

Ballspenden

by Stuart Millard

It all began with one man. Like a lot of things that got scratched onto the face of history, that's all it took. Nobody knows his name. I guess nobody thought to ask. Nor do they know why he took it upon himself to start dancing in the middle of the pavement at 1:47 on a Tuesday afternoon. The first to join him were probably only doing so to be ironic, sarcastically humouring the giddy twat doing the robot to a parking meter by leaping around like the DJ had just stuck on their favourite track. But they didn't stop. Didn't, couldn't. Before long, a small handful had grown into dozens, each lost to the rhythm, throwing aside whatever else they'd planned for the day to dancing with wild abandon to the tunes inside in their heads, or on their iPods, or whatever lyrics and notes came puking out of their mouths. Once the crowd really started to grow, people ditched their cars in the middle of the street, and soon, they numbered in the hundreds. It spread like a disease, an outbreak of breaking out, an airborne meme with visible symptoms of body-popping and clumsy pirouettes, mushrooming out across the country.

Reading it off the page, you might get a sense of community, of a joining of the race with a primal impulse transcending twenty first century trappings and even language itself, but that's not how it felt at the time. This was no flash mob celebration of the human spirit; it was something else, something that inadvertently said more about us as a species than any cynically organized campaign for giant water pistol fights in Trafalgar Square had ever managed. Even if you're doing it together, there's no unity when everyone's dancing to their own tune.

Myself, I spectated for a while out of the window, bemused and amused, an interloper at someone else's surprise party. I watched people staring as the mood swept down the street, some confused, others elated, but all throwing up their hands and going with it.

Before it descends into a ragged chaos, it always starts in that golden age Hollywood way. Leaping onto the bonnet of a car and spinning around a lamppost, Gene Kelly-esque tip-taps through the cigarette butts and dog dirt; those first moments are the liberating release of this long dormant urge that's been bubbling under the surface of the louts and the brickies, housewives and posers, and desk-bound office drones who daydreamed away the hours and could finally be *free*.

My co-workers twirled past the photocopier and out into the street, our supervisor gliding out of sight, swaying arms conducting an unheard melody, while Jaq from accounting pogoed in front of the window to Starbucks like Johnny Rotten, joyously spitting at her own reflection. Only once I'd joined, did I begin to understand. My first action was to listen to the sound of my shoes tap-dancing on the roof of a minicab, before I took on a more free-flow movement, organically circulating in and out of groups like bubbles in an orgy hot-tub.

The power of the dance had become so entrancing that anyone caught in its path would immediately stop what they were doing. Blood-soaked surgeons tangoed with beer smelling pub men; a traffic warden spazzed out an energetic Manumission rave, and a mother River-Danced betwixt the splayed limbs of a silent corpse. That was the first body I saw. After eight hours, people just started to fall. Nobody wanted to be the first one to stop.

I became aware of the approach of a conga-line, chanting and kicking its way down the street like a spectral locomotive with its fires stoked by handfuls of cheap Ecstasy tablets. It was a full twenty minutes before it had fully passed, and I hooked myself onto the back, clutching the hips of an exhausted looking woman, as others clamped on behind me. Making our way out of the city, the dancing continued. A group of strangers bopped around the remains of a fatal car accident; I sang and can-canned my legs, like I did as we

passed a moshpit of people thrashing themselves together into a mush. The weak and the frail who'd just kept on going until their hearts had popped lined the streets like discarded jackets at a sweaty disco. But still, people spilled from their houses to join us, those who tumbled to the ground being trampled beneath our feet, filling their dying breath with song.

At sunrise, I caught the gaze of the girl in front, craning her head back for a moment. In her eyes, I thought I saw a glimmer of doubt, a "why?" but she turned towards the front and kept on going. An hour later, maybe three, we came upon the first man I'd seen in almost a full day who was *standing*, completely still. There were others too. Some struggling home, others seated on the curb, utterly drained. Suddenly, everyone just crumbled to a clumsy halt. The line dispersed, and a flood of tired emotions dribbled through my clotted veins; confusion, relief, sudden self-consciousness at my jaunty poise.

I heard that a few miles in front, the head of the conga line had gone over the edge of a cliff, those behind whooping and kicking to the sounds of their dance partners smashing against the rocks below. I briefly wondered why they'd kept on dancing to their deaths. They were just too ashamed not to.

After that day, life went right back to normal, the nine to five grind. Nirvana on the radio — *Come as You Are*. I tapped my foot against the floor in time to the bassline and the office became so silent it almost creaked. The eyes of everyone upon me, I hushed my limb. I eyebrowed a small nod of apology and went back to my work, while inside, I pictured myself falling.

