

Sally Houtman

One Slow Dance with Buddha

So suppose that it is a cool night with just a hint of autumn in the air and this woman, just your average woman, say, is standing in the dark so nondescript, and let's say he'd looked at her, looked through her, half a dozen times or so in that sea of whitewashed faces before she caught his eye. And let's say the room is long and narrow with a staircase rising at one side, and the hardwood floor creaks a bit beneath his shoeless feet as he stands before her with his right hand raised. And let's say she stands to face him squarely as the music climbs and she glances past his shoulder, past the folds of his garment, and through the bevelled window she can see the sky so wildly blue and she feels the jump and shiver of something urgent and exacting, and there is no one on the dance floor but those two.

And let's say she is not the philosophical type, but say, the type to look at a thing and not really see it, but there's something about his narrow eyes, something in them she's seen before: in the eyes of the people on the bus; at the bookshop; in the library; or on a busy street. And let's say she lifts her hand to place it on his light brown skin as she begins to move with him to the music's soft irregular beat. And let's say she is piqued by his strange familiarity and she cocks her head and says, "Do I know you?" and then pauses and then says, "I mean, have we met somewhere before?" And say they are moving faster now, making gentle circles on the polished floor, and the weight of her body is on the balls of her feet and he leans against her, shifting slightly, shouldering the sky, and coyly smiles.

And let's say that she, who is prone to idle chatter, waves off his coyness with a curt flick of her wrist and looks away into the dim light, at the fixtures on the walls as they travel past, with their muted globes like sand-scored glass and the lights seem to be there and then not there as he moves her round and round in time with the cello's flighty dip and rise, and the sky and the floor and the lights, they are all the same.

And let's say this woman, who is prone to chronic drama, is the headstrong kind, the type

to punch out words in upper case with a cigarette dangling from her lips, say, the kind to conclude a verbal skirmish with the hurling of a plate. And let's say that she is somewhat of a sceptic, not at all erudite, not at all the scholarly type, not one to dwell on absolution or abstraction of any kind, but say, just an average woman with a shallow blush of longing and too many hats and shoes. And say for years she's endured this kind of sallow yearning, this mouldering malaise, until she can feel each rasping moment pass, until time around her hurts.

And let's say that on the dance floor now she feels a kind of lifting, a percussive burst of forward motion, say, and her yearning, like the distant wail of a drowning man, begins to ebb into the teardrop timbre of the acoustic guitar, and in that wail, that yearning, that forward motion, in everything that makes this what it is, the edges of her future buckle into a slowly advancing past.

Now say that she is holding her position with a hand upon his back to feel his steady breathing and the weight of her body is merely ballast for her soul. Then let's say she looks and really sees him: his smooth and tender hands; the gentle cross-stitch of his brow, and say that there, in the rich emptiness of her longing, comes the pin-prick tingle of sudden recognition, the realisation that nothing in the physical world could bring her satisfaction.

And let's say that one day, in a sense, when the dance is long done, in a sense, she will awaken from a dark and ropery dream (say, of intolerance and greed), and this dream will yield to one of raging waters and roaring seas, and let's say that, in the way a face in a blind man's memory remains forever young, the eddies of that dance remain, perfectly preserved. And let's say that, beyond this day, this ghostly and enchanting day, the world will go on turning and turning more quickly around her and she will pivot against its erratic beats and subversive rhythms because this woman, just your average woman, will sleep a buoyant sleep, say a sleep as pure and clear as Macau on a September day, because her pulse, more sure, more steady, beats a sturdy tempo through her now.
