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# Why I Hate the Promenade

BY DOUG BOST

**I** WAS 22 WHEN my girlfriend started noticing my hearing problem.

She and I had been dating since I was 17, in high school in Orono. She was in college. We broke up over Christmas break, but then we got back together. And then, right before I started school at NYU, she broke up with me for another guy, and that was the end. Until—two years later, she moved to New York. And we started dating again. And when that happened, it was kind of wonderful. It was just like we imagined it back at Orono High—two kids from Maine, making it together in the big city.

Then she started noticing that this problem with my hearing was getting more and more pronounced. So I didn't tell anybody, but I went to a specialist. I was ready for bad news. The doctor did a number of tests, and then he sat me down and asked me how I

knew I had a hearing problem. And I said my girlfriend told me I'm not hearing her very well. Sometimes she has to repeat what she says three or four times before I hear it. Even then sometimes I'm just pretending to understand. And he asked me if I had this experience with other people, and I didn't answer. And then he told me my hearing was fine.

It was diagnostic confirmation of something I already knew, really.

So one night I met her after work, and I told her I still thought she was a wonderful person and I cared for her, and maybe I was making a terrible mistake but...this was it. And she asked me if I hated her, and I said of course I didn't. And she asked me if I never wanted to see her again, and I said that wasn't it at all.

And then she said, "What about the

dance lessons?"

And I said, "What dance lessons?"

"I told you all about it," she said, which was probably true.

It turns out just a few days before I made my decision, she'd done something we'd always talked about. She signed us up for a couples ballroom dancing class. It was a gift to me. To us. But now everything was different and she wiped her eyes and she nodded seriously and said she understood and she didn't know what was she going to do about these damn dance lessons, but it would be okay, and I said, hang on. They're just dance lessons. I've always wanted to learn. We both have. Let's do it.

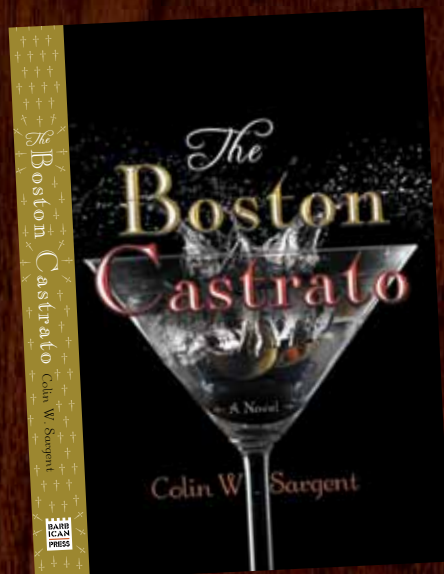
But y'know who takes couples ballroom dance lessons? People who are about to get married. We were the opposite of that.

Lesson one was like dental surgery. But

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## FICTION

everybody was awkward that first week. Everybody except that couple who dressed like Spanish dancers. Elaborate outfits, billowing sleeves.

The instructor had a tiny little mustache and kept correcting my posture. He walked us individually through the basics of the foxtrot, and then we paired off.

Her favorite part of the foxtrot was the promenade. Slow, slow, quick, quick, together. But I couldn't keep it in my head. I kept nipping the front of her shoe with my foot during the first back-and-forth steps, and then I'd look down and I'd realize I should never look down and by then I'd stepped on her other foot, probably, and before I could re-focus she'd started the promenade without me so my slow-slow steps were like tripping up an escalator and she would nod at me reassuringly while whispering the steps, and I'd tilt my head at her at that, I'd give her a smirk because come on, I didn't need the steps whispered at me after all this time, but then boom, I clipped her left toe again, goddamn it, and I missed the transition to the promenade and I'd have to wait for the music to come around again. My hands were pushing and prodding her waist like I was feeling for a benign lump. It was bad.

In the fourth class, we broke into different pairs. We had to dance with other partners. In the movie version of this story, this is where we'd briefly fall in love with other people before realizing our true feelings. In reality, I was paired with a really graceful crazy-cat-lady and later the front of my sweater was covered with hair. My ex had been paired with one of the Spanish dancers and seemed to love it, but I saw his partner later that night making fun of her by pretending to lumber around clumsily. So I accidentally knocked that woman's coat off its hook and stepped on it.

After one of the later classes, my ex and I walked to the subway together. Something had been funny, I forget what, and we were laughing, and I asked her if she wanted to get a piece of pie in the diner and she just looked at me, so disappointed, and said, "You broke up with me." And I apologized, and she told me I wasn't taking her seriously, and I went home and wrote this whole long thing in my journal about what an ass I was. And what a good dancer it turns out she was.

And eventually, the last class came around.



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My friends were saying I must be relieved, but the truth is I was looking forward to these Sunday classes. More and more, it was just reassuring to know when I was going to see her again. Tonight we had to show how much we'd learned, one couple at a time, everybody else watching.

So class began, and in the center of a circle of the soon-to-be-married or at least soon-to-be-in-a-wedding-party, somebody made a joke and she laughed and I put my hands exactly where they needed to go but not like a textbook, more like an instinct, and we did that previously impossible foxtrot, turned the same way when we had to, and reversed the same way when we had to, and when we got past the spot that was always the rough spot, we kept going. Step, step, together. I definitely clipped her foot, at least once. But as it went on I got kind of flushed with the parts of it that were working, and she was flushed, too. And our music ended, and people clapped. And then the Spanish couple did some semi-professional routine that was actually very charming and the guy kissed her at the end of it and you could tell they were really crazy about each other.

**A**nd then it was over. She and I got our things and said goodbye to a few of the other people we'd gotten to recognize, and lingered as we headed for the door, as I thought about how close she lived to the dance studio, and I thought she looked very pretty in this dress, and then we had our moment with the instructor and his tiny little mustache at the door. He shook our hands and smiled, and we told him how much we'd gotten out of the lessons and how much we thought we'd improved, but he wasn't saying much. He just kind of nodded.

"We'll definitely keep working on our steps," I said. Which I meant, when I said it.

But it got absolutely no reaction from either of them. I realized my smile was kind of pasted on, I'd been smiling for a while, but now that I actually looked at her, she seemed more serious than I thought she'd been earlier.

And the dance instructor raised his eyebrows, kind of like there was nothing more he could do for us now. And he thought about saying one thing but he didn't say it, and then he said, "You just weren't listening to each other." ■

Doug Bost is a writer and a terrible dancer who grew up in Maine and now lives in Brooklyn, NY.



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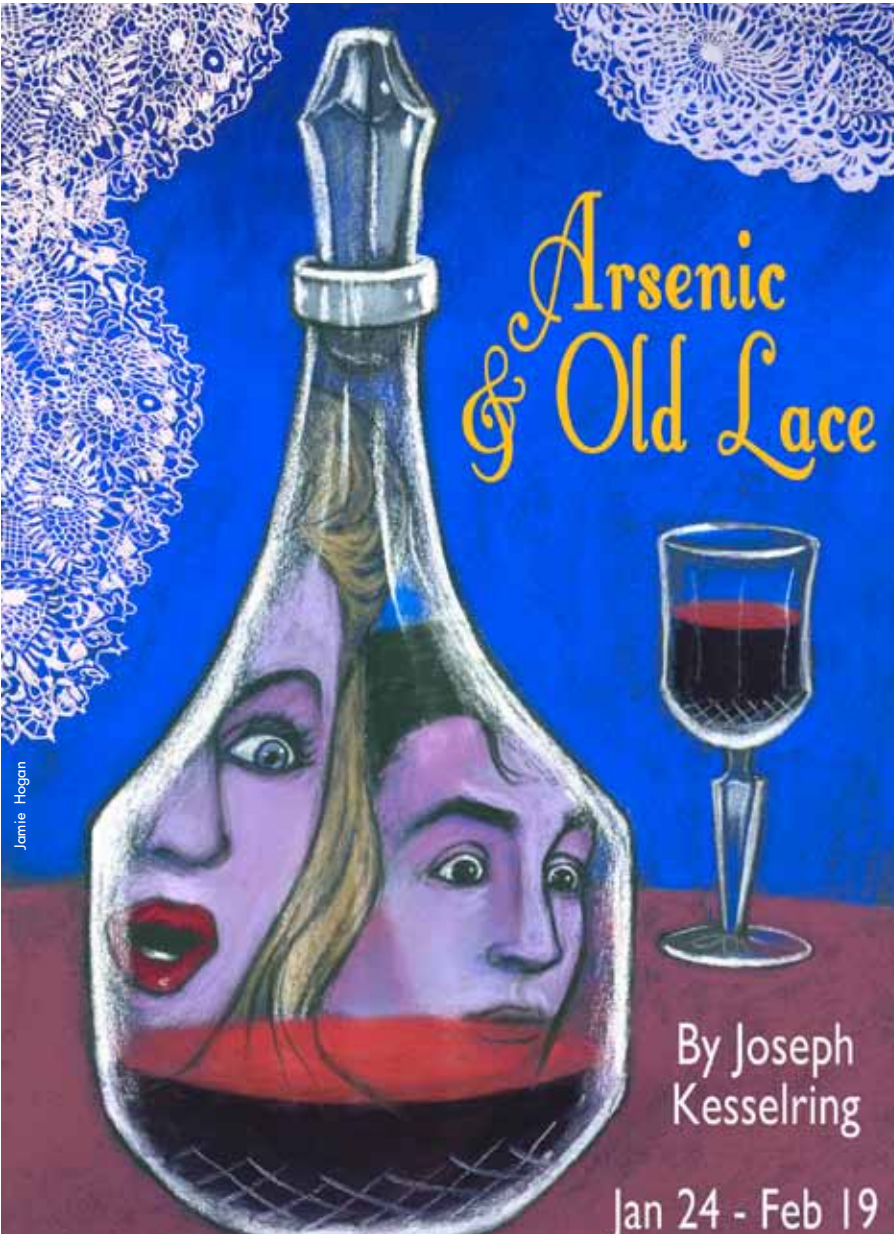





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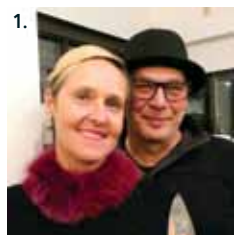
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