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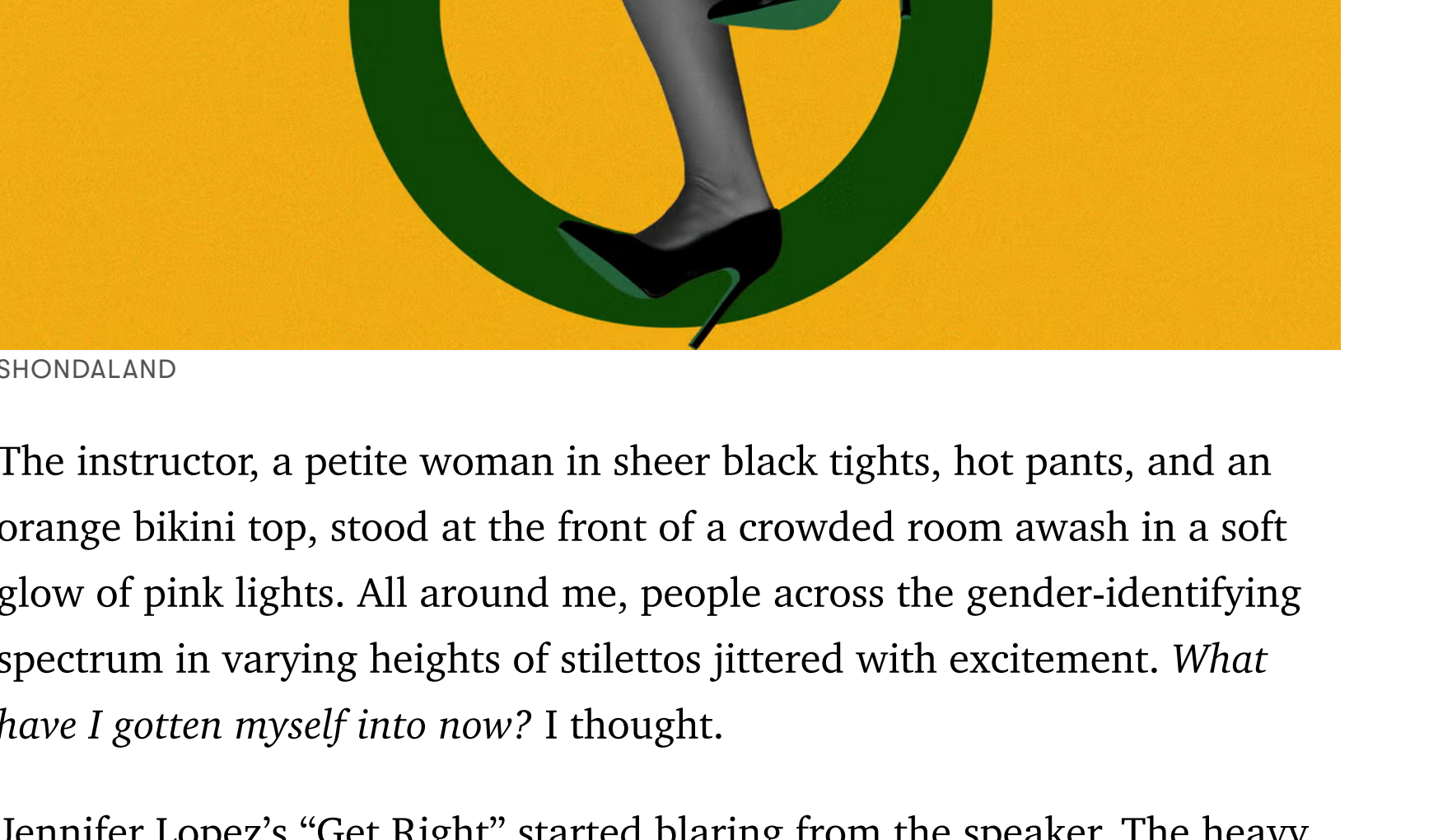
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I Danced Away My Inhibitions in High Heels

Yearning for the freedom of movement, a writer learns how to get out of her head and into a pair of stilettos.

BY KIMBERLY BRIDSON PUBLISHED: JAN 24, 2024



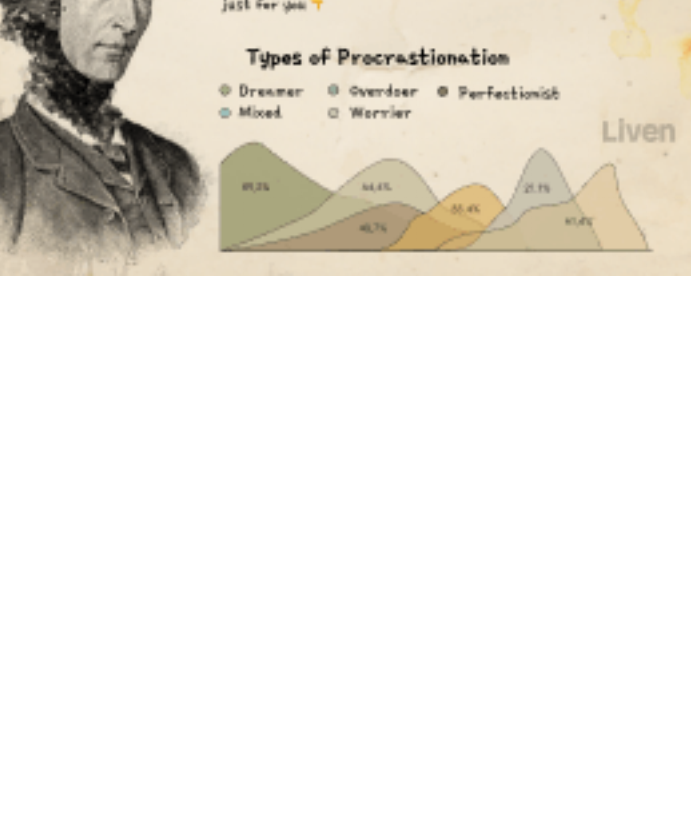
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The instructor, a petite woman in sheer black tights, hot pants, and an orange bikini top, stood at the front of a crowded room awash in a soft glow of pink lights. All around me, people across the gender-identifying spectrum in varying heights of stilettos jittered with excitement. *What have I gotten myself into now?* I thought.

Jennifer Lopez’s “Get Right” started blaring from the speaker. The heavy bass did little to drown the sound of my pounding heart, with beads of sweat already forming on my temples. At 41, I was taking my first heels dance class at famed Los Angeles dance studio [Playground LA](#). It was the first dance class I’d taken since I was 9, when my former ballet teacher sneered, “You move like a cowboy.”

By the time I hit my 40s, I was tired of denying the parts of myself I longed to explore. I wanted to shed my excessive self-consciousness and the preoccupation of what others thought of me. I wanted to feel unabashedly empowered and sexy, if only for myself, even if, after two C-sections, my lower stomach protrudes in a way no amount of reverse crunches can ever reverse, and cellulite pocks the backs of my thighs.

Most of all, I wanted to dance, despite being told enough times I had no business doing so. Heels class, a genre of dancing that blends multiple styles performed to pop, hip-hop, and R&B in high heels, seemed like a fun place to start. “First up,” the instructor said, “are struts. I want you to freestyle. Do whatever makes you feel good.” She demonstrated, taking four exaggerated steps — like Naomi Campbell storming the catwalk in the 1990s — stopping, arching her back, swooping her torso to the ground, and running her fingers up her legs as she rose.



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The instructor repeated the move down the length of the room, continuing to maneuver her body in ways mine was incapable of replicating. We lined up in rows of five, and a familiar mortifying burn seized hold of me. I considered making a run for the exit. When it was my turn, I teetered down the line, barely stopping to hit the moves I was supposed to, almost crashing into the person in front of me.

The action continued for an excruciating 15 minutes, which I blacked out from embarrassment. The rest of class consisted of learning a 35-second routine to Remy Ma’s “Conceited.” From there, we were broken down into smaller groups of 12. I tripped through most of it, my joints stiff with memories of humiliation. “Hold your own gaze in the mirror while you dance,” the instructor barked. I didn’t dare.

I’d been a longtime lurker on this dance studio’s Instagram account since I relocated to Los Angeles six years earlier. I was in awe with how effortlessly the dancers moved, the confidence they exuded as they looked into the lens, flirting with an invisible audience. They appeared to be having a blast. And they did it all in heels. I couldn’t bring myself to sign up for a class, opting to observe from the safety of my screen. Meanwhile, life continued hurtling by: a new marriage, balancing co-parenting, nurturing my daughter’s relationship with her stepfather, IVF, a newborn, the pandemic. But when the house was still, I’d lie awake in bed, volume turned down on my phone, and watch dance videos till I fell asleep.

Rhythm was in my family’s blood. My uncle was a professional dancer in Mexico. At 77, my mother could still dance to salsa with two knee replacements. Once at Gay Pride in Portland, Oregon, my sister jumped onstage, gyrating her hips to the delight of the cheering crowd before security hauled her away.

Instead of fighting tears of humiliation, I danced through the rest of the class laughing.

The only shimmying I was capable of depended on how many cocktails I drank. Even then, only my shoulders might bob about, while the rest of my appendages remained rigid as tree trunks. Dancing meant letting go, relinquishing control of my body and mind. One of my first memories of doing so was inextricably tied to shame.

At a birthday party when I was 5, I played a game where we danced in place. Once the music stopped, the last kid to drop to the floor was out. I was quickly eliminated. So engrossed in the moment, I kept flitting through the air for several seconds after pause was hit on the tape deck before I finally clocked the silence. I turned to find everyone, parents included, staring. Stifled giggles filled the party as I slunk to the ground. The heat in my cheeks burned for a long time.

Several years later, I soldiered through the aforementioned ballet teacher’s blistering weekly criticisms of my double-jointed elbows and hyper-extended knees. Not out of strength of character, I must admit. My parents refused to let me quit after I’d begged them to sign me up, and they’d paid for the season. When my final recital was over, I threw my pink slippers in the trash. I settled for getting my dance fix by repeatedly watching my favorite movies, *West Side Story* and *Dirty Dancing*, on LaserDisc. If only I could move like Anita or Penny.

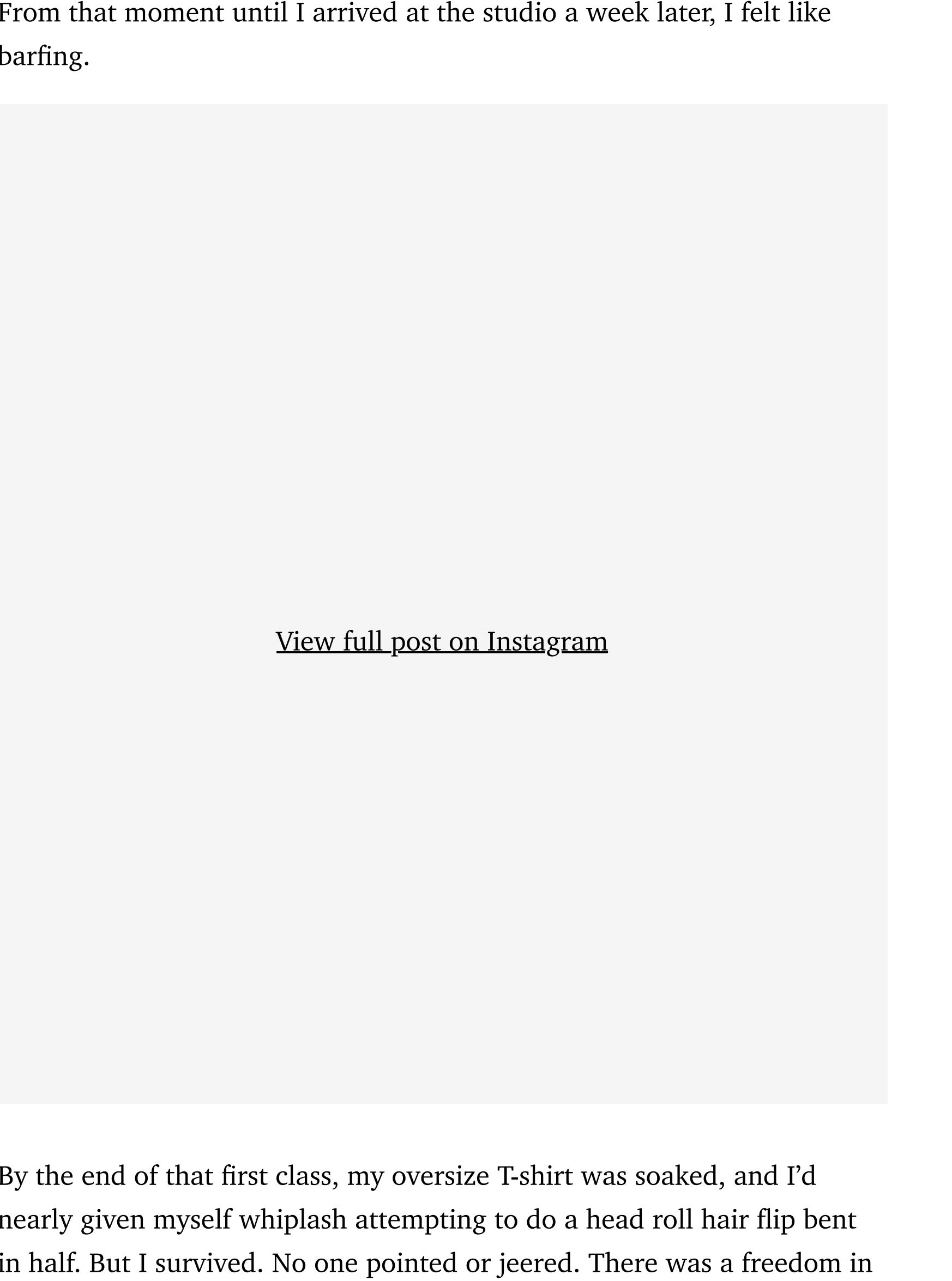
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When I was a freshman in high school, a friend talked me into auditioning for the role of a dancing zombie at a local haunted house. A choreographer taught us the first few counts of the “Thriller” routine. The next day, I was delighted to learn I’d booked the gig. I wasn’t cut out for the Bolshoi, but I could jerk and twitch like the undead perfectly fine.

The absence of finesse and grace wasn’t the only obstacle blocking me from pursuing my heart’s desires. Throughout my adolescence and into adulthood, my parents stressed the importance of always looking put together. My mother fretted if I left the house sans makeup with hair undone. “Don’t you want to feel pretty, *mija*?” she’d ask. I’d scoff yet stop at the mirror in our entryway. It wouldn’t hurt to at least put on mascara.

My father wasn’t any better. Obsessed with weight, he started putting me on the scale at a young age, setting me on a decades-long battle with body dysmorphia. I was far too preoccupied with how I presented myself to others, always in control of my appearance and body. I didn’t know how to let loose.

One evening, late at night, I downloaded the studio’s app, entered in my credit card info, took a deep breath, and booked a beginner heels class. From that moment until I arrived at the studio a week later, I felt like barfing.



By the end of that first class, my oversize T-shirt was soaked, and I’d nearly given myself whiplash attempting to do a head roll hair flip bent in half. But I survived. No one pointed or jeered. There was a freedom in surrendering to dance, letting go of my body and inhibitions.

Accomplishing something I’d been too shy and scared to try so long filled me with a confidence I’d never experienced. I needed to do it again. Back at my house, I signed up for my next session.

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This time, the instructor was a perky blonde in patent leather over-the-knee boots. She started her class in a vein similar to yoga. We sat on the ground with our eyes closed. Instead of hands clasped at the heart, our hands grasped our high-heeled feet. “Set an intention,” she said. “Give yourself space to let go. You’re free from judgment here for the next 90 minutes.”

Next up, a warm-up of struts. After the first round, the instructor scanned the room. “Did everyone have a chance to go?” A girl nudged me forward. “You didn’t,” she said. I hadn’t meant to skip it. I’d gotten lost in the fray. “That’s okay,” I said. She’d already raised her hand, pointing at me. The instructor smiled. “We’ll go together.” She must’ve registered my terror because she grabbed my hand, holding it as we strutted down the center of the room, 50 pairs of eyes locked on us.

I was expecting to hear muffled cackles, but the room erupted into a cacophony of whoops, cheers, and clapping hands. With the encouragement of these strangers, my legs moved with purposeful swagger, my hips jutting side to side. Instead of fighting tears of humiliation, I danced through the rest of the class laughing. I walked to my car elated. When I got home, my husband said, “You’re glowing.”

Every week, people of all ages, sizes, and ethnicities gather to learn new choreography in high heels. It is the most inclusive and supportive environment I’ve ever been a part of in my life. Slowly, I’ve replaced my more conservative outfits with experimental garments, like a fringe lace bodysuit and sequined shorts. I even bought proper lace-up 4-inch dancing heels complete with mesh panels and ankle support. Outfits that six months ago I would’ve sworn I’d never be caught in.

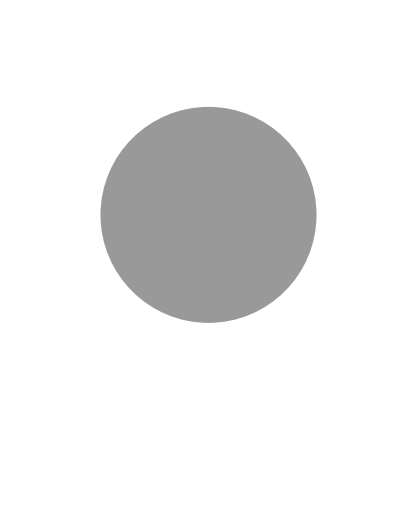
In the dance studio, no one cares about my lower pooch or how silly I look trying to channel my inner Beyoncé. I don’t get to attend class as often as I’d like. A prepubescent tween and a toddler keep my days and nights pretty occupied. But when I do, I leave the studio lighter, happier, and more self-assured.

Each class ends with an instructor selecting groups of about five people to perform the routine while a cameraman films. Dancers are eager to be selected and show off their new moves. Still lacking the technical skill and comfort, I avert my eyes as the instructor makes her picks. One day, I’ll have the guts to perform in front of a lens. For now, I’m content just meeting my own gaze in the mirror with acceptance and a smile.

Kimberly Bridson is a Los Angeles-based writer who has contributed to Vogue and The Sun Magazine.

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