

I Carried a Watermelon

DIRTY
DANCING
AND ME



KATY BRAND

Katy Brand

I Carried a Watermelon: Dirty Dancing and Me

Аннотация

'Massively enjoyable' Dawn French I Carried a Watermelon is a love story to Dirty Dancing. A warm, witty and accessible look at how Katy Brand's life-long obsession with the film has influenced her own attitudes to sex, love, romance, rights and responsibilities. It explores the legacy of the film, from pushing women's stories to the forefront of commercial cinema, to its 'Gold Standard' depiction of abortion according to leading pro-choice campaigners, and its fresh and powerful take on the classic 'coming of age' story told from a naïve but idealistic 17-year-old girl's point of view. Part memoir based on a personal obsession, part homage to a monster hit and a work of genius, Katy will explore her own memories and experiences, and talk to other fans of the film, to examine its legacy as a piece of filmmaking with a social agenda that many miss on first viewing. One of the most celebrated and viewed films ever made is about to have the time of its life.

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I CARRIED A WATERMELON

Katy Brand



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

Copyright

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Dedication

For all the Babys. Never stop trying.

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Introduction

This is the book I have always wanted to write. I just hadn't realised it until 2019, the year of my fortieth birthday. My husband asked me what I wanted to do to mark the occasion, and I said without hesitation, 'I want to watch *Dirty Dancing*.' It even surprised me a little, hearing it come out of my mouth, but we sat down, found it on Netflix and settled in for the evening. I'm so glad we did, because it felt like coming home.

It had been some time since I'd last seen *Dirty Dancing* – a few years – but as soon we pressed play, and that banging, jangling opening to 'Big Girls Don't Cry' by The Four Seasons came through the speakers, I was right back there where it all began. I felt excited. I felt it wouldn't let me down, and I hoped I wouldn't regret it. I think in some ways I wanted to have a moment to reflect on the first 40 years of my life. To look back on my teenage years, and compare myself now, to the girl I was then. I needed a way to measure my progress, and with that need came the realisation that *Dirty Dancing* has been a constant

influence in my life since I was 11 years old. Would my reaction to it remain the same? How much of that obsessed girl (because I was entirely obsessed with *Dirty Dancing*) remains within me, and how much of her has fallen away?

Of course, since my obsession abated from its height at around the age of 13 (when I was viewing it daily), I have watched *Dirty Dancing* a good few times, but as an adult I haven't really concentrated on it, or myself properly, as it plays out on the screen. Suddenly I wanted to focus on it, to really see it again in all its glory. I saw the fortieth birthday screening as part of my development as a person, and maybe a way of rounding off the first half of my life, giving me a pause as I enter the foothills of middle age, and beyond. This book is largely the product of that evening. I'm so glad my husband was cool with it.

And afterwards, as the credits rolled, I sat quietly by myself for a moment, enjoying that special glow you get when a story transports you. It's a 'proper film' – exciting, honest, sexy, moving, and uplifting. It was all still there. It's so life-affirming and joyful, but with enough substance to keep you satisfied. Life can wear you down, and by now I have suffered a few slings and arrows of my own, but I went to bed, newly 40 feeling as invincible as I had as a teenager. That night I fell in love with *Dirty Dancing* all over again.

But perhaps it's also been a while since you've seen it and are a little hazy yourself, or maybe you've never seen it at all (in which case, I'm somewhat amazed you are reading this book – you must

really like me, thanks very much ...), so here is a summary of *Dirty Dancing*, that I am going to write in a slight frenzy of love and excitement – can I get it all down in one attempt without checking anything? Let's go ...

The Plot of Dirty Dancing

It's 1963 and Baby Houseman is 17 years old. As the film opens, she is sitting in the backseat of her family's car, as they drive to a holiday resort called Kellerman's in the Catskill Mountains. Baby is reading in the back, and somehow managing not to get car-sick. Her father Jake, a hard-working doctor, drives with a smile of contentment on his face, every inch the respectable family man. Her mother, Marge, is calm and understanding, while Lisa, Baby's older sister, panics that she hasn't brought enough shoes.

At first, the family settle into resort life, with its dancing lessons and boating lake. It's like a posh American Butlin's. It's relaxing, yes, but (dare Baby admit it?) perhaps a little boring. All this changes when professional dance instructors Penny and Johnny put on an evening show for the guests. Their performance is energetic, sexy and powerful, and Baby is transfixed, but also intrigued.

Later that night, she wanders into the staff area, though it's forbidden to guests. There, she finds Billy, a resort porter, who is attempting to carry three large watermelons to a party. Why he needs so many watermelons is not immediately clear, but not to worry, the point is that Baby loves to help out – she isn't just

a spoilt rich girl – and so she takes one from him. She follows Billy into the party, and suddenly she is transported into a whole new world. A dirty, dirty world.

The hotel staff are unwinding after a hard day's work by having a good old dance. And it's not just any dancing – this is full-on, filthy grinding, a universe away from the sedate shuffling going on front of house. Penny and Johnny arrive, join in for a while, and then suddenly Baby is in Johnny's arms, having her first unofficial dancing lesson. This sensual moment reduces Baby to a puddle of lust, and will transform her jolly family holiday into an emotional, sexual and choreographically challenging few weeks that go on to change her life.

A couple of nights later, Baby is reluctantly hanging out with the hotel owner's grandson, smarmy Neil, who has taken a bit of a shine to her. By chance, she stumbles upon Penny, who is crying in a deserted kitchen. Baby runs to find Johnny, who comes to get his dance partner, and learns that Penny is pregnant by sleazy, spoilt waiter Robbie (who is by now romancing Baby's sister, Lisa). Billy has found a back-street abortionist who will take care of Penny's problem (it's 1963, and so there are very few safe options open to her), but it costs \$200, which they don't have, and he is also only available on the night when Johnny and Penny have to perform a show dance at another hotel, the Sheldrake. Baby borrows the money from her father (without telling him what it's for) and also steps up to fill in for Penny on the night.

This means she must very quickly learn the dance, with

Johnny as her teacher and partner. As they work together, we feel the tension building— both sexual and fearful – can she pull this off? Finally, they go off in Johnny’s bashed-up old car to dance the mambo at the Sheldrake, while Billy takes Penny to have her pregnancy terminated. Apart from one small fluff on the dance floor, Baby gets through it. They are elated, but when they get back to Kellerman’s late at night, they find Penny bleeding and in agony. The abortionist botched the job.

Baby runs to get her father, who treats and reassures Penny, but is horrified that Baby is hanging out with people he considers to be reckless and unreliable. He gets the wrong end of the stick and thinks Johnny is the father of Penny’s baby, and is suspicious that he and Baby seem to know each other well. In his most ‘upright and loving father’ tone, he forbids her from having anything more to do with the dancers.

Baby defies her father, going straight to Johnny’s cabin, where she asks him to dance. This becomes one of the greatest seduction scenes of all time. After some earth-shattering sex, they start a relationship. How could they not?

Meanwhile, a lonely older woman, Vivian, who has been paying Johnny for private dance lessons and anything else that ‘comes up’, discovers this new relationship, and in a fit of jealousy, accuses Johnny of stealing purses and wallets around various Catskills resorts. Max Kellerman tells the Housemans he is about to fire Johnny, and Baby has to step in and reveal – in front of everyone – that she has been spending her nights with

him, as this is the only alibi he has to prove he is not the thief.

Later, it is revealed that an elderly couple, the Schumachers, are responsible for the thefts, but Kellerman fires Johnny anyway for his forbidden liaison with a guest, and so he leaves the resort and Baby with tears in his eyes. Eventually, everyone realises that Robbie was the one who got Penny pregnant, and Lisa breaks it off with him. There is a great deal of misery all round, and Baby has some home truths to tell her father about prejudice, and snobbery, and what it takes to be a decent person.

It seems the summer has come to a bad end, and not just for Baby, but for everyone. Is this the end of an era? A wider loss of innocence? Max Kellerman seems to think so, as he laments times gone by – are cosy family resorts which feature wig trying on sessions and ballroom dancing lessons going to survive? Are they simply too old-fashioned?

But what's this? It feels like the future has come to claim its place at the table. For at the evening talent show, on the last night of the season, Johnny Castle returns! Making a bombastic entrance, striding through the room for all the world like a man who hasn't just been fired, he finds Baby sitting with her parents in the audience. He takes her out of The Corner nobody should have put her in. They spontaneously perform their mambo routine so perfectly – including the impressive lift Baby couldn't manage at the Sheldrake (amazing what a life-changing shag can do for your confidence) – that everyone, even Max Kellerman and Baby's dad, agree they are perfect together, that Johnny is a

good man, and Baby is her own woman. The whole audience are up and dancing and they all have the time of their lives.



And breathe. Well, I didn't check anything until after I'd finished. I just blurted it all out from memory. It was quite exciting, and hopefully, a helpful reminder as we take a deep dive into one of the greatest films of all time. Please do watch it though (who needs an excuse?), as it stands the test of time, and repeat viewings. It really is a phenomenal piece of work. Written by former dancer Eleanor Bergstein, drawing from her own life experience, filmed with a small budget (\$4 million, which is nothing in feature film land) and a total lack of belief from the very studio that made it (they wanted it to go straight to VHS), it has grossed over \$200 million worldwide, spawned multiple remakes, including a long-running live show, and thousands of articles, tribute events, wedding dances, proposals and even academic papers. It has also affected my life in the most unexpected ways.

Although I was not truly conscious of it until much later, in some respects *I Carried a Watermelon* cleverly started writing itself before I was even aware of my desire to explore and celebrate *Dirty Dancing* in real depth. A few years ago, I took part in a live show where the premise was you wrote a love letter

to something very important to you, and then read it out for the audience. I chose *Dirty Dancing*, seemingly out of the blue, but once I started writing my letter I saw that I meant every word. I took it to the gig, stood up and delivered it, and I was amazed by the response. I thought people would simply laugh at me, but in fact I had a line of women, and some men, waiting afterwards to thank me, and hug me, and tell me how much it meant to them too. I looked for the letter when I started writing this book, and found it tucked away deep in my computer files. I read it again and still felt that burn of passion coming off the page. That letter became the start of this book.

What I began to realise, as I wrote my letter, was that *Dirty Dancing* has somehow shaped me and my choices, insinuating itself into my life in unexpected ways – it has shaped my sexual preferences, my attitudes to social class, good character, politics, love, relationships, casual sex, abortion, father/daughter issues and, of course, my understanding of whether it's possible to learn a complicated dance routine to perform in public in only a matter of days, at the same time as losing your virginity and ensuring an old, thieving couple is prosecuted for their crimes. All off the back of carrying a watermelon.

But why do I love *Dirty Dancing*? Would it be too much to say it's like the wind ... through my tree? Yes, maybe, but it wouldn't be far off. It has everything – daughters and fathers, sisters, neglected wives, fear of how a pregnancy will affect your career, low-life scum and rich wankers, and how to handle them

all. It's like an instruction manual for girls – well, middle-class girls anyway. Girls like me. 'Normal' girls who sometimes have a bit of a yen to get out there and do something a bit crazy. Nice girls who suddenly get an urge to carry a watermelon and get dirty with the 'wrong' sort of man.

I'm so glad *Dirty Dancing* got made, when it so nearly didn't – Eleanor Bergstein struggled to find funding for her script for years, and eventually had to shoot the whole thing over a few autumn weeks in a cold and rainy hotel resort in Virginia, on half the budget she had originally intended. I'm so glad it was released, when it so nearly wasn't – the company that stumped up the money couldn't initially see much potential beyond 'straight to video' and so it might have fallen by the wayside. And the fact that there is an abortion storyline right at its heart meant that it lost sponsorship money – but still Bergstein bravely resisted calls to change her film and remove the abortion. She was clear that we should not ever be complacent about our rights as women, and I think she has been proved 100 per cent correct in this regard.

I'm so happy that *Dirty Dancing* is now widely getting the more serious recognition it deserves, when it so easily may not have. It was dismissed for years as an enjoyable but largely insignificant piece of entertaining fluff – a commercial hit, yes, but nothing more – when in fact it is an important rite-of-passage story for girls. The female lead, Baby, is about as active in the story as it is possible to be. She makes it all happen. Every last moment is down to her, from the funding of an illegal abortion

to the offer to fill in and learn the dance, to the extraordinary first seduction, and then the exoneration of Johnny as a thief. She drives the entire plot.

It has been much observed recently that things ‘girls like’ are often trivialised when compared to things ‘boys like’ – that stuff for women is romantic, domestic and ultimately insignificant, whereas stuff for men may be entertaining but also has ‘universal themes’ or an ‘important message’. I can’t think of another film I’ve seen that has more universal themes, or a more important message than *Dirty Dancing*. I’m so glad I’ve found this way of obsessing about it a little more, and a load of new people to do it with.

In its way, it is a feminist manifesto – a story with a heroine who has to defy her family, stand up for her principles, save the man she loves, and is finally lifted up in a floaty pink dress – you can still be a powerful woman in a floaty pink dress, after all. And you should never put up with being put in a corner, no matter how you’re dressed. I’m glad it came into my life all those years ago, and I promise not to neglect it again. So, I’m wearing my Kellerman’s t-shirt with pride (bought off the merchandise stand at the live show), even though it’s slightly too small. That way, a little bit of it is always close to my heart, reminding me that nobody puts Baby in a corner. Thanks for being there, *Dirty Dancing* – I was a Baby when we met, but just look at me now.

1 Hungry Eye

It was the summer of 1990, when everyone called me Katy and it never occurred to me to mind. Mainly because that was my name. I was 11 years old. The world felt new, my secondary school uniform felt newer, and as it was a weekend I was told that if I wanted to, I could stay up to watch this film I'd barely heard of on TV called *Dirty Dancing*.

I liked films with dancing in them – like *Bandwagon*, *Singin'*

in the Rain, and *Top Hat*, with Gene Kelly or Fred Astaire. My favourite films were *Mary Poppins* and *The Sound of Music*, where women on a mission turn up and sort some people out. I liked the big numbers and sassy romantic story-lines, the up-against-the-clock drive when characters put their differences aside to pull together for the Big Show, the finale. I knew I liked the old stuff best. I could take or leave *Grease*, frankly – it's always struck me as a bit cold. Rizzo was all right, but Rizzo was meant to be a schoolkid and she looked like she was 45 and already on her third divorce. So even though this so-called *Dirty Dancing* was intriguing, I wasn't expecting much. I could always turn it off if I didn't like it.

Well.

I'm not sure I moved a muscle for the entire duration of the film. It's possible I held my breath. When it finished, I went straight upstairs for I couldn't bear to break the spell by talking to anyone. I lay in bed, staring at the glowing star stickers on my bedroom ceiling, tracing them from one to the next. I was trying to remember every moment and relive it. My body was alive with some unspecified but powerful energy. My mind was blown.

Scenes flew across my memory like shooting stars with such speed and brightness that I couldn't keep hold of them for long. It was a feeling. A heartbeat. And my heart was beating out of my chest. The opening – the family's arrival at the hotel – inauspicious in some respects, but with the promise of something more as porter Billy and Baby bond over unloading the bags.

Then the tingle of the opening bars to ‘(I’ve Had) The Time of My Life’, played slowly on the piano, a tease of the magic yet to come, as Baby makes her way up to the main house to ‘look around’, and later glimpses Johnny being told off by Max Kellerman (‘no funny business, no conversation, and keep your HANDS OFF’). That opening dance number, where Penny and Johnny burst into the room and show what they can really do left me almost panting. The stage is set – this magnificent, talented man, pulsating with passion, but with a bad attitude, is breathing the same air as our Baby. The anticipation of what would happen next was almost too strong to handle ...

And then, and then, oh and then that staff after-party – still my favourite scene – the sense of stepping into something ripe but forbidden, too good to turn back now. The dancing – like nothing I had ever seen before, raw and direct, primal. I felt hot thinking about it. And giggling and hugging myself over that line, ‘I carried a watermelon’, as Johnny curled his lip and Baby scolded herself for being so naff. I felt I could so easily be her. It was coming back to me in flashes – the impossibility of the task ahead of Baby – learning to dance to a professional standard in five days; the build-up of tension between Baby and Johnny, so perfectly paced – you knew what was going to happen, but you couldn’t wait to see it – the delicious inevitability of it. And then that sex scene – the confidence of Baby now! To pull him in, to make it happen. Could a girl really do that? Could she just go and get a man if she wanted him? I couldn’t believe it.

The twists and turns, the injustice of the stealing accusations against Johnny – I felt it burn within me, just like Baby did. She had to save him, I totally understood that – I would have done the same. The sick twist of heartbreak as he leaves her, the bleak wasteland that follows, as if life will never have colour again. And then the triumph of his return! He comes back! To find her! And to lift her high in the air, to show everybody what an amazing woman she has become. Oh god – I wanted to be Baby. I wanted it all to happen to me. I had to see it again. As soon as possible. I wanted this feeling to last forever.

But cruelly, the experience was fleeting and unrepeatable, it seemed. I had not thought to record the film off the telly as I watched it. I could not have foreseen the effect it would have on me, and now I was kicking myself. I didn't have the resources to video everything on the off-chance that it would radically re-order my emotions and inform my destiny. Nobody had that many blank videos at their disposal, surely – where would I store them, for god's sake? These were just some of the confused, racing thoughts zig-zagging through my overwhelmed and overheated brain. I couldn't believe I had lived before *Dirty Dancing*. I couldn't believe anything had mattered.

At first, I had to hold the memory of it within myself. I couldn't afford to buy it, and renting a video was an occasional treat, with the choice of film very much a committee decision involving the whole family, and I didn't detect quite the same level of enthusiasm in the house for *Dirty Dancing* that I was

barely keeping under control. I had to wait.

Then, a few months later, I spotted it in the terrestrial TV schedule. The excitement was immense, and I made sure I was ready. I found a tape that had an episode of *Tomorrow's World* on it, followed by the second half of an old football match. They would be sacrificed in order that this might become The *Dirty Dancing* Tape. I carefully peeled back the old sticker, and replaced it with a brand new one, on which I wrote '*DIRTY DANCING – DO NOT WIPE*' in thick black ink. I crouched before the VCR player in readiness at the appointed time, lined it all up, and pressed record.

As soon as the film finished on TV, I immediately rewound the tape to check it. I pressed play. Please, please be there. It was. OK, for some reason, the first five minutes were missing, which was frustrating, but predictable considering our somewhat capricious video machine, which seemed to delight in mysteriously switching channels mid-record, or ending the recording early for no apparent reason, or just turning off altogether, so it had to be watched like a hawk. But the bulk of the film was there. I had done it, it was mine. IT WAS MINE. And nobody could take it away from me. I had caught the magic in a net.

So I watched it all over again. Twice in a night. It didn't feel excessive, it felt right. Because now it was available for me to view whenever I wanted to. And I wanted to. A lot. I watched *Dirty Dancing* after school. Every. Single. Day. For THREE

MONTHS, until my concerned father confiscated and hid the tape, and it very much occurred to me to mind.

It took me a week to find it, discreetly rummaging in every drawer, ransacking then replacing the contents of various cupboards. I have always been an obsessive person – bloody-minded, stubborn, relentless in my pursuit of what I think should rightfully be mine. I am, to put it mildly, *tenacious*. I knew that the confiscated *Dirty Dancing* tape was somewhere in the house. I felt in my bones that my dad would not be so cruel, so callous as to throw it away entirely. I understood on some level that he was trying to save me from myself – perhaps encouraging me to widen my viewing habits. Or to do some homework. But life was different now that *Dirty Dancing* was in it. It was my lifeblood. I had to have it. It was my drug of choice. And so, I continued the search – of course I did.

And then, one night I got lucky – I had almost given up, but I had a hunch, and so I returned to a previously searched area. My diligence was rewarded. Pulling back an old garden chair, I gasped, and felt a quickening in my belly, as I caught sight of a familiar black plastic corner, tucked at the back of the junk cupboard under the stairs, behind a huge sack of dry dog food the dog wouldn't eat but my dad wouldn't throw away. Could it be? Could it really be? I reached into the cobwebby darkness, the musty, meaty, slightly sulphurous smell of old dog food wafting unnoticed into my nostrils. What did I care for that? I was holding *Dirty Dancing* in my hands again.

My elation is hard to describe. I had done it. I hadn't given up, and I had found it. The urge to watch it right there and then – to gorge on its sunlit perfection and wipe my chin afterwards – was strong but I had to bide my time: it was past 11pm when I made my glorious discovery, and though the house was quiet, I couldn't risk being caught. Trembling, I forced myself to place the precious tape back in its meaty-smelling hiding place, kissing it first, and went back to bed quivering with anticipation. Within a few hours, I would be watching *Dirty Dancing* again.

By now I was 12, and allowed to be at home alone after school until my parents finished work. Tomorrow would be just such a day. Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow. Such sweet joy tomorrow would bring. I would arrive home from school at 4.15pm. My parents would usually arrive around 6pm. That was my window. I needed 1 hour, 46 minutes to watch the whole thing, which was tight, but if I fast-forwarded through the opening credits, I could do it all, rewind it, and have it safely back behind the bag of dog food before anyone knew what had happened.

I barely slept. I couldn't concentrate at school. Baby, and Johnny, and Penny, and all the others were waiting for me. I crashed through the door, dumped my bag, and breathlessly retrieved the one and only copy of *Dirty Dancing* I could ever hope to possess (videos were bloody expensive in those days). I put it on. I pressed play. I licked my lips and sat down on the sofa. I was ready. It began.

Oh my god, every minute was still perfect. I sunk into it, let it envelope me. I felt safe but also excited. Perhaps this is what love feels like, I thought. As the film ended I once again felt that heady sense of being invincible. I could do anything. I was just like Baby, and there was a Johnny out there for me somewhere.

Until one day – disaster! The tape broke, and it stuck at the point where Johnny defiantly says, ‘You just put your pickle on everybody’s plate, college boy ...’ and would not move on from there, no matter how many times I ejected the tape and wound it on manually with a coin. I tried to move it the other way, thinking I could get beyond the glitch. It seemed to work for a moment – I could feel the tape spooling on nicely, but then there was an ominous clicking sound, and peering inside the black box, I could see it was now hopelessly tangled. Oh god. OH GOD.

I held the VHS tape limply in my hands like a beloved deceased hamster. Should I bury it? With a full service? I couldn’t believe it. It was gone. A piece of me went with it – partly because I loved *Dirty Dancing* so much, and partly because I had ripped my nail trying to fix the tape, and the torn part had dropped inside.

I filled the vacuum as best I could. There was no internet at this stage, of course, or maybe there was, but it was of no use to me as it merely connected a few military bases, American universities, and a clutch of badly-dressed geniuses in garages sending each other strings of numbers that meant nothing. So I survived by being creative – I found coping strategies to keep it alive within

me. I forced my best friend from school to allow me to act out my favourite scenes in my living room. (I should clarify here, it was the dancing scenes I wanted, specifically the tuition scenes – I did not wish to recreate anything sexual with my best friend, though she may have been more nervous of where this was heading than she let on.) I co-opted my little sister into the game whenever I could. She was up for it, being a fan herself, but I always took it too far, until people were broken.

I had of course made a taped copy of the full soundtrack, which I had borrowed from the library. God, how I loved those songs; they introduced me to a whole new genre of music. ‘Hungry Eyes’ by Eric Carmen still makes my heart flutter, and the stomach-drop of pain you feel as Solomon Burke sings ‘Cry to Me’ hits me every time. ‘In the Still of the Night’ by Fred Parrish and The Satins is a crooning delight. I had never heard songs like this before, and they excited me. Not to mention ‘(I’ve Had) the Time of My Life’, with that immensely distinctive half-time chorus opener, which then picks up a nice little groove you can’t help but move to.

And then there is the also wonderful but slightly less acknowledged second soundtrack, which features some of the more obscure Latin dance tracks, for the true enthusiast – I had to order it specifically from the library, and I made a tape of that too. I had all the dances tracks at my disposal now, and I used them to the point of wearing them, and myself out. All day at school, I would badger my best friend to come over, and when

she relented, we would do the ‘Hungry Eyes’ rehearsal montage with Penny over, and over again (oh, how I wanted a red leotard with a little gold belt, and black fishnet tights, and gold sandals), with her standing in front of me, ‘teaching’ her the moves. I was too bossy to be Baby – I had to be Penny. For some reason, I always loved that whole sequence, starting with Penny looking at Johnny with great meaning over Baby’s head – this is the moment where we see how high the stakes are for them. This has to work, it just has to.

My best friend, though, was soon fed up with her role. She liked *Dirty Dancing* well enough, but I managed to eclipse her with my obsessive behaviour – I took it to an unnecessary level. I wanted it all the time, to the exclusion of all else. Finally, when pushed to the limit of her tolerance and Latin dance abilities, she refused to participate any longer. Or even come to my house for fear of an ambush. My sister also had other interests to attend to. And so, now I was alone with my madness.

My requests for a new shop-bought copy of the *Dirty Dancing* video, with a real cover and everything, to replace the mangled tape, for my birthday, and then at Christmas fell on deaf ears – clearly an enforced separation was now underway and probably for my own good. *Dirty Dancing* was again forbidden, and we all know how effective that is when keeping teenage girls from the object of our desires. *Dirty Dancing* was my unsuitable first boyfriend, my leather jacket relationship, my staff-guest liaison, and my parents were stepping in to preserve my honour.

I wouldn't have access to my own copy again for another seven years.



Of course, tape or no tape, the film still influenced my real-life crushes. I ought to confess at this point that, until the moment Johnny Castle came into my life, my first real love was Michael Jackson. This was the late 1980s, and though people thought he was weird, there was not yet any hint of the full horror that was to come. I wrote him long, long letters. I read *Moonwalk* – the official biography – several dozen times. I even tried to ‘trick’ International Directory Enquiries into giving me his phone number by calling 151 from the phone box at Amersham station on my way home from school, and saying as convincingly as I could that ‘a man named Michael Jackson has called and left no number – I believe his address is Neverland Valley Ranch, Santa Barbara, California, USA’, and then waited patiently as they confirmed what I had deep down suspected but could not bring myself to admit – that the number was, indeed, listed as ‘ex-directory’. True story.

Johnny represented a new kind of man for me – unequivocally heterosexual in an old-fashioned ‘movie star male lead’ kind of way: tough, strong, emotionally closed, waiting for the touch of a good woman to open him up. I’d seen them on film before,

but they were usually either cowboys or played by Tom Cruise. Johnny had old school sex appeal, he had swagger, he had improbably 1980s clothes and musical tastes, given that he lived in 1963. He was wary and cautious to begin with – a man of few words – but then once you got to know him, he opened like a flower. He had vulnerabilities, he had talent, he had the moves. And he was clearly very, very good at sex.

This was all very well, but it had to remain in the realms of fantasy, because as I looked around me, there seemed to be few men of my age (12) that could really match up. The boys at my school were perfectly fine, if you liked competitions to see how long you could hold your hand over a Bunsen flame without crying, extended belching displays where we had to also ‘smell the burp’, and having your burgeoning breasts commented on at every possible opportunity. But Johnny was a ‘real man’, to use a now outdated and probably somewhat toxic phrase. I was done with studied ambiguity – I wanted a hunk. Narrow-hipped, long-haired, feminine-featured men with a suggestion of eye-liner were no longer my bag. Nothing wrong with them, but they did not push my buttons. I wanted someone who hid their sensitivities under a gruff exterior. I wanted someone who might throw a punch under certain circumstances, especially if some ‘Robbie the Creep’ type was to impugn my honour. I wanted a project. Just like Baby, I wanted to sort someone out. I wanted a diamond in the rough.

But this was a side issue. As I look back, I can now see that

while Johnny Castle was a formative type for me when it came to men, my real crush was on Baby. It was all about Baby. She was called Frances; my middle name is Frances. And the similarities didn't end there – o-ho no. We both had a fire in our bellies for social justice and human rights – she was joining the Peace Corps; I did a 24-hour sponsored silence in aid of Oxfam (much welcomed it seemed at the time, by parents and teachers alike ... in fact, there were enquiries as to whether, in return for a larger donation, the period of silence could be extended). She liked wearing cut-off denim shorts, I liked wearing cut-off denim shorts. Mine were home-made though, and a little less 'neat' than Baby's.

In fact, I had gone a bit nuts with the scissors one day and hacked up my best jeans, cutting each leg from the knee into a long, jagged point that each reached to mid-calf. My horrified grandmother, who was looking after me and my sister that afternoon, could only look on and whisper, 'Are you sure you're allowed to do that to your clothes, Katy ...?' The reflection in the mirror when wearing them made my actions instantly regrettable, although I felt I had to style it out to save face in front of Grandma. Frankly, I looked like an extra from *Oliver!*, but nonetheless I wore them stubbornly to the park and library that day, and tried to look nonchalant and vaguely superior to anyone I caught sniggering.

That night, I cut the jagged pieces off, creating a wonky and uneven but more traditional denim short, and then stuffed them

in a drawer and pretended to my parents I didn't know where they were. They never saw the light of day again (the jeans, not my parents). How I coveted Baby's beautiful pair, with their perfect turn-ups and smoothly flattering cut through the hips. The dream pair of denim shorts still eludes me to this day, but I will never stop looking.



Besides my clothes, I tried to get *Dirty Dancing* into my life in any way I could. I begged and pleaded to go on a family holiday to a resort, in the Catskills, where I now knew through painstaking research (again, pre-internet – I had to actually ask things, of actual humans standing in front of me. Can you imagine? The horror) was the area in upstate New York known for its holiday resorts where the fictional Kellerman's nestled. It was made very clear to me that I might as well ask for the moon on a stick, because flying from London to the US to an all-inclusive resort for three weeks for a family of four was (a) prohibitively expensive, and (b) wouldn't happen even if we won a million pounds, as the idea of going for enforced cha-cha lessons and group aerobics sessions in the lake with a bunch of strangers was really considered a kind of hell in our household.

So it was a campsite in Cornwall again, like last year, and the year before. And don't get me wrong, these were enjoyable

holidays full of freedom, clear waters, hot sand and thick clotted cream, but with the best will in the world, it was not Kellerman's. And I wanted Kellerman's, badly. It wasn't that I thought I would somehow actually find Baby and Johnny, and Billy and Penny, and carry a watermelon and have to dance at the Sheldrake at incredibly short notice. I wasn't completely insane. But I wanted my own Baby experience, and to do that, there must be staff, and an element of 'backstage' to stumble in on. There needed to be staff quarters to be caught in. There had to be some rules for me to disobey, and someone to compromise my reputation with. And although there was a jolly old Cornish couple who ran the campsite shop, and a guy 'on reception' who honestly looked like a retired pirate, who could perhaps be termed 'staff', they didn't live onsite, and even if they did, the chances of me coming across the three of them engaged in some sort of sweat-laced-dance-off-cum-orgy in the early hours seemed slim, though perhaps I underestimate them.

It was mostly roaming the ancient, pagan Cornish landscape for me, trying to find other children who would willingly participate in spontaneous, free-style dance lessons. It was fun, but not satisfactory. I had a longing for romance and drama, and something magical to happen by moonlight. And one year, as unlikely as it sounds, I got it.

We visited the Minack Theatre to see a production of *Guys and Dolls*. It is a spectacular outdoor auditorium, cut right into the rocky cliffs, where the audience sits on smooth stone benches

and the performers play in front of the backdrop of the Atlantic Ocean. On a clear night at the right time of year, halfway through the show the sun sets and the moon rises, glittering on the water, kissing everyone with a pale silver. This was just such a night. And even better, we were staying over that day with a school friend of mine and her family in a large cottage right next to the theatre itself.

The show was so beautiful that afterwards I floated back to the house in the dusky light, my head full of songs and a new crush on my hands: Sky Masterson. I was not being disloyal, I told myself, for this was surely only a holiday romance, and Johnny was where my heart lived. But Johnny was at home.

My friend and I were sharing a room. We sat on the wide window seat with the old wooden sash frame pulled up high, so the warm night air would envelop us and we could hear the sea. We wanted to keep the feeling going for as long as we could. And then we heard it – singing, men singing, the sound will-o'-the-wisping to us across the twilight. They were cast members, singing songs from the show.

We froze on the window seat – this was the dream. Was it in fact, a dream? The bedroom overlooked the garden, with a path that wound its way down to a low stone wall and an iron gate at the end. Two men were now silhouetted against the full moon, the shapes of their costumes – sharp suits and trilby hats – clear against the pale brightness. They stopped at the end of the garden, and looked towards us. Straight at us. We ourselves were picked

out by the low glow of a night light inside, behind us. There was a pause. We held our breath. And then they started singing again, this time just for us, songs from the show: a medley.

This was it. It was happening. This was as close to backstage at Kellerman's as I was going to get on England's most westerly point. In fact, across the now near invisible horizon, lay Kellerman's itself, just 3,000 miles away as the crow flies. It was enough. I was transfixed. I wondered if we should steal out of the house, trip down the path, and try to inveigle ourselves with these men, perhaps there would be a cast party somewhere, perhaps there would be dancing, perhaps there would be a call for me to step in on stage to cover a cast member who needed time off for a tricky personal medical procedure that had to be kept hush-hush, perhaps, perhaps, perhaps ... But then the singing stopped, the men waved to us and moved on, their crisp outlines smudging into the night.

We had been, and there is simply no other word for it, *serenaded*. SERENADED, for god's sake. For the rest of the holiday, I would lie on my inflatable mattress in our canvas tent, listening to the August rain and trying not to touch the sides, feeling all my feelings. It was the same feeling as I got when I watched *Dirty Dancing* – a tingle of magic, the sense of a million possibilities glittering before me.



The next obvious step in my obsession was to enrol in some actual dance classes. A short distance away from home, in the next town, there was a small dance school, which offered lessons in ballet, tap, modern, and something called ‘national’, which was basically learning the national dances of the various countries of the world – a singularly useless skill, but undeniably good exercise. I was naturally disappointed to find that the merengue, the salsa and the mambo were not on offer, but I made do. It was a start. After all, this was the Home Counties – Latin dance was really not a thing. But I did all of it, even the national dancing – all day Saturday, and Wednesday nights. And I loved it.

It may not come as a huge shock to learn that I was not deemed physically suitable for an internationally successful career as a prima ballerina, but I could definitely do modern or jazz dance pretty well, and tap too. I could *feeeeel* the music. G-gong. G-gong. I could move to it naturally, instinctively. I felt that if I had to step in at any point to help a dancer in anguish, and thereby meet the love of my life, I would be OK. I would do Johnny proud, and we would then have excellent sex. I was prepared.

Our dance teacher wasn't Penny by any stretch of the imagination, but she taught us the basics and was mostly encouraging in a terrifying kind of way. And she certainly made no secret of her opinions on our figures. On one occasion, she burst into the cramped changing room during our lunch break to find us all eating various bars of chocolate. Her face reddened in

disgust, and she jabbed a finger at each of us in turn, punctuating her warning that, ‘They. Will. Make. You. Fat.’ A jab for each of us. I was munching a Bounty in a particularly bovine way at the time, and her unexpected accusation landed heavily. I suddenly felt ashamed and guilty. I finished the Bounty though. I wasn’t about to waste it.

Each year my dance school would host a local show called ‘the Choreographic’ and we pupils would have the opportunity to design our own routines and perform them for members of the public. There would be prizes and cups, and one horrifying event where we would have to spontaneously choreograph and perform a three-minute dance, onstage, to a piece of music we had never heard before. The risk of humiliation was high, and failure almost certain, and it was the only compulsory category. Whether it was meant to be enjoyable, or simply an expression of our dance teacher’s sadistic streak we will never know, but it scared the living shit out of everyone. Everyone except me. Because I was prepared.

By this point, dance improvisation was basically my hobby. At home, at the weekend, I would wait for everyone to leave the house, on errands or trips out, and beg to stay behind so I could play music as loudly as I was able on our HiFi stack and choreograph my own routines. I use the term ‘choreograph’ lightly – it was more a case of me just flinging myself about as wildly as I could, having cleared the furniture to make an acceptable dance space. It was absolute primeval abandon. A

casual passing observer, catching the display through a window, might even be alarmed. But god, it felt good. It was total release, and I felt connected to *Dirty Dancing* through it. I felt I understood what made those characters tick. I felt part of their world. I was *Dirty Dancing*. And incredibly, that year, I won the Improvisation Cup at the Choreographic. This was mainly down to the fact that I had managed (by chance) to strike a pose right at the very moment the music stopped, which was accidental but impressive, since we had never heard it before. But it was also because of *Dirty Dancing* – it had made me bolder, braver. So, when the music started, I just danced, and I didn't care about anything else.



The white heat of my besotted first encounter with the film began to fade when I was around 13. It had lasted two years – longer than some marriages – and I think made a foundation stone for the rest of my life. My obsessive tendencies were unexpectedly transferred around this age when I quite suddenly became a fundamentalist evangelical Christian, which lasted until I lost my faith at 19, after starting a theology degree.

I would like to say that I fell in love with Jesus, but if I'm honest, I fell in love with the worship band leader at my church. I managed to get myself into the band so I could moon at him from

close quarters, though my love was firmly unrequited. Frankly, Jesus barely got a look in. I was ‘with the band’. Finally, I had made it backstage, where I liked to be, and still do. *Dirty Dancing* had given every backstage area a romantic flavour for me – the glamour, the secrets. And the band leader was a man of few words, a little gruff, but with his own damage and vulnerabilities. He was talented, but had seen a lot of trouble. His family life was tough. I think you know where I’m going with this ...

Yes, *Dirty Dancing* has provided the template for my emotional life, my romantic life, my sex life and even my marriage. It inspired a love of dancing that has continued to this day: for better, for worse. It was like having a cool older sister, or a glamorous but slightly drunk auntie who will tell you a bit about life – about men and women, and the way we lock together, and then twirl apart. It showed me what it felt like to be a teenage girl, and how you become a woman. It goes beyond my experience, and has affected so many like me, and unlike me.

And of course, it gave us all something to say whenever we are stuck for words: ‘I carried a watermelon.’ So many people have now told me they’ve gasped ‘I carried a watermelon’ in an awkward moment just to ease the tension. Those four words have now entered the mainstream lexicon. It’s a phrase that has influenced our culture – you can buy (and I have) t-shirts, mugs, water bottles and more with it printed on. It’s even the title of a book ... This is a huge achievement for any writer, so congratulations to Eleanor Bergstein – there aren’t many who can

boast that four words conjured from their own imagination would become a phrase known and loved by so many people. But there's so much more to say. Follow me ...

2

You Love Me

Baby Houseman loses her virginity twice on screen, and the first time is through the medium of dance. The moment she wangles her way into the staff party with the infamous watermelon is where her sexual odyssey really kicks off. In the next 90 minutes or so, we discover that *Dirty Dancing* has an awful lot to say about sex, youth and freedom – much of which is extremely helpful to a young girl watching, with her eyes out on stalks.

Johnny Castle approaches Baby as she stands awkwardly in the corner, seeming gruff and unimpressed at first that his cousin Billy has smuggled in a ‘guest daughter’ – as we have already learnt, due to excellent exposition, proprietor Max Kellerman does not approve of extra-curricular staff-guest fraternising, at least not for the dancers, so Johnny is understandably concerned that this intruder may get them all in trouble.

Baby is already slightly turned on by the deeply filthy dance displays going on all around her. As she follows Billy through the steaming, writhing mass, her skin flushes and her lips part. She looks a bit ‘glowy’, shall we say. But that’s nothing compared with what’s in store for her sharp sexual trajectory. Because Johnny Castle casts off his initial wariness and gets the devil in him for a moment. He invites Baby to dance. And so, it begins ...

Using dance as a proxy for sex isn’t new. In fact, using anything as a proxy for sex is fairly standard across all art forms – cutting to fountains gushing, or the tide rushing in at the crucial moment, is now so clichéd that it’s a joke in itself. Even Jane Austen was at it in *Pride and Prejudice*, when she used Elizabeth Bennet’s carefree lone muddy walks, her flushed cheeks and bright eyes shining from the fresh air, to convey a kind of vigorous drive and lust for life that does the job for Mr Darcy. But here in *Dirty Dancing*, the metaphorical shield is Durex-thin – it is in fact quite explicit. Basically, dancing = sex with your jeans on.

The scene continues, with Baby joining the throng at Johnny’s

invitation. As the more experienced dancer, he calms Baby down, gets her to feel the rhythm, and she stiffly lurches and thrusts with all the style and grace of Theresa May at a hip hop night, and as you watch, you feel the cringe go deep on her behalf.

But he doesn't laugh at her, or belittle her. As Otis Redding belts out 'Love Man', he pulls her to him, tells her to look in his eyes, to relax her shoulders, and – what do you know? – within minutes they have locked groins and she has become like a cooked noodle in his arms. The song ends, and he leaves her, but she can barely stand up. She appears to be melting from the vagina outwards. The message is this: a good dance will prepare you for good sex. You need not fear losing your virginity with a man who dances like this. It won't even hurt, for god's sake – you'll be so ready for it, you'll have excess natural lubricant to bottle and sell.

I don't need to be the latest person to describe the awkwardness of watching sex scenes with your parents – there are a million comedy routines covering it, and we all know what that's like in any case from sphincter-tightening first-hand experience. And so yes, on my first viewing there was all the usual 'eyes-straight-ahead-don't-swallow-don't breathe' stuff going on, which meant my enjoyment was a bit ... subdued.

Part of the sex appeal is how imperfect some of them look at times, by modern film standards. It's not all painted and pretty; it's sweaty and lusty, with mascara running down their cheeks with the sheer heat of it all. I remember being absolutely thrilled

with it – not necessarily in an explicitly erotic way, but it certainly gave me a feeling of warm excitement. It all looked so physical and immediate – you can feel the chemistry coming off the screen. Sex is natural and easy. Bodies are fun and sensual. So, feel good about yourself. And I did, after watching it.

So, while dancing is obviously the main focus of the film, and the dancers set the tone in a smoky, oily kind of way, it's sex that really underpins the whole thing. In her review of *Dirty Dancing* when it first came out in 1987, the eminent American film critic Pauline Kael wrote in the *New Yorker*, 'dancing is a transparent metaphor for main character Baby's sexual initiation ... this is a girl's coming of age fantasy: through dancing she ascends to spiritual and sensual perfection.'

Ascending to spiritual and sensual perfection sounds pretty good to me now as a 40-year-old woman, never mind as a teenager, but as a young girl approaching puberty the thought of sex terrified and fascinated me in equal measure. I had a habit of trying to get boys' attention, but as soon as they showed any interest, I would feel sick and back off hard. Of course, I was still too young to actually do it, or really want to do it, but trying out your powers early on the opposite sex, with varying degrees of success, seems to be a rite of passage for many girls.

My attempts were clumsy to say the least. I was not in any way coquettish or even especially nice, and thought being sarcastic was highly seductive. If I fancied someone a bit, I would relentlessly take the piss until there could be no doubt that I

considered them scum of the earth. It was counterproductive, but kept me and my delicate feelings protected in public. ‘You’ll cut yourself on that tongue one day,’ a teacher said to me after overhearing a conversation I was having with one poor victim.

The idea of flirting, or being soft in any way, made me feel ill. I can’t explain why, but it was a physical sensation – a visceral recoil. Thankfully, I got over it, so perhaps it was just nerves, but for a long time my relationships were always verbally combative – I saw it as a sign of affection, or rather, the kind of affection I was willing to express at the time. The idea that you should be nice to boys if you want them to like you seemed perfectly logical to me, it was just when it came to anything romantic that I went a bit strange. I had lots of friends who were boys, and they had always seemed fairly interchangeable with the girls. I didn’t wear dresses much, or skirts. I liked blue jeans, blue t-shirts and scruffy trainers. I mostly had my hair short, and could barely be bothered to brush it. If I dressed up at all, it was leggings and a large jumper. Before I watched *Dirty Dancing* that first time, I don’t think I really understood intimacy between couples, and the kind of ‘sex appeal’ that was usually shown in films felt like it came from another planet. I couldn’t relate at all.

But now here was a girl called Baby, who wore jeans and white plimsolls, and denim shorts, and loose-fitting t-shirts, who was slightly awkward and bad-tempered with this man, Johnny, and yet he seemed to like it. Here was a girl like me, wearing clothes like mine (only better), having her first sexual relationship with

a man who clearly knew his way around. She didn't wear make-up, she didn't have a push-up bra, she didn't stick her bum out, or pretend to be weak in his presence. She didn't use any tricks. She was wholly and completely herself, authentic in all respects, even as she changed her entire world view in the space of three weeks. And, as a result, she had the shag of her life. In fact, read 'Time of My Life' as 'Shag of My Life' and you get quite an accurate sense of the journey of the film – perhaps that was Eleanor Bergstein's euphemistic intention all along.

I believe this formed the basis for how I approached the notion of sex appeal as I entered my teens for real. I knew I wasn't pretty in the sense of 'pretty-pretty' – I knew who those girls were and what you were supposed to look like to be one of them, but I didn't really try to be like them. I still don't most of the time. I have learnt through my professional work that if you want to look properly good, or as good as you can possibly look, you need a minimum of two hours with a professional hair and make-up artist, seriously restrictive undergarments (or 'shapewear' as it is coyly known) and a four-inch heel or higher. I'd rather be comfortable. I'd rather look slightly shit, smile for the picture, resolve never ever to look at it, and then enjoy the rest of the evening. I even applied this to my own wedding, which is why we didn't have a professional photographer. I don't regret it – I had the best time. I wore a blue dress because I always manage to spill my food, I partook eagerly of the hog roast and pavlova, and then danced all night.

Penny – played by eighties pin-up Cynthia Rhodes – Johnny’s dance partner, drips old-school glamour and always looks astonishing. Tiny Jennifer Grey looks positively dumpy next to her sometimes, but it doesn’t matter. Because it doesn’t matter to Baby, and it certainly doesn’t matter to Johnny. Late in the film, Baby’s more groomed older sister Lisa offers to do her hair, but then stops herself with the line, ‘No, you’re pretty in your own way.’

‘Pretty in your own way’ became my lifeline. My mantra. There is one brief scene in *Dirty Dancing* where Baby tries to change herself or her appearance for Johnny, and that is when she stops on the stone steps to apply her sister’s ‘beige iridescent lipstick’, swiped from her drawer in the family cabin. And even then she makes a bit of a joke about it, draping herself over a railing in a cartoonish mockery of how a Hollywood siren might move. She’s having fun, and to be honest, that lipstick would be so plain it would barely register. The only other time she makes an effort is when she dances with Johnny at the Sheldrake, and that is for professional reasons. Yes, her outfits get sexier and skimpier as she learns to dance, but this does not appear calculated to have a sexual pull on Johnny, more for us to see that she is gaining confidence in her own body as she learns what it can do.

Other than these moments, it’s ‘pretty in your own way’ the whole time. I still look at myself in the mirror, and I see the imperfections, and then I catch myself and murmur

comfortingly, 'You're pretty in your own way.' This is partly to excuse the sheer lack of effort on my part on a day-to-day basis, but also it's a kind, realistic and affirming little ritual that makes you forget the pressures of having to contour yourself until you basically resemble a Kardashian, no matter the original shape of your features.

In fact, there is never any suggestion that Baby has to achieve a certain 'look' to get Johnny's attention, or win his desire. The first time they have sex, it follows the car journey back from the Sheldrake, in which Baby climbs in the back seat to change out of her more glamorous and revealing dancing outfit and back into the jeans and shirt she was wearing before. Johnny seems genuinely attracted by her character, her commitment, her goodness and her determination. That is what turns him on. However you look at it, this is a great message for a young girl entering the world of sexual politics for the first time. Or anyone, in fact.

There are no games with Baby and Johnny, and when you think about it, that is quite striking. They work together, they fancy each other, so they fuck. They communicate directly with each other. They don't send messages through friends, or play hard to get. They want it, so they do it. And then they do it again, and again, and again. The central issue of the film is not whether she has slept with him too fast to retain his respect, or whether he fancies someone else more, or whether she's cool enough for him. It's whether or not she can solve the mystery of a series of

purse thefts from the hotel for which he is accused before he is fired. And whether she can respect herself, even when she loses the respect of her father. It's strong stuff. And it's all very sexy, especially when they keep dancing with each other half-naked and a bit sweaty.

Even when they think they are going to have to separate for good, there is very little angst or stress. Watching this scene now, it is incredible to me how mature it is. Standing opposite each other next to his car on a dusty track, they embrace. He says, 'I'll never be sorry,' she agrees, and then he drives away. She waves for a moment, pauses and then turns to walk back to the hotel. It's so weirdly calm. They both seem to accept that it was fun while it lasted, they had some good times, but now it's over, and they have to go their separate ways. There is no suggestion that Baby will throw away her future for him, or that he will pursue her, or let her down at a later date. They kiss, they hug, he drives off, and she waves. And all the while 'She's Like the Wind', composed and performed by Swayze himself, plays over the top. What's not to love? When you compare it to the hysterical, 'my life is over' form of comparable scenes in more recent romantic dramas, it's revolutionary. It basically tells you that you can have a holiday romance, and then get over it and get on with your life. Think how many wasted hours we could all have saved over the years, when we've agreed to meet up with a holiday shag back home, and then sat opposite each other in a dreary pub, wondering, faintly embarrassed, what the hell you ever saw in each other, praying

no one you know comes in.

But even though I had all this formative education thanks to *Dirty Dancing*, my teenage years were barren, sexually speaking. In fact, I think you could even throw the word ‘frigid’ around and I wouldn’t kick you in the nuts. Of course, there’s nothing wrong with not being ready, but I was definitely resisting even the most innocent of romantic encounters – a light touch, a gentle snog. I think now that part of the attraction of becoming a full-on, fundamentalist, evangelical Christian from the age of 13 to 19 was the fact that they didn’t believe in sex before marriage, so I always had an excuse. ‘I can’t have sex with you because of Jesus,’ is a very effective deterrent, if you didn’t already know ...

I somehow knew that the reality would be a let-down, compared with Baby’s first experience, and therefore also the version I’d imagined for myself. My fear was in fact confirmed by my first snog, back at that Cornish campsite, at the age of 13. I remember his tongue thrusting in and out of my mouth with such vigour that I wondered whether he was trying to eat my dinner. Of course, he was young too – no doubt he is now a top-level snogger – but this put me off for a long time. It felt nothing like the soft kisses that Baby and Johnny share. But nevertheless, there was a dusky magic to it, and that moment just before the moment, when you know it’s going to happen and something inside takes over, is still a thrilling memory. That feeling of stepping outside to share a cigarette with someone you fancy, and realising they fancy you too, and it’s going to happen, and

it's going to happen now, is one of the most delicious sensations known to mankind.

Deep down I was waiting for Johnny Castle. An older man, perhaps. Or at least someone who knew what to do. In the film, he is meant to be 25 to Baby's 17, and Swayze himself was 34 when it was made (Grey was 27). This keeps us just on the right side of 'slightly pervy', but the age gap, both real and imagined, has been remarked upon before. It is really the sincerity and innocence of the performances that keeps us from any true discomfort.

Some have said maybe Johnny does this every year, and Baby is simply his latest victim, but I'm not having that. Because there is nothing untoward or unequal about the sex Baby and Johnny have. In fact, Swayze himself understood this, saying in a TV profile of his life and career that the film shows the loss of Baby's innocence, but the regaining of Johnny's. A more beautiful and insightful comment on their respective journeys, I could not compose.

And when that astonishing sex scene finally happens, crucially, it is Baby who initiates it. She seduces Johnny. She comes to his cabin, expressly disobeying her father, who has literally just told her she is to have nothing more to do with him. She's performed her duties at the Sheldrake, so there is no need for her to come at all. Baby may hope to use apologising to Johnny for her father's behaviour as a cover for her late-night visit, but she knows perfectly well what she's really after, and

suggests they dance together, one last time. As they move to the cracked soul of ‘Cry to Me’ by Solomon Burke, she runs her hands over his naked torso and grips hold of his buttock like a woman who knows exactly what she wants. It is one of the sexiest scenes of all time. Watching them blend together, in and out of bed, is enough to give you palpitations. And the best thing about it all is that Baby clearly loves it – she is not ashamed or guilty, she just wants more. Here is a teenage girl losing her virginity with no misery, shame or tears. She loves sex. It can be done!

When you are brought up with the constant reinforcement that your virginity is both a hindrance and a prize, that the losing of it will be traumatic no matter how you do it, can you conceive of how astonishing this film is? Let’s stand back and give it a moment. Let’s applaud it. Teenage girls can love sex and not be ‘little minxes’ or ‘sluts’. Who knew? I want more of this.

I wrote a play in 2018 called *3 Women*, with an 18-year-old girl in it, and I wanted the same for her. Writing her dialogue, when she’s talking about how much she loves sex, was such a thrill. I thought of Baby throughout. When she shouts that immortal line to Johnny as they argue about their fate – ‘Most of all, I’m scared of leaving this room and never feeling again, my whole life, the way I feel when I’m with you’ – I think I knew, even as a young girl, that she meant sex – there’s unfinished business here, and Baby could surely sense it was building to something wonderful. It’s a cry of lust, as much as it is one of love.

Johnny clearly has no idea of the sheer power he possesses

here. He blinks back at her, bewildered. But he has had this effect on women before, so it shouldn't come as too much of a surprise, though it's sort of sweet that he hasn't realised. And it can get him in trouble – one woman who has experienced his skills, Vivian, is even prepared to tell an absolute stonking lie because she fears she will never get near it again.

Ah yes, Vivian. Vivian Pressman, brilliantly and subtly played by Miranda Garrison (although on first viewing I was convinced it was British actress Lesley Joseph, of *Birds of a Feather* fame ...), brings us to a different kind of sex represented in *Dirty Dancing*. In fact, there's a lot of shagging in *Dirty Dancing*. It drives the plot as much as the dancing does. And a lot of general sexiness – everyone looks pretty up for it all the time. Even Baby's parents, Jake and Marge Houseman, have a naughty twinkle in their eyes, to be frank.

The air of melancholy and loneliness, and faded glamour Vivian brings can be lost in the frenzy of the first few viewings, but it's there and it's important. When I first watched it, I was too overwhelmed by it all to really take her, and her storyline, in. But later in life I have grown quite fascinated by it.

It's Max Kellerman's introduction to Vivian early in the film that sets the tone. He watches her gracefully dancing with Johnny, a wry and sympathetic smile on his face as he explains to the Housemans that she is a 'bungalow bunny' – women who spend all week alone at Kellerman's while their wealthy husbands work, arriving at the weekend only to ignore them

further, choosing to play cards instead of dancing with their wives. It is clear that Vivian and Johnny have some form of quiet arrangement, and that she is one of the women 'stuffing diamonds in his pockets' that he refers to later in his speech to Baby about his experience of being sexually exploited in the resort. There are no sniggers, or jibes about older women. He doesn't suggest that he is lowering himself, or is repulsed by her. There is an implied competition with Baby of course, which Baby wins, and yes, her youth is part of it, but also there is a sense that Vivian represents a jaded, toxic scene that we wish Johnny was not involved with, and Baby is his route out.

My only criticism of this storyline is that, as I have got older, I have wished to learn more about Vivian. There's so clearly a real story there, and she would have things to say about life, men, and probably a whole lot else. Probably more than Marge Houseman, who doesn't seem to have a lot going on, and even less to contribute, save for her final bark at her husband, 'Sit down, Jake', as Baby and Johnny take to the stage in front of everyone.

It took me a while to realise what was going on in one of the final scenes, where Vivian's husband Mo offers Johnny some cash in hand for 'extra dance lessons' for his wife, because he will be busy playing cards all night. It took me even longer to understand that Johnny's decision to reject the offer of cash (and therefore reject Vivian herself) from Mo Pressman, in front of her, motivates her to report him to his boss for stealing the purses and wallets that have been going missing around the resort. This

then leads to Baby having to expose their affair by providing his alibi, while accusing the old couple, the Schumachers (who are found to be the real thieves). ‘I know he didn’t take them,’ she says falteringly, her eyes flicking briefly to her shocked father, ‘I know he was in his room all night. And the reason I know ... is because I was with him.’ Wow – what a moment! Your heart could beat right out of your chest. She has just told everyone she is shagging the arse off her dancing instructor, right there, over breakfast.

There’s a lot to learn from this film when you are 11 years old. The mysterious and complicated world of adults was slowly coming into focus for me, but a lot still went over my head. There are layers I missed the first time I watched *Dirty Dancing* that would later reveal themselves with repeat viewings (even to this day, Vivian Pressman is now a pretty vivid character for me, rather than a slightly tragic side-show). I remember around this period (the early 1990s) hearing the phrase, ‘Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned’, for example, and gaining some insight into its meaning because of Vivian’s actions. To make herself feel better after Johnny’s rejection, she goes straight to nasty Robbie Gould, the waiter, and is discovered on top of him by Lisa, Baby’s sister, who arrives ready to let him pop her cherry. And all the while, a stone’s throw away in another cabin, Johnny and Baby are having another world-beating shag. It’s a busy night.

The moment where, in the harsh early morning light, a grim-faced Vivian, free of make-up, exits Robbie’s cabin, and, as she

tucks her tights into her evening bag, looks up to see Baby and Johnny, the image of wholesome sexuality, kissing each other goodbye after a night of love and tenderness, has got to be one of the bleakest images in romantic cinema. In fact, it has saved me from some seriously ill-advised, on-the-rebound-style hook ups over the years – I just picture myself as Vivian at dawn, still in her party dress, no tights, wondering who's using who, and it's enough to make me order a cab home. Thank you, Viv.

So now, let's deal with Neil. Poor Neil Kellerman represents all those men who inexplicably believe themselves to be catnip to women everywhere, when in fact they really couldn't be less sexually appealing. Even I, aged 11, understood that this man is not the one you want, even though he is intent on telling you that he is all you could ever dream of. He is the absolute antithesis of Johnny, and a sexual wasteland. A date with him would leave you about as moist as a beech-nut husk stranded in the midday sun. Mere mention of the line, 'I love to watch your hair blowing in the breeze', to any woman familiar with the film and therefore the scene where Neil invites Baby to come for an evening walk, will result in an instant and uncontrollable physical reaction of pure cringing disgust. Try it – honestly, you'll be amazed at the power those ten words can have. In fact, you don't even have to have seen the film.

Crucially, Neil can't dance. And this, to writer and retired dancer Eleanor Bergstein, essentially consigns any man to the sexual slag heap. For Bergstein, dancing is the greatest indicator

of sexual prowess and compatibility. That's why it's called *Dirty Dancing*. Even more criminal than not being able to dance is not being able to dance while believing you can, a flaw Neil exhibits when he walks into the studio to talk to Johnny before the big end-of-season show. Baby tells him that she's just there to have some 'extra dance lessons'. We see Neil raise his hands, and gyrate a little, and utter the words, 'I can teach you, kid,' which will induce a vomit response in anyone who now firmly understands that dancing = sex. No, Neil, you can't. No, no, no.



But who am I to judge? Even though I knew every inch of what they were up to, how sex was and wasn't meant to be done, who to do it with – ideally – and when, what you should and shouldn't need to wear to get it, there was nothing much happening with me in that department in real life. It was, shall we politely say with a cough, 'theoretical'. That is, until I went to my first hip hop club in London, far from home, far from church, with a group of new and exciting friends I had met at a drama club.

I had always liked hip hop, rap, R'n'B – I can't say that I was particularly knowledgeable about them, or that my tastes within the genre were sophisticated, but they were unusual for the time and place I grew up. I went to a comprehensive school in Hertfordshire. It was mixed socially, but predominantly white.

Most people were into guitar music and pop. I found bands such as Radiohead and Nirvana made me semi-suicidal, and instead hoovered up the likes of Arrested Development, The Fugees and Blackstreet, which were the bands in those genres that made it to the Top 40 in the 1990s. So although my tastes were uncommon in my little part of the Home Counties, I was still well within the parameters of what was available to buy from the music section of Woolworth's in town. There was nothing especially cool or underground about me – I just liked what I liked.

Dancing to Nirvana in a nightclub is very, very different to dancing to Blackstreet. Very. Different. The first time I went to a club playing this sort of music I was 17 years old, and – thanks to *Dirty Dancing* – I thought, 'Yes, this is it – this is what I want. I know how to do this.' And I dived in.

And it was here that I had my second ever snog, and let me say it was very, very different to the first one. Very. Different. It had started with dancing, some very, very dirty dancing, which resulted in a stern word from a friend as she pulled me away, looked me beadily in the eye, and told this naïve, 'watermelon carrying' suburban bumpkin that the 'only rule in the club tonight is you leave with who you came in with, OK?' I nodded dumbly, not quite understanding – of course I would leave with her, I didn't have anywhere else to stay ... woahhhhhh, I see, I get it. She thought I might leave the club with this man I was dancing with, and stay at his house and have sex with him, and fuckin' hell, I'm only 17 and

immeantobeachristianbutgodknowsidontfeel
verychristiantonight andohgodimdancingwiththis
managainanditsjust.so.sexy.

Then he snogged me. And this man snogged me good and proper. There had been some fairly full-on dancing going until this point, but now some serious shit was happening. We weren't even dancing anymore, I was somehow just sitting on his lap at the side of the room, snogging his face off. He even put his finger in my mouth as we snogged, and somehow made it work. I have tried to recreate it since with other men, but generally it's an awful idea. Don't try it. I think you have to be drunk and recently dancing to Ginuwine's 'Pony' to pull it off.

This was a mini-epiphany for me. Actual sex wouldn't happen for another three years, and actual good sex a little time after that. But this was as close as I could imagine getting as a frigid, evangelical Christian virgin who didn't believe in sex before marriage. Was this my Johnny Castle, at last? I can't remember the man's name. I think he muttered something about being a 'driver' and that he would 'take care of me'. I'm not going to suggest that this was a marriage proposal, but it certainly felt romantic. He was a nice man. And a truly incredible kisser. He was quite a lot older than me. I don't remember any sense of feeling pressured by him to go somewhere else, so perhaps I was lucky, or unlucky. We could be happily married now – him doing his 'driving' to support us, and me at home with nine kids, still totally captivated by his ability to make putting a finger in your

mouth while kissing an enjoyable experience. Who's to say what could have happened? Either way, I left the club with my friend, who practically body-checked me out the door, and as the hot sweat cooled onto my body in the night-time air, I felt heated from the inside. I felt like Baby. I felt like a woman.

You can do a lot worse than use *Dirty Dancing* as your guide through the sexual shenanigans of early youth. Baby is not a silent, smiling, swishy-haired princess. She is outspoken, noisy and casual in her appearance. She finds a man in Johnny who respects all of that, likes it, loves it, even. He only wants to lift her higher. Literally and figuratively. This film says, 'Find a man like Johnny, and go get him. Don't change yourself, change the world. Change the man if necessary. But remember: you're pretty in your own way. You don't have to change a thing.' It's a decent message for a teenage girl, better than 'drink fruit-flavoured laxatives to be thin', or 'shade your nose away with this beige pen', or 'take more clothes off to be noticed'. It's sexy, but it's equal. Everyone's at it, for good and bad reasons. It's messy.

But that's life, and that's sex. You can't make it tidy, so you might as well enjoy it.

3

Todo Un Po

7.30pm, 13 March 2010.

The show is *Let's Dance for Sport Relief*, a charity that raises money for African and UK aid projects, and it's going out live to an audience of 8 million people.

I am stood on the world's shiniest floor, behind two large sliding black doors, beyond which are nine TV cameras, a live studio audience, a panel of judges, presenters Mel and Sue and my new fiancé.

Thirty seconds to performance.

I am wearing a black leotard, a glove made of shards of mirrored glass, three pairs of tights, a pair of strappy heels and a lot of gold body make-up.

Twenty seconds to performance.

I can hear Mel and Sue begin my introduction. Standing in front of me are two professional dancers, wearing the same leotard as me, minus the glove, each with about 70 per cent less thigh than I have.

Ten seconds to performance.

I can hear the end of the video clips package. I am shaking uncontrollably. It's fear, yes, but also adrenaline. More adrenaline than I have ever felt running through my body in my entire life. I wonder if this much adrenaline is actually safe. I wonder if I might need a paramedic.

Five seconds to performance.

They are saying my name. The music starts. The doors start to slide back. And I can see only bright lights as we move forward in line. I'm supposed to be strutting sassily, but I can barely walk because I'm shaking so much. Am I dying? Possibly. But it's too late to stop now. Beyoncé's 'Single Ladies' starts playing and the rest is noise. Blur and noise.

Oh god. I still feel sick now, and I'm only writing it down.

At the time of writing, the YouTube video of me performing the 'Single Ladies' dance has nearly 40 million hits. Every year, a TV company in Japan enquires about my availability to perform on Japanese national TV, competing against their

leading Beyoncé impersonator. Every year, I say yes, and then ask for a fee so ludicrous that I never hear from them again. Until the following year, when a fresh enquiry is made. They truly believe that doing the ‘Single Ladies’ dance is my main occupation. They think I am the UK’s leading Beyoncé impersonator, and therefore a worthy opponent for their own home-grown Queen B. And with YouTube numbers like that, who can blame them? They do not know that between then and now I have lived through a somewhat gritty labour, and giving birth to a baby with an unusually large head has left me rather less able to slut drop suddenly or convincingly.

The ‘Single Ladies’ dance is still usually the first thing anyone says about me on introductions to panel shows, live events, and other appearances on TV, radio and the stage. It’s in my official CV. People put the song on at weddings, meaning I am forced to hide until it’s over, otherwise all the other guests form a circle around me and clap until I drunkenly agree to attempt as much of it as I can remember. I performed a version of the dance on my 2010 tour, dressed in full military gear as a butch soldier character I invented called Captain Rosie, closing the first half of the show to a standing ovation more often than not. Years after the event, a man booked me for a gig on the basis that I would perform ‘Single Ladies’, but he didn’t tell me that in advance, and even though I explicitly said I would be doing normal stand-up, he didn’t listen and was so furious that my act was ‘Single Ladies’-less, he didn’t want to pay me.

In terms of reach and endurability, nothing else I have ever done comes close. I had three series of an award-winning sketch show, I was in the very episode of *Peep Show* which was voted the most popular ever, I've written a novel – A WHOLE NOVEL, FOR PITY'S SAKE – I've met Prince Philip *and* Dame Emma Thompson. I've met THE POPE. And yet all these things might as well not exist, when set alongside three minutes of 'Single Ladies'-based exertion in 2010.

And I don't even mind. My greatest triumph was expressed through the medium of dance, and I sort of love that. And it was a really fucking difficult dance at that. I'm not going to lie – it nearly killed me. We had five days of rehearsal: that was the rule. Everyone in the competition was only allowed five days of rehearsal, no matter what dance they were doing. Which is both fair and not fair at the same time.

I turned up to the rehearsal room on the morning of day one feeling nervous, but certain that the choreographer and two professional dancers would have the whole routine worked out, and they would simply teach it to me. It would be tough – I wasn't really fit enough to do it justice. But it was a comedy show, and so long as I learned the basic steps and messed about a bit in the middle, we would be fine. We had loads of time ...

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