

I JUST WANNA DANCE

By Hank Trout

It's 1959 and I'm six years old. My family has gathered at my grandparents' house this Sunday to watch The Ed Sullivan Show. I'm sitting on the cold linoleum floor, watching, as this very tall, thin, very regal-looking woman walks onto the stage. Her gray hair is pulled back in a severely tight bun, and she's wearing a high-necked long-sleeved black dress. The music starts, and she begins to sway from side to side as if blown by the wind, and then she's pirouetting and gliding across the stage, and I am mesmerized, I cannot take my eyes off her. The music stops and the applause thunders out of the television. Suddenly, I jump to my feet and I begin swaying and gliding around the room and spinning and twirling. "What the hell has gotten into you?!" my dad yells at me. "Nothing, Daddy, I just wanna dance!"

It's 1965 and I'm twelve years old. I'm alone at my junior high school's annual Swing Into Spring dance. Mr. DiCecco the phys ed teacher is spinning 45's on an old record player hooked up to the P.A. system. He drops the needle on Chubby Checkers' "The Twist" and I can't sit still anymore. I walk across the gym floor and stand before Beverly Wilkins, the only African-American girl in this lily-white school. "Do you know how to do the Twist?" I ask her. She shrugs and says "Sure," as she stands up, and we walk out onto the dancefloor. She looks so pretty in a yellow dress, with yellow ribbons braided into her pigtails. We Twisted through Chubby Checker, and then through The Beatles' "Love Me Do." The next song is a slow dance, "You've Lost that Loving Feeling" by the Righteous Brothers. "Slow dance with me?" I ask, and she just shrugs. I put my left hand on her waist, she puts her right hand on my shoulder, and I take her left hand in my right. But before we dance half a dozen steps, Mr. DiCecco pounces on us and separates us like a couple of boxers in an illegal clinch. He looks down at me and yells, "You should know better!" and at Beverly he yells, "And you should stick with your own kind!" "We didn't do anything!" I pleaded. "It's because I'm colored," Beverly says. She turns and runs out of the gymnasium to the girls' bathroom. "Why did you yell at us?" I ask Mr. DiCecco. "We didn't do anything wrong! We just wanna dance!"

It's 1989, just one week before I find out that I am HIV-positive. It's 9:30 on a Saturday night, and I've just returned home from another memorial service; it is my second memorial that day, my third that week. I've been to so many memorials already—I'm only thirty-six years old and I've already lost thirty-six of my friends. I'm tired and I'm hurting and I'm afraid to be alone tonight. I need to dance, I need to sweat, I need to flirt, I need to move, I need to forget the memorial services and all the grief and chaos, all the death and terror. So I pull on my jeans, lace up my boots, and put on a tank top. I'm headed to the End-Up because I know that, more than anything, I just wanna dance.

And now it's 2018, and I've just turned sixty-five. The virus that invaded my body thirty years ago continues to inflict its damage. I used to have forearms like Popeye's and biceps the size of tennis balls; today, I am so weak that I can't lift anything much heavier than this cane. My bones have grown so brittle that I have fractured my spine just by bending over. I've lost so much muscle in my legs that I cannot climb stairs without assistance, and some days I can barely walk at all. Still, no matter how painful it is, I know it's true, I still just wanna dance.

So tonight, I'm hoping for a miracle! Send me a tall strong dancing god! Let him see me from across the room, see how hungry I am to be dancing. Let him cut through the crowd on the dance floor and walk right up to me. Let him offer his hand and pull me up to my feet and guide me to the middle of the dance floor, where I kick off my shoes so I can stand on the tops of his boots. I want to wrap my arms around his neck and lay my cheek on his shoulder as he dances me around the room. Dance me to a time and place where I can sway and glide and twirl like Martha Graham, and no one yells at me. Dance me to a time and place where I can hold Beverly Wilkins in my arms and dance with her like a righteous brother, and no one yells at us. Dance me to a time and place where all my friends are still alive and kicking up their heels. Dance me to the end of the universe and back. Dance me to the end of time itself. And if this turns out to be the last waltz, that's okay. Tonight, I just wanna fucking dance!