Breaking Point

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Our heads are filled with the native rhythm of an aerobic beat and hot anticipation. My mouth is moving: talkie, talkie, talk, nervous chatter at our table. It’s okay; this guy can’t hear a word I’m saying over the Bee Gees blaring on the speakers. He’s just grinning at me; he doesn’t care about words. This is Spring Break, Fort Lauderdale, 1979. The stench of warm beer on sunburned flesh intoxicates us. It is the smell of independence.

How deep is your love? How deep is your love?

Because of Krista and Sharon—perfect 10s on the Bo Derek scale—college boys from Everywhere, USA track us down in each bar. The three of us could pass as blood sisters, with our tan faces, copper feathers and golden highlights—Farrah Fawcett-style. We have our upturned noses and pointed chins; though I do not carry mine as high as they do. Back in Cincinnati, I am that girl with no legs—I was born without them because of thalidomide, but that’s another story. I wear two fake legs, and in a pair of pants with a crowd of strangers, I become a beautiful girl with a limp. A novelty!

Back home, I am considered a 4—I get one point for the pretty face, one for a sense of humor, and two for sheer determination.

Tonight, though, I’m shooting for a 10. New to me is the sandy blond with Donny Osmond teeth who sits next to me at our table. He’s gorgeous; his lashes are longer than mine. See, I say to myself: Except for the legs, I’m no different from Krista and Sharon. I’ve been telling myself this line all year; only now, I’ve got the cute sandy blond to prove it.

He wants to know about me, so I tell him I’m the highest-seeded tennis player on our varsity team—a freshman at that.

Krista and Sharon stop their flirting and turn twin Farrahs in my direction. I’m terrified and exhilarated all at once. My heart ricochets from one emotion to the other.

My sandy blond is with me, though. He’s riding the roller coaster grandeur of a wounded tennis star. He’s nodding his head; yes, he can see that, the bit about my athletic prowess. He squeezes my biceps. Only a tennis player could have arms like those, he says.

Krista and Sharon bite down on a snort. I blush and my sunburned cheeks sizzle under beads of sweat. I do not explain that biceps like these come from lifting the dead weight of my entire being every time I get out of a chair. No, I say that I ran into some bad luck, tripped on a tennis ball, got under my feet, don’t know how it happened, both ankles twisted, and here I am: a limping tennis star.

Krista’s hazel eyes expand to impossible proportions, and Sharon’s cool brown eyes narrow. We will have stories over Mimosas—poolside, in the morning.

And my guy is doing whatever it takes. He says he could see something like this clumsy, tennis-ball stuff happening; stuff like that happens to him all the time; but what the hell? Should we dance? Could we dance with the limp and all?

I start to say no, but his eyes say yes, so I stand up, only to face the silver-studded disco ball with a million tiny mirrors reminding me that I’m a one-in-a-million girl—and that I’d rather be like the other 999,999.

Colored light rays snap and scatter from the rotating ball. My heart ricochets again. What am I getting myself into?

On our way to the dance floor he says, you sure screwed up those ankles; and I say, I’m just glad they’re attached to my feet. I don’t tell him that I once got out of the car only to realize that my driving foot was still sitting on the floorboard.

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Mobs of couples jam onto the dance floor, and we are there. My man in pink cotton has given new meaning to the sheep’s clothing. He takes me in his arms for this slow dance, and I look up at his smile: Donny Osmond teeth, which begin to seem more like fangs. But who exactly is the wolf in sheep’s clothing here?

Still, it is so intoxicating, the lie. I want to keep it going. I can’t believe he’s picked me. The song ends before I’m ready to let it go.

Then, we are hurled into more Bee Gees: You can tell by the way I use my walk I’m a woman’s man: no time to talk. Music loud and women warm, I’ve been kicked around since I was born.

I’m clapping for my partner while he does the John Travolta, and I am mesmerized by those hips; no man in Cincinnati moves his pelvis like that. He takes my hands in his and gives me an easy twirl. The tension in my heart softens—I can do this.

Now he’s grinning. He has plans for us. He grasps me by the waist and lifts me up into the air. My momentary calm begins to splinter. He starts to turn around, spinning me under the lights. As we gain momentum, I become a
human color wheel, whirling in the disco lights. My screams echo and bounce off the crowd. No! Which in college-speak means yes. Yes!

My partner is buoyed by the excitement and my screams, spinning us ever faster. My body, in midair, is a propeller, a motion I know I cannot sustain.

I feel my left leg begin to disengage, but I am powerless to stop it. It severs off and launches from my lemon-yellow corduroys, the penny loafer guiding the missile into the mob, into places I was never meant to go.

“NOW!” I scream. “Put me down NOW!”

He hears that and puts me down. I crumble to the floor, a one-legged Raggedy Ann, in the midst of a pulsing disco. My partner is still dancing; he doesn’t realize what has happened. His face earnest, sincere, he’s reaching for the ghost-partner in front of him, never imagining her demise.

Ah ha ha ha stayin’ alive. Stayin’ alive. The lyrics swirl around me as I realize that I’m about to be trampled.

But I have to get that leg. The crowd is drunk and I know that a wooden leg would make a nice fraternity souvenir. A drop of someone’s sweat lands on my head, right at the part. Or is it something worse?

I glance back one last time at my sandy-blond guy in the pink oxford, still dancing. He doesn’t even notice me, the girl who now starts to wriggle away on her elbows.

And if he does, he doesn’t follow.

And if he follows, I don’t want to know about it.

I want only to hide in this jungle of dancing feet on a floor vibrating from the stomping mass, but one couple notices me and others begin to stare. I pray the sandy blond is not among them; I’ll settle for abandonment over more humiliation.

So I mobilize. My tennis arms become machetes to carve out my escape. I start chopping at ankles with my wrists. The magnificent sting is nothing compared to my embarrassment. I butt my head into anonymous thighs—some are in jeans, some in polyester, some are bare flesh in short shorts. My hands go numb as I press against the floor for leverage while my head continues as a battering ram. Someone taps me on the back; I jerk my shoulder up to shield my face. Is it him? Would he actually come after me?

I turn around to face that first couple who noticed me. The man is standing there, looking off to the side, as if he were about to offer his jacket to a naked woman on the street. “Can we help?” he asks.

I’m so stunned by this act of kindness that my arms begin to wobble. I almost collapse, but that leg is out there; someone could be stomping on it right now. “I lost my leg!” I have to scream so he can hear me. He nods politely—as if this were an everyday occurrence—and asks, “What direction?”

I don’t know. I only remember being a propeller and then a color wheel and then a broken doll. How can I explain all of this over the noise? It could be anywhere. So I point upward. “It just flew off!”

“I’ll find it,” he says, slipping easily into the mob. And he does eventually find it.

But in the meantime, I’m left alone to face his partner. From where I’m sitting she’s got the longest legs in the world, stretching out like saplings anchored to the earth. She looks nervous, like she might laugh or cry at any moment. She’s probably my age but the halter top, bellbottoms, make-up, and frosted hair make her seem older. On another night I would have rolled my eyes at this disco queen, but she squats down to my level and her eyes are as innocent as Bambi’s under mascara. She blinks, and we stare at each other. In this mass of human sweat she smells of lemon. Then in a voice that borders on a scream she asks, “What can I do?”

“Hide me!”

She squints and tries to imagine that before she stands up, stretching her limbs to form a curtain around me. Her tanned arms are stretched thin, though her bellbottoms form a nice cover. “Is this good?” she asks, but the doubt on her face is answer enough. How can I tell her that it doesn’t matter anyway? There is no sandy blond guy coming after me.

It was only one small lie in a bar during spring break. I’m sure that everyone lies about themselves in a bar on spring break, but for me it was a fiercely desired escape. It was a stolen moment in which I could exist without having to explain anything. It was the exhilaration of exerting control over how I was viewed by society. It was the freedom to plunge into the chemistry of attraction, of knowing that whatever transpired or didn’t transpire would have nothing to do with my legs. Although deep down, I suppose I knew that it would ultimately fail, I couldn’t help but succumb to the few heady minutes of freedom from the inevitable judgment.

The lie was wrenched off and hurled into the abyss, and now the truth is down here on the floor with me. The truth is that I cannot control how anyone sees me, and that I must somehow part with that need. So I’m fleeing less from my partner than from my lying self. I’ve lost something tonight—something more than a leg, something more than a lie.