

### *Dancing Daydreams – March 11, 2015*

My balance teeters as I land, spinning on one foot atop of the abrasive concrete, preparing for another leap. I don't bite it, but man... it's close. I feel a shot of adrenal relief seize my body, and I bite back an impetuous smile as my body springs into a final landing of a five-piece pirouette... umm... I mean, tornado-kick. I'm gasping for oxygen, my muscles tensed, and I feel the stares of unwelcome eyes. Of course, in prison, unwelcome eyes are almost always watching me. But presently, they're intent. To be fair, though, I am making a bit of a spectacle of myself. Not that I have a choice, given my introverted nature, but I'd much prefer practicing my dances unobserved.

I saw a live musical once when I was a kid. The music and the story were lost to me, but the dancers electrified my spirit. Arching their bodies into impossible poses while leaping into grand flights through gem-colored spotlights. I thought they were magic. Long afterward, I continued to visualize the amazing ways the dancers contorted their bodies, and how I yearned to have that ability. I began to nurse a daydream of growing up to be a dancer. I needed good mental escape skills, and I still credit my intricately-scripted daydreams for keeping me sane through a dark childhood spent largely in my own company. But dancing aspirations for a boy in the '70s? It probably did more damage to my self-esteem than good.

I first found out what a loser I was for wanting to dance when I asked a foster mom if I could take ballet lessons. Damn, how that woman laughed. It was like being slapped in the face.

Forever afterwards, she loved telling that story. The other foster kids started calling me The Dancing Fairy, soon shortened to just "Fairy". I'd never been socially adept to begin with, but that foster mom gave me no sporting chance with my peers. In the end, I made their acceptance irrelevant the same way I'd used in many foster homes before and after: I ran away and never came back.

Alone, I continued fantasizing, performing clumsy but uninhibited dances. There's no telling if I had any aptitude for it. Certainly the odds were against it, just as it is for the millions of kids who long to become famous actors and musicians. I suppose most childish ambitions are unrealistic, but it's still an asshole who kills childhood dreams.

I had other daydreams held in reserve that were almost as delicious as dancing. Like martial arts, which is a common dream among little boys, especially the ones who have been bullied or abused. I loved karate movies, and I loved heroes. I would imagine that instead of being small and vulnerable, I was a hero with unparalleled fighting abilities. No one could hurt me. I'd spent so much of my youth digging through dumpsters; it only followed that I'd play and dream in them for hours, alternating between martial arts hero — leaping and flipping onto the soft trash — and spinning body contortions in front of an awed audience as my fantasy switched to stage dancing. In those trashcan moments, I was neither lonely nor helpless.



You'd think that with the passing years, those childish daydreams would've withered and died and, were I a citizen instead of a prison statistic, they probably would've. But the penitentiary is a place where years of adult responsibility are erased and a kid's mental escaping skills are resurrected. The single defining characteristic of childhood is being powerless, and so is it with an inmate. With few choices and little autonomy, what's left but to fantasize about having both? Reality is painful. Dancing in front of an adoring crowd is not.

But years later, my dancing daydreams were still laced with shame. Cruelty and rejection of the unconventional are something else that kids and prisoners have in common. I wouldn't have been doing myself any favors by revealing my dancing aspirations to my peers. Such a ridiculous secret, as if there's something perverted about a man who longs to dance on stage.

If only I had the privacy to jump and twirl like an idiot. Of all possible freedoms, I place privacy right at the top. To use the bathroom and bathe unobserved, to sing aloud or just scratch my bum with a lack of self-consciousness (sigh). Bliss. I doubt most people regard privacy as amazing freedom — unless they lose it. Or maybe it's just me... Many inmates grew up with big families. Maybe the loss of privacy doesn't torture them as much. But for me? It's the poke of a demon.

If I *were* in the free world, maybe I'd still try my clumsy convulsions where people could see me. Maybe. I've dealt with the fact that approved human beings couldn't possibly have a lower opinion of me, and I think one of the blessings of aging is that you progressively disregard others' opinions about what's acceptable. Ever seen an old man wear his trousers pulled up over his belly? You may think he looks silly, but frankly, he doesn't give a damn what you think. I haven't reached that mature level of disregard yet, but I've gotten much better at not letting other people's opinions be a guide for me. Unfortunately, in such a potentially violent atmosphere such as in a prison, concessions to social etiquette are necessary for your physical safety. It's important not to appear weak in anyway, lest you become prey.

Inmates have some pretty twisted concepts about what constitutes weakness, and while I don't support or subscribe to these unwritten childishly macho laws, I prudently obey some. I've always been careful about my body language, facial expression and conduct, checking to make sure that I don't smile too much or exhibit any other trait that might label me as weak or effeminate. One might say I have overcompensated the other direction with exaggerated virility, which leaves me drained. I miss courtesy, kindness, sensitivity. I miss being touched. And I miss being allowed to be who I really am.

I'm a long time Yoga enthusiast, and it's no big secret that a few other prisoners are as well, but we practice in our cages instead of the recreation yard where the masses can watch us. Basketball and weightlifting are manly; Yoga,



most certainly, is not. Following that strain of logic, the leaps and twirls of a wannabe Broadway dancer would be the essence of "not cool".

So what's a dreamer to do? For the first decade of prison, I kept the joyful rhythms and exhilarating movements confined to my imagination, as if my body were paralyzed. It's likely that my mind is where my dancing fantasies would've stayed confined had my other lifelong fantasy, martial arts hero, hadn't met opportunity.

While martial arts is too esoteric to be cool in prison, it falls under "acceptably mansome". I met an inmate who worked as a Taekwondo instructor before becoming a disposable person. Between his teaching and my obsessive practice, my fantasy became a reality. Not that I became the Hollywood hero I dreamed of — I was far from invulnerable — but my body finally learned to perform some of the artful, acrobatic kicks I'd seen in so many movies. My Taekwondo practice earned me some strange looks, but it never got me branded as weak. I poured my enthusiasm and desire to receive vitality and self-confidence in return. It became a positive in my lowly incarcerated experience. But it still wasn't dancing. Or was it? (I land a perfect five-piece pirouette... er, tornado-kick, with a flourish of my hands added for style. Instead of applause though, I get glares and affected indifference.)

One of the training exercises for Taekwondo are Forms: choreographed martial movements designed to engage multiple imaginary opponents. At a high level, forms take on a fluidity of movement that become a beautiful art, marked by its low stances, high kicks and spinning hand-strikes. It takes hours of practice to get the movements precise and a good teacher will relentlessly drill the student to visualize his targets with clarity. It's important not only to perform the correct movement with proper force, but to see a vital striking point on the imaginary opponent's body. If a Taekwondo instructor observes that a student has his mind somewhere else, discipline quickly follows. My instructor emphasized that a serious student never executes forms with his head up his ass. I feel like he was perfectly correct, but....

I pause for a moment to catch my breath. Walking to my starting place, I stand still for a moment, listening. The unwelcome watchers and the miasma of their judgment fades as I hear the first notes of music make their way through my body. I snap my body to the left, dropping into a low front stance and stabbing a quick one-two punch, followed by a spinning roundhouse kick towards the sky. I don't need to think about the movements because my body knows them. I simply attune the movements with the beat of the music in my head. I'm not fighting multiple imaginary opponents as I'm supposed to be; no doubt my instructor would kill me, but even he fades in the spotlight. I'm on Broadway, and I just know an adoring audience is awed by my movements...

My favorite sequence is coming up: The five-piece pirouette. That's right — I said pirouette and NOT a tornado kick.

I'm dancing in the penitentiary.