

Dancing with Tex

by Amy Abercrombie

Picture this. It is early evening. A cleared auditorium in an elementary school in Ft. Belvoir, Virginia is filled with boys and girls, all of whom are middle school age. The boys are lined up along one wall, the girls on the opposite, as if enemies awaiting battle. The girls are wearing dresses that have been carefully ironed, and the boys wear slacks and clean shirts. It is 1952, and an “elderly” couple named the Harrisons plays records from the Big Band era as they teach us the precise steps of the foxtrot, waltz, samba, jitterbug, tango, cha-cha, and polka. Mr. Harrison cuts quite a rug, and the movement of his legs under the loose trousers of his suit as he dances makes me think they must surely be made of rubber. He is very smooth.

I am one of the girls, and I always get asked to dance. (My mother, who was the belle of the ball in Brooklyn in the 30s and was short herself, always said it was to a girl’s advantage to be diminutive, for then you could partner any boy). Although I do not suffer the humiliation of not being chosen, I can well imagine it. My most frequent partner is a boy in a crisp white shirt named Tex who is in my class at school and is very smart. He is handsome, as well. We seldom exchange a word. When it is a Sadie Hawkins dance and girls get to invite a boy to dance, I pick Tex. For a while, he also asks my chum Peggy to dance, but that has ended and I am thrilled that he consistently chooses me. We are often asked to demonstrate a dance, we are that good.

The strains of Glenn Miller and Artie Shaw meld with the brink-of-adolescence turmoil in my head and heart, and I will forever associate that music, which was really before my time, as the most heavenly on earth, and I never tire of it. Most especially, “Begin the Beguine,” as recorded by Artie Shaw. What a song!

At school once a week we have square dancing, and Tex asks me most of the time to be his partner in the sets. I am on top of the world.

From my 6th grade diary.

February 20 (1952). Today I went to school as usual, and Tex, of course, paid no attention to me. When we went in the end room to square dance, Mrs. Mandlebaum didn’t choose Tex or me, but on the 2nd dance it was girls’ choice, and I paused for a few seconds and then went over to Tex. He seemed to follow me, so I went in a set, expecting him to stand beside me. He didn’t though, and instead walked over by Barbara C. I guess Barbara must have chosen him, and he didn’t go to the set right away. I was so embarrassed, I walked back and sat down by Louise. Then Mrs. Mandlebaum chose Louise M. and I to dance and I was boy. I almost cried when we were dancing. And after Phys. Ed. I almost cried, too.

That night I decided if Tex didn't like me I would always admire him secretly.

Once Tex invited me to dinner at his home. He had a pretty sister named Marie who was my big sister's age. The only thing I really remember about that meal is what was served and how I suffered trying to eat it.

I am not one for seafood. My father loved it and didn't see why everyone else didn't love it, too. I can still taste the greasy scallop that he forced me to eat as a child. So when I smelled the familiar fishy smell at Tex's home, I knew I was in for it. I had to eat it! Fortunately, they served iced tea out of a bottomless pitcher, and so I was able to wash down small portions and give the illusion that I was enjoying the meal. What I did for love! Meanwhile, Marie made a face and asked her mother what the dish was. "It's shrimp delight," she was told.

"Well, it's not a delight to me!" Marie retorted. My sentiments exactly.

Feb. 21. Today I went to school and of course Tex paid no attention to me. I was so mad after yesterday, I told Alice W. to tell Tex I didn't like him any more. After she told him, she told me he said he disliked me too. I said I didn't care but after she had gone I almost cried. This was my first broken heart.

At Phys. Ed. we played dodgeball, and Tex was a 2 and I was a 1. When all of the girls in my team were out except me, Tex hit me with the ball. He said I gotcha, Amy! I think Martin, Norris and Barron like me.

Almost everyone knows I like Tex, and at morning recess, Norris told Tex I didn't like him unless he liked me, and Tex said He didn't like me unless I liked him. I do! On the way home from school, I sat with Alice and told her I liked Tex as a boy friend. She said she would call him up and tell him I liked him, but he stayed after school to finish his test. I wish I didn't get jealous so easily.

Tex had an unusual name, one that I doubt is held by anyone else in the world, unless someone in his family is his namesake. But to me he was always Tex. This will sound bizarre, but it took me until age 64 to summon the courage to look him up. He was that much of a god to me. I imagined him as some powerhouse in Houston or Dallas, surely successful in life, given his brains, looks, and well, his dancing abilities. And so via the Internet I found out that he had been in the Marines and was killed in Vietnam in 1967. I also found the e-mail address of his sister Marie and wrote to her.

Feb. 25. Sometimes Tex stares at me at school and he did today. Norris sent me a note asking if I liked Martin, Barron, Norris or Tex, but I didn't answer it. At Phys. Ed. we played outside, and Donna R. told Norris I liked Tex best. True. While I was waiting for the bus, this morning, Alice W. said she told Tex I liked him as a boy friend and he said something like "hot dig!" I like Tex better than Johnny R. and Lawrence B.

Tex and his family moved back to Texas after the sixth grade. That Christmas I got a card from him that I have kept all my life. It showed Santa dressed in a cowboy outfit with a lasso in his hand and was signed simply, Tex. There was a return address. I cannot adequately describe the thrill of receiving that card. I struggled with myself how to answer it: Should I say "from the girl you left in Fort Belvoir," or "from the one you left in Fort Belvoir"? I do not remember if I actually did send a response. Surely I did.

Feb. 28. Today, at the room, Alice W. asked Tex if he liked me. He said very much. Alice is having a picnic Sat. and inviting Sharon, Harriet, Geoff, Reed, and Tex. When she invited Peggy, I didn't want to come. At Phys. Ed. we square danced, and Tex was my partner. After school, Alison told me that Marie said she asked Tex why he combed his hair so much, is it because of Amy, Marie asked? Tex said something like "I'm not saying why!" I hope he likes me as much as I like him.

I began corresponding with Marie by e-mail after writing her how sorry I was to hear of Tex's death thirty-eight years previously. I told her how special he had been to the 6th grade me. And I was able to find out what unfolded of his life in the short years he had. It was not an altogether pretty story.

Marie said she and Tex had a remarkable mother who was very nurturing, as were her mother's parents, her sister, and children. The mother was intelligent, creative, and loving, with a degree in liberal arts and a master's degree in education. The father of the family, an Army career soldier, believed that raising a boy to be a man meant bullying (physical and emotional), and evoking fear. The result, said Marie, was that Tex was a rebel of the first order, starting with his rebellion against his father, and later while in junior high and high school, against the bigotry and arrogance of the white, Protestant, male-dominated culture there in the South during the Fifties and early Sixties.

He flouted the rules of their small town and yet, even then, was admired more than he was ostracized. He had a certain humor that softened his very strong passion against unfairness and injustice that made people laugh at situations instead of getting angry and defensive. He put himself on the outside and wasn't afraid to be completely different and go against the powers that be. He was charismatic, which benefited him enormously, for nearly everyone he knew or touched admired and loved him, even those who didn't understand the way he lived or thought. He had a way of touching your soul, Marie wrote. There was just something about him.

Tex became a Marine, and they kept trying to get him to go to officer's candidate school, said he was a natural leader, but he wouldn't, claiming the people he admired were the "grunts," not the officers, whom he largely disparaged.

Feb. 29. Today I went to school, and in a spelling B, Tex, D. A., and I were the last ones up. I missed the word Phoenix. At afternoon recess, I played chase, but I didn't chase Tex. I think Alice E. likes him. I think Tex likes Alice. Tonight, I wore my quilted skirt and beaded blouse, and I danced with Tex all but once, because Donald K. chose me. Because of Sadie Hawkins day, we had 2 girls choice dances, and I chose Tex. Every time some one just touches Tex, he starts getting mad. I don't blame him, but, he fights so much, I never have much time to dance.

Tex was very sports-minded, and boxed for his battalion in the Marines. After getting out the first time, he tried boxing in Golden Gloves around Texas. While at Texas A&M he was on both the boxing and wrestling teams. He may have been the only P. E. major in his class to take physics, and when people would ask him why in the world he was taking physics, he would say, I am so tired of people thinking just because you are interested in taking physical education as a major, you are a dumb jock!

Tex had played football and was a quarterback at the beginning of the 8th grade, but kept getting slammed so hard that he got two concussions. The coach wouldn't take him off the team, even though his mother asked him to do so after the doctor said one more concussion could be deadly. She then threatened the coach with legal action, whereupon he reluctantly dropped Tex from the team. Tex was so angry he dropped out of school and hitchhiked to his grandmother's who lived on a farm some distance away. At his new school, a little country school, he played on the baseball team that spring.

He loved hitchhiking, which started (much to his mother's horror) when he was in the 8th grade. By the time he was a senior in high school, he was hitchhiking all over Texas and into Mexico. Tex was constantly evolving emotionally and intellectually, his sister observed, and his potential was enormous. To die so young was not only a tragedy for him but for all of us, she wrote.

March 3. Today I went to school and Tex and Reed both missed the bus, but came that noon. I gave 1/2 of my heart to Tex. On the way home, on the bus, Tex was bad, so Bobby C. asked me if I wanted to sit by him. I said no. Reed told me, on the bus, Tex had double crossed me, and because he was bad, had to sit by another girl. I hope he likes me!

Tex told Marie he would never have children because he was afraid he couldn't be the kind of father that he would want a child to have. Obviously, his father had not set a good example for him. But he loved Marie's two as though they were his and showed it every day he was with them. When her younger child, two-year old Donna was killed in an accident, Tex took it very hard. He told Marie he knew she was brave enough and had courage enough to have another child, which she later did.

He said he wished he believed in God so he would have something to hate for Donna's death. He said he couldn't believe the world could just keep on going as though nothing had happened, the sun come up and people just going on about their business. He said all had just stopped completely the moment little Donna was gone. Tex had joined the Marines right out of high school for four years and had served in Vietnam, but right after the funeral for his niece, he left on the bus for Camp Pendleton to re-enlist. That was the last time his sister saw him.

March 5. I had fun today! Alice E. was absent today, and Tex came to school with his hair all fixed and a white shirt on. He looked very nice, but I like him better plain. At Phys. Ed. we square danced and Tex chose me. While we were dancing, I asked Tex if he would be my partner in girls' choice. He said he would. I hadn't danced in so long I made some mistakes, and was afraid Tex wouldn't chose me again, but he did.

Marie remembers vividly the day in October, 1967—Tex was twenty-seven - her father called and said, "Marie, your mother and I have just been informed that Tex has been killed in Vietnam. You need to come home, your mother needs you."

I have trouble seeing the Tex I knew in the photos Marie has sent me that show him as a man. I so want to get to know that man. There is no fear now. In 1967 I was divorced, had taught school for two years but was going back for a masters in elementary education in the Teacher Corps at the University of Kentucky, interning in the eastern Kentucky hills and inner-city Louisville. I was adamantly opposed to the war in Vietnam.

It would never have occurred to me to look up Tex—partly for fear that one or both of us wouldn't measure up. But I would have loved his passion for justice. I would have loved his hunger for adventure. I would have found his intellect compelling. I would have loved his mother, and his sister. But I particularly do not like boxing, finding it brutal. And I have never been much of a sports fan.

Marie said Tex loved to tell stories and could keep you entranced for hours with the things he did and the people he knew from all walks of life. He enjoyed reading John Steinbeck. Marie saw him as a pragmatic idealist—very soft-hearted, but trained to be a killer by the Marines. He and she argued about that contradiction a lot. But, she writes, Tex was working through his own demons.

She adds that he enjoyed the music of Bo Diddley and Little Richard. *And he loved to dance.*