

Duck Tale

First Dance

While I was visiting a friend working in the music department at a local Barnes and Noble bookstore one mid-August day in 1997, a young female customer with her jet-black hair done up like classic pin-up model Bettie Page walked up to the music counter and asked if they had any swing music.

"Do you swing dance?" I asked while my friend who worked behind the counter looked to see what he had in stock.

"I do," she said.

"Where?"

"Club Chicago on the west side. It's not much to look at on the outside, but it's amazingly cool on the inside." She went on to describe spots she frequented around town, including ones with lessons. "Here's my e-mail address. What's yours?"

"L-C-A-C-H-O-L-A@..."

"Hey, wait, I know you!"

"You do?" I didn't recognize her.

"Yeah, you're the one who used to write columns for the *Cougar*! I used to read you all the time!" Ever since I started writing the column for the *Cougar*, I had been having a lot of these happy coincidences at various spots around town. "My name is Tanya. It's nice to meet you in person."

I wondered if she wanted to go out sometime.

"I just graduated with a degree in French and am about to leave for France to teach high school English."

Ah. Oh, well. At least I got an e-mail address out of it. More importantly,

I had the name and address of a local club to go to with Angelique and our friends. Earlier that summer, Angelique had been e-mailing me about the exciting Los Angeles swing dancing scene. She was there teaching creative writing and asked if there were places to go swing dancing in Houston.

Angelique and I had met through an online dating site in the spring of 1993, though we never dated. When we met in person after several days of online chats, she resembled her online handle, Elf. She was a short, attractive long-haired brunette with fair skin and exquisite fashion sense. She was a lot of fun to be around with her outspoken and opinionated personality combined with a sharp wit and keen, observant eye.

Angelique and I cemented our friendship during my last two years at college when we took several English classes together after I changed my major. After Angelique and I graduated, we hung out together Wednesdays at McGonigel's Mucky Duck, a pub with a warm wooden decor and many Irish and Celtic decorations adorning the walls. Wednesday was open mic night, where musicians would go up on stage and practice their various folk instruments.

Another regular event Angelique invited me to join was Movie Night Mondays at Chuck and Ashley's place. Chuck, a tall, lanky bespectacled fellow with a fashionable collection of dress shirts, hats, and vests, would pick double features based on connections he had found on the Internet Movie Database. It wasn't unusual for Chuck to show David Lynch's depiction of a dark suburban underworld in *Blue Velvet* with the science-fiction epic *Dune*, not because they were both David Lynch films, but because they both starred Dean Stockwell, one of Chuck's favorite actors. Ashley was an illustrator with a steady, quiet presence and enviable fashion sense. She wore long, dark flowing dresses that went with her long, dark hair that constantly covered her bespectacled eyes. She and Angelique were the best of friends and inseparable. Finally, there was *X-Files* Night at Tim's. He was another friend of Angelique's who was a big fan of all things science fiction. Tim had short, dark hair, narrow eyes, a round face, average height and build, and liked to wear a long brown coat reminiscent of one worn by Doctor Who, the main character of the British science-fiction television series of the same name about a time-traveling hero who traverses time and space in a phone booth.

After I told Angelique about the local swing dancing scene and Club Chicago, we made plans to go.

Friday, August 22, was one of those typical warm, muggy late summer

nights in Houston where you would step outside after a shower and have to come back in for another shower five minutes later. Angelique had invited Chuck and Ashley to come out swing dancing with Angelique's friend Nicole, who was worried about not having a partner. Nicole was a short woman who looked like a cross between Sherlock Holmes and Velma from *Scooby Doo* with her vest, tie, thick glasses, and short, dark hair. "Don't worry, Tanya said you won't need a partner since we'll be switching partners during the lesson," I told Nicole. Ashley winced with worry after hearing that. Angelique comforted her with a hug. Chuck and I just shrugged at each other. Everyone was dressed sharp, but comfortable. Even if the night turned out to be a bust, at least we all looked good.

I knew where the club was since I had scoped out the location earlier that day, so Chuck, Ashley, and Nicole followed me and Angelique. "Keep your speed down, there are people following us," Angelique reminded me as I pulled out of her parents' driveway in my Acura. I had purchased it after my beloved Nissan, which I drove like a hooligan at every opportune moment, was totaled while helping move my old college friend Shannon's family to a rural home near Texas A&M. The biggest problem for me was buying a new car instead of moving out of my parents' place where I was still living. Because the rent my parents were charging me was cheaper than moving into my own place, remaining with them allowed me to put money into savings for first and last month's rent plus three months' living expenses.

Not wanting my heavy right foot ruin the evening by leaving everyone else behind, I went ahead and did as Angelique said. When we arrived at the warehouse marked with a small exterior sign proclaiming itself 'Club Chicago,' Angelique began laughing maniacally. The exterior of the warehouse with its rusted metal paneling, worn wooden planks, and tall weeds looked as if it had been plucked out of some old horror movie. "Geez, I hope this place looks better on the inside than on the outside. I wonder what horrible thoughts are going through Ashley's mind now," she said as Chuck and Ashley pulled up in their Honda.

"I heard it's much cooler on the inside," I told Angelique and the group, putting full faith in Tanya's judgment.

After we each paid our admission, we walked in at 7:45 p.m. I fell in love with the huge parquet floor, the movie-theater style seating at the edges of the floor, the large balconies, and the wall-spanning backdrop featuring a silhouette of the Chicago skyline at night that glowed with city lights. "How popular did Tanya say this place was on Fridays?" Angelique asked. There was only one couple dressed in vintage garb sitting near the edge of the floor

in the entire place. After we did our walkaround, we took our seats in the chairs adjacent to the floor while Nicole made a beeline for the bar by the entrance.

When the music started, the couple got up and started doing what looked like the lindy hop, which I recognized from a recent Gap commercial that had been airing on television. It was both fascinating and frightening at the same time. Fascinating because they looked as if they were having fun as they danced in sync to the music, broadly smiling as they did. Frightening because it meant I would have to learn how to lead another human being in a dance I knew little about.

Once the couple began teaching the lesson for the evening, I found I lacked any sense of coordination: I stepped too far back. My hands and arms weren't synced with my body. I couldn't follow directions.

Angelique took note of my nervousness: "Len, stop being so hard on yourself. You're trying to learn something new."

Over the course of our first hour there, the couple, who announced themselves as members of the Houston Swing Dance Society, taught us basic 6-count East Coast swing with a few turns. "That's plenty to have fun with," Angelique reassured us all.

Once the lessons were done, Ashley, despite her initial apprehension about switching partners, was out on the floor more than any of us, having picked up the steps with ease. Angelique and I danced together a couple of times, but I still wasn't getting it.

"I'm going to need more practice if I'm going to get this right," I said at the end of one of our dances.

"We all will," Angelique replied.

"This is fun, but it might be a bit much to do every week."

"I agree," Angelique said. "But we should definitely come back."

"Yes, definitely."

Angelique and I went swing dancing three more times over the next couple of weeks, inviting more of our friends along. I was hoping all those years of tennis would shorten the learning curve, but dancing with a partner added a level of complexity tennis hadn't prepared me for because it required me to be creative when leading a partner through a dance. It's a difficult process if you don't know many moves because you have to vary up moves to keep it interesting. Determined to get better, I started going on my own to the Club Chicago lessons to learn new moves and improve my skills, dancing with whoever was willing to put up with me, which was easy. All I had to do was put forth an effort and ask for a dance.

The Binder

When I arrived at the Mucky Duck the night of October 3, I was carrying around a binder containing a couple hundred pages worth of comic strips I had done for *The Daily Cougar*. Some of the regulars were curious as to what my artwork was like beyond the sketches I drew of the other patrons at the pub while hanging out with Angelique and the gang, so I brought my homemade compilation to show them.

Normally, I would be playing chess and having a Newcastle brown ale with Wynn, a skinny guy with a big laugh whom I had met at Chuck and Ashley's. He had short brown hair, a Romanesque face, expressive eyes, thick eyebrows, and a slight limp in his confident walk. An English lit major with a love of Dr. Seuss, he would flatter me with compliments in an attempt to get me to go bed with him. I would humor him by hanging out with him, but would never oblige his advances. One day, he took it upon himself to teach me how to play chess and we started arriving early at the Duck on open mic Wednesdays before all our friends did so we could get a couple of rounds of chess in.

As I walked into the pub, I took note of an attractive blonde at the bar whose eyes followed me as I made my way across the room. She had her long curly hair tied back in a ponytail and looked out of place in the laid-back atmosphere of the Duck with her gray and black corporate attire.

Several of my friends were having a round of beers and enjoying the musicians taking advantage of the open mic. Eric, an information technologist whom I knew from my English literature classes, was there with Nicole and Tim. I gave the binder over to Diehl, one of the regular musicians who was too young to drink, and he looked through the comics. "Wow, you did all these? These are great!" he said as he flipped through the pages. Once Diehl finished, he passed the binder to the next person. Everyone else was already familiar with my comics from reading the paper at school, so they glanced through the binder. As they did, the blonde at the bar kept leaning forward to get a better view of what was in the binder.

Nicole and Tim shifted their conversation to a script Tim had started to write when Angelique arrived with Chuck, both looking as if they were dressed for a nice night out on the town. Angelique took one look at the table and declared "I want to move over to the penalty box." Angelique and Chuck then made their way over to a booth next to the bookcase on the far wall from the stage. Tim, Nicole, Eric, and I got up and followed her while

the blonde at the bar watched us get up and move over.

Who was this beautiful young woman and why did she keep staring at us?

After we seated ourselves, I stood up, looked over at the blonde, and said: "I am going to hate myself if I don't do this, so I might as well summon up the 30 seconds of bravery and do it." Angelique and Nicole both looked at me as if I had lost my mind. I strode over to where the blonde was seated at the bar, our eyes locked on each other.

"You can't be having fun here all by yourself," I said without averting my gaze.

She gave me this broad smile, the first I had seen from her all night, and said: "Sure I am, I'm having lots of fun listening to the music."

"Well, you're more than welcome to join us over at the penalty box."

Her eyes brightened with glee as she got up and followed me over to the box. When I arrived at the box, all my friends looked up at me, confused as to what was going on.

"Everyone, this is..." I turned to the blonde.

"Amy," she said with a smile, her eyes shining in the dim lighting of the Duck.

"... Amy!"

"Hi, Amy!" everyone said in unison.

"Amy, this is everyone."

Angelique and Nicole were giving me a look of 'what the hell is going on?' as we made room for Amy. She sat down and looked over at my binder at the table.

"I need to satisfy my curiosity. What IS this?" she said, pointing at the binder with her delicate fingers.

I took the binder and handed it to her. "Yeah, I noticed you looking at it earlier. Here. It's a book of comic strips I did in college."

"Smooth," a surprised Nicole said to an incredulous-looking Angelique.

"What do you think? Are they any good?" I asked Amy after she read a few pages.

"Yes, they're very funny."

"Thanks."

She was quiet and shy. Much different from Angelique and the rest of our outgoing gang. I noted she didn't have a ring on, though she did have on a pair of large, beautiful earrings that looked as if they were handmade.

"So, Amy, where are you from, and what do you do?" Playing 20

questions when first meeting someone isn't the best way to get someone interested in you but is an opportunity to learn their story.

"I'm from Vermont and graduated from school with a degree in accounting. I don't like my job and will be leaving in December."

"Why did you come to Houston?"

"I don't want you to get the wrong impression of me, but I came here because of someone special. We're not together anymore."

"Oh. Sorry to hear that." I decided not to press too much on why she and this special someone weren't together because it sounded like a touchy subject. "What are you going to do after you quit?"

"I don't know, but I would like to have a job outdoors."

"I wouldn't be able to work outdoors, I have bad allergies."

"I do too, but I do like going camping. I camped at the Renaissance Festival every weekend last year."

"Wow, I've never been camping."

"Never? You should go sometime, it's fun!"

Her large, brown eyes brightened as she smiled. She looked pretty in the low light of the Duck.

"Your hair smells wonderful," she said as she leaned in and took a whiff of my long, dark hair that went down to my belt line. With Amy so close, my body tingled with excitement. "What do you put in it?"

"Thanks. Head and Shoulders," I replied. I worried I was being too straightforward with my answer because I didn't come across as playful and charming as I wanted.

"Hey, Len, are you coming out to the Beans show this Saturday?" Angelique asked from across the table.

"Of course." Amy had this look of intense curiosity on her face. "You're invited to come with if you're interested," I added.

"What is it?"

"Beans Barton and the Bi-Peds is this eclectic rock band who dress in crazy costumes when performing. They've been around for years. The coolest part is when Beans does abstract oil paintings on stage. He auctions them off for charity at the end of the show."

"Sounds fun. I would love to go."

"Great. Would you be up for dinner with me beforehand?" I asked.

"Yes, I would like that."

We exchanged numbers before talking more and learned we were both 25 years old. We were the last of our group when Amy decided to leave well past midnight. I let her walk out of the Duck without walking her to her car.

I worried I had made a mistake there.

“So, who was that?” Mindy, one of our regular waitresses, asked. Wynn had been trying to get me to ask Mindy out because he enjoyed the stilted way we interacted as if we were stumbling around in the dark in our flirtations with each other. She was a tall woman with blonde hair that came down to her chin, large blue eyes, and a long nose like tennis star Steffi Graf. Every time I saw Mindy, I had a difficult time taking my eyes off her because I found her physically attractive. I never asked her out because she had both a young son and a boyfriend.

“Amy.”

“Amy? What kind of a name is Amy?”

“Um...” I almost asked ‘What kind of a name is Mindy?’ but thought better of it. “I don’t know.” Wait a minute. Was Mindy jealous? I narrowed my eyes at Mindy, who gave me an intent look. “Ugh, I can’t believe you,” I said in disgust.

She giggled.

“So, what does she do?” she asked after she stopped giggling.

“She’s an accountant, but she wants to be an artist.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

Huh? “What do you mean?”

“Artists become accountants, not the other way around. She’s no artist.”

I didn’t agree with Mindy on that count, but couldn’t vouch for Amy since I had only just met her. “Well, she seems like a nice person. See you next Wednesday.”

“Yeah. See you.”

Kind of Blue

It took me three days and three phone calls to get in touch with Amy. I left messages the first couple of times, but she didn’t return my calls. When I got ahold of her the day we were supposed to go out, we made arrangements for me to pick her up for dinner after I got off work, then head on over to the guitar bar near Amy’s apartment.

I worked as a pre-press technician at a family owned printing business. My primary duties included scanning photographs into the computer and

outputting film to be used for printing. Working pre-press was valuable experience for someone who was thinking of going into graphic design because you gained an understanding of how to deliver digital files that give the printer few, if any, costly problems. It wasn't creative work like I did at *The Daily Cougar*, but it did pay the bills.

I arrived on time at Amy's and, just as I did, the rain that had been falling in heavy sheets the entire week began to lighten up. It was dark and there wasn't much light for the driveway leading up to the garage above which Amy lived. I tried my best not to step in the mud covering the driveway as I made my way from the street to the wooden steps located left of the garage leading up to the second floor. I proceeded up the steps with caution, then tapped on the door, but the only response was from a mewling cat. I could see through the drawn curtains the lights were on inside and knocked again with more confidence.

I heard footsteps approach and Amy opened the door. "Hi, I just got home," she said as she let me in. She had on a long-sleeved white shirt with black corduroy pants and black shoes. Her hair was tied up in a ponytail like the first night we met.

"So, this is my place," she said as she led me past the small living/bedroom room, dining room, and into the kitchen. There was some jazz music playing in the background.

"I like the music. Who is it?"

"That's Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*. Do you like jazz?"

"I like this," I said with a nod as she smiled.

A skinny black cat came up and brushed against my leg.

"That's Kitty. He's got a habit of rubbing people's legs because he's shedding." Kitty began rubbing my leg as if on cue. Kitty? Who names their cat Kitty?

"How old is he?"

"Two."

She looked at me and smiled, then said: "I want to clean my face before we go."

"Okay," I replied as she went into the bathroom.

I walked over to her small bookshelf to check out her book and CD collection, which contained albums by Enya, Bob Dylan, Ziggy Marley, Neil Young, Philip Glass, and several others. There were books about Taoism and yoga, plus several self-help and self-healing books. Scattered about the apartment were various herbs, small paintings, plus drawing and watercolor paper. There were two closets full of clothes, while her bed consisted of a

mattress on the hardwood floor.

I tried walking over to the kitchen. "Ow! Hey!" Kitty, who had been rubbing me, had bitten me. Not friendly, cat. Taking the hint, I went back to the dining room and waited.

After several minutes of waiting, a happy and calm Amy came out of the bathroom.

"Ready?" I asked.

"Yes, let's go."

She let me out of the apartment, then we both walked down the stairs before heading into the darkness of the driveway. I could barely see with what little ambient light there was and tried my best not to step in any of the mud puddles in the driveway. Amy laughed and confidently walked past me.

"The car is over to the left. It's the black Acura," I said from behind her.

"Oh, I like Acuras. I want to buy one someday. I looked at getting a Jeep the other day, but it was so expensive."

"Yeah, cars are expensive," I said as I unlocked the passenger side door. "I'm in a pizza mood. Does that work for you?" I asked as I let her into my car.

"Yes, that sounds great."

We made our way over to a pizza restaurant whose warmly lit, dark wooden decor reminded me of the Duck. Walking through the narrow passageways was like walking through a labyrinth. We took a seat at a cozy, intimate booth, where the table was lit by candle, then looked over the menus.

"Do you want to split one? These look pretty big," I said, nodding over to the neighboring table.

"I don't eat meat, but we can split one."

"I'm going to get mushroom and pepperoni on my half. How about you?"

"I'll take black olives and tomatoes."

After we placed our order, we continued our conversation.

"Tell me more about Vermont. Do you miss it?"

"Sometimes. I miss the changing of the seasons and all the colors of the leaves there, but I like the temperate climate here."

"Would you ever go back?"

"I don't know. I have more of a future here than I did there, but I would like to eventually live in a log cabin."

She had this longing for a more simple life I found attractive because it