

THEY HADN'T REALLY DANCED MUCH since their wedding all those years ago. There had been a few charity balls, a couple family weddings that actually included music one could dance to. But even those events were in the distant past. He had always been the better dancer, she would readily admit that. But he always assured her that he didn't mind her missteps or her difficulty following the music because he loved being a couple—the two of them in the midst of a sea of others.

She was a bit hesitant about this idea of his, but had cautiously agreed when he proposed it—and now here they were. He carried a canvas shopping bag, and she gripped her cane lightly as they held hands to cross the street and climb the steps. When he opened the door for her, he realized that he, too, felt a few butterflies of fear. The large room they entered had a worn hardwood floor surrounded by some dented old metal folding chairs. About fifteen people were seated on the chairs—some presumably couples, others seemingly alone. Everyone appeared to be older, around the same age as the couple—though it was hard to tell. They found empty chairs and bent

to remove their sneakers. Knowing that he struggled, she helped him with his laces before slipping on her own low-heeled shoes.

Once the music started, she left her cane and, putting her hand in his, stepped into his embrace. She looked up at him and they grinned widely at each other while they waited for the formal instruction to begin. This class was for beginners, which they were not, but since it had been so long . . . anyway, they definitely made the right choice. The class lasted a bit less than an hour and they both found it necessary to sit out and rest a few times. They were both exhausted when the music ended and both knew they would experience stiff joints and sore muscles tomorrow from the unusual exertion.

Despite how difficult it had been for them, they had really enjoyed themselves at that first class and soon became regulars, attending every Tuesday and Thursday morning at 10:00 a.m.

Their gradually worsening arthritis and the increasing pain they had both endured for years may have slowed them down a bit but they were determined and progressed to the Advanced II group before the third year was out. It was just as he had envisioned it—the two of them in the

Dancing Shoes

Diana Norman

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midst of a sea of others. They socialized with the other dancers before and after class, of course, and even made quite a few good friends. But on the dance floor they only had eyes for each other.

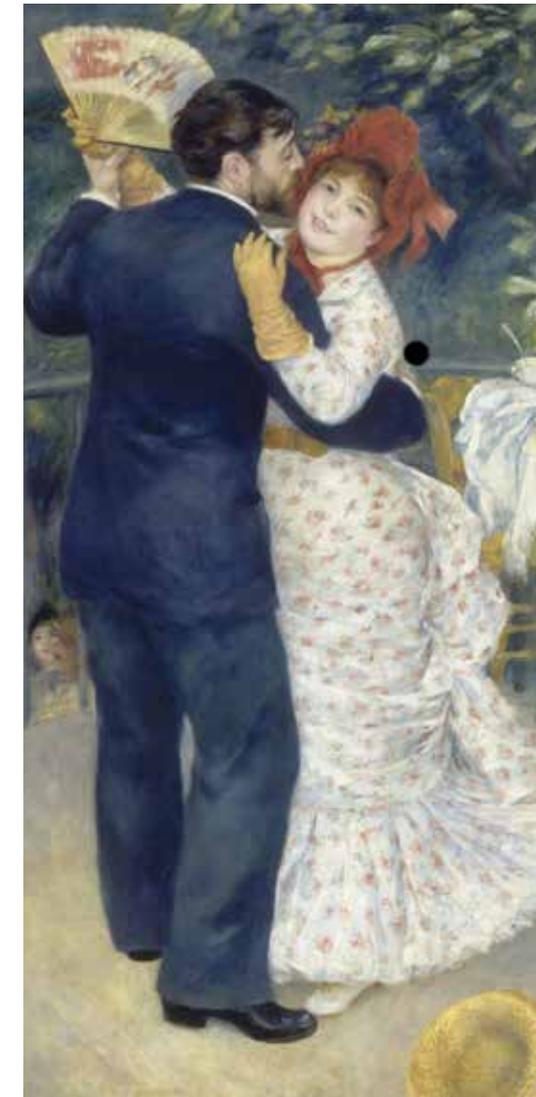
Come December, they took a break from classes to attend a family holiday vacation at a friend's mountain cabin. They hadn't seen several of their children and grandchildren recently and both were quite looking forward to this festive retreat. They had even prepared a surprise dance number to share during the family's planned talent night.

It took most of the morning for them to shovel and sand the walk and load the car with suitcases, bags, and brightly wrapped gifts. But by late afternoon they were on the road. And just two hours later, the driver of an oncoming van lost control on the wintry roads, and there was nothing anyone could do. They were both pronounced dead at the scene.

Many people grieved for the couple as they had had many friends and a big extended family. A large crowd attended a ceremony at the crematorium. The couple had been clear about their wishes for this eventuality, and, as per their detailed request, they were cremated together in one another's arms.

Their ashes were combined and kept in an urn at the crematorium until the ground thawed enough for burial. When spring finally arrived, they were laid to rest in their plot beneath the headstone they had previously chosen. Flowers were laid upon the grave.

That night, under a clear starlit sky on a small knoll near the top of the cemetery, a magical moment occurred. The night breeze was blowing through a nearby copse of tall tamaracks and music began to waft from their branches. She drifted softly into focus sitting on their headstone, lovely in her wispy white gown and he, cloaked in a fine white tuxedo, bent to select a pink rose from the freshly laid funeral flowers at her feet. He tucked the flower gently in her hair and bowed theatrically before taking her hand. They stepped toward one another, pressing their bodies tightly together. Their eyes met lovingly, and with smiles upon their lips, they danced lightly and gracefully to the ethereal music of this magical place. In fact, on clear starry nights in spring when the wind is blowing just so, it is said they can be seen in one another's arms, dancing—still. ❖



Pierre Auguste Renoir, *Country Dance*, 1883