

I Wanna Dance

With Somebody

Learning to Follow

By Xochitl Gonzalez

There comes a time in everyone's life when they need to stop making excuses, look in the mirror, and confront head-on the gap between who they are and who they want to be. A few months ago, that happened to me. I could no longer put off the full and joyous life I felt I deserved. I decided it was finally time to learn to salsa. I'm a very good dancer, generally speaking. Get me in a club, and I'll be in the center of your dance circle. Invite me to your wedding, and guests will think I'm a professional party motivator. Hip-hop, old-school disco, merengue, bachata—even my cumbia's not half bad. But salsa has always eluded me. Not because I couldn't master the steps or the rhythms, but because dancing salsa, for a woman, traditionally requires being led.

The horns could be soaring, the rhythm rising up from my toes and bursting through my chest, but when I'd get onto the dance floor with my partner and he'd start nudging me this way and that, my entire body would stiffen. Around us, couples would be strutting in seductive tandem, and my poor partner would be left to bat me around like a reluctant spinning top. Eventually we'd both give up.

I could trace the problem to the 1990s, and college. By day I was exposed to third-wave-feminist texts—lots of talk about claiming my power and rejecting gender roles. But on evenings and weekends, the small coterie of Latino students enrolled in my predominantly white college would gather and dance. The chasm between the bodily autonomy I was being empowered to have intellectually and the physical pliability to a partner's will that salsa required was simply too wide for my teenage brain to bridge. As I got older, and experienced sexism not just in theory but in practice, my discomfort only solidified.

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But I was missing out on having fun. And I felt a deeper disconnect. It isn't just that I wanted to dance salsa. You have to understand: I felt in every molecule of my being that I should be dancing salsa. And dancing it well.

I'm a loud and proud New Yorker, and salsa is as New York as a bagel with a schmear. We even have our own style of dancing it: “salsa on 2,” where you break on the second beat of the measure. The sonic roots are in Cuba, but salsa as most people know it was born in the dance halls of my hometown. It's also part of my Puerto Rican inheritance. During its golden age in the '60s and '70s, Nuyorican salsa was more than just dance music—it was the sound of political empowerment and pride. When I see people dance salsa well, I feel like I am watching people fully be free. I'm not talking about the kind of routines you see on *Dancing With the Stars*; I'm talking about the moves you see at a block party or your parents' anniversary party. My bodily aversion to being led on the dance floor was getting in the way of me fully participating in my culture.

Near my home in Brooklyn is a salsa studio; I'd walked by it longingly for a decade. At last I walked in and set up a series of private lessons. I'd been living my entire adult life as a leader, and I was finally desperate enough to admit that I wanted to learn to follow.

I couldn't have predicted that Andy, my dance instructor, would provide me with more breakthroughs than my past five years of therapy. Andy's not particularly philosophical, or even chatty—we had a lot of dance floor to cover in each 45-minute session. But after showing me the basics and being sur-

prised at how much I already knew, he asked why I was actually there. When I explained that I had trouble being led, he became a merciless diagnostician, offering the kind of commonsense advice that hits like profound wisdom. Immediately, it became clear that what was keeping me from being a better dance partner was not really about dancing at all.

First, he stopped me to point out my tendency to look at my feet instead of at him. When I explained that I wanted to be sure I was doing everything right, he reminded me this was about how we danced together, not just about my performance. Eye contact, he added, would help us move more in sync.

My homework was to practice one move—it's called the Cross Body Lead, for the curious—until it felt as natural as walking. “If you do this well,” Andy told me, “you'll signal to your partner that there's space for them to lead, and who doesn't want to dance with someone who makes space for them?” On my way home, I wondered how many of my connections and relationships had fizzled over the years because we were too busy focusing on our own success to make space for each other.

When I went back the next week, my Cross Body Lead was on point. But my new issue was that I was going from one move to the next without waiting for Andy's signals—the hand gestures and light touches with which the leader guides the follower. “What you think we're gonna do next is not the same as reading my signals of what to do,” he told me. In other words, the dance is a conversation and I wasn't listening.

At some point, Andy stopped me. Fundamentally, he explained, I have to believe that my partner wants me to look good and have fun. I need to trust that if I let my partner lead, they'll see what moves I like and direct us there.

