

The Dance Teacher

By

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I waited anxiously at the front desk for my dance teacher. Being new to the school I knew next to nothing, and I watched other dancers glide over the shiny wood floor of the main ballroom in front of me. They seemed to move so effortlessly, and I thought I could never be that good.

The only thing I had going for me was my love for salsa. Having been married to a Colombian woman for ten years I had been exposed to a lot of it. When my wife and I were still together, I had taken a few lessons from a local teacher. I knew only two steps: basic and back step, and ever since I got my iPod I practiced whenever I got the chance. In fact, it was my iPod that compelled me to take dance lessons in the first place.

As soon as I got it I loaded it with as much salsa as I could get my hands on. The intoxicating syncopated rhythms were like a drug, and I couldn't stop moving my feet. I would plug the thing into my ears, slip the thin metal case into my back pocket, and practice in the hallway of my building every night after work. It wasn't long after that when I realized I needed dance lessons.

I announced my intentions to my coworkers, Ellen and Dawn, and they both said go for it, so a quick internet search turned up several Latin dance studios. The one that caught my eye was Robert Brewster's DanceCorner on 34th and Broadway, right next to the Empire State Building. After the free introductory class, a half-hour private lesson was offered for twenty dollars to evaluate your skills.

So, here I was, waiting for my half-hour private lesson, excited and nervous.

A beautiful blonde woman in her late twenties walked up to me and introduced herself. "You must be Chris Smith. My name is Cathy. I'm going to be your instructor," she said, shaking my hand.

She was carrying a notebook which she clutched to her chest. I wasn't surprised by her beauty—dancers in general were beautiful people—but I was floored by her countenance. She had the most amazing intense blue eyes, and I knew right away that she was a sharp woman. Her silky blond hair was pulled back, exposing her delicate Eastern European features. Her dance shoes made her look taller than she really was, and I realized that she was actually quite short.

"So what kind of dance are you interested in?" she asked.

"Salsa," I replied.

"Come with me," she said, nodding her head in a no-nonsense sort of way toward the hallway.

I followed her down the hall to a small room lined with mirrors. Another couple was there, working through a lesson.

"Have you danced salsa before?" she asked.

"I've taken exactly three lessons. I know two steps: basic and back step."

“Show me,” she said, putting down her notebook.

I showed her my basic.

“You learned New York salsa. Where did you learn it?”

“In Rockland County where I used to live. What other kind of salsa is there?”

“There’s salsa on one, which is what most of the rest of the world does, and there’s salsa on two, which is New York salsa.”

“Why does New York have its own salsa?” I asked.

“I don’t know. New York just has to be different,” she replied. “Show me your back step.”

I showed her my back step.

“Make sure you actually step when doing the back step. Don’t just point,” she said, demonstrating. “Let’s try dancing together,” she said, moving closer to me.

“I’ve never danced with a partner,” I admitted. “I’ve always danced alone.”

“Salsa is a partner dance,” she replied, holding out her hand.

I put my right hand on her shoulder blade and put my other hand in hers. We began doing basic. I had practiced the step enough to feel confident, and realized how agile she was. She counted the steps as we danced—one, two three, five six, seven. She looked me directly in the eyes as we danced, and I looked directly into hers. Dancing with a partner required a lot more concentration than I thought, making my body stiff.

She shook my arm. “Relax,” she said. “You’re way too tense.”

I tried relaxing my arm, but my muscles just wouldn’t unwind. After a few minutes she stopped.

“Let’s try doing a turn,” she said.

She showed me how to do a left hand turn on seven. When I tried following her I realized that the rubber-soled clod hoppers I was wearing would not let me turn very smoothly.

“You need to get some leather-soled shoes with a heel,” she said. “It will make your life a lot easier.”

“I have a ton of dress shoes. I’ll just rotate them.”

Soon the lesson was over, and Cathy and I sat down on a bench and she began filling out an evaluation card. “You’re confidence is good. How do you feel?” she asked.

“I don’t feel so confident dancing with a partner.”

“I’m giving you a four. You have good rhythm. I’m giving you a five. Your technique is good for what you know. I’m giving you a four. You just need to learn more steps. You’ll be starting in Salsa I. We have group classes but I suggest you take private lessons. You learn much faster that way. Take this card to April’s office at the front desk, and she’ll work out a program with you.”

Cathy walked me up to April’s office, and I handed her the card. She didn’t seem too interested in how I did; obviously she had seen a lot of these. April was an attractive woman with long blond hair and pretty brown eyes.

“So how did you like it?” she asked.

“I liked it a lot,” I replied, sitting down in a chair in front of her desk.

April pulled out a rate card and began explaining the different programs. “What are you interested in doing?” she asked.

“I want to do the group class and private lessons.”

“Great! You get a ten percent discount on each for doing them together. The total for five private lessons and the group class is \$512.00. Tuesday night is salsa night, and Thursday night is open. We have a free class on Thursdays. We have parties every night starting at 9:30. The parties are free; we just ask that you dress up for the parties. How do you want to pay?”

I took out my wallet and pulled out my debit card. She swiped the card and I signed the receipt.

“Now let’s get your picture taken for your membership card. She took me over to the front desk where they snapped my picture and printed out a laminated membership card. “Don’t lose your card. It costs \$15.00 to replace. Cathy will be your dance teacher.”

Cathy was standing beside me. “When can you come in for your private?” she asked.

“How about tomorrow night at 5:30?”

“Do I have an opening then?” she asked the young lady behind the counter.

“You sure do,” she replied, typing on the computer.

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow night,” said Cathy, kissing me on the cheek.

I left the studio filled with excitement. At last I was going to learn to dance.

The next day at work I told Dawn and Ellen about my experience. “She said I have good rhythm,” I told them.

“That’s great,” said Dawn.

Dawn was my boss. She and I had long conversations together. I loved the hell out of her. I considered her more of a friend than my boss, but I always made sure I respected her authority. We had so much in common it was scary at times. We loved the

same books, felt the same way about religion and politics, and we had the same sense of humor. Dawn was a talented painter, and her work adorned all four walls of her office. I never got tired of looking at her art.

That evening after work I took the V train from 53rd and Lexington down to 34th Street. I arrived just a few minutes before my lesson. Cathy walked up to me and smiled.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

“Sure am,” I replied.

I followed her down the hall to the salsa room. We started right away doing basic. After a few minutes Cathy stopped. “You probably already know this step, but I’m going to show it to you anyway. It’s called a cross-body walk.”

She showed me how to step to the side and walk her across my body to the opposite direction. She was right. I did know that step. I had just forgotten it. I tried the step a few times, and then Cathy started shaking my arm.

“You’re too stiff,” she said. “When you push against my arm like that it actually stops me from moving. Do you have a lot of stress at work or something?”

“Cathy, I have a very high stress job.”

“What do you do?” she asked.

“I do two things. I’m a software engineer. I work for the state. I’m also a writer. I have a book coming out next fall.”

“What’s it about?” she asked.

I began to get excited. I loved telling people about my book, even if I didn’t talk about it with everyone. “It’s called *Swiss Journey*. It’s about a young boy who gets sent to a Swiss boarding school because of his academic and discipline problems. While there

he falls in love with a girl named Alexandra Cavalletti from Rome, Italy. She comes from a very wealthy family. Her father is probably the largest horse trader in Europe, and he also owns a famous line of wines. Anyway, he dies during their second year in school. Her mother can't handle the loss or the family business and goes insane. She ends up selling the horses to a meat company and burning the vines to the ground. This is a true story," I said excitedly. "Anyway, they both get thrown out of school after being caught in the middle of a sexual encounter, but they remain in contact and cross paths over the years. But they never really come together because of circumstances in their lives. They finally do come together as lovers in their late forties, but the affair ends unhappily when they both realize they were just chasing ghosts from their childhood they could never have."

"That sounds like an interesting book," said Cathy. "Is that your first novel?"

"Actually, it is. It's mostly autobiographical. I have written two other books since then. They are both being read. It took me four years to get it published. What about you?" I asked. "Did you go to college?"

"Yes."

"What did you study?"

"I studied creative writing, psychology, and English," she replied.

I was impressed. Now I knew she was bright. "So, you're a writer!" I exclaimed.

"What have you written?"

"Mostly short stories."

"Have you tried writing a novel yet?"

"No," she replied.

“Cathy, when I was younger I wrote nothing but short stories, but I didn’t start writing seriously until I hit my late forties.”

“You had enough distance,” she said.

“Exactly.”

“I spend more money on books than I do on dance shoes. And dance shoes are expensive,” she said.

I looked down at her feet. “Really!” I knew right then that I liked this woman.

Cathy took my hand, and we started dancing again. “I’m going to show you how to turn me on one,” she said.

On the first count she raised her arm and went into her turn. It seemed simple enough. “After you turn me I want you to do a left hand turn,” she said.

On one I raised my arm and she went into her turn. I followed her and started my turn on seven, both of us ending up in step. “Good!” she said. “But when you turn me I want you to simply raise your arm. You don’t need to twirl me. I’ll do the turn on my own.”

We tried the step a few more times. I was getting the hang of it.

“Now I’m going to show you how to do a right hand turn,” she said, stopping.

She showed me the step and I tried it a few times. It felt awkward at first, but I picked it up pretty quickly.

“I can’t find anything wrong with that,” she said finally.

“Oh, come on! Nothing?” I asked.

“If you want I’ll look, but I can’t see anything.”

“There has to be something wrong. My hand is too tense,” I said.

“Your hand is always too tense, but your turn is perfect.”

I was ecstatic, and felt as though I could actually dance well, even though I knew I had a long way to go. Cathy looked up at me and smiled, and I looked into her beautiful, blue eyes. I began to realize how deeply attracted I was to her. The attraction wasn't so much sexual as it was spiritual. There was something about her I adored, and I suddenly had the urge to take her in my arms and kiss her.

Class ended and Cathy walked me up to the front desk. “Can you come this Friday? I don't want you to forget what I've taught you.”

“Sure,” I replied. Actually I wanted to come sooner, but I also didn't want to use up all my privates too quickly. They were expensive.

“What time can you come?” she asked.

“Is 5:30 okay?”

“Do I have an opening then?” Cathy asked Kristal, who worked behind the counter.

“Let me check,” she said, typing on the computer. “Yes. You're all set, Chris. See you on Friday.”

Cathy put her arms around my neck and kissed me on the cheek. I knew it was a natural gesture for her, not to be misinterpreted, but nonetheless, feeling her in my arms felt really good.

Every night after work I practiced my dance steps in the hallway outside my apartment. I didn't practice to music; instead, I counted each step out loud to make sure I got them right. I practiced religiously and slowly until I understood what I was doing.

The whole time I practiced I kept thinking about Cathy. She was enigmatic and beautiful, and I wondered what she thought of me.

My neighbors reacted to my practice sessions in different ways. The Korean couple down the hall was amused, and the wife always stopped and did a couple of steps with me in the hallway. She was so friendly and nice. The young couple one door down would pass me by like I was insane, and they always gave me funny looks.

The woman from Ecuador who lived at the end of the hall stopped to talk with me. We were on friendly terms. She had two kids my kids' ages, although we hadn't had any play dates. She kept mostly to herself.

"Hi, Chris. Are you taking salsa lessons?"

"Yes I am," I replied. "Do you dance salsa?"

"A little bit," she replied. "Where are you taking lessons?"

"A place called DanceCorner on 34th and Broadway."

"Oh, in the city. Is it reasonable?" she asked.

"Depends. I'm taking private lessons and a group class. It costs \$500.00 a month."

"Ouch," she said.

"They have guest nights every second Tuesday of the month. You should come check it out," I told her. They offer a free class for guests and then there's a salsa party afterwards."

"Maybe I will. Bye for now," she said.

"Bye Gabriela."

I continued dancing until I worked up such a sweat I had to take a shower. Afterwards I lay on my bed and lit a cigarette. The exercise felt good but I felt a twinge in my back. "Oh, no," I said out loud. Ten years ago I had herniated a disc the day after I earned my second black belt in Israeli Survival. I had trained long and hard for the test, which consisted of running five miles and then coming back to the studio to fight twenty-five guys in succession, full-contact two minute rounds with a thirty second rest between rounds. I was black and blue from head to toe after the test, but I had passed. The next day I was sitting on the floor doing some light stretching when I heard something pop.

I knew it was serious when I couldn't move. At first they thought it was muscular, but then I developed such bad sciatica I could barely walk. A CAT scan revealed the damage. The pain was debilitating. Two surgeons told me not to operate because it was too risky and I was too young. They recommended physical therapy. It did nothing. I tried acupuncture, chiropractors and massage therapy. Nothing worked.

Finally I accepted the fact that my martial arts career was over and simply stopped exercising. Anything more physical than sex aggravated my back. After ten years of inactivity the pain finally left, but I had taken up smoking and put on at least forty pounds. I was terribly out of shape.

Within the first week of dancing I noticed how quickly I was dropping weight. The pounds were shedding from my body like butter. I cut sugar out of my diet and ate healthy lunches. For dinner I just ate salads. Soon my tired, old wardrobe didn't fit at all, and I started buying new clothes. My self-confidence was rising steadily, and both Dawn and Ellen noticed the change. I was feeling pretty good, but I was worried about my back.

My group classes were on Tuesdays at 7:30. They were nowhere near as satisfying as my privates with Cathy, but I got the opportunity to dance with different people. I also found the group classes a lot more basic, but basics were good. Franklin, my group class teacher, told me that if I wanted to be a good dancer I needed to know basics.

That Wednesday after work I went to my private with Cathy. She was wearing a tight pair of jeans and a tight blue top. Her body was exquisite. "I'm going to show you a new step," said Cathy. "It's called an open break."

She showed me how to start a cross-body walk and let go of her shoulder into a back step. I was having trouble with the count. "You're going to fast!" she said.

"I keep hearing the music," I replied.

"You have to follow my count or you'll never get this step."

"I'll try," I said.

Again I went to the music.

"I'm going to take you into another room where they don't play salsa. They only play waltz if you don't start following my count. Do you eat a lot of sugar or something?"

"I looked at her for a second and said, "I smoke too much."

Cathy shook her finger at me and said with a smile, "Stop smoking. It interferes with your salsa."

I laughed. Cathy showed me how to push her gently away from me with my left hand and pull her into me as we touched right hands. It was a sawing motion. She stopped.

“Your arm is too high. You need to be right here,” she said, moving her arm back and forth at her side.

We looked each other in the eyes and at this point I was so mesmerized by her I didn't know where I was for a second. Instinctively, I took my finger and poked her gently in the solar plexus.

“Right here,” I said, suddenly realizing I had just made a pass at her—a subtle one, but a pass nonetheless. Our eyes locked and Cathy had a serious look on her face.

“I'm ticklish,” she said.

We began dancing again on her count until I had the motion down. “Now let's do it to the music,” she said, and we went into the step perfectly synchronized. It was a fast song and our feet were in perfect unison. It was an unbelievable moment for me as we went back and forth, our right hands touching as we moved together.

Suddenly, Cathy raised her arm and went into a turn. I moved quickly with her. I put my hand on her shoulder blade and tried to do the move in the opposite direction, but she stopped dead. “You have to get to me quicker if you want to do that,” she said.

I was disappointed. I wanted to experience that feeling again. Class was over. She walked me to the front desk. “Can you come this Friday?” she asked.

“I have to pick up my kids,” I told her.

“Are you sure you can't come?” she pleaded.

“Cathy, I would love to do two privates a week with you, but I just can't afford it.”

Cathy stared away from me a second or two, and I wondered what was going through her mind. “How about next Friday,” she said.

“Done.”

We made the arrangements and Cathy kissed me on the cheek. “I’ll see you on Friday,” she said.

I watched her as she walked away. I was so mesmerized by her it was scary. As I left, I felt my back cramping up. Damn. The last thing I wanted to do was to stop dancing. I decided to see a doctor, and the next day I made an appointment.

That Tuesday I went to my group class. I arrived a few minutes early and saw Cathy by the front door. My heart fluttered and I walked up to her quickly and kissed her on the cheek. “Cathy, we have a problem,” I said.

“What’s the problem?”

“Ten years ago I herniated a disc in my back. It’s what got me out of the martial arts. It’s causing me problems. Do you have any suggestions?”

“You bounce too much when you dance. We can work on your technique. You can also try inserts in your shoes to take the stress off your back.”

“I made an appointment with an orthopedist for tomorrow. I’m determined to keep dancing,” I said.

“That’s good,” she said.

“Cathy, the last time we danced together we were perfectly synchronized. It felt unbelievable.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll have those moments again,” she said.

“I hope so. It was a really good feeling. I have to go to class. I’ll see you later.”

After group class I was getting ready to leave when April walked up to me.

“Chris, tonight is guest night. We need men for the guest class. Can you stay?”

“Sure, I’ll stay,” I said, as she led me by the hand to the class.

Guest class was like an intro class. We did a little bit of Latin Hustle and some salsa on one. It was fun. I got a little confused after studying salsa on two, but I realized I was a lot better than most of the people there.

After class the instructors were brought into the room and introduced. Cathy was among them. After the introductions, Cathy made a bee line right for me. “Were you a star?” she asked.

“They did salsa on one. I got all confused,” I replied.

She laughed and took me by the hand and led me to the main ballroom where the salsa party had commenced. We danced one dance together and then stood next to each other. Suddenly, I was overcome by fear. I was overwhelmed by my feelings for her and didn’t know what to do. “Cathy, I have to go to bed. I’ll see you on Friday.”

The look of disgust on her face was unmistakable, and I nearly ran from the room. I put my jacket on quickly and left. I felt like an idiot. I didn’t know how to interpret her reaction. Was it disappointment? Or had she misinterpreted what I had said?

When I arrived at home I stopped by Carmen’s apartment. Carmen was one of my dearest friends. When I was unemployed I used to stay up all night with her in her apartment watching movies and talking. Carmen never went to school and could barely read or write. But street smart she was. We both loved each other very much. She was married to an asshole who nobody liked. He had just lost his job and things were tight. They didn’t sleep together anymore; Carmen slept on a small bed in the living room, and Jay stayed in the bedroom. There was no sex.

Carmen and I never fooled around. She and I were just close friends. I took care of her and she fed me. She made a living cleaning apartments for people in the building, and she cleaned my apartment as well.

“Chris Chris,” she said, when I walked through the door. “How’s the dance going, Bubi?”

I kissed her on the cheek. “It’s going good.”

Cori, a friend of theirs, was staying in the apartment until she got one of her own. Cori and I were also becoming good friends. Cori worked for an urologist and was slightly overweight. She had some serious self-esteem problems. Regardless, I thought she was beautiful, and she had a good heart. I kissed her on the cheek as well.

“How are you doing, Chris?”

“I’m a little confused,” I replied, sitting down in one of the easy chairs.

“About what?” asked Cori.

“There’s something going on between my dance teacher and me, but I’m not sure what.”

“Oh, tell me,” said Carmen, patting my knee.

I told them all about my dance teacher, including what happened tonight. “Do you think she misinterpreted what I said?” I asked.

“How the fuck could she do that?” asked Cori. “You were tired. You told her you were going to bed.”

“You don’t think she thought I was implying that she come with me, do you?” I asked.

“Hell, no. You didn’t ask her to go to bed with you, did you?” asked Cori.

“No. I just told her that I needed to go to bed. But her reaction was so obvious.”

“I think she likes you,” said Carmen, laughing. “Is she involved with anyone?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Do you like her?” asked Carmen.

“I like her a lot,” I replied.

“Ask her out,” said Carmen. “What are you so afraid of?”

“Carmen, I’m not really in a position to date anyone.”

“Why not?” asked Carmen.

“Carmen, I just filed for bankruptcy, my divorce isn’t over yet, and my house is in foreclosure. I’ve got issues,” I said.

“I thought you said your wife didn’t show up for court and the judge dismissed the case, or whatever the fuck it was,” said Carmen.

“My wife didn’t show up for court three times in a row, and the judge asked us to file for a judgment of default. But she hasn’t made her decision yet. Technically I’m still married.”

“That’s fucked up,” said Cori. “Why wouldn’t your wife show up for court?”

“She’s crazy,” I replied, sighing. “When I moved out two years ago I told her she could have the house, but that she would have to sell it. She could have walked away with \$100,000.00 in equity, but she told me after ten years of marriage it wasn’t enough.”

“How much more does that stupid bitch want?” asked Carmen.

“She wanted me to pay for the house on top of the \$1,800.00 a month in child support I give her.”

Cori’s eyes widened with shock. “How much do you give your wife?” asked Cori.

“\$1,800.00 a month,” I said matter-of-factly. “She could have kept the house if she had gone out and gotten a fulltime job. But she wanted me to pay for everything. The expenses got to be too much, and then when I was unemployed I fell behind on everything and was forced into bankruptcy. Now she gets nothing.”

“Stupid bitch is not thinking about those kids,” said Carmen.

“That worries me too. Sooner or later she’s going to get thrown out of that house. The court took it over as part of the bankruptcy settlement,” I said. “I have no idea where she’s going to go, and she doesn’t seem to care.”

“That’s crazy, Chris,” said Cori. “How the fuck can you afford to give her that kind of money each month?”

“Cori, I make good money. It’s just that my wife gets most of it,” I replied. “I don’t have a lot of disposable income. In fact, these dance lessons are killing me, but I love it so much I’m willing to sacrifice.”

“I wouldn’t give up the dance,” said Carmen, lighting a cigarette. “That’s your passion. You need this right now.”

“I agree,” said Cori.

“I don’t intend to give it up, but I may be forced to give up smoking if I want to keep going. Ten dollars a pack really adds up.”

“How much do you smoke?” asked Cori.

“Sometimes two packs a day,” I replied, lighting a cigarette.

“That’s a shit load of money,” said Cori.

“Tell me about it. I’ll be quitting any day now. Besides, my daughter hates it when I smoke.”

“I guess you’ll be giving up your hookers, too,” said Carmen.

“That’s a given,” I said, shooting her a dirty look.

“Chris, you see hookers?” asked Cori, suddenly fascinated.

“Sometimes,” I said, matter-of-factly.

“Where do you get hookers?” she asked.

“Forget about it, Cori,” I said. “I’m not going to talk about it. Thanks a lot,” I said to Carmen.

She just laughed. “You know I love you, Chris Chris.”

“I love you, too. I have to go to bed. It’s getting late. Have a good night, ladies.”

Carmen stood up and gave me a hug, and I went to bed.

That Friday before class I apologized to Cathy for cutting out so quickly. “That’s okay. I understand,” she said, plugging her iPod into the sound system. I let it drop for the time being, but I knew it wasn’t okay. Cathy stood in front of me and held up her hand. I looked into her beautiful, blue eyes and wanted to kiss her so badly I actually had to restrain myself. I didn’t know why I was so attracted to her, but she was like a drug for me. Every time I looked at her I was overwhelmed with such passion that I could barely contain it. She must have picked up on it. How could she miss it?

Halfway through the class I looked at her and stopped. “Cathy, I would love to read one of your short stories. I’m dying to see what goes on inside that head of yours,” I said, running my hand down the back of her head. Her hair was soft and smooth and felt good beneath my fingers.

“My head is a very scary place,” she said.

“I still would like to read some of your work.”

“I destroyed most of my stories,” she said.

I looked at her in shock. “Cathy, why would you do that? Cathy, I don’t like my writing either, but some people think it’s good.”

“Trust me. I know good literature, and my work was no good.”

I didn’t believe it for a second. Her work might have been immature, but I believed in the bottom of my heart that she had talent. She was filled with so much intelligence, passion and beauty, it radiated from her like a soft, warm glow.

We continued dancing until class was over. After class she walked me up to the front desk and I apologized once more for cutting out on her so quickly.

“It’s okay,” she said. “It was nothing.”

I wasn’t going to let her off the hook. “No, Cathy. You reacted.”

“I was reacting to something else,” she said. She was a terrible liar.

“No, Cathy,” I said firmly. “I read people very well. You reacted.”

Without warning she threw herself into my arms and breathed into my ear, “It’s okay, I still love you.”

I was taken completely off balance. “I love you, too,” I said. And with that she turned and walked away.

I stood there flabbergasted, not knowing what to do. So I put on my coat and sort of floated to the train station. I was falling in love with a woman I barely knew. “Slow down,” I said to myself. “Get to know her first. This could be a real disaster.”

The next day at work Dawn asked me how the dancing was going. “There’s something going on between me and my teacher,” I said.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

I told her about what happened at the salsa party and how Cathy threw herself into my arms and told me she loved me. Dawn did a double take. “So she thinks she’s in love with you. What did you do?” she asked.

“Nothing. I told her I loved her too.”

“How old is she?”

“She’s twenty-eight.”

“That’s young. Does she know your situation?” asked Dawn with a serious look on her face.

“She knows nothing about me. I intend to ask her out to lunch and tell her everything.”

“I approve whole-heartedly,” said Dawn.

Now all I needed was the opportunity to ask her out. That Tuesday I sat in one of the overstuffed chairs by the front office reading a book before group class. Cathy stood right in front of me. I looked up at her and smiled. “Hey,” I said, getting out of my chair. “How are you?” I asked.

“I’m good. I’ve got a class in a few minutes. I thought I’d stop by and say hello.”

“Cathy, do you have any days off?” I asked.

“My only day off is Thursday, and I usually end up working those days too.”

“You put a lot of hours into this place,” I said.

“All I do is dance and read. I have no life but I like it.”

“What are you doing for Thanksgiving?” I asked.

Cathy shook her head and gave me a look of disgust. “Nothing much,” she said.

There was my opportunity. My sister always did Thanksgiving in Philadelphia each year, but she got married last summer and was going to her husband's family. My father decided he was going up to Rochester to spend Thanksgiving with his wife's family, leaving me with nowhere to go. Perhaps Cathy and I could do an early dinner together. It would be a perfect time to talk.

That Friday Cathy asked me about my books. "Would you like to read one?" I asked.

"Sure," she said.

"I have three of them. One has lots of sex, one has light sex, and one has no sex at all."

Cathy looked up at me and said, "The sex is not important. It's the story that matters."

I was truly pleased by her response. She was no prude and her answer showed real intelligence. I decided to give her *Swiss Journey*. It was written in the first person and revealed the most about my character. I knew I was taking a huge chance by letting her read it, but I figured if she liked it she'd like me too.

That Tuesday before group class I saw Cathy. "I have something for you," I said, pulling my manuscript out of my bag.

Cathy took it from me and tucked it under her arm. "I'll look forward to reading it," she said. "What are you doing for Thanksgiving?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. My sister usually has Thanksgiving at her house, but she just got married, and my father is going away to be with his wife's family, so I guess I'm on my own."

“Well, I’m going to my father’s house and I’m bringing a friend. Good luck with that,” she said, walking away.

I felt like an idiot. She just brushed me off. After class I went straight home. I stopped in to see Carmen. “Hi Bubi,” she said kissing me. “How are you doing?”

“I’m more confused than ever,” I said.

“What happened now?” she asked.

I told her about my fiasco with my Thanksgiving invite.

“She was being polite,” said Jay. “She’s bringing a man home with her and didn’t want to tell you. Otherwise she would have invited you.”

“You think?” I asked.

“I’m sure of it,” said Jay, nodding his head.

“She’s playing games with you, Chris. I’d like to slap the shit out of her,” said Cori.

“I don’t know if she’s playing games. I think I just misinterpreted what she said.”

“Chris, she’s giving you mixed signals. That’s playing games,” said Cori.

“Chris Chris, you’re welcome over here for Thanksgiving. We’re not doing much. I’m making my baked ziti,” said Carmen.

“Thanks, Carmen. You want me to bring anything?”

“Yeah, Baby. You can bring me a bottle of coke.”

“Not a problem,” I said. “Cori what are you doing for Thanksgiving?”

“I’m going to my boyfriend’s family”, she said.

“That sounds nice. We’ll miss you. Well, guys. I’m going to bed. I’ll see you tomorrow. Bye Jay.”

“See you later, Chris.”

On Thanksgiving Day I went to Paul’s market and picked up two bottles of soda. I stopped in at Carmen’s apartment around five. She was in the kitchen, cooking. It smelled delicious. Cori had already left and I sat down in front of the television. Carmen was watching her Sci Fi channel. She loved that stuff.

The three of us sat down and ate a quiet dinner. Carmen was a great cook. After dinner, Carmen and I walked to Paul’s to buy cigarettes. I always bought her cigarettes because she had so little money. We walked hand in hand in the soft rain through the back streets of Flushing until we came to the Auburndale train station. Next to the station was Paul’s.

“I better not go in there,” said Carmen.

“Why?”

“Because I think they saw me stealing some dish soap,” she said, giggling.

“Jesus, Carmen. Why do you do that?”

“Me and Jay Jay are broke. I do what I have to do to get by.”

“Carmen, if they had caught you stealing they would have said something. I was in there once and watched a kid get caught. They made him empty his pockets and they called the police.”

Carmen looked up at me wide-eyed. “Really! Did they haul the poor kid off to jail?”

“No, the kid ran off. But they were pissed. Believe me, if you had been caught you would have known about it.”

“You think?”

“Yes. So, come on in out of the rain. And remember, you are with me. If you need anything, I’ll buy it for you.”

“Thanks, Bubi,” she said, giving my hand a squeeze. “Can you buy me some snacks?”

“Anything, Baby. You know how much I love you.”

Carmen loved Devil Dogs, so I bought her a box and two packs of cigarettes and a pack for myself. We walked back to her apartment and found Cori sitting on the couch.

“What are you doing here?” asked Carmen.

“I broke up with Joe,” said Cori. She was smiling so I guess she was happy about it.

“Really!” said Carmen. “At his father’s house?”

“No. We were driving back to his house and we had a fight. I just couldn’t take it anymore. He’s a fucking control freak. Do you know what he said to me? He said that he hoped I had a lousy life and he called me a fucking cunt.”

“Sounds to me like you did the right thing,” I said.

“What kind of person would tell another something like that?” she said.

“Not a very nice person,” said Carmen. “You’re better off without him. But you knew this was coming. You never loved him in the first place.”

Just then Rita and Cassy walked in. Rita was tall and thin with dark green eyes and long dark hair. I thought she was stunning, but she was bit of a nut case. She also hated men. Cassy was her roommate. I didn’t know her very well, but I had heard stories about her. She was a hard worker who held down two jobs to get by.

“Happy Thanksgiving, guys,” said Rita.

We all said hello and Rita started rolling a joint. Cassy had two six packs of beer, and I knew a party was about to begin. Rita sat by the window and puffed on her joint.

“You want some, Chris?” she asked.

“I’ll take a couple hits,” I said, taking the joint from her. I didn’t need very much pot to get high. Two hits and I was done. I’m bi-polar, so pot has an odd effect on me. Instead of mellowing me out it kicks me into mania. I knew if I smoked I’d be up for a couple of days. I didn’t care because I had a four day weekend, although I had to go to the city tomorrow for my private with Cathy. This should be interesting.

At around midnight Cori announced that she had to be at work the next day and needed to go to bed.

“Cori, there’s a party going on. Are you saying we all need to leave?” I asked.

“Well, I do have to get some sleep,” she said.

“Cori, I have an idea. Why don’t you go up to my apartment and crash. I have a really comfortable bed.”

“I don’t know, Chris,” she said, shaking her head.

“Cori, it’s not a problem. Tomorrow morning you just come down and get me and I’ll drive you to work. I’m going to be up all night.”

“Can I take my dog with me?” she asked.

“Sure. Here, get your stuff together and I’ll take you upstairs,” I said.

“Come on, Annie,” she said to her Jack Russell terrier. “We’re going to bed.”

She packed up her night things and I led her upstairs. I took a wrong turn in the hallway and got lost for a moment.

“Chris, you don’t know where your own apartment is?”

“I’m stoned, Cori. I get a little disoriented.”

She burst out laughing. We came to my apartment and I unlocked the door.

“Wow. Your apartment is clean,” she said.

“You can thank Carmen for that. But I try to keep it clean for the kids. They don’t like coming over to a messy apartment. Can I get you anything?”

“Can you put some water in a bowl for Annie?” she asked, sitting on the bed.

“Sure,” I replied, taking a bowl out of cupboard and filling it with water. “Where do you want it?”

“The kitchen is fine,” said Cori.

“Do you want me to set my alarm for you?”

“No. I use the alarm in my phone. I just need to plug it in. Can I unplug the lamp?”

“Sure.”

Cori unplugged the lamp and plugged in her phone. “Well, I guess I’ll say goodnight,” I said, kissing her on the cheek. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Chris. Have fun tonight.”

I left and went back downstairs.

“That’s the first woman I’ve had in my bed,” I announced. Everyone laughed.

“No it’s not,” said Carmen. “She’s the second. The last time I cleaned your apartment I got in your bed and took a nap. You have one comfortable bed, Bubi.”

“Jesus! All these women are sleeping in my bed without me. This is pathetic!” I said.

Carmen laughed and tousled my hair. “Ten bucks says she’ll be back down here in twenty minutes,” she said.

“No. My bed is really comfortable. She’ll go right to sleep.”

“You don’t know that woman. She never sleeps. I’ll bet you she took four pills to knock herself out.”

My mind began to race, and I started thinking about Cathy. I needed to back off. She was obviously asking for space. I wasn’t angry at her, nor was I jealous. I hardly ever got jealous. It was one of my better qualities. If she was with another man on Thanksgiving, that was okay. But I couldn’t stop thinking about her. I kept seeing her big blue eyes in my mind and wondered what it would be like to kiss her. I really wanted to find out.

That morning Carmen and I were still watching T.V. and talking when Cori walked in looking very bedraggled. Rita and Cassy had left hours ago. “I hardly slept at all,” she said.

I was surprised. I thought she’d sleep like a baby. After all, my apartment was quiet.

“Chris, you have a really comfortable bed,” she said.

“Doesn’t he?” added Carmen. “I love that bed. Why didn’t you sleep?”

“I kept hearing noise from the street,” she said, gathering up her work clothes and heading toward the bathroom.

“That’s because you opened up the window all the way. If you had shut it you would have slept fine,” I said, reaching for another cigarette. When I didn’t sleep I chain smoked.

“Chris, your apartment is even hotter than this one. I need air,” said Cori.

“His apartment is hot. But it’s also a lot smaller than this one,” said Carmen.

“Chris, are you sure you want to drive me to work?” asked Cori.

“Cori, I have to get my car inspected before the month is over. Otherwise I’ll get nailed. I’ll drive you to work and then drop my car off at the garage. Today is the perfect day for it because I don’t have to be anywhere.”

“I appreciate it, Chris,” said Cori.

She went into the bathroom and changed and Carmen looked at me with her big, brown eyes. “I can’t believe I broke night again,” she said.

“We used to do this all the time. Will you get any sleep at all?”

“Yeah, I’ll sleep. What about you?” she asked.

“I’ll probably crash on Sunday,” I replied, putting out my cigarette and lighting another. “I’m taking my car to the mechanic across from Paul’s. You need anything?”

“Can you get me some more cigarettes?”

“Not a problem,” I replied.

“Chris Chris, every time you smoke pot it fucks up your head and you don’t sleep for days. I don’t think you should smoke that shit anymore,” said Carmen.

“My head is already fucked up.”

“No, but pot will really fuck you up. It’s not good for you. I don’t want you smoking it anymore. You hear me?” she asked, rubbing my back.

“Up a little higher,” I growled.

“What I wouldn’t do to have your brains,” said Carmen.

“I wouldn’t mind having your body,” I retorted.

“You’d be a walking amusement park,” said Carmen, laughing. “Promise me you won’t smoke that shit anymore. You hear me?”

“I promise,” I said with a sigh. She was right. Pot wasn’t good for me at all, although there were times when I enjoyed being manic.

Cori came out of the bathroom. “You ready, Chris?”

“Yeah, let me go upstairs and get my coat,” I replied. “I’ll see you later, Carmen.”

“Bye baby,” she said, kissing me on the lips.

After dropping Cori off at work, I headed to the garage. My car was a 93 Toyota Corolla with 170,000 miles on it. I maintained it meticulously, even though it looked like a battered tin can. The engine was strong, but I knew it had problems. It made a squealing noise when I turned the steering wheel and I was afraid the catalytic converter was shot. I knew it was going to fail inspection, and I prayed it wouldn’t cost me more than \$500.00.

The manager told me he’d call me around noon once they knew what it needed. I picked up some more cigarettes for me and Carmen and walked home. Carmen was sleeping, so I put her cigarettes on the coffee table and headed upstairs.

I lay on my bed and closed my eyes. Of course, I knew I wasn’t going to sleep, but I needed a little bit of downtime. I thought about what I was going to wear for dance class. I didn’t need to dress up, but I wanted to look nice. I decided to wear my new pink shirt and a pair of jeans; I really wanted to impress Cathy.

Around 12:30 I got a call from the mechanic. My car needed a new catalytic converter, three new tires, a new high-pressure power steering wheel hose and the front break pads needed to be replaced.

“How much,” I asked.

“Eleven hundred dollars,” said the manager.

“Jesus, I didn’t know it was going to cost that much.”

“If you pay cash I’ll cut you a break. It’ll be a thousand dollars.”

“Will it be ready today?”

“No. We can’t get all the parts in today. We’ll have it ready for you on Monday.”

“What time do you close?”

“Five.”

“I don’t get home till six. Can you wait for me?”

“Not a problem. I’ll be here. We’ll see you on Monday.”

I hung up the phone and sighed. There goes my dance budget. I was paid up through December, but I knew I’d have to take January off until I could build up my resources again. I wanted to give the kids a nice Christmas this year and I couldn’t afford to dance at the same time. Oh, well. The kids come first.

At four-thirty I took the train into the city. I walked down 34th Street from the train station to Broadway. I arrived at the studio just in time. Cathy came up to the front desk to get me, and we headed to the salsa room. Franklin was there giving a private.

“What did you do for Thanksgiving?” asked Cathy.

“I went to an all night Thanksgiving bash at my neighbor’s,” I replied. “I have to warn you, I haven’t slept, so I might be a touch edgy.”

“Great. Maybe we should just sit and talk about salsa,” said Cathy.

“No, I’ll be fine. I’m used to this, trust me. Cathy I put a thousand dollars into my car today.”

“Ouch. That’s got to hurt,” she said. “You know, my father always told me that no matter how hard you try to save, unexpected expenses always pop up. How’s your back?” she asked.

“Oh, I saw the doctor. He told me the problem is not the disc. He said the muscles around the injury have tightened up and need to be loosened. He started me on physical therapy.”

“That’s good news. Are you going to be okay to dance? I don’t want you to collapse on me. They’ll blame it all on me.”

“I’ll be okay. In another ten minutes I’ll start hallucinating, but I promise I won’t die on you.”

She laughed. “I know what it’s like to be sleep deprived. I never sleep. Trust me, I know all about sleep deprivation.”

I wondered if she might be bi-polar, too. She certainly fit the profile—brilliant, driven, and quirky.

“Cathy, I’m bi-polar. I can go for days without sleep. It’s part of my condition. I wrote my last book in three weeks,” I told her.

“That’s not good!” she exclaimed.

“It was a good book.”

Cathy held up her hand, and we began to dance. I felt okay—maybe a little tense—but I managed to keep the step. Things started to fall apart when I tried to turn her on two. The motion was to cock her arm on the second beat and then bring my arm across my chest, spinning her into a left hand turn. First I couldn’t get the count right, and then I began to grapple with her.

“You’re hurting me,” said Cathy. “You have to begin the motion on two by simply extending your elbow and then just pull your arm across your chest. You’re muscling me. Try to relax.”

I tried it again but I still missed the count, and I ended up forcing the movement.

“I need this arm,” she said. “I’m not joking. You’re hurting me.”

I felt awful. This class was becoming a disaster. “Cathy, the last thing I want to do is hurt you,” I said.

I let go of her right hand, and held her left hand in mine. We did a little basic.

“That’s it. Use the other arm,” she said.

On one I held my arm up and she went into a turn.

“Let’s try something else,” she said. “I’m going to teach you some shine.”

She showed me what looked like a back step, except after I crossed my leg behind me, I brought my front leg over and ended with a step on my other foot. I tried the step a couple of times.

“That’s a Suzy-q,” said Cathy.

I tried again.

“I don’t know what that was, but you somehow managed to keep the count,” she said.

I started laughing. I was getting punchy. “It’s a simple step. I’ll probably remember it, but I doubt I’ll get it right today.”

“It’s okay if you don’t remember anything. I know you’re sleep deprived. I’ll forgive you.”

We started dancing basic, and Cathy began to cry out in pain. What the hell did I do this time? She looked at her left hand, and I noticed something wrong with her finger. I held her hand in mine and took a closer look. The skin around her fingernail was red and inflamed. I knew what she was suffering from, and also knew it was painful.

“As long as I didn’t do I don’t care,” I said.

“Thanks a lot,” said Cathy, laughing.

Class ended, and I was somewhat relieved. On our way up to the front desk I asked her if she had started my book.

“I’m up to chapter five,” she said. “I’m enjoying it. People get scared on the train when I pull this huge manuscript out of my bag.”

“What do you think of Alexandra?” I asked.

“Honestly, I can’t say. I haven’t gotten to know her yet,” she replied.

I tried to remember what was in chapter five. I had rewritten the damn thing so many times not even I could remember.

“Do you want to do Friday again?” she asked.

“You seem to like Fridays,” I replied.

“I love Friday. Why don’t we do Friday at 5:30.”

Cathy reached up to kiss me, and my whole body stiffened. After what happened with Thanksgiving I wasn’t very receptive to her affections. She must have picked up on it because instead of throwing her arms around my neck, she simply kissed me lightly on the cheek.

“Bye, Cathy,” I said, as she turned and walked away.

I still loved her, too.

Later that night, I got a call from my agent, Chantell. I told her about what happened with Cathy.

“You know, Chris, Thanksgiving is a heavy family holiday. I think it’s sweet that wanted to spend Thanksgiving with her, but what’s done is done.”

“I thought she didn’t have any plans,” I said. “Anyway, I feel like an idiot.”

“How old is this chick?”

“She’s twenty-eight,” I replied, waiting for the storm.

“That’s a zygote to me. What are you doing messing around with a woman that young?”

“I don’t know. It just sort of happened. It’s not like I was chasing her. Things just turned out that way. Anyway, she’s reading *Swiss Journey*.”

“You gave her *Swiss Journey*?” Chantell asked, as if I had committed some heinous crime.

“Yeah. What’s the big deal?”

“Chris, she’s going to read that book and fall for you. And once you have her under your spell the two of you will be horizontal in no time at all.”

“What the hell are you talking about? She may not even like it.”

“I’m sure she’s going to like it. You forget, I read all 400 pages in one sitting. I know how powerful that book is. Once she finds out you have a soft side, she’ll be all over you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. If it’s so powerful why did it take four years to sell? Hell, it was rejected 27 times.”

“That has nothing to do with anything. Most editors are idiots. All great books get rejected. And four years is nothing compared to others I’ve placed.”

“Sally didn’t like it. She hated that book,” I said.

“Sally was in love with you. She was jealous of Alexandra, remember?”

“I don’t get it. Why are all these women jealous of a character in my book?”

“Ottavia, I mean Alexandra, was the love of your life. Sally couldn’t deal with the fact that you loved Ottavia so deeply, and the fact that you couldn’t love her the same way.”

“Yeah, but that’s been over for years. I’ve moved on.”

“Chris, has this chick said anything about your book?” asked Chantell.

“She’s only read the first five chapters. And her name is Cathy.”

“I hate to say it, Chris, but you are in no position to get involved with a twenty-eight-year-old woman. I don’t mean to say you don’t deserve to be happy. But you still have Gloria hanging over your head.”

“What’s the big deal?” I asked.

“Does she know you’re bi-polar?”

“I told her today.”

“How did she take it?”

“It didn’t seem to faze her,” I replied, lighting a cigarette. I was becoming annoyed with this conversation.

“Chris, you know that I love you, but I don’t want to see you get hurt. I was there when Ottavia ruined your life. I can’t go through something like that again. I just don’t have the energy.”

“Well, what did you expect? Ottavia ripped my guts out.”

“Exactly!” said Chantell.

“What makes you think Cathy is going to destroy me?”

“Because I know you, Chris. Once you fall for a woman you commit every ounce of your soul to her.”

“That’s only happened once.”

“I know you like this woman. You actually found someone who loves books more than you do. I can tell that you’re falling for her already. You need to quit dancing.”

“You’re being a little dramatic, Chantell. I haven’t even kissed her.”

“But you want to, right?”

I paused a second. More than anything I wanted to kiss Cathy. “Look, Chantell. I think it’s sweet that you worry about me so much, but I’m a big boy now.”

Chantell breathed a sigh of disgust. “Look, I have to do a radio show in ten minutes. I just called to check in on you and to tell you my book comes out tomorrow.”

“You mean *Changing Times*?”

“That’s the one.”

“I’ll be the first one to buy it. I can’t wait.”

“Thank you, Darling. Now I want you to think about this conversation carefully. You’re messing with fire, and you could get burned.”

“Thanks, Chantell. Good luck with your show.”

“Thank you. You be a good boy now.”

“I will.”

We hung up. Jesus! Every time I get involved with a woman Chantell flips out. She must think all women are the devil. And what does Cathy's age have to do with anything? I don't see a problem with it. Yeah, Cathy was complicated, but I liked complicated.

The next morning I went straight to Barnes & Noble and bought every copy of Chantell's latest book. She had put me in her last book and used my real name, but she told me that in the sequel I had a much larger role. I blew through the book in two hours. She had put me in the first three pages. She made a reference to my last novel, although she had changed the name from *Christina* to *Matilda*. She told me she couldn't use the real names for some legal reasons. I called her as soon as I finished reading.

"Great book!" Chantell.

"Thanks," she said.

"I loved the first three pages," I said, leaning back in my office chair with a big smile.

"I knew you would."

"I'm curious as to why you had me married four times. I barely survived one marriage, let alone four."

She laughed. "I tried to imagine what would happen to you if you were a successful writer who actually had money."

"Give me some credit, for Christ's sake! And did you have to announce to the entire free world that I see hookers?"

"You already did that in *Christina*. It just gives your character a little more color. Remember, it's just a book."

There were going to be repercussions, I was sure of it. Nonetheless, I was extremely flattered. She had given me a huge plug. “Has anybody responded to your book?” I asked.

“Well, it’s only been out one day, but I got a couple of e-mails from editors asking me if *Matilda* was a real book,” she said.

“Did you send them the manuscript?” I asked, excited.

“Don’t you worry about a thing, Darling. I’ve got it covered. This is what I do best. Remember?”

“You are good,” I said, laughing.

“Listen, I have to run. I have a conference call in a couple of minutes. You be good,” she said.

“Thanks, Chantell. I’ll talk to you later.”

That Tuesday I saw Cathy before group class. She was wearing a tight black skirt and a pink sweater. She saw me coming and smiled. I kissed her on the cheek and then pulled Chantell’s book out of my bag and handed it to her.

“My agent wrote this book. I’m in it. She used my real name. I’m in the first three pages.”

Cathy took the book from me and studied the cover.

“This is a sequel. Her first book, *Not His Type*, was on the romance bestseller list for three weeks. It also won an award for Best African-American Romance,” I said.

“I’ll look forward to reading it,” she said. “There’s my student. I’ll see you later.”

I watched her walk down the hall with a tall man. I smiled. I wondered how she was going to react to the first three pages. I stayed for the party after group class. Cathy

came up to me, took my hand, and led me to the dance floor. I didn't dance very well in front of a lot of people; my confidence seemed to vanish.

Around ten-thirty I decided to leave. Cathy was standing near the front door, talking to one of her students. I went up to her and said goodnight. She threw her arms around me and whispered in my ear, "Dancers and writers are fucked up people." And she walked away.

Now, there's a statement. Cathy had this habit of dropping these enormous bombshells on me and then take off running. For once I wished she'd tell me these things when she first saw me so that we'd had a chance to talk about it a little. Hell, at this point I was willing to pay the ninety bucks for our private just to hear her story.

On the train home, I thought about what she told me. Obviously she was reacting to *Swiss Chocolate*. She was telling me something important, and I didn't take it lightly. I was definitely fucked up, and so was she. No wonder we had such a strong connection to each other. I was beginning to really fall for this girl.

That Friday I showed up right on time, and Cathy came out to get me. She was wearing a tight pair of brown pants that accentuated her strong legs and a white top. She wore her hair down and looked so stunning I nearly melted when I saw her.

"Ready?" she asked, smiling.

"Yep," I said, walking with her down the hall.

When we got to the classroom I stood next to her as she plugged her iPod into the sound system.

"I really hope *Swiss Journey* does well," I said.

“It will. I’m only halfway through it, but based upon what I’ve read so far, I think it’s going to do well.”

I was truly pleased. I really valued her opinion. “Where are you in the book?” I asked.

“Don’t ask me that. I can’t tell you. I’m reading five books at once,” she said.

She found a song with medium tempo and held out her hand. “I’m going to teach you Cuban Motion today,” she said.

I watched her as she did a side step with her leading knee bent, her weight over her leading leg, and her hips thrust back over the straight leg. I tried to follow, but the motion was so foreign to me. She counted very slowly as I followed with awkward, mechanical movements. I felt like I was learning to walk for the first time.

“It’s such a simple step. I don’t know why I can’t get it,” I complained.

“Just because it’s simple doesn’t mean it’s not difficult,” said Cathy. “You’re doing fine. Don’t bend both your knees. Keep one leg straight and the leading leg bent. Here, let’s just do the motion without the step,” she said, shifting her weight from side to side.

As she bent her knee, she thrust her opposite shoulder forward, rolling it back as she shifted her weight to the other side. I felt like a broken corkscrew as I tried to follow. After a bit of practice I thought I had an idea of what the motion should look like, but I didn’t feel comfortable with it at all.

“Let’s try it with the step,” said Cathy.

She counted the step slowly, and I followed the best I could, but it wasn't long before I got completely lost. Cathy slowed her count to a crawl and broke the movement down even further for me. With enough practice I could learn this, I thought.

"This Sunday I'm competing with one of my students at the King's Ball in Newark, New Jersey," she said. "Why don't you come?"

"I have my kids this weekend. What time is it?"

"The junior competition starts at nine, and the adult competition starts at noon. We have to be there in the morning to check in," she said.

"My kids might enjoy the junior competition. Can you write down the information for me?"

"Sure," said Cathy.

After class she wrote down the information on a piece of paper. "It's the first exit off the New Jersey Turnpike. It's in the Radisson Hotel."

"I'll see you Sunday," I said.

She kissed me on the cheek and walked away.

That Sunday I got the kids out of bed early and told them we were going somewhere special today. I had given them a bath the night before and picked out their clothes.

"Where are we going, Daddy?" asked Samantha, my eight-year-old daughter.

"We're going to watch a dance competition," I replied.

Samantha didn't seem too excited with the idea, and my autistic ten-year-old son, Andrew, turned on the PlayStation. I quickly poured them both a bowl of cold cereal and gave them some orange juice.

“No more PlayStation, Andrew,” I said.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because it’s time to eat,” I said, placing his cold cereal in front of him and turning off the television.

As the kids ate their breakfast, I jumped in the shower and shaved. I decided to wear something casual. I put on a well-worn denim shirt and a comfortable pair of jeans.

After the kids finished breakfast, I quickly got them dressed and packed them in the car. It was an easy drive over the Throgs Neck Bridge to the GW Bridge, where I picked up the Turnpike heading south. I took the first exit and saw the Radisson Hotel on the left. I was running late; getting the kids dressed always took longer than I wanted, especially Andrew who didn’t follow commands very well.

Going into the hotel, I asked the front desk about the King’s Ball, and they told me it was on the third floor. I took the elevator up and saw a group of people standing around the lobby in dance costumes. I saw Cathy and waved. She smiled as I walked over to her.

“Cathy, these are my kids,” I said, gesturing with my hand.

Cathy put both her hands up and said, “Whoa. I can’t handle kids. I can say hello and all that, but that’s as far as it goes.”

My mouth dropped open. I had just stepped on a major landmine. I couldn’t believe she just said that to me. It’s one thing to feel that way, but another thing to come out and say it, especially when meeting them for the first time.

In a way I understood where she was coming from. I was coerced into having kids by my wife. Fatherhood was difficult for me, especially coming from the kind of

dysfunctional, abusive family that mine was. Despite my insecurities about being a father and all my intimacy issues, I never missed a weekend with my kids.

When I was unemployed I took them every weekend so my wife could save money with the babysitter. I also never missed a child support payment. On birthdays and holidays I always made sure they had nice presents, and did whatever it took to spend time with them.

Christmas was difficult because my wife never let me have the kids. Not even on Christmas Eve. We always celebrated Christmas the weekend after, so the kids got two Christmases—one with my wife and one with me.

Cathy's reaction was a problem, but I wasn't ready to call it quits. Instead, I decided to reconcile my feelings about this later. After all, she did warn me when she told me she was fucked up. I suspected from all the clues she had given me that there were some serious father-daughter issues with her. Out of my three sisters, only one had a child, and the youngest finally got married at the age of 46. They couldn't deal with children either.

I noticed Cathy was wearing a ton of makeup. She looked doll-like with all that rouge. "You look nice," I said.

"Yeah, if I want to look like a drag queen," she said.

I burst out laughing. She probably only wore makeup for dance competitions.

"They're running late," she said. "The competition doesn't start until ten."

"Then I'm right on time."

Cathy yawned and looked up at me and shook her head.

"This is early for you, isn't it?" I asked, laughing.

“And you think it’s funny. I’m dying for some coffee,” she said.

“You want me to go get you some?”

“Could you?”

“How do you take it?” I asked.

“Just coffee,” she replied.

“Black? Do you know where to get it?”

“Probably on the first floor,” she said.

I grabbed the kids and took the elevator down. I found the dining room and asked for a cup to go. I took the coffee back up to her. The competition finally started and it cost \$45.00 for me and the kids. It seemed like a lot of money just to watch a dance competition.

Andrew and Samantha were pretty rambunctious, so I found a table next to the door in case I had to get them out of there in a hurry. Cathy walked up to me and said, “The DanceCorner table is on the other side of the room, if you want to come sit with us.”

“My son is autistic. I need to be near a door in case he gets a burst of energy,” I said.

“Understood,” said Cathy.

It was charming to watch such young talent on the dance floor. These kids danced their hearts out, but my kids were bored to tears. Samantha put her head on the table and Andrew squirmed in his seat the entire time. I had hoped Samantha would take an interest in seeing kids her own age dancing, but she said she was more interested in soccer.

After the junior competition I got up and walked over to the DanceCorner table. Cathy was practicing with her partner. I went up to April and told her that I had to get my kids out of there before they went ballistic.

“The adult competition starts in just a couple minutes. Can’t you stay a little while longer?”

“I’ll try,” I said, “But my kids are getting hungry and my son is autistic and he’s bored. That’s a volatile combination for an autistic child.”

Cathy came over to me. She looked pretty in her costume. “Cathy, I really wanted to see you perform, but I have to get my kids out of here before they go nuts. Good luck,” I said.

“I understand. I’ll see you next week.”

I packed up the kids and left. I dropped them off at around five at the house in Rockland County and drove home. It was a two hour trek that cost \$120.00 a month in tolls alone. After parking the car I stopped in at Carmen’s apartment to say hello. I told them what happened.

“I would have told her to go fuck herself,” said Jay. “This is a package deal. Your kids are a part of you, and if she can’t accept that then she’s not worth the effort. She probably thinks you have money because you’re an older gentleman and is looking for someone to take care of her.”

“Jay Jay, not all women are like that,” said Carmen. “But I agree with Jay Jay. Your kids are a part of you. Do you hear me? Nothing should ever get in the way of you and those kids.”

“From what you told me so far, she doesn’t sound like she’s worth it,” said Cori.
“I’d just move on.”

I thought about it carefully. This was a big problem, but I also saw things below the surface. Cathy was complicated, but she had worthy qualities; it was a question of whether or not we could work through those issues. Or maybe I was rationalizing and couldn’t see things clearly because of my feelings for her. At this point, I had no idea. If only I could get some time to be alone with her to get to know her better.

“Guess what, guys. My agent published a book and put me in it. She used my real name. I’m in the first three pages,” I said.

“Read it to me,” said Carmen, lying back on her couch.

I opened the book and began to read. When I finished the first three pages, I put the book down.

“That’s really cool, Chris,” said Cori. “I’d like to read one of your books.”

“Cathy has *Swiss Journey*, but I can give you my last book, *Christina*.”

“Which book was your agent referring to?” asked Carmen.

“*Christina*,” I replied.

“Why did she call it *Matilda*?” she asked.

“Some legal reason. I’m not really sure.”

“Do you have your book in your apartment?” asked Cori.

“Do you want me to go get it?” I asked.

“Sure. I’d love to read your work,” said Cori.

I went upstairs, grabbed my manuscript out of the closet, and ran back down.

“Here you go,” I said, handing her the manuscript.

“I’ll start reading it tonight before I go to bed,” said Cori.

“Can you read it out loud?” asked Carmen.

“Yeah, I can read to you if you want,” she replied.

“Chris is one hell of a writer,” said Carmen. “He used to read to me when he was unemployed. What was the name of your book again?”

“*The Eagle*,” I replied.

“That was a great story,” said Carmen. “I could see that as a movie.”

“That would be nice. Well, guys, I’m going upstairs. You have a good night,” I said.

“Good night, Bubi. See you tomorrow,” said Carmen, blowing me a kiss.

That Tuesday I saw Cathy while waiting for my group class to begin. She came up to me and said hello. I looked into her beautiful blue eyes, and all I felt was passion. This woman had me spellbound. Her hair hung loosely around her pretty face, and I swept a loose strand away with my finger. She smiled.

“I have something for you,” I said, pulling a book out of my bag. It was a copy of *A Confederacy of Dunces*, one of my all time favorites. She looked at the cover and snatched it out of my hands.

“A book I never heard about,” she said.

“It was written in the 60’s. It won the Pulitzer Prize posthumously. The author committed suicide. Make sure you read the forward.”

“I read everything,” she said.

“Cathy loves books,” said the woman next to her. I had never seen her before, but she must have been a friend of Cathy’s.

“Then we have something in common. I have a book coming out next fall. My agent just published a novel with me in it. She used my real name,” I said. Then I realized I was bragging. I hate it when I do that.

Cathy threw her arms around my neck and kissed me on the cheek. “I’m so proud of you,” she said. I melted. She must have read the first three pages of Chantell’s novel. “I’ll see you later. I have to teach a class,” she said.

I watched her walk away with her student. I was proud of her, too.

The next night while practicing in the hallway I saw Gabriela coming down the hall. She was wearing a tight button-down cashmere sweater and a pair of jeans. She had a beautiful body.

“Hi, Chris. You’re getting better. Your spins are looking sharp.”

“Thanks, Gabriela.”

“Hey, Chris. I picked up a book yesterday and your name was in it. Is that you she’s talking about?”

“Are you talking about *Changing Times* by Chantell Veneble?”

“Yes!” she said, smiling.

“She’s my agent. How far into the book are you?” I asked, wiping the sweat from my brow with the back of my hand.

“I just started. Wow. That must be a good feeling. How’s your book coming along?”

“You mean *Swiss Journey*? Everything is on schedule as far as I know. The editor wants some minor revisions, but I have until August to get them done.”

“Hey, didn’t you say that guest night was every second Tuesday of the month?”

“Yes. Next Tuesday. Do you want to go?”

“I’d love to, if I can get my brother to watch the kids. I’ll let you know.”

“Do you do a lot of reading?” I asked her.

“I like reading romance novels. I never read her first book, but now I’m curious to see what’s in it,” said Gabriela, leaning against the wall.

“I’m in that book, too.” I said, smiling.

“Your agent must really like you,” said Gabriela.

“She told me once she’d do just about anything to get me published. She’s a good friend.”

“And she kept her promise. That’s exciting. Well, I have to go to bed. I’ll let you know about Tuesday. Have a good night.”

“You too, Gabriela.”

I continued dancing another ten minutes and then took a shower. I’d have to tell Cathy I was bringing a friend to guest night. I sat down at my desk to check my e-mail when I noticed an envelope next to my keyboard with the word Daddy written on it. Samantha wrote me a letter. I carefully opened the envelope and found a birthday card she had created.

From...Sammybear

To, Big Dady Seabear.

Underneath she had drawn a picture of a bear with mouse-like ears, big round eyes, a rabbit nose and a moustache. The bear had lots of arms. (Seabears have lots of arms.) Next to the bear was a smoking cigar and what looked like a washing machine. On the bear’s stomach she had written:

Happy Birthday Big Dady Seabear!

I opened up the card to find a letter she had written:

Dear, Dady

I'm sorry I said that word, But I didn't mine to cuz I don't want you to die fast.

Oh I forgot that it was your birthday! I felt so sad about you that I was crying. But this is my last chance to say that don't smoke not even do not, do not, do not get cigaretss or cigars cuz if you do I'll start crying.

Love, Sammybear

Opposite the letter she had drawn a picture of the action figure she wanted for Christmas. She was quite the artist. I was stupefied. And touched. I took my cigarettes and threw them in the garbage. Now was the time to quit. Then I went online and found the action figure she wanted and ordered it. That was two presents she was getting for Christmas.

That Friday I showed up at my usual time and Cathy came to greet me. She was wearing a pair of low-cut grey slacks that accentuated her cute little ass. She took me back to the salsa room, and we started dancing.

“Cathy, I quit smoking,” I told her.

“That’s good,” said Cathy. “How do you feel?”

“Slightly homicidal.”

She gave me a sidelong look and stepped away from me. “I know it’s hard to quit smoking, but since I’ve never smoked I don’t know what it feels like. I’m allergic to cigarette smoke.”

“You’re lucky. Cathy, I’m bringing a friend with me to guest night,” I said, putting my hand in hers.

“That’s good,” said Cathy. “How are you doing with Cuban Motion?”

“I think I’m Cuban Motion challenged.”

She laughed. “I’m sorry. We’ll work on it. Right now I want to go over what we’ve learned so you really understand it.”

We went over all the steps I had learned, and then spent the last twenty minutes practicing Cuban Motion. We stood side by side in front of the mirror and practiced slowly. I was beginning to pick it up, although I still wasn’t comfortable with it.

Seeing Cathy next to me made me crazy. It wasn’t so much that I wanted to fuck her, although I thought about it often, but more the way I felt whenever I was around her. I felt enormous affection for her, and I wanted desperately to simply take her in my arms and kiss her. I loved her mouth, and the way she wore her hair, but looking into her eyes made me wild with passion. Her beautiful blue eyes, filled with so much life, drove me to the edge of self-control. It was all I could do to keep myself from grabbing her gently from behind the neck and pulling her lips to mine. All I wanted to do was kiss her—a small, passionate kiss that turned into an explosion of desire.

Class ended, and in a sudden burst of emotion I ran to her and kissed her on the cheek, knowing that if I tried to kiss her on the lips, she may never talk to me again. There had to be some way to lead into a kiss. A moment where the two of us knew it was right and we could come together naturally as if it were meant to be. I needed to be alone with her, but she was shielded from the world in the microcosm she had created for herself. Why couldn’t I just ask this woman out? What was I so afraid of?

Cathy walked me to the front desk and kissed me on the cheek after we scheduled our next lesson. I kissed her back and said, “Bye Baby,” as if she were the only woman I ever loved. I was falling hard and fast for this woman, and we hadn’t been to first base yet. Not even a first date for that matter! This couldn’t be normal, and I wondered if I had built all this up in my own head until I believed it was love. And even though I loved her, I was scared to death of telling her because I barely knew who she really was. What if I was falling in love with a person I ultimately couldn’t stand? What if our passion burned like a sparkler on the Fourth of July and then fizzled out in a puff of smoke? I needed to ground myself before I started spinning out of control. But every time I saw her I was overcome with desire. I can’t reiterate how frustrating all this was.

Monday night I found a note under my door from Gabriela, telling me she could come to guest night. I knocked on her door. She wasn’t home, so I printed out all the details about how to get to the studio and slipped it under her door.

The next morning she called me at the office. “Hi, Chris. It’s Gabriela. You weren’t clear about what time I should be there,” she said.

“About 8:15,” I said. “I’ll be in class until 8:30, but I’ll probably be joining you in the guest class. We’ll have fun. I figure we can leave at around 10:30 after the performances.”

“Who’s performing?” she asked.

“The instructors,” I replied.

“I look forward to it,” she said.

“See you tonight,” I said.

After work I walked down Lexington Avenue to 34th Street, taking my time. My class wasn't until 7:30, so as was usual, I sat at the bar and ate a salad for dinner, and then plopped myself down in one of the overstuffed chairs by the front office to resume my reading. I was almost finished with a fun book co-written by Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs called *And the Hippos were Boiled in Their Tanks*.

Cathy came up to me and said hello. Because it was salsa night she was busy with privates. I watched her on the computer by the front desk. Her back was turned to me as she punched up some information. Her hair was in a bun and she was wearing my favorite grey slacks and a white shirt.

"There's my student. I'll see you later," she said.

I went back to my book. At around 7:15 I got up to use the bathroom, which was almost directly across from the salsa room. Cathy was giving a private to a tall, thin man. I didn't think it appropriate to watch, but as I went into the bathroom I noticed Cathy looking at me. I smiled at her and continued on my way.

Toward the end of group class, I saw Gabriela watching from the doorway. The distraction made me miss my step, and my New York walk turned into an embarrassment. Dancing required a lot of concentration.

After class ended I went up to Gabriela. "You made it," I said.

"Here I am," she said, smiling.

"Well, follow me. The guest class is down the hall," I said, taking her hand.

We walked down the hall to a small room where a group of people had assembled. They were mostly women, so April went around the studio to find some more men. She herded everybody into class and our instructor came in.

Class began and I soon realized that we were doing salsa on one. It wasn't so confusing to me this time, and I did rather well. The women rotated around the class after each step until Gabriela was in front of me. Gabriela couldn't stop watching her feet as she danced.

"Don't look at the floor, look at me," I said.

"I have to look at my feet," she responded.

I smiled. I did the same thing when I first started. After class I looked for Cathy but didn't see her. She must be still teaching her private. The party began and I took Gabriela into the main ballroom.

"I'm going to show you salsa on two," I told her, taking her hand.

I demonstrated basic on two, took her hand, and walked with her slowly until she had the step down. Then we danced. After the second song I asked her if she'd like something to drink.

"I'd like some water," she said.

We went up to the bar and I got her some water.

"Gabriela, I quit smoking," I told her.

"That's wonderful!" she said. "What made you quit?"

"I'll show you," I said, taking her over to the couch outside the ballroom where my shoe bag was. We sat down and I pulled the card Samantha had made out of the bag.

"That's adorable!" she said.

Just then Cathy came around the corner and stood in front of us with an angry look on her face. "Why aren't you dancing?" she scolded.

She looked at Gabriela and then at me, and started to walk away in a huff.

“Cathy!” I said. She stopped and looked at me. “This is my neighbor, Gabriela. She’s the one that sees me in the hallway dancing all the time.”

Cathy composed herself and said, “Oh, Chris has told me about you.”

“Do you work him pretty hard?” asked Gabriela.

“She works me like a dog,” I said. “Cathy, I have something for you.” I reached into my bag and pulled out the book I had been reading. “I’m almost finished with this. I want to give it to you when I’m done.”

She took the book from me and read the flap on the back cover and handed it back. “Take your time. I have plenty of reading material right now.”

“Do you want to dance?” I asked, standing up and taking her hand.

“Sure,” she said.

We went out on the dance floor and began to dance. Cathy didn’t make eye contact with me at all. I knew she was upset, and I felt a little flustered; I didn’t know quite how to handle the situation.

“Cathy, I’m getting bored. You’re going to have to show me some new moves,” I said.

The song ended and Gabriela came towards us. I grabbed her hand and we went out on the dance floor. Cathy walked away. A few minutes later the lights came on and the floor was cleared. The performance was about to begin.

The first performance was a Latin Hustle which I enjoyed. Gabriela stood next to me, and someone behind me asked me to sit down. I took a seat on the floor. Gabriela moved toward the back.

The next performance was the most amazing salsa I had ever seen. I didn't think you could do that much with salsa but I was wrong. I was truly inspired, and then disappointed when the performance ended.

The final dance was a tango. I loved watching tango; it was so intricate and beautiful, and these two dancers were really good. Maybe after I learned salsa I could try my hand at tango.

After the performance ended all the instructors were brought in and introduced. Cathy was toward the end. She was so beautiful my heart fluttered a bit when she was introduced. I hoped tonight didn't kill whatever it was we had.

Gabriela came up to me. "We better hurry if we're going to catch the 10:47," she said.

We went and got our coats. I looked around to see if I could find Cathy, but Gabriela started toward the elevator. We walked quickly down 34th Street toward Penn Station. Gabriela stopped at a ticket machine.

"I'm going to get something to drink. Do you want anything?"

"No thanks," she said.

I went over to Dunkin Donuts and ordered a small coffee. Gabriela was waiting for me by the ticket machine. "What did you think of the performance?" I asked.

"It was beautiful," she said.

"I can only hope that someday I can be that good."

"Keep dancing," she said.

Our train was called and we went down the stairs to the platform, finding seats toward the middle of the car. We sat down.

“Gabriela, does the father of your kids ever see them?” I asked.

“No. I came from Ecuador pregnant with my first. And then I had my second a year later with another man,” she said, looking out the window. “I’ve never been married.”

I was surprised. That wasn’t like most Spanish women. “That must be difficult for them,” I said.

“They are okay. It’s easier for me that way. I don’t want a man in my life. I have my job and I take care of my kids. I don’t want a relationship. I’m very difficult,” she said.

“Everyone’s difficult,” I said.

“I’m really difficult. I get bored with men very easily.”

“You just haven’t found the right man,” I said. “Sooner or later it will happen.”

“You know I’ve almost finished Chantell’s novel. You see hookers,” she said.

I laughed. What else could I do? I knew that damn book would have repercussions. “Chantell knows me a little too well,” I replied. I also knew that Gabriela would never let me get close to her, not even as friends. Oh, well. I didn’t have very strong feelings for her anyway.

We walked from the train station to our building and took the elevator up to the fourth floor. We got to my door and stopped to say goodnight. Gabriela extended her hand. I laughed and kissed her on the cheek. “Thanks for coming,” I said. “I’ll see you around.”

“I had fun. Sleep well,” she said, and she headed down the hall to her door.

That night I could barely sleep. I kept thinking about Cathy and how she reacted to my bringing a date to guest night, and I felt as though I had done something wrong. I knew that Cathy had feelings for me, and I had feelings for her. Maybe it was a mistake bringing Gabriela to the dance.

The next night after work I stopped in at Carmen's apartment and told her what happened.

"Do you think it was wrong for me to bring Gabriela?" I asked.

"No," replied Carmen. "You are not in a relationship with this woman. It was guest night. You're supposed to bring a guest."

"I could see if you guys had been dating and you showed up with another woman," said Cori. "But you guys are not in a relationship. You had every right to bring a guest. Besides, it was guest night. What did she expect?"

I couldn't help feel that I had done something wrong. Cathy had problems; this much I knew. I should have known she might have reacted. I should have been more sensitive to her feelings.

I decided to call Chantell. I told her what happened. "Of course she got upset. She's queen of her little bubble. You did nothing wrong, Chris. You weren't necking with this woman on the couch, were you?"

"No, I was showing her Samantha's birthday card."

"Chris, if you guys had been in a relationship, I could understand her being upset. Women get a little funny about these things."

"Yeah, but I can't help feeling that I did something wrong."

I told Chantell about what happened at the dance competition. Chantell was aghast. “Chris, women today come in three forms: fucked up, really fucked up and off-the-charts fucked up. You seem to attract all three. I think you should stay away from this woman.”

“Does this mean I can never have a healthy, normal relationship?” I asked.

“Chris, I am the healthiest relationship you got right now. Besides, how many times do I have to tell you? You can’t afford to be in a relationship. You need to stay focused. You have your kids to worry about.”

I didn’t dare tell her that I was in love with Cathy. She would have flipped. Despite what everyone was telling me, I still felt as though I had fucked up, and I felt horrible about it.

That Friday was my private with Cathy. I decided to play things down. Cathy came up to the front desk to get me, and we walked to class. I was a little sleep deprived. I was beginning to obsess over this woman, and I knew how dangerous that could be. If I went too long without sleep there was a good chance I’d go into full-blown mania, and all hell would break loose.

“My friend had a good time the other night,” I told Cathy.

“She looked like she was having a good time,” said Cathy.

“I doubt she’ll join the school,” I added.

“Why not?”

“She’s raising two kids on her own. She doesn’t get out much.”

Cathy took my hand and we started dancing. “I’m going to show you a new step. It’s called a cuddle check,” she said.

She showed me how to take both her hands and turn her until my arms were wrapped around her, and then she went into a spin and we both ended up in basic on seven. It was a beautiful move, and I really enjoyed her spin out of my arms.

I put my arm around her, rested my head on hers, and looked at us in the mirror. “What do you think of me?” I asked.

“I think you need sleep. And a backrub,” said Cathy. She didn’t pull away, but she didn’t respond to me either. I looked into her eyes and was overwhelmed with my desire to kiss her. The feeling was so powerful I wasn’t sure if I could control it for a second. Cathy must have picked up on it because she looked away.

“Let’s work on your Cuban Motion,” she said.

Then I felt great sadness wash over me. How could I tell this woman how I felt? I loved her so deeply I was scared. Everybody was telling me to stay away from this woman, but I wanted nothing more than to be in her arms.

Class ended, and Cathy gave me a perfunctory kiss on the cheek. I was beginning to go into depression and felt a major down cycle coming on. Down cycles were easy. All I needed was sleep. I didn’t have the kids that weekend, so I’d have plenty of time to compose myself.

Later that night my depression flipped into mania. I was beginning to rapid cycle. Shit. The last time this happened I couldn’t sleep for a week. There was only one thing to do: I had to start writing. That was the only way to keep myself from going over the edge. And call my doctor. At around three in the morning I was outside of my building pacing back and forth on the sidewalk in the rain, talking to myself. Carmen opened her window.

“Chris, are you okay, Bubi?”

“I’m a little crazed right now. I’m going into mania.”

“Come on upstairs and get out of the rain, Bubi. Shit, the neighbors are going to think you’re out of your mind.”

I went upstairs to Carmen’s apartment and she brought me over to the couch. She wrapped her arms around me and held me close. “What’s going on, Bubi?”

“I’m obsessing over Cathy,” I told her.

“You’re really taken by this woman, aren’t you?” she said, rubbing my back.

“Carmen, I don’t understand it. I barely know this woman, yet I can’t get her out of my mind. This has to stop. It’s not normal.”

“I think you’re in love with a fantasy,” said Carmen.

“What do you mean?” I asked. I got off the couch and started pacing the floor.

“What I mean is that you’ve built up this fantasy about her in your head, and it’s driving you crazy. And would you please sit down? You’re driving me crazy.”

“I can’t sit, Carmen. I have to keep moving. Maybe you’re right. Maybe this isn’t really love at all. Maybe my disease is playing tricks on me.”

“Does she know how you feel?” asked Carmen.

“I’ve never told her, but the chemistry between us is so strong it’s unbelievable.”

“Chris, you can’t do this to yourself. Especially over a woman. Have you talked to your doctor?”

“I called him today.”

“What did he say?”

“He wasn’t in. I left him a message. I’m going to be up for days. I need to start writing. I’ll see you later, Carmen. I’m going upstairs,” I said, giving her a kiss.

“I love you, Baby,” she said, giving me a squeeze. “Try to get some sleep. You’re going to make yourself sick.”

I went upstairs and sat down at my computer. I decided to write about Cathy and me. I wrote about ten pages in the third person when I realized it wasn’t working. It was too close. I had to write in the first person. I hated writing in the first person; it seemed so self-indulgent.

I deleted my work and started over from scratch. The writing was beginning to flow. I had written straight through the night until about noon the next day, when I realized I needed a break. My mania had subsided. I managed to avert a complete disaster.

My doctor called. “What’s going on, Chris?”

“I went into mania last night.”

“Are you taking your medication?”

“Yes.”

“What brought it on?”

“A woman,” I replied.

“Women will do that. Can you come in on Tuesday?”

“What time?”

“How about ten in the morning?”

“I’ll be there,” I said.

I started pacing the floor again. Even though I wasn’t in full-blown mania, I knew I was pretty unstable. I hoped to Christ my doctor didn’t put me back on Lithium. I hated that shit; it gave me the shakes, and I couldn’t handle all the blood tests.

I decided to call Mimi. Mimi ran a string of hookers from different apartments on Northern Boulevard. We had stopped having sex years ago, but we were very good friends. When I first left my wife I called Mimi to see if she knew of any apartments. She got me an apartment in a nice building on Crocheron Avenue. I moved out with nothing and she brought me dishes, glasses and silverware.

When I lost my job, I used to go to her place for lunch. She let me see the girls when I could afford it for half price. I never had to pay the house; I just had to tip the girls. In return I wrote her a software package to help manage her clients. When a client called, she'd type the phone number into an input screen, and his name and information would pop up. There was a scheduling module that kept track of all the different girls they had seen. I even programmed a panic button that wiped out all her data in case the cops showed up at her door. She had also read all three of my books. *The Eagle* was her favorite.

“How are you, Dear?” she asked when I called.

“I'm fine, Mimi. I need to come see you. I need to talk.”

“Sure, Honey. You're welcome here anytime. Come on over.”

I walked over to her apartment and she buzzed me in. She didn't live there; this was just her command post for managing her business. I walked into her apartment. Mimi was from Ecuador. She was wearing a sexy red cocktail dress. She had thick blond hair that cascaded past her shoulders into ample breasts. She had a pretty round face with dark brown eyes and a voluptuous mouth. She kissed me on the lips.

“What's going on?” she asked.

I told her all about Cathy. Mimi sat on the couch opposite me with a blanket over her knees. She listened attentively until I had finished.

“You gave her Swiss Journey?” she asked.

I just shook my head and laughed. “Do you think I fucked up by bringing a girl with me to guest night?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t have done it. If she has feelings for you she would have gotten jealous. That’s how women are.”

“I feel like I fucked up,” I told her.

The phone rang. Mimi typed the phone number into her computer before picking up. “Hi, Baby. How are you?”

There was a pause.

“Today is working Bianca, Danielle, Deena and Adrianna.”

Another pause.

“You don’t know Adrianna. She’s new. She’s from Colombia. Very pretty girl and good in the room. She’s twenty-eight.”

Another pause.

“You want to see Bianca? Okay, Honey. No problem. For what time?”

Mimi looked over at me and smiled. “Okay, my dear. Three it is. She’s in 2B,” she said, hanging up the phone.

I smiled. Mimi was very good at her job.

“The fact that she can’t handle your kids is a big problem. Your kids are a part of you,” said Mimi.

“That’s what I’ve been hearing,” I said.

“The fact that she’s so young could also be a problem. I know that when you are in love age doesn’t matter, but what happens ten years from now? She may decide to leave you for a younger man.”

“That’s a possibility,” I said. “I really don’t care about her age.”

“Do you love her?” asked Mimi.

“I barely even know her,” I replied.

“Yes, but do you love her?” she asked.

“Yes, I love her,” I replied.

“You know some women are not very good at expressing their emotions in person. I think you should do what you do best,” said Mimi, smiling.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“You should write to her.”

A light bulb went off. “I’ll write her a story,” I said, “And I’ll end it with this conversation.”

“Don’t tell her I’m a hooker,” said Mimi, looking a little worried.

“I want to tell her everything. I don’t want to keep any secrets from her.”

“You’ll let me read it when you are done?”

“Of course,” I replied. “I hear Paula is getting married.”

“January 3rd. She’s very excited.”

“Is she going to give up hooking?”

“She said she’s going to do it part time. A lot of men ask for her.”

“She’s a beautiful woman,” I said.

“She’s also very sweet,” said Mimi.

“Trust me, she’s a bitch.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Mimi.

“Because she’s going into a marriage based on lies. I’d have more respect for her if she married one of her clients. At least he’d know what she was.”

“Imagine what would happen if her husband found out?” asked Mimi.

“A big divorce,” I responded. “Women are filled with so many secrets. It’s no wonder I find them so intriguing. How are you and Joe getting along?”

“Fine,” said Mimi. “You know my mother came to visit last month.”

“That’s nice. How did it go? You couldn’t work while she was here, I take it.”

“I have to work,” said Mimi. “You know Joe owns a lumberyard.”

“Yes.”

“Well, when I told him my mother was coming he put me on the books as a bookkeeper.”

“Really!” I exclaimed. “That was nice of him.”

“I get a paycheck from his lumberyard every week. I know nothing about bookkeeping. When my mother came I took her to the lumberyard to pick up my check. I had Joe show me where the bathroom was. The key hung on the door inside the office. My mother is very smart. I took the key off the door and told her I was going to the bathroom. When I got back, Joe handed me a check. My mother looked at the check and saw my name on it. I was so nervous she’d find out and went ‘Whew’ when we left,” she said, making a gesture with her hand.

I cracked up. Mimi’s machinations never ceased to amuse me. “He must really love you. Do you love him?”

“I love him as a friend.”

“And does he love you as a woman or a friend?” I asked.

“He loves me as a woman. But he told me he would never leave his wife. We have a nice relationship. He sees me every Thursday night for two hours.”

“Hmm,” I said. “And he pays well?”

“Fife hundred dollars a pop on top of the weekly paycheck he gives me.”

“Wow. You’ve got a good thing going.”

“It’s nice. Sometimes he just takes me out to dinner. I never charge him for that. He’s a very sweet man. Well, listen, Dear. I have an appointment at two thirty.”

“What time is it?” I asked.

“Two twenty-five,’ she said, looking at the clock.

“Well, I’d better be going then,” I said, standing up.

Mimi came over to me and wrapped her arms around me. “Good luck with your dance teacher, and let me know what happens. I’m dying to find out.”

“She may never respond to my writing. It may just freak her out.”

“You have to take that chance,” she said, kissing me on the lips.

I left her apartment and headed for home. I had a lot of writing to do. I thought about Cathy and all that I was going through. All my friends told me she wasn’t worth the effort. I didn’t see it that way. Cathy was special. She was definitely worth the effort. More importantly I believed in Cathy. What I needed was to let go of the fantasy and ground myself. I needed time. What we needed was friendship, and the opportunity to grow from there.