

These past few days, I've been listening to the waltz. It comes to me in the form of a borrowed playlist of songs in 3/4 time. Most of them are new ones, songs I could find music videos for and covers of, none of them overtly addressing their rhythmic origin in the hand-on-shoulder, small-of-back kind of way. Yet, I can't help but make that association myself. All of the songs feel like that dance, like throwbacks. The waltz feels like a throwback, significant in cheesy and nostalgic ways. I think about my parents' wedding, I think about prom, but mostly I think about Cotillion.

Cotillion is a manners class, a sort of outdated institution that teaches the kind of politeness one would only use when attending very classy events, ones probably called "benefits" or "functions." At age 12, I already had pretty good manners but I begged my parents to let me go because I had two nice dresses that I never got to wear and I wanted to meet boys. I knew some other people from my school were going—one of them was my friend Savannah who was my best friend in private and my sometimes friend in public.

Savannah, very advantageous, always had bigger fish to fry. I once did a George W. Bush impression for our class that made everyone laugh and that week she talked to me a lot, but most of the time, when I tried to talk to her, she'd shoot me those sharp side glances and grit her teeth. Savannah was taller than me and already had boobs. I hadn't hit puberty yet and felt inordinately inferior. I gummed quietly to her back like the twin who didn't make it in the womb.

The class was held bi-weekly on Friday at a dilapidated country club an hour from my house. My mom drove me to the first night. We arrived at the same time as a minivan, which opened to reveal all of the other kids from my school who had carpooled there together. I made my mom drive past them into the parking garage. My mom turned off the car and I fumbled with the buttons of my cardigan. My mom let me do this for five minutes until the car light turned off.

We emerged from the dark of the garage into a cushy lobby, newly renovated in shades of cream and white. White sconces, chandeliers flickering white light across the walls, white flower arrangements.

The class was held in a beige ballroom.

"More like smallroom, ha!" said a rowdy boy named Nate who had a big crush on Savannah. Later, it was discovered that Nate had cut out Savannah's 4 by 4 picture from the yearbook and pasted it onto a pool noodle, which he squeezed vertically between his knees and jerked off to in his Jacuzzi.

To his disgusting credit, Nate was right. The room was small for its purpose; teeming with sweaty tweens, it felt grimy. Though the lobby was new, this room was decidedly old. I was nearsighted but didn't know it yet, so the surroundings dissolved into a worn blur—the greying walls blended into the greying ceiling and the room fuzzed out. I looked down at the 70's, artsy pattern on the carpet. Beige of course, punctuated by jots and dots of muted darks. It swam all over itself, the streaks and color like minnows in a cloudy pond.

The satellite colony of kids from my school stuck together in a huddle. Nate was chatting to Savannah, trying to get her to sit next to him at one of the utensil-laden tables. The first

day's lesson was about learning which fork to use for what thing. I touched Savannah's arm and she flinched, so I found a seat next to a boy with a feathery Bon Jovi-esque haircut and a Homer Simpson necktie. I smiled lightly at tie-boy but he didn't smile back. I looked down at my yellow dress and crossed my arms high over the material that gaped at the chest.

The class was run by a couple, Mr. and Mrs. Gollatz-Clapp. The Gollatz-Clapps were old-fashioned, obviously. This class was their actual career. The fact that they made a living off of the business of manners really punctuated their existence. Their existence was also punctuated by gross Dan, who would always clap after they said their names.

Mr. Gollatz-Clapp was a big man. His skin stretched tight and shiny across cheeks that cherried into glistening pouches when he smiled. He was always red, and in retrospect, always a little bit drunk. Mrs. Gollatz-Clapp was the opposite, mean and pale with heavily powdered cheeks. She only smiled when she was demonstrating how to say thank you and she never let it settle into her face. The smile would flash and disappear like the spark of a faltering lighter.

At the beginning of each class, Mr. and Mrs. Gollatz-Clapp would walk around the room to each kid so we could greet them with a handshake and a compliment.

"Now, when you compliment someone, *never* compliment something specific. You always want to keep it very general, something along the lines of 'you look very nice tonight' or 'you look well, sir,'" said Mrs. Gollatz-Clapp. In other words, we were to keep our sentiments devoid of personality and/or life.

This rule made speaking to each other very difficult, so we often broke it. An hour of the class was always devoted to some sort of manner lesson and then an hour devoted to learning a dance, and during the dance you were meant to make "polite conversation" with your partner. My first dance was with Simpson tie. He held my back while I held his shoulder and we stepped around the floor in mangled 3/4 time.

"I like your tie," I told him. "I know I'm not supposed to say that though." I giggled and looked down.

"Thanks," he said flatly. "You look very nice tonight." His eyes scanned over my head for his next partner.

The weeks went by like this, anti-climactic and loveless. Soon, I had worn the two dresses I had wanted to wear and the only thrill was the occasional recognition from Savannah. This would sometimes come in the form of an eye roll when she had to dance with gross Nate, or a comment made privately in between switching dance partners. Sometimes, we would carpool home together if she wasn't going with one of the other girls from the class.

On those nights, in the private space of the vehicle, we would gossip. We hated the Gollatz-Clapps. We imitated them, how we thought they must have spoken to each other outside of class, only addressing each other by Mr. and Mrs. with the same complimentary vagueness they had tried to instill in us. I was always Mr. Gollatz-Clapp because I had a lower voice.

"Mr. Gollatz-Clapp, would you please get me some toilet paper, this bathroom appears to be out."

"Certainly Mrs. Gollatz-Clapp. You're looking well on the toilet tonight."

We spoke loudly about Jessica's dress and how Bradley had spilled punch all over his shirt. We spoke in hushed tones about Lily's dad, how when he dropped her off he was smoking

a cigarette. We called the girls who wore kitten heels sluts. We didn't know what it meant but it was taboo and satisfying in our mouths.

"Did you know Dayton got his first..." Savannah brought her voice down to a whisper, "'hard thing' when he was dancing with Sally tonight?"

"What's a hard thing?" I whispered back.

"You know, when his penis gets, like, a boner, an erection," Savannah raised her eyebrows and made her index finger rigid. "Sally said it was pressing into her leg during the foxtrot. She told me she could feel it."

We had just learned about erections in school but I didn't really get it yet. I imagined a cylindrical sponge filling up with blood and water.

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The Waltz is said to be the oldest of the ballroom dances and, to be quite honest, it feels like it is. When I think about the waltz I think about violins, tapering waists nestling into rustling skirts. The dance is tied up in romance, a rhythm intrinsic to a sway, an ease in the body, a vulnerability.

But the waltz I picture was not always that way. The dance began as a sort of clippy alternative to the slower, more restrained dances of the past—the Viennese waltz in particular. Operating at 55-60 measures per minute, the Viennese Waltz had the heart of a hummingbird. It was manic, and much of the enjoyment was lost in the struggle to keep up with the music. The dance was frustrating and exhausting, but there was an element that gave it staying power, the "modified closed position," a scandalous stance in which the man put his hand around the waist of the woman as they faced one another, stepping in time.

The 19th century brought a languid lull in tempo: first came the Boston waltz, which replaced the multitudes of frivolous whirls with soft, slow turns. The gliding steps provided for the necessary ease in gait and thus, the American waltz came into being.

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For our last cotillion class, we learned the waltz. We had sort of danced around it, doing other things that required steps in similar time, but that night was the night we'd put it to the test. We were supposed to have dressed extra nice for the occasion. I wore a chiffon dress printed with cherries which I insisted upon belting with a thick, metallic braid of leather. I had straightened my hair but it looked greasy and heavy. I could feel my bangs planting pimples on my head.

Despite the fact that we had shamed other girls for wearing kitten heels, Savannah was wearing a pair that night. I thought about being catty, shooting her a mean glance, but she looked so beautiful I couldn't bring myself to say anything. She had put on light makeup, mascara, eyeliner, lipstick, and wore a v-neck dress with a skirt that flared out at the waist. She had taken off the camisole that her mother had made her wear under it, because it was itchy.

Even though she'd discarded the camisole, Savannah continued shifting. As she sat, she pulled up at the top of her dress. She bit her fingernails at the table, nervous and girlish,

something I'd never seen her do in public. This activity was in contrast to her appearance. She looked five years older than everyone in the class, and gross Nate was on her like a barnacle.

During the waltz, Nate grabbed Savannah and reeled her onto the dance floor. He was about a head shorter than her, but the kitten heels put him level with what he was most interested in.

This had happened before: Savannah had been forced to dance with him and she'd always rolled her eyes, scoffed, and gone along with it. Nate had always been leery and boyish, but this night was different for her. She took her hand off Nate's shoulder and tried to button the top of her cardigan while they stepped to the music. He spun her around quick so she had to grab onto him again. Her head loomed above the others on the dance floor. Her eyes closed for a moment. I could see her breathe in sharply. She grimaced.

My partner was a small boy with a high voice named Josh who I'd danced with before. Throughout the class we'd come to choose each other as partners because it was safe and then because it was fun. He called me by my last name, and it made us feel like pals, like we'd built a treehouse together in a past life. Neither Josh nor I had great rhythm, but we had made do with each other for the Cotillion season, laughing when we were off time, and complimenting each other on specific things like smell and earlobes.

"Hey Josh, we should dance over this way, we've gotta make a little switch."

"You don't want to dance with me anymore, Kurland?" Josh said. His voice cracked lightly in between the two syllables of my last name. Josh was growing up.

"Of course I want to dance with you, you're the only one as bad as me," I said, almost maybe flirting. "That's not it."

I lead us over to Nate and Savannah. Nate was going for a strategic dip. Savannah resisted his attempts to bend her over. I tapped Nate's shoulder and he looked at me with annoyance.

"What?" he asked petulantly, halting his gait.

"May I cut in?" I said, as I'd seen done by many a heroic suitor. Nate looked at me with disgust.

"You already have a partner, and I've never danced with you," Nate spat.

"I'm not talking about you," I said. I pushed him aside ever so lightly and put my hand on Savannah's waist.

"Shall we, Mrs. Gollatz-Clapp?"

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I've danced the waltz a couple more times in my life. I danced it with my dad at my cousin's wedding, standing on his feet in that daughterly way as he held my arms. I danced it with my boyfriend at my senior prom, standing on his feet in a girlfriend-y way, my head pressed to his chest. I've felt like the waltz is obsolete for a long time. I'm not sure when I'll dance it again.

My first interaction with this 3/4 playlist was in the kitchen of my friend's house. At the time, it wasn't very substantial. We were trying to think of things to add beyond the three songs already on it: "In My Room" by The Beach Boys, "Regret" by Fiona Apple, "Love on the

Brain” by Rihanna. The three ring too true to me, they are my current waltz, my three steps. These days I’m always in my room, full of regret, thinking about love.

As I tried to think of songs to add, I stepped lightly across the kitchen tiles. 1,2,3, 1,2,3, 1,2,3, 1,2,3. Part of me wishing I had a partner, part of me happy to waltz alone in a kitchen full of people.

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There exists a lesser known variant of the waltz called the Hesitation waltz. This version of the dance is not very popular. Though the American waltz is slow, the Hesitation Waltz is achingly slow. Rather than the 1,2,3 step of the American version, the hesitation waltz stipulates one step to three beats of measure, essentially eliminating the 2,3, from the footwork equation. There isn’t much movement in this style. It leaves the partners with a third of the steps they would have originally had. There’s less potential to mess up or get lost because each step is followed by a two-beat halt. This provides the potential for the dance to be extremely rigid and the awkwardness of this makes for an ugly turn around the dance floor.

But the resistance to this dance seems due to more than just the look of it. Perhaps the dance is unpopular because it is difficult. It involves daunting levels of intimacy and vulnerability; the lack of structure that comes with the two beats lends itself to the unknown. It means time that no one knows what to do with. You can stand sharp, always waiting to jut into the next step onto the floor, but that seems like a cop out. The anticipation of movement gives the partnership a burdensome context. It’s just a dance. This closeness doesn’t mean much more than that.

The alternative is to breathe. Though the feet hesitate, the upper body stays fluid, drifting forward, backward, constantly settling into the partnership. Each pause means a further melting; the hand shifts gently on the shoulder, the palm presses softly into the back. It’s a lean into each other, into the things that can’t be said.

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When I listen to the 3/4 playlist, which has grown to include nineteen songs, I think about cotillion. I wonder if Lily’s dad still smokes and if Sally can still feel the ghost of Dayton’s boner on her leg. I think about Josh, his voice perpetually dropping into something I probably wouldn’t be able to recognize now. I wonder where he is, if he still smells like sweat and his dad’s Old Spice. But even more, I think about Savannah in kitten heels, my hand on her waist and hers on my shoulder, leaning into each other in 3/4 time.