set my chips in the Come.

“Bet!”

It happened that the shooter abandoned his routine just then for some reason, or for no reason at all, and quick-threw the dice, which hit me in the shoulder and for the first time failed to reach the end of the table.

“Seven out!” the stickman cried when they landed in the Field. “Line ’em in.”

A chorus of moans followed. Like the moans one imagines from the faceless damned in a painting by Hieronymus Bosch.

“Jesus,” one man moaned.

“Watch it! Oh, Christ!”

Line 'em in. Everyone loses.

It goes without saying.

I sarcastically tipped the dealers the thirteen bucks I had left, and that was the end of my gambling.

RAIN

In winter, a light rain never seemed to let up until it wasn't rain anymore, but a mockery of rain, the way time to a prisoner becomes nothing more than an empty calendar.

WINNING

The jolly rich fat man in charge of building the downtown stadium was the first catalyst of my addiction. A big tipper, a one-hour roll, a woman, literally, on each arm. And laughing the whole time, yakking it up. Thousands of dollars in play. Everyone had the time of their lives, high-fiving strangers. I

walked away two grand up, and even my girlfriend at the time couldn't stay mad at me long, although I stumbled in horny and drunk at six a.m., once I spread out all that money.

DANCE

Today you associate ballroom dance with former athletes and television stars engaged in some humiliating spectacle, so desperate are they to recapture their fifteen minutes of fame. Back then it meant whatever remained of Arthur Murray and its progeny, or what your grandparents did for romance before God invented rock 'n' roll. One of those issue was Ted Blaine's Dance Club, where I found myself employed after answering a classified ad.

COMPENSATION

A typical member of the club might be a seventy-three-year-old widow—a Beatrice or a Minnie; I even had a Gladys once—women with names so out-dated that not changing them became a kind of passive rebellion against the tyranny of obsolescence. Another type was a middle-aged couple in a stale marriage who weren't ready to acknowledge their troubles openly yet but who sensed them, so that when our flyer came in the mail with a free lesson, the

wife, understanding on some level their need for a fresh start, would suggest they try it out, and after an argument of whatever length, depending on whether the husband had someone on the side yet, he would give in, calculating the pain from an hour of swing and cha cha to be less than the price of smoldering acrimony. The last type was the young single women. These usually had obvious physical shortcomings—weight issues, many of them, or simply below-average looks. One of mine had curly red hair and stood six foot seven. Waltzing we looked like rejects from the world's worst circus.

I ended up there after being fired from my sales job at a for-profit college for stealing. I did it; I took the money in order to gamble. I was a pretty good salesman—*marketer* is the term they used there—but even so, the commissions weren't enough to satisfy my habit. In the new position, the ability to dance was not a prerequisite. I answered the ad because I sensed a secret sales job in it, and I was right. As long as you could stay a couple lessons ahead of your beginner students you were okay, the idea being to keep things light and build trust, enough to sell them bigger packages down the road, some of which ran as much as fifteen G's. The owners—a born huckster with a pockmarked face, and his wife, a relentlessly positive, wide-eyed former student of his—

were like the people at the college, only preying on the lonely instead of the stupid and the poor.

The dance club occupied a large mirrored space in the basement of a mall on the outskirts of Seattle. The main floor housed a food court where you could buy falafel from an Indonesian, tempura from a transplanted Valley girl, or spaghetti and meatballs from a taciturn Sikh. Occasionally I hit on the Croatian woman who made the burritos, a refugee from the Yugoslav Wars. Her quiet dignity put me to shame. In her homeland, she might have been the leader of some arcane resistance movement known only by its initials. In the food court, she folded tortillas and repelled my advances.

On the way home, I would stop at the casino in Tulalip. After I finally lost everything and started going to Gamblers Anonymous, I still stopped there but I didn't go in, I just sat in my car in the parking lot, sometimes as long as an hour, testing my resolve. One night after a party at the club, at which I'd lugged around an old widow named Hazel for over an hour in the hopes of selling her a Bronze program, and after which, with the help of the owner's remarkable closing skills we did sell her that program, resulting in a substantial commission for me, my resolve wavered. Fortunately, the party went late, and

I had stayed up so late the night before to personalize Hazel's program, describing the many ways that dancing would benefit her hardened octogenarian soul, that I was exhausted and fell asleep in my car at the casino before the decision as to whether to risk my not-yet-posted commission on baccarat, roulette, or dice could be made. I woke to the slam of a car door. Across from me, entering her car from the wet night was a dealer at the end of her shift, a woman who had dealt blackjack to me many times. She didn't notice me, or pretended not to. Her name was Sandra Blackfeet, and I'd hated her from the first night she cleaned me out.

Don't get me wrong, with real gamblers it's not about money. I hated her because of her attitude. She wanted to win. She dealt fast and made comments that seemed harmless on the surface, but in a mocking tone:

"Oh, I guess you shouldn't have hit that."

"Can't win tonight, can you?"

"Nineteen, that's good," and then, revealing her own hand: "Oops, twenty. Not good enou-ugh," drawing out the final word into two syllables like that, almost singing it, as she swiped away my losing bet.

I never beat her, and I believe she was happy about that, even proud. Several times as I walked away from her table busted, I looked back to see if she

was laughing at me, a snub I never caught her at but always sensed lurking in her marginal smile. A Native American like many of the dealers, she had long black hair she wore swept around her neck, and a face that was easy to look at despite a vague indication of gloom. The casino sat on a reservation, overseen by the council of the Tulalip Tribes. Presumably they were among the myriad tribes we'd stolen land from and were now paying back by granting licenses to steal. Another quarter of the dealers were Southeast Asian—Laotians or Cambodians or Vietnamese—the children of refugees, displaced souls, who, along with the Natives, gambled disproportionately in their off-hours. As for Sandra, I had nowhere to go, so I followed her out of there with some dim notion of confronting her when she got home.

We only had to drive a few minutes. It was past midnight, moonless, overcast. I followed her down a gravel road into a trailer park, past a group of Indians drinking around a fire. A quarter mile beyond them she pulled up next to a trailer and parked beneath a frilled awning. I drove past it a couple hundred yards, turned off my lights, and waited. Then I skulked back to do whatever it was I intended—assault her in some way, I think, looking back on it, if she'd been alone and I'd been able to muster up the courage.

In the distance, the Natives' voices combined with the crackle of fire. A light turned on as I approached her trailer. On tiptoes, I could see her through half-drawn curtains exit a small bedroom. I waited, alternately looking toward the park entrance while affecting a nonchalant pose and rising up in anticipation of her return. The smell of wet trees reminded me of childhood fears. When she finally did return, her hair was damp. She wore a towel that covered her breasts and hips, but just barely.

She unfastened the towel and threw it onto a chair in my direction. At that angle, I could tell I was invisible to her, a shadow among shadows. She removed a silken, cream-colored chemise from a drawer, a striking indulgence in those surroundings. Her naked body revealed a tattoo of an eagle on her hip, with a white-feathered cap straining onto the side of her belly. My desire for revenge merged with sexual longing. I fancied primal screams, the spinning axis, the luscious earth before the dawn of man. She put on the garment and got into bed, and I walked to the other side of the trailer in front of the door, where I weighed whether to take back in one fiendish act everything I believed I was owed.

Who contemplates something like that? Me back then, that's who. I stood there for what might have been seconds or hours, with the same rush I felt

after pulling the arm of a slot machine, waiting for the wheels to turn. I was about to knock when out of the darkness, stumbling in my direction and mumbling to himself, approached a man. I don't know if he saw me. I hustled to my car. I do know, by looking back from the top of the road, that he—her husband or boyfriend or some braver offender than I—entered her trailer.

At home, in bed, I wrote false assurances in half-finished programs. The Rosenquists would learn proper spacing for their upcoming showcase. Carrie Anne would express the romance she craves through the magic of sway.

PLAYING

I am not the only villain in my own story. I felt justified stealing the money from my wife, for instance, from the stash I knew she kept under bras and panties in her bureau, because a month before that I'd come home early from the dance club and walked in on her *in flagrante delicto*, as they say, like the flash point in some big-box-office movie. The guy had worked on the furnace. His name was Frank. I didn't interrupt them. I went straight to the casino and had the night of my life. I bet the Player hand at baccarat eight times in a row, and it came up Player every time. For the first hour after I got home, I

forgot that I'd been cuckolded. To be honest, I didn't much care. I never confronted Partridge about it, even later that spring when after eighteen months of marriage we put an end to our charade.

COLOR

Sometime after the break-up I started seeing an Asian woman who had begun working at the club. She was half-Korean. The other half Slovenian or Slovakian or something. Built like an Olympic wrestler. She wore boots everywhere, an extraordinary variety—army boots, go-go boots, Uggs. She kept her hair kind of mohawk-y—buzz-cut along the sides, a little less so in the middle. Two nights a week she stripped at a club called the Blue Lady Lounge, and the rest of the week, like me, she taught lonely hearts how to shuffle around a dance floor.

We started grabbing a drink after work and then started having sex. What a fireball! Twice we got kicked out of dives because she sassed back at some lippy drunk woman and refused to quiet down. I stayed out of it. She brought that same passion to the bedroom, although I detected a note of insincerity in her loud cries, a carryover, I guessed, from the false interest demanded of her at her other vocation. In those days, I didn't sleep much. I spent a lot of time

smoking and drinking, walking around town, reading obituaries and want ads. What I liked best about her, believe it or not, was that she maintained a beautiful garden. She grew blackberries, tomatoes—and the flowers! Her colorful front yard shouted WAKE UP, QUITTERS to a neglectful neighborhood. Unfortunately, her tenure at the club came to an abrupt end. She had just begun teaching me to cook when at our meeting the next day, the owner, who did not appreciate her rawness the way I did, called her out for being repeatedly late, knowing what her reaction would be. She flipped him off and walked out, much to the pleasure of the owner's wife, in particular. That might have been the last time I saw her. This was before cell phones were commonplace. I'm not sure we'd even exchanged home numbers.

DECEIT

Around that time a gambler I used to see periodically on a blackjack game started showing up at G.A. meetings. The dealers knew him as the guy who came in twice a day for an hour, first at five a.m. wearing a running outfit, and then again in the evening, always in a suit. He'd been keeping his gambling a secret from his wife, telling her that he was working late each night and jogging in the mornings. He told me that one of the dealers we both liked, a kid

named Charlie Freed, had been arrested. This kid had remarkable hands, a real magician. It turns out that for months he'd been making one black chip—a hundred dollars—disappear from his tray every night, somehow getting it into his mouth without being detected. That would explain why Charlie, so friendly by nature, would occasionally go silent for as much as an hour at a time. They finally caught him on a night he was coming down with a cold. A stolen chip rolled across the dice pit and landed at the shift manager's feet as Charlie was walking to break, after he suddenly and uncontrollably sneezed.

DARKNESS

Night after night I returned to the casino just before Sandra Blackfeet ended her shift. I parked near the exit, watched her get into her car, and followed her home. I had no reason to follow since I knew where she lived and could have waited for her there. But the process exhilarated me, the simulated chase. The routine helped me formulate what it was I was doing.

Which was what, exactly? I don't know what I envisioned originally. Knocking on her door, stepping inside. Eventually I imagined her naked, backed up against the refrigerator. I would demand sex, to which she would fold her arms and refuse even to respond. That's where the fantasy got a little

murky. We would have sex. Not consensual sex but not rape, either. I know that isn't possible given the legal niceties of it. It's a fantasy! Suspend disbelief. Her ultimate acquiescence was a key part of our reckoning, in my mind. Oddly, the fantasy always degenerated into some twisted reverse humiliation, when during the act she'd begin to make flippant comments similar to the ones she made on the tables: "Not good enou-ugh," all singsong, or "Having a little trouble tonight?"

Or: "So sad, you've come up short again."

The truth is I was too fragile to make any part of my vision a reality, thank God. Each night, I rolled down that gravel road and turned past what seemed like the same circle of darkly clad men drinking around a fire. I parked in the recess of a pine grove at the top of the hill and snuck back to the modest place that Sandra Blackfeet called home. As at least one set of curtains was always open, I always peeked in.

Sometimes, as on the first night, I caught a glimpse of her in the nude. Other nights she changed clothes out of view, and I was only able to observe her tidying up or watching television. It always ended the same, with the same man wobbling up the path, visibly drunk even from a distance. I learned the rhythms of his approach so well that I never failed to get out of there in time.

I never got a good look at his face. Instead, I would watch him from a distance, wait a few minutes after he entered the unlocked trailer, and drive away.

On the seventh night, it all happened the same until the end. For a fraction of a second as I was putting my key in the ignition, I thought I saw a small object inside the trailer zip in and out of view. Before I could question whether it was a trick of the moon's light, a sound of shattering glass made me shudder. A plate or a cup maybe striking a wall, it was followed immediately by the muffled voice of the man yelling. On some level, I'd known this was coming. Their living conditions, his habitual drinking, her subtle expressions of contempt, all made an eruption of violence appear inevitable. In retrospect, it's what I'd been waiting for all along, for this mysterious man to take my revenge for me. I heard from Sandra Blackfeet what sounded like pleas. I could not make out words, even the man's, who again raised his voice. I would not have been ashamed then to admit that I became excited. Images emerged of hunted birds and the ancient settling of scores. I longed to hear her cry out in pain, to beg for mercy, only to be refused.

Their silhouettes passed before the curtains like shadows in some aboriginal play. I decided I needed to witness her comeuppance up close. But as I neared, the figures vanished. At the window, I stretched upward and peered

into their empty kitchen, where the shards of a broken glass vase lay scattered on the floor. The sink faucet had been left running. Hearing voices in the living room, I slid around front intending to try the window on the other side of the door. Then, just as I passed the door, it sprung open. I whirled around and froze.

Out stepped the man. He looked older than I imagined, with long stringy hair, a ruttled face. He didn't see me at first, but when he did he took a step backward.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I—"

"Who are you?"

"I'm lost," I said, beginning the speech I'd prepared for such an occasion. "I turned in here by mistake and can't find my way out."

My explanation appeared to confuse him. He held the railing for a moment to keep from falling.

"I'm looking for the main road."

He ignored me and began wringing his hands. The light from inside revealed that one of his hands had blood on it that was running down his arm. When he finally looked up, we made eye contact.

“I cut myself,” he said, holding out his hands. He started to teeter and grabbed the railing again for balance. That’s all he said. He hung his head and exhaled hard as I eased around him, saying, “It’ll be all right, man. . . . You’ll be alright.” Before darting up the hill, I took my eyes off him only for an instant, as I passed the screen door and caught a glimpse of Sandra Blackfeet sweeping up glass.

TRAUMA

Every day at the club the dance director gave the instructors, many of whom, like me, had no formal training at all, a lesson in grace. This was the best part of the job because I got to pair up with the female instructors, who were invariably young, straight, and attractive, whereas most of the male teachers were gay. Occasionally the numbers didn’t match up, and I ended up dancing with one of the gay guys. It was awkward at first, but I adapted to it just fine. It only bothered me with this real flamer—a wiry short-timer who wore hair extensions and never stopped talking. He made everyone laugh, especially the women. It was his brash manner more than anything else that we found funny. We even laughed one night after work, at a bar, by the splashy way he told us that he’d been sexually molested as a child by his grandfather.

His grandfather! Jocularly! At the time, I wondered if that's what made him turn out gay. I see how stupid that is now.

Here's the way it worked: The woman in charge of generating leads lured people in with a free lesson. We "specialists" showed them a few steps, livened it up with our enthusiasm and charm, and sat them down afterward to push a four-lesson program for ninety-nine bucks. If they bought, at the end of their fourth lesson we hit them up again for a \$1,500 "Variety" package. A surprising number went for it. Like a ballplayer, if you batted .250 you could make a living—.333 put you in the Hall of Fame. After that came the much bigger "Bronze" program. Some people also bought showcases—formal, choreographed routines they performed with their instructors at annual balls. We offered Silver and Gold programs, too, but most people were tapped out long before that.

Most of the older women didn't care to learn new steps; they just wanted to talk and be led around the floor—or carried, it often seemed, like with Hazel the Curmudgeon, as I called her, whose short, Gumbyish frame belied how heavy she felt draped over my arms. I preferred the retired couples where the man had no gracefulness at all. Former blue-collar workers were best. Give me a retired fireman or lathe operator, men whose muscles ached and who

stopped the lessons to tell jokes or old stories. One guy I taught, along with his wife, had engaged in hand-to-hand combat in Vietnam. He had a nervous tic and frequently glanced around the room as if anticipating an ambush. The lessons were primarily to placate his wife; he had no interest in dancing whatsoever.

With not just him, with everyone, over time, listening to them, getting to know them, I felt less like a teacher of dance than a psychiatrist specializing in PTSD.

SEVEN

At one of the meetings, we went around the circle and talked about our favorite games. One guy liked the Big Wheel, a game with terrible odds that they place by the door to get your last dollar on the way out. One night in bed he dreamt of a system that would work on the wheel and hustled to the casino in his pajamas to get there before it closed. He lost the last of his bankroll just as they were locking the doors.

The game I miss most is craps, with its scatological name and its sexually evocative lingo: horn, hard eight, Big Red, don't come. Knowing its terms makes you feel unflappable, part of some exclusive fraternity, like you belong.

My favorite piece of jargon is not suggestive at all—it's Skinny Dugan. People with only a passing familiarity with craps think that when the dice land on seven it's a good thing, but that is not usually the case. More often than not a seven means the shooter is done and everyone loses. A player saying the word *seven* on a game is therefore considered bad luck, so various alternative names have evolved, one of which is Skinny Dugan. It's a way of saying, without actually saying it, what you hope won't happen but know will eventually come.

GRACE

Why would I return to the trailer park after the encounter I'd had, with a drunk and potentially dangerous Indian? It's a fair question. Which I answer with a question: What else did I have now that I'd sworn off my favored form of risk?

I wanted to be there when the tension escalated, to witness the woman's lover exact the revenge I was too cowardly to claim. I wondered if, and on whose behalf, I would intervene.

I returned several times but saw nothing to indicate conflict. Finally, one night from my car I noticed the light in the camper shimmer and then dim, as

if a lamp had been knocked to the floor. The shout of a man was replaced by a female cry. I approached stealthily, stopping when the light grew full again, the lamp set straight. I began to hear echoes of struggle and reproach. The kitchen window was shut, so I went around back to the one farthest from the door, my plan in the event of another surprise meeting to simply flee, a plan derived from my calculation that the man, in our prior encounter, had seemed more preoccupied than threatening—or, if that gamble proved wrong, that his age and condition made him unlikely to pursue. A full moon hung low as if to spotlight my shamelessness. Again, the curtains were parted; the closed windows dampened the couple's sounds. The yelling intensified and then suddenly stopped. I have never been more excited, not on a one-hour roll, not on a double-down at the table maximum.

When I raised up on my toes, what I witnessed confused me. The woman wasn't there. Face down on the couch lay the man, his body convulsing. What had I missed? Was he hurt? His hand was heavily bandaged. Had he assaulted his lover (his wife?) and left her for dead in the kitchen?

I craned in an effort to see more, but there was nothing to see; the woman was gone. I decided that the man wasn't hurt, he was sobbing, and the bandage

was most likely the result of his outburst the week before. Then, suddenly, from below, Sandra Blackfeet stood into view on the opposite side of the pane.

“. . . air might help,” I heard her say, as she slid open the window.

It happened too quickly for me to react. We were close enough to play cards. Had she looked out she would have seen me, but her head was turned toward the man.

“I’ll get you some water,” she said before heading to the kitchen.

When she returned, she sat on the couch and helped him sit up. I was right, he had been crying. Now he was breathing deeply, his eyes as black as graves. He drank from the glass. She stroked his hair. After a long pause, he sighed and said: “She’s gone.”

He began to cry again, softly. She cradled his head and teared up also. “I know, Daddy,” she said finally. “I miss her too.”

I had not noticed in my prior confrontation with him how much they looked alike, with their stocky frames and their smallish noses. “She fought hard,” I heard her say very faintly. Her father nodded, his eyes focused on the paneled wall, where for the first time I noticed a framed picture of a Native American woman about his age standing by a river, smiling.

“She’s with the angels now,” the man said, staring at the woman I presumed to be his late wife.

Hoping for violence, I’d confused mourning with rage. Suddenly, violence seemed as unlikely in that setting as hitting the lottery or developing some rare disease. I never prayed, but when I finally settled to the ground, I prayed for forgiveness. At home, while splashing water on my face, I had trouble looking in the mirror.

GRETA

One of my students at that time had suffered a traumatic brain injury. Her name was Greta. She’d been on the back of a motorcycle with the on-again, off-again boyfriend she intended to break up with for good that night when an accident killed him. She must have been twenty-four or twenty-five. She moved in with her parents afterward, who thought dancing might be good therapy for her depression. She got around pretty well except for a slight limp, and she talked almost like a regular person except that her short-term memory was shot, so she often repeated herself. Also, she had that faraway, brain-damaged look in her eyes, like a gentle zombie.

Because she tired easily, we would frequently cut her lessons short and just talk at one of the tables. She liked to tell stories about her family. When she was a teenager, her grandfather showed up at a family gathering without her grandmother once during the holidays and wouldn't say why. Nobody asked. That's what kind of family they were—very German. They acted like it was normal and only talked about her grandmother's absence in whispers in secluded corners. The grandmother—her father's mother—later asked her father how to go about getting a divorce. Her father shrugged it off, and his parents stayed unhappily married until they died a week apart from each other several years later. Long before Greta was born, the grandfather had briefly placed the grandmother in a sanatorium where she received shock therapy, but no one talked about that either, she said. I got the impression that Greta used to hold things close to the chest, too, but that the injury changed that, to her family's ongoing bewilderment.

Those first lessons we ran out of time before we wanted them to end, so we started meeting outside of the club. Nothing sexual. We'd meet in coffee shops, drink lattes, eat scones. The injury had left her with a heightened sense of smell, and she found the aromas there especially pleasing. She'd help me tailor Variety programs to particular clients by suggesting alternative words

for my descriptions. She'd been an English major in college and had a large vocabulary. "Write *festive* instead of *fun*," she'd say, or "*Nimble* works better than *graceful* there." Then, forgetting what she'd said, a few minutes later she'd repeat it: "*Festive* sounds better than *fun*, don't you think?"

When it came time to sell her a Variety program, she knew what was going on. I was perfectly honest about our procedures. "I'm brain damaged, not stupid," she said. She bought the whole package. In the closing room, she told the owner she wanted to buy even before he opened his mouth.

A week later she didn't show up for her first Variety lesson. A middle-aged woman came in when the lesson was scheduled to begin and demanded to talk to the owner. Through his glass office wall, I watched her lean in and point an index finger angrily into his desk. It turned out to be Greta's mother. When she learned that Greta had paid \$1,500 for dance lessons, she assumed we'd taken advantage of her daughter's disability. The owner refunded their money. I called Greta at home several times in the days that followed. Each time her mother picked up and refused to let Greta talk. The final time she threatened to call the police.

THE BEGINNING

My grouchy, eighty-one-year-old client Hazel had been a cop—twenty-eight years on the force followed by seventeen as a prison guard at the women’s penitentiary. I learned that during the first of the 200 Bronze lessons she purchased to while away her retirement. She hated that word, *retirement*; it intimidated of death. She couldn’t remember my name, but she remembered that I used to gamble, so she called me Lucky. Whenever I told her a story about some degenerate gambler or started in about the depths to which I myself had sunken in my darkest days, she’d say something like, “You think that’s grim, Lucky? You don’t know what grim is.”

Life is so fucking sad when you stare it in the face without blinking. Only when you see the sadness in others can you begin to forget about your own.

I stuck with that job for two years and had only one relapse, a brief night of roulette inspired by gin-induced madness. I lost, thank God. Mostly, it’s a period I look back on fondly, when I began to feel, even if most of what I felt was regret. The dancing made a big difference. Who would have thought that an old witch, a TBI victim, a jittery Vietnam vet, and all the rest could play a part in my recovery, or me in theirs, just by propping each other up and shambling from one end of a room to the other?

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