

The Dirty Dancing Appreciation Society

Jennifer Joyce

Caitlin's trainers squeak on the gleaming parquet floor as she edges into the room. She freezes, eyes wide as they dart from one end of the room to the other, breath held as she awaits the reaction of her presence in the community centre.

Nothing. The murmur of conversation and laughter continues from the circle of chairs in the centre of the room, and the heated discussion charges on from the kitchen. There's a serving hatch between the kitchen and the main space, the counter filled with a tea urn, a row of white cups and saucers, and a plate of biscuits (plain Digestives and Rich Tea, not a decent biccy in sight) but although she can hear every word of the battle from within the kitchen, she can't see who the voices belong to.

'Why is it always bloody tea that tastes like gnat's piss? I pay my subs, just like everybody else. I deserve a hot drink too.'

'If you want a coffee, there's a jar of instant in the cupboard and a kettle on the side.' A face appears at the hatch, mostly obscured by mousey brown curls. 'Anyone else want a coffee? Bernard's putting the kettle on?'

'I bloody am not!' A body barrels out of the kitchen, face and neck pink, mouth screwed up tight, and it marches towards the circle of chairs.

'Come on, Bernard. Sit down and we can get started.' A chair is patted and eyes are rolled as the angry little man thunders into the circle.

'We can't start yet. Lisa isn't here.'

'She text me to say she's running a few minutes late. It's her mum again. She wants her to set *Corrie* recording. It's somehow come off series link.'

'She's always running around after someone. If it's not her mum, it's her son or that limp lettuce neighbour. She needs to start saying no.'

‘I don’t think it’s in Lisa’s vocabulary, bless her.’

‘I’ll say it for her then.’

The people in the circle were either chipping into the conversation or nodding in agreement, and Caitlin felt her stomach clench. They all knew each other, all knew this Lisa and her inability to say no, and she was on the outside, invisible to them as she looked on. Just like at work, where she was no longer the new girl four months on but still the outsider. She’d uprooted herself for that job, moved away from her friends and family for the chance to clamber up the career ladder, missing out a couple of rungs in one go, but had it been worth it? Her colleagues all hated her; the woman she’d replaced, although well-respected by her colleagues, had been sacked for gross misconduct after an incident involving a broken photocopier and a very important, very married client. Caitlin wasn’t sure how, but it was somehow *her* fault that she now occupied the corner office while the other woman was still job-hunting several months later. It was becoming abundantly clear that she didn’t belong in Manchester. She should pack in her job and run back to Whitby as fast as her little legs could carry her, even if it did mean she’d have to squeeze into her mum and dad’s box room, crammed somewhere between the three broken lawn mowers that her dad was absolutely going to fix one day very soon and her mum’s sewing machine, which hadn’t seen any action since she’d attempted to recreate Caitlin’s choice of prom dress for a fraction of the cost. Caitlin had fallen in love with the dress as soon as she’d seen it in the shop window. Made from the palest pink satin, the dress fell to just below the knee with a twirlable skirt, scooped neckline and delicate spaghetti straps. It was beautiful, and not only because it reminded her of Baby’s dress in the final scene of *Dirty Dancing*. But the recreated dress sadly didn’t make it off the sewing machine (there was still a piece of pink satin trapped underneath the presser foot almost a decade and a downsizing house-move later) and the original had been snapped up by the time her mum had admitted defeat. Caitlin had gone to the prom in a stunning midnight blue gown that pooled at her feet and cost almost fifty quid more than her original choice, and she’d spent the evening alternating between mourning for the baby pink dress from the shop window and feeling like an ungrateful cow.

It wouldn't be so bad back at Mum and Dad's. The room would be cramped and she'd have to share with Marcus Rashford (her nephew's hamster, not the footballer) but it'd only be a temporary measure until she found her own place. And Marcus Rashford was pretty cute with his twitching whiskers and fat cheeks. Yes, he chewed on his bars and ran on his wheel so noisily her sister had dumped him on their parents, and he'd been shifted from the dining room to the box room because of the smell, but she'd cope and she'd soon find a new job and a nice flat that was even more amazing than the city centre apartment she was currently renting. So what if she loved her job, that she relished how fast-paced and challenging it was compared to her other jobs of the past? She'd find something comparable in Whitby. Something that left her feeling fulfilled and driven, as though she was finally achieving something with her life. Right?

'Here.' The curly-haired woman had marched from the kitchen, cup and saucer held out in front of her, and she was now thrusting it at Bernard. She sounded surly, her dark expression matching her tone, but she'd balanced a Digestive onto the saucer.

'Thanks.' Bernard gave a curt nod and took the offering, a smile twitching at his lips as he dipped the biscuit into his coffee.

Nobody had seen her yet. She could slip out of the community centre as stealthily as she'd arrived and sneak off home to her amazing apartment. The amazing apartment that felt cold and hollow when she thought about how lonely she was in Manchester. She had no friends inside work or out of it, despite her efforts. She'd tried everything she could think of; joining the gym (she'd made a lot of sweat but no companions), the book group where nobody actually seemed to enjoy reading and tore into every book with delight, and the baking class here at the community centre where she'd created delicious cakes during the six-week course but not one friendship. It was at the community centre that she'd spotted the poster for The Dirty Dancing Appreciation Society on the noticeboard. She adored the film, from the beautifully (and sometimes filthily) choreographed dance routines, to the deliciously forbidden romance of Baby and Johnny. A society that appreciated the breathtaking joy of that film was a society she wanted to belong to. She couldn't back out, even if

the prospect of edging her way towards the circle of strangers made her want to throw up on the shiny parquet floor.

‘We really should get started.’ The curly-haired woman tapped her watch. ‘We can at least go through the routine while we wait. Greg and I have been practicing the lift all week.’

‘How’s it going?’ One of the other members – a woman in her early twenties with her hair scraped up into a high ponytail – leaned in towards her, her eyebrows inching up her forehead.

‘Nailed it.’ The curly-haired woman leaned back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest.

‘Can we see it?’

Caitlin inched forward, slowly and carefully so her trainers didn’t squeak on the floor again. Hopefully she could slip into the circle and claim a vacant seat while the others were distracted.

‘Not until Lisa gets here.’ Bernard slurped his coffee, eyeing his curly-haired friend over the cup. Caitlin froze, her foot raised to calf-height. No distracting dance move meant there would be no slipping into the circle unnoticed. She lowered her foot gently to the ground and thought again about creeping out of the room when the door behind her swung open, fluttering the posters on the noticeboard.

‘Sorry I’m late. It was a *Corrie*-related emergency. Oh, hello. You’re new.’ Caitlin was finally spotted. The woman looked her up and down and beamed. ‘How lovely. Have you met everybody yet? Let’s grab a cup of tea – I’m *gasping* – and I’ll make the introductions. I’m Lisa, by the way.’

Caitlin was swept away by the woman, who guided her towards the kitchen’s hatch and pressed a cup of tea into her hand. ‘Help yourself to a biscuit. We seem to have missed the Jammy Dodgers. You have to be quick.’ She led Caitlin into the circle and the introductions were made: curly-haired Suzanne and her lift-partner, Greg, ponytailed Ella, mother-and-daughter duo Jane and Olivia, and coffee-aficionado Bernard.

‘It’s so lovely to see a new face. You’re very welcome, Caitlin.’ Lisa sat down, patting the free seat next to her. ‘Now, this isn’t a quiz – there’s no right or wrong answer – but I’d love to know what

your favourite scene from the film is? Mine's the montage with the tickly armpit. Makes me giggle every time.'

Caitlin sat down, sandwiched between Lisa and Ella. 'My favourite's the log scene.'

Beside her, Ella gasped. 'Mine too!' Jumping out of her seat, she sang the song from the film, moving back and forth on an imaginary log before stopping to twirl her foot in the air. 'I could watch that scene over and over again.' Ella flopped back down onto her seat with a contented sigh while the others chipped in with their favourite scenes.

'You can't beat "I carried a watermelon".'

'The lift for me, obviously.'

'I like the cabin scene, when Baby asks Johnny to dance with her and they end up doing it.'

'You're such a reprobate, Bernard.'

'What? I like it because of the way it's shot. All dark and moody. Classy, like.'

'Yeah, right.'

'Shall we move on?' Lisa reached into her oversized handbag and pulled out a hardback notebook. 'We agreed last week that we're going to go with Olivia's suggestion of a flash mob dance routine at the summer festival. We've got just three weeks to rehearse, so let's get cracking.'

The notebook was snapped shut and everyone, apart from Caitlin who was glued down to her chair with terror, jumped out of their seats and started to make room for the rehearsal by stacking the chairs against the far wall. Bernard and Greg attempted to move the pool table, but gave up when three rounds of 'one, two, three, lift!' didn't budge it a millimetre.

'Do you want to stand at the back with me?' Ella held out her hand to Caitlin, who was still seated, fingers clinging to the sides of the chair with knuckle-whitening intensity. 'You're new to this, so you'll make me look good. But if you do pick it up straight away, can you teach me, because I'm rubbish. My mum says I've got three left feet.'

'Three?'

Ella shrugged. 'She says the extra foot makes me even more ungainly.' Smiling, Ella wiggled her still outstretched hand. 'Come on, it'll be fun, I promise.'

And it was fun. With Suzanne and Greg taking centre stage as Baby and Johnny, the rest of the group were the backup act, carrying out moves similar to those of Johnny's friends in the film. And it wasn't as though Caitlin hadn't perfected the moves in her bedroom during her teenage years. The intro to '(I've Had) The Time of My Life' still filled her forearms with delightful goosebumps, and she wasn't alone in her reaction to the music. Everyone came alive, even Bernard, who was putting his everything into the steps, his face contorted with concentration as he carried out the moves only a fraction of a second behind the others. And then Greg stopped, his eyes on Suzanne. She gave a nod and then she was off, tearing across the limited space the community centre offered. Greg reached out, scooping Suzanne up off her feet, holding her aloft, higher and higher. She was at shoulder height when it happened; Greg only took a tiny fairy step backwards but it was enough to unravel the move. One second he was pushing Suzanne towards head height, the next he was sprawled out on the parquet floor with his dance partner lumped on top of him. The music played on – Bill Medley's euphoric times wouldn't be paused for a potential broken spine – but the Dirty Dancing Appreciation Society came to a complete and silent standstill as they looked on in horror.

'Oh my goodness.' It was Lisa who found her voice first, rushing to the mangled pair and kneeling by their side. 'Are you okay?'

'Yeah. I think so.' Greg's voice was a rasp. He was probably winded from the impact, plus Suzanne was digging her elbow against his windpipe as she attempted to clamber off him.

'Do we need a new Johnny then?' Bernard folded his arms across his chest and lifted his chin in the air. 'Because I'm pretty sturdy. I won't crumple like a piece of paper.'

'I didn't crumple like a piece of paper.' Greg, now free from Suzanne who was sitting on the floor and inspecting her nails for damage, eased himself into a sitting position, only wincing very slightly. 'I lost my balance, that's all. We've done it a million times over the past week with no problems. If you give me a minute to get my breath back, I'll prove it.'

And Greg did prove it, even if it took three more goes to actually get Suzanne up in the air without the pair splatting onto the ground.

‘With a bit more practice, we’ll be absolutely amazing at the summer festival.’ Lisa beamed at the group, now sweaty and, in the case of Greg, severely bruised. ‘Shall we call it a day and head across to the pub? I heard a rumour Bernard was getting the first round in.’

‘I bloody am not.’ Bernard snatched up his jacket, missing the cheeky wink from Lisa.

‘Are you coming for a drink with us?’ Ella slipped her arm through Caitlin’s as they made their way across the community centre. ‘You could show me the moves again, if it isn’t too much trouble? You’re already way better than I am. Three left feet – am I right?’

‘You’re better than you think you are.’ Caitlin reached for the door, which Bernard was holding open. ‘But we can have another practice. I’m not in a rush.’ Only the empty apartment awaited her.

‘Thanks. I’m glad you came tonight.’

Caitlin held the door for Lisa. ‘Me too. It’s been fun.’ She winced as she caught sight of Greg limping across the room. ‘For most of us, anyway.’

‘You’ll keep coming, won’t you?’

Caitlin nodded. She’d keep coming, because maybe she’d finally found her tribe, and she wouldn’t have to share a room with a smelly rodent and her dad’s collection of defective lawnmowers after all.