

My First Love

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Once upon a Time

My First Love
by MONICA BHASIN

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Your body is a microcosm which has everything you need.

'Dance helps extend the music beyond itself', and how rightly said. One feels the lyrics intensely when one is taking them through the body and expressing them through dance.

Jennifer enjoys Hip Hop. She might even have been a Belly dancer if she had the will to go through the rigour and discipline of it. Isolation can be exhausting and challenging in this form of dance, she says. Line dance however is closest to her heart, her first love. 'Shhh, my husband doesn't know that', she whispers. Husbands know, trust me, Jennifer. The dance forms she has learnt equip her with skills she can use in Line dance. Understanding them finetunes her perception of what she should put together in choreography.

There is a heightened sense of romance in the way she talks about the balance between her work and her passion. One flows into the other and she happily carries her lessons from one to the other. When everyday and everything has become a statistic, she manages to soften both edges. She moved to Kuala Lumpur to find better job opportunities. Her prowess and interest in the subject have helped her to prepare modules of e-learning at work. The lockdown has been the busiest time for her because they are researching and preparing new initiatives in e-learning. The 'online' mode of teaching helps her apply technique in both fields, dance classes and teaching modules.

Jennifer has worked towards her Masters in Education in her school and college, as was the custom and expectation in her family. Dance and music were a luxury, her middle-class family would not have happily supported, she says. Straddling two worlds was a difficult prospect, financially and physically. She would watch longingly as girls walked to their dance classes in pointed pink shoes and pretty dresses. She secretly hoped for an opportunity. Later, a work colleague who knew her from school and understood how interested she was, nudged her towards classes where Line dance was being conducted. It was also a part of the Master's degree curriculum.

She got so 'hooked' she came back with a CD for the music. She would study step sheets. Videos were not enough to satisfy the eagerness to learn. I feel a certain affinity with her here, because her method and approach to learning dances encapsulates all that I have tried to follow in my practice. Very soon she could teach because of her thoroughness. She understood the mechanics behind it. She was already at par with intermediate dancers, and her classmates were surprised. They would ask her to teach them and so the instructor in her grew confident.

Jennifer feels lucky to have danced with the best, Rachael, Hadisubroto Roy, and Fiona and many others. Meeting with

THE CHAT WAS CANDID; HER ANSWERS TRULY DELIGHTFUL AND THOUGHTFUL. SHE WOULD LIKE FRESH BLOOD TO COME INTO LINE DANCE AS IT HELPS BUILD THE COMMUNITY. WITH HER EXPERIENCE IN THE FIELD OF DESIGNING CLASS MODULES, A FINE COLLABORATION OF LINE DANCE ROUTINE WITH ACADEMICS CAN BE INCORPORATED IN THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM. OUR DANCE COMMUNITY IS REACHING FAR AND WIDE AND HAS THE POTENTIAL TO LEVERAGE SOCIAL MEDIA LIKE NONE OTHER.

these dancers has left an indelible taste of finesse and talent that she feels blessed to have been exposed to, the implicit context of this being that she herself is as talented as the people she looks up to. Unmistakable.

This incident, I quote as an example of the fan following she must attract. At the dining table after a dance event, to her utmost surprise, a dance celebrity 'mentioned', almost an expression of interest, I would say, that he wished he could marry Jennifer. 'Name withheld', she is sure that he is very embarrassed and avoids referring to it. But that evening everybody was shocked. An awkward silence followed and 'I was dumbfounded and for me everything was a blur after that'.

Unless it was an intellectual or academic engagement, it was not encouraged by her family. I guess that is one of the reasons she feels that she is a 'serious kind of person'. She tries to practice light-heartedness, and it is a sincere ongoing effort. She suspects that it might not be easy to change. On the other hand, 'If students come to me for serious competitions, I am particular about technique'. She will be strict, I understand, because their success is important to her. However, if they are older and are coming there for health and happiness, she does not impose her rules on them.

LINE DANCE CRAZE WAS ALREADY RAGING IN MALAYSIA IN THE YEAR 2000. SHE HAD JOINED CLASSES IN 2004 WHEN THE LINE DANCE SCENE WAS BUSY. SHE WAS SO OBSESSED THAT WHEN SHE DROVE TO WORK SHE WOULD BE DANCING IN THE CAR. ONE TIME A LORRY DRIVER DROVE ALONGSIDE AND KEPT STARING AT HER AS SHE LISTENED TO MUSIC AND ACTED OUT THE STEPS WHILE DRIVING. SOUNDS FAMILIAR?

Also relatable, I mean, I feel her pain, to put it colloquially, when she talks about suddenly having the spotlight on the floor, when her friend and she were dancing the Angel by Guyton Mundy. 'My legs turned to jelly, as I did the arabesque', for the other dancers had stopped dancing and left the floor, and all eyes were on her, at a dance party.

'I have loved every moment spent in dancing, judging, choreography, teaching and learning'. The music has to be good, and that can carry her to a happy place. Everyone's truth. She has had her special moments of glory in teaching on the same floor as the instructors she idolises. Her dances have been taught by the Line dance stalwarts she admires. The kindest compliments come from her students and colleagues when they like dances she has written. The deepest joy within is an expression that needs an expression in the language.

The cherry on the cake and a really big one, was when she was asked to teach for forty five minutes on the Crystal Boot Awards coveted floor in 2015. Overjoyed and nervous at the same time, she finished teaching in fifteen minutes. The replay of the event in her mind still embarrasses her and she says she has learnt from her mistakes. It bothered her for a long time.

We have all been through performance aberrations, Jennifer. There are symbols for anger, happiness, sorrow and yet a very disturbing emotion, embarrassment, has no graphics to describe it. 'An incident where the main stage was set at a diagonal to the walls as the dancefloor was L shaped' was so confusing that Jennifer and her dancers ended up dancing on the wrong walls. To add to the confusion of diagonal walls was a dance that started on diagonals. Oh! these inexactitudes!!

SHE SPEAKS FONDLY OF HER SENIORS LIKE BUNGA RAYA WHO HELPED HER TO SPREAD HER WINGS AND TRAVELLED WITH HER TO EVENTS OUTSIDE THE COUNTRY. SHE MET PEOPLE IN THIS INDUSTRY SHE HOLDS IN HIGH ESTEEM. RACHAEL, JOHN ROBINSON, NIELS POULSON, GUYTON MUNDY, FRED WHITEHOUSE, DARREN BAILEY AND SHANE McKEEVER. SHE FELT OVERJOYED TO BE DANCING ON THE SAME FLOOR AS DANIEL TREPAT AND GUILLAUME RICHARD.

On one of her trips to India she choreographed Hare Ram, a Bollywood song. This catapulted her to fame. 'Bunga Raya was very generous in her efforts to promote me'. Her name comes up several times in our conversation. Thank you Bunga Raya, for recognising Jennifer's star talent.



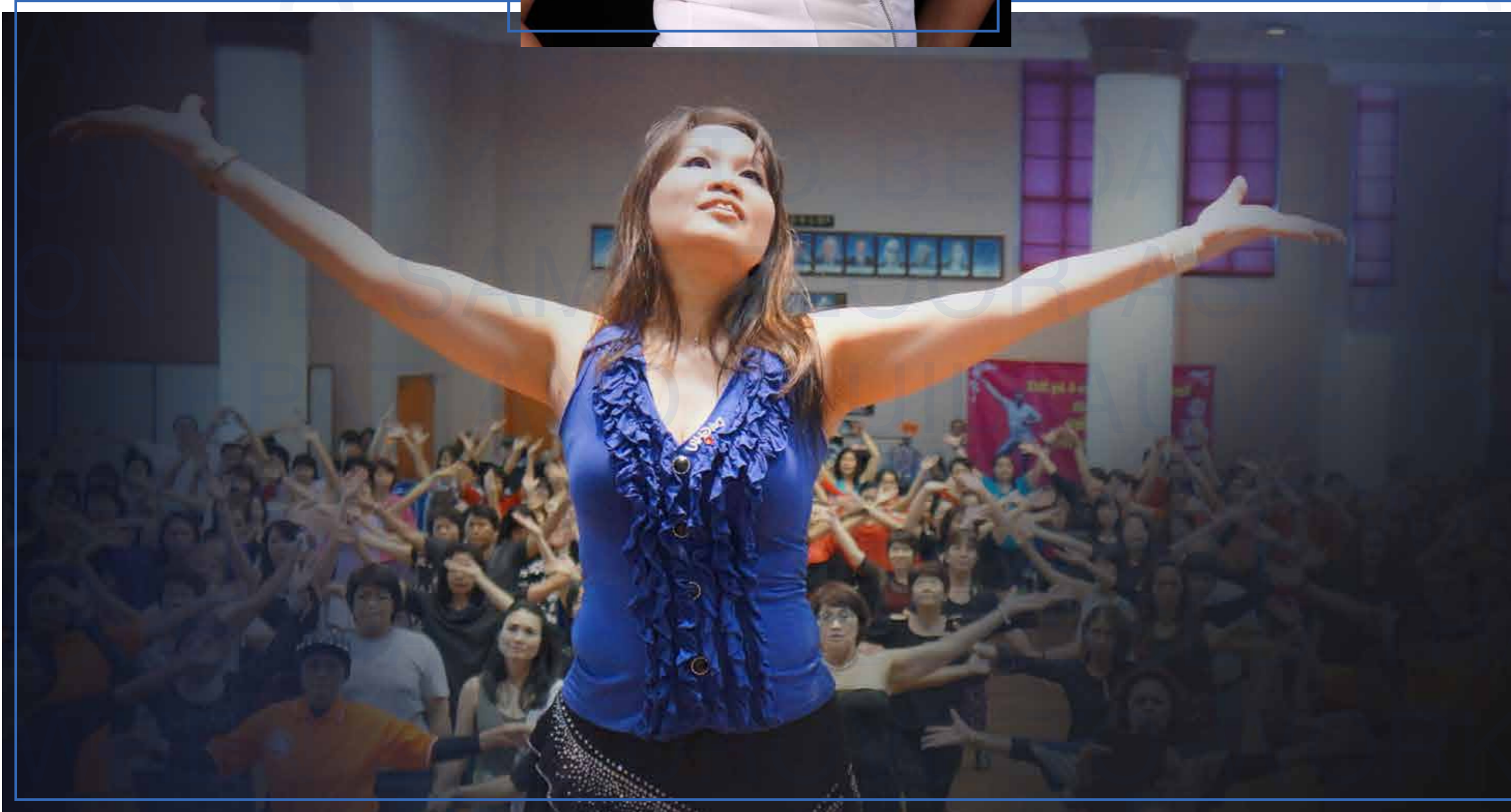
Her dance Copacobana, which she wrote with Philip Sobrielo Gene, was chosen as a competition dance at the UCWDC. Only One Road made a mark at the UK-DC.

'Feel the music and express it in dance movements'. She is a 'do it yourself' kind of person and enjoys decoding things on her own. That is how she started choreography too. Country music was not her most favourite genre. Today however she enjoys all kinds of music and dance including Country and Hip Hop, though Night Club and Ballet top the list.

She represents the Line Dance Foundation as an ambassador from Malaysia. This appeared on her radar in 2015 when she attended the Crystal Boot Awards. They did a Malaysia event for the CBA, the following year, the first outside the UK, and raised funds. People came together to help with Jennifer and Bunga Raya spearheading the project. Betty and Helen, in her opinion, are creating a protective shield for the Line dance community. 'What I mean is, it is like insurance'. A wonderful way of explaining this, Jennifer. She praises them for 'asking', which is a challenging job. They keep asking again and again and it is quite an admirable feat and to ask for others is laudable, truly. They are helping people to talk about mental health and not sweep such issues under the carpet. 'Not to be proud of' is no longer the stigma attached to feeling low or unproductive.

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