

DANCING WITH THE STARS

(of Buckley and St. Bernard's)

BY ZIBBY RIGHT

NO ONE SAID GROWING UP IN MANHATTAN was normal. In fifth grade, because ice-skating, gymnastics, piano lessons, ballet class, Bob's Sports Club, and religious school weren't enough, I joined the waltz of single-sex private school kids. Literally. Every Monday night, I pulled out the requisite white gloves from their plastic Cerrutti package and donned one of my fancy party dresses. To ensure that I never wore the same dress two weeks in a row, I kept a detailed list of what I'd worn and when. November 19th: *green plaid Joan Calabrese dress, matching green-velvet headband.*

(To avoid being the next James Frey, I must admit that some of the details in the story are a little hazy. If anyone does remember what I wore on November 19, 1986, by all means, correct me.)

In my all-girls school, Brearley, there had been talk of little else. Between French verb conjugations, *Oliver Twist* discussions, and dodgeball, we'd been swapping our outfit selections for the night, benefit-circuit mavens in the making. "But I was planning to wear a white blouse and velvet skirt!" one of them would cry.

My dancing-school career commenced at Barclay's, one of the two elite ballroom-dancing schools in Manhattan. Once I received the much-coveted invitation to Knickerbocker (the other one, conveniently located around the corner from my family's apartment), my parents whisked me over to the Cosmopolitan Club in my Rowe's party coat and matching cap, and never looked back.

Inside the Cos Club, after all the parents and nannies had said goodbye, the girls lined up on one side of the long hallway, the boys, in their miniature ties and blazers, on the other. I used to get so nervous being remotely close to boys that I found it virtually impossible to speak. The fact that I towered over most of them, thanks to my early growth spurt, didn't help. Had I known then that I would never pass 5'2", I would have savored the experience.

When the oversized mahogany doors finally opened, we marched down the marble hallway into the massive grand ballroom and took our seats, boy-girl-boy-girl, in a circle of folding chairs under the crystal chandelier. The instructors, a tall, lithe, European couple with incomprehensible accents, demonstrated each step

with exaggerated motions, pointing their toes and twirling like they were performing *Swan Lake*. Then, it was our turn.

First came "boy's choice." We girls sat in our party dresses on the cold chairs waiting to be chosen as the boys zigzagged across the room to find partners. Even the girls in the "in-crowd" at school were reduced to tears if they didn't get picked early enough. Usually one of my family friends or religious-school classmates would take pity on me (and my braces) and extend a sweaty palm in my direction. The relief I felt at getting off those chairs was epic.

The dancing itself was torture. My patent-leather Mary Janes must have been magnetic; every boy in the room managed to step on them. Eye contact was off-limits, so despite holding a boy's hand and having his arm around my waist, I had to painfully avert my gaze. Since I was too shy to speak anyway, I contented myself with focusing exclusively on the steps. I would master the cha-cha!

All hour long, my mother's advice played on repeat in my head. "Just be yourself!" she would chirp. Who on earth was *that*? I'm almost 30 now and I'm just getting close to an answer.

"Girl's choice" dances were much more pleasant. My strategy was to pick my poor target from across the room so that the moment the instructor said "go"—wham! I was off. I never chose the boys we all had crushes on for fear of rejection. No, I went for their friends, my Episcopal nursery-school buddies, or even the guy sitting next to me. I just couldn't risk getting stuck with one of the nicknamed boys. How could I be seen with "Pencil Face?!" At the end of the night, we trotted out to the lobby, breezing past the opposite sex to fire off answers to our parents' 20 questions about the fox trot. The gloves went back in the closet until the next week.

Looking back, I can't believe I took part in such an outdated, exclusive custom. Now, I can't even find online references to Barclay's, Knickerbocker, or any comparable classes. It's as if the whole ritual never existed. But I know it did (and still does). When it came time to take dancing lessons for my wedding last year, my husband and I took one class and let the gift certificate for the other four sessions expire. We didn't need them. I was a pro. ♦



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