

Stepping

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I stepped over the line one time too many. That's how Dad put it. So I'm in this Virginia female academy or whatever the hell it is instead of doing my senior year back home where I was majorette and happy.

"Cool your heels up there in Lynchburg, Miss Madeleine," he said to me, "and if your grandmother's alma mater doesn't calm you down, we'll see what Mr. Falwell's institution can do." You can't tell when he's joking and when he's not, but he wasn't joking about Lynchburg.

"Why do you persist in these inappropriate behaviors?" he said: "Are you trying to make your mother and me unhappy?" That is so ridiculous, I can't believe. I LIKE him and Mom, I just have my own ideas about living my life, for God's sake. If I weren't the only child, they wouldn't have so much time to worry about what I do. They're actually lucky to have me the way I look at it. I don't do drugs, I don't sleep around, I make decent grades. What do they want?

One thing they wanted was for me to pledge Mom's old sorority, and when I refused to join one at all you'd have thought I'd died the way they carried on. They wanted me to major in accounting, and when I decided on political science they didn't like it worth a damn. Then the debut, alias meat market, and I wasn't about to do that either. "Madeleine, you have no respect for the traditions of your past," Dad said. He actually talks like that, you wouldn't believe. You'd have to see him. He's like Mr. Anal Retentive USA. He couldn't look sloppy if he wanted to, you know what I mean? Hair sculpture cut, mustache trimmed, shoulders at attention, stomach flat. Gets around for an old guy too. He can still beat me at tennis.

Sometimes I feel like messing his hair up real good and yelling, "Get loose, Dad. Lighten up."

What got me sent to Lynchburg was stepping. I never even heard of it until I went to college. The first time I saw stepping was in the cafeteria when one of the black fraternities was doing it for initiation. It's these really neat routines like a cheer, except a lot more complicated with real synchronized steps and words like a chant or a rap. The kids make up the steps and write the words themselves. Then sometimes groups get together and compete and give prizes for the best routine.

You probably think it's funny that I didn't know what stepping was sooner, growing up in a town that's 70 percent black. But when school integration came to most places it didn't come to Indianola. The white parents pulled their kids out of public schools and put them in these private academies, and the public schools are still mostly black kids. So I never knew any blacks growing up except the maid.

The first black friend I ever had was Medgar Martin. We met our freshman year in the marching band. I played the saxophone before I made majorette, and he did too. I was so amazed that he was from Indianola because I had never seen him before in my life. It was like finding a whole other world in my own hometown. We hit it off real good, and we liked to kid each other a lot. He would tell me a girl didn't have any business playing the saxophone, and I would tell him he was a sexist and ask him if he thought he had a corner on the rhythm market, and he would say I was a racist. We went back and forth like that all the time about who was the worst sexist or the worst racist.

He'd tell me his troubles with his girlfriend Lashasha, who goes to Jackson State, and I'd tell him mine with my boyfriend Josh. Once I met Lashasha when she was up visiting and came to band practice with Medgar, and I liked her a lot too. I never told Josh I was friends with Medgar, not that I tried to hide it either. You have to understand how it is there, though. It's not Mississippi burning now, but there's these invisible lines. The black kids have their sororities and fraternities, their halls in the dorms, their tables to hang out at in the grill, and the white kids have theirs. Nothing official, but everybody knows. You can be friends in class, but you don't hang around together, go out for pizza or anything like that.

Anyway, last spring Medgar gets put in charge of working up the stepping routines for his fraternity. They're going to a competition at Jackson State, this mostly black campus, and Medgar is real competitive

so he wants to do something that will knock their eyes out. We're sitting on the quad one afternoon, taking a break from band practice, and he starts to show me some of his ideas.

"Unique is what I'm going for," he says. "Want to do something new." He jumps up and runs through a few of the moves and asks what I think. I make a couple of suggestions, and then he sits down and says, "Know what would be real funny, what's never been done?"

"What?"

"Put a white dude in it. Peanut in the chocolate sauce." He dies laughing just thinking about it. "Damn! that's a good idea," he says, slapping his leg. "Trouble is, I don't know one that could do it."

"Now, that's a racist remark there," I say.

"Yeah, well, you know it's the truth. Just look around."

I admit I can't think of a single white guy who could, or would do it for that matter. Then I have this idea. "What about me?" I say. He thinks this is so hilarious that he falls over backwards whooping, bicycling his legs in the air and beating the ground with his fists.

"Get up fool," I say. "What's so damn funny?" But he is out of control laughing.

"I could do it," I say. "I was in drill teams in high school. I'm a majorette."

"Get out of here with your white self," he says, gasping for air. He's got nothing good to say about our majorette routines. He says they're the whitest he's ever seen, which is the worst thing he can think of.

"Look," I say, "just try me. I dare you." I know he won't be able to let that pass, and right away he straightens up.

"You're on," he says. "Meet me out here at ten o'clock." So I do, and he shows me some of the basic stuff, and soon I'm stepping almost as well as he is. He won't admit it, but it's true, and he's getting more and more attached to the idea of taking me to Jackson. He just can't figure out how to bring it up to the other three guys, Jamal, Reggie, and Rick.

Finally he brings them along one night when we meet to practice, and they can't believe it. "Man, you're crazy, man," they say, but then they begin to kind of like the idea too. So we work every night until we've got it really great. But then Medgar starts to worry. What would my parents say? He doesn't want to cause me any trouble. He knows they're on my case a lot about this and that. And Josh? He would definitely not see the joke.

“Look,” I say. “How could they know?”

“Word gets around,” Medgar says. “Grapevine.”

“My parents aren’t connected to any grapevine that starts at Jackson State,” I say. “They’ll ground you for the rest of your natural life.”

“I can handle them,” I say. “Get over it.”

Actually, it never occurs to me that they could possibly find out. And I really want to do this. It’s fun and different, and I’ll get a glimpse into a world I’ve grown up with, but never been in. And I guess too I’m a little excited by knowing it’s sort of forbidden.

Medgar finally agrees to go ahead with the plan, and we decide on our costumes, black tux and tails with white shirts, purple cummerbunds, purple carnations. Medgar has one more hard time renting a tux small enough for me, and I have safety pins holding my pants up, but we look sharp. I tell Josh I’m going home to study for exams. We get down to Jackson State and meet Lashasha, who’s going to let me stay with her in the dorm. She thinks the whole thing is a hoot. We put on our tuxes and get over to the gym, and they’re trying to keep me out of sight so when we go on I’ll be a big surprise. And I’m like really nervous all of a sudden because I’m the only white person there, and I’m thinking what if they don’t think it’s funny, what if they hate it, and I’m thinking I may throw up. But Medgar’s cool, he says no sweat, we’ll knock ‘em out. So it’s our turn and we go on and everybody is dead quiet for a minute when they see me, sort of stunned. Then we swing into step, and we’re so together, you know, like we’ve been stepping with each other all our lives. And the whole place just kind of explodes, they just go crazy, and keep bringing us back for encores. We win it hands down just like Medgar said. And the rest of the weekend is great too, one of those good times you never forget, worth all the junk that goes down later.

If that stop light in Indianola had been green when we hit it on our way back to campus Sunday morning, I would’nt be in Lynchburg today. But it’s red and we stop, and there to the left of us, slowing the gray Park Avenue down for the yellow light that anybody else would have gone through, are Lewis and Alice, my mom and dad, Mississippi’s own Ken and Barbie. They’re coming from church and headed to the country club for lunch, Lewis in his three-piece suit with his hands at ten and two on the wheel like the driving manual says.

Ordinarily it wouldn’t make any difference, meeting your parents at a

stoplight, but the fact that I'm with four black dudes, drinking beer and eating nachos, and one of them is driving my new red Mustang puts a different complexion on it.

"Shit!" I yell and hit the floorboards. "Mom and Dad." The light changes, and Medgar squels off leaving about half my steel-belteds behind. It's one of those weird igni-seconds when you don't know if you've been seen or not. We drive on to campus, but I'm worried the whole 35 miles. Lewis and Alice wouldn't be crazy about me going off for the weekend with four guys period, but four black guys?

No big deal in New Jersey I guess for a white girl to drive around with black guys if she wants to, right? People from the North say ya'll don't have racism like we do. But it's different in the Delta.

Anyhow, that night Lewis calls me up. "Hello, Madeleine. Study hard this week-end?"

"For sure, Dad," I say. "We started exams Friday."

"Car running o.k.?"

"Great, it's a great little car. I'm a lucky girl."

"How's your gas mileage?"

"Well, I haven't had it on the road much. You know with studying and all."

"I have court in Clarksdale tomorrow. Got time for lunch?"

It's the last thing I want to do, but I know better.

"I'll make time," I say.

"Good," he says. "Meet me at the Sweet Olive at 12:30."

So I hung up, and I'm sweating because I still don't know if he's seen me or not. I'm a pretty good match for him usually, but this time I'm at a definite disadvantage, not knowing exactly how much he's seen. He's going to be working me like he works a witness, and I try to get psyched up.

Usually I'm late, but I get to the Sweet O. at 12:15 and get a table in the middle of the room, knowing he won't make a scene in public. He comes in right at 12:30 on the nose, kisses my cheek, says he'd like to eat on the porch today. Nobody else is out there, and I'm getting plenty worried. He orders for us, and we get our iced tea, and he gets right to the point. "Madeleine, did you loan your car to anybody this weekend?"

"You told me not to do that."

"But I asked if you did?"

“No. Absolutely not.”

“Could anyone have taken it without your knowledge?”

“No way.”

“I’m sure I saw your car in Indianola about noon yesterday.”

“Impossible,” I say, deciding to deny everything.

“A young black man was driving.”

“Dad! The world is full of red Mustangs. Give me a break.”

“But they don’t all have the license plate MS MAD.”

I curse the day I let my roommate talk me into that vanity plate, I can tell you, but I stand my ground. “You simply made a mistake,” I say. Then I lean over and pinch his cheek and say, “Pore ole Daddy, his eyes are going.” Usually I can tease him and make him smile, but he doesn’t smile. He glares at me and about that time the waiter brings out the chicken breast in mushroom sauce with garden salad and potato puffs and I light into it like I haven’t eaten in a week. “Awesome,” I say, trying to get his mind off the car. “You wouldn’t believe what we had in the cafeteria for Sunday dinner.”

“You had better tell me everything, Madeleine,” he says in his best courtroom voice. “Because I have ways to find out.”

He’s right about that. I never realized before this happened that Mississippi is one big small town. Everybody knows everybody else or a least knows somebody who does. You can’t get away with anything. And Lewis has contacts all over, black and white. But as Alice says, I’m as stubborn as he is, and I don’t give an inch. I run my mouth a mile a minute like nothing is wrong, but Lewis doesn’t talk at all. When we say good-bye in the parking lot, I feel like I’ve already been charged, tried and convicted.

Sure enough, by the next week-end he knows the whole story and so does Josh. Josh has an absolute fit, says I’ve ruined his reputation, and he can’t hold his head up on the campus anymore. “They just wanted to make fools out of us,” he says. “Can’t you see that?” Then Lewis calls me home and announces the plan to export me to Virginia. He says Medgar probably asked me to go so he’d have a car. He nor Josh either one believe those guys are really my friends.

Alice tries to talk him out of sending me off, but she can’t. And finally I think to myself, what the hell, at least Virginia is a change of scene. I’m sick of Josh trying to tell me what to do, and I’m sick of Lewis playing

his little parent police games. So I'll go to Virginia and whatever they've got up there, it won't be Lewis sitting at every stoplight and Josh freaking every time I turn around.

Medgar feels terrible because he thinks the whole mess is his fault. He even offers to talk to Lewis, but I know better than that. Besides, this is not Medgar's fault at all. I know what I'm doing. And in a way I'm glad it happened, you know? I mean it started out as a good time, something crazy to do, but it made me see some things about those lines, things I want to do different from my folks.

You know Howard University up there in Washington, D.C.? Well, that was Medgar on the phone just now. "Want to go steppin' big time?" he asks me. "We been invited to the national." So they're hitching up here next weekend, and we're going on to Howard for some hot competition. And if Lewis calls, will you do me a favor? Tell him I just stepped out.