

Dance Out Your Grief
by Lisa Salmon
Highly Commended

I calculated the dates. The number of days between Mel's deathday and my birthday coincided precisely with the number of days we'd dated. It all made perfect sense: we must be cursed. In every movie and in every TV show dykes died. Not everything in movies and TV shows and books comes true. But this did. When women are free and connected to our power, we get punished. The four walls were closing in tight, so I pulled on my boots and my lucky charm pendant and set out into the night.

The door bitch shouted *Hi there Sugar*, but I didn't stop to chat, I headed straight past the bar to the packed dance floor where conversation was drowned in song. I swished past the stomping clone boys in their lycra mini shorts and their flexing and bending, posing and posturing, to party with all the luscious lesbians *who were not yet dead*. With each swivel of my hips and stamp of my feet I convinced myself I was lucky to be alive.

My body grooved with the beat and my mind spun with the lights. Through the crowd I spotted her. My body lurched and remembered her hands on my hips, on my shoulders, over my breasts. But when she looked up, I saw a stranger. Not Mel, it was someone else. *Mel's dead*, I reminded myself. We were crouched in the pale winter sun when I joked that she might *die of a broken heart* and she said *don't flatter yourself* and then she went and died of heart failure. Who has heart failure at 21? Those afraid to say *I love you*? I wish I could have loved her more.

The omniscience of the departed scared me a little. It meant my dead lover could now read my thoughts. I tripped over a drag queen's discarded handbag, but managed to catch my stumble and loop it into a fab new dance move. Now Mel would finally be convinced of my love for her. There are many ways to express grief. Why cry when you can dance?

I stumbled into a group of Muscle Marys, galvanized by their tight bond of testosterone. Their vibe was less flamboyant than the gym bunnies, and much less welcoming of my girlish twirls. I left them to it. Rivulets of sweat streamed down my torso. An old friend sidled up beside me. *How are you?* I mouthed. He held up an emaciated arm, from it dangled a hospital ID tag. The hospice let him out for the night. He lip synched: *If only I could, make this world a better place, if only I could...* I squeezed him tight. He popped a pill into my mouth. *Thanks Babe*. I spun slowly, taking in the scene around me. The dancefloor was packed with thousands of queers, all pounding out our grief. In the era of HIV/AIDS, this is how we survived.

I stomped my feet. Doc Martens were the perfect dance shoe. Bouncy and firm. I checked that my skirt covered my arse, hoping mum

wouldn't ask for the suede dress back now that I had trimmed it down and dyed it purple. Above us, laser lights pulsed and swept the dance floor in shimmers of love. My stomach churned and I felt sweet surges of ecstasy as the drug came on. Tingling gushes of pleasure coursed through my body. I slowed to enjoy it.

I opened my eyes to see a giant fairy in a tightly upholstered tutu. His handlebar mustache glittered and tiny wings fluttered as he twirled on pointe with muscly hirsute legs. I beamed him a big smile. He was gorgeous. Gorgeous! My hairy godmother waved his dime store wand and the music softened. He sprinkled me with fairy dust and delivered a message.

Queerly Beloved, receive the blessings of bounteous joy from every queen here and from those beyond. We bless you with strength to face the curse that has forsaken you. Use this power to release yourself. Be free and be safe.

He gave me a twinkle and then disappeared in a puff of smoke. There was a long pause when all anyone could hear was their own long deep inhalation. Then the beat resumed, and we dropped back into the groove.