

Appetite

Serena had heard, that women, upon meeting a man, decide inside of three minutes whether or not they would have sex with said man. *Three minutes*, she thought, *I can wall sit for more than three minutes. Something's not right about that.*

This information had come to her in a vulnerable moment. She had decided that she needed to do something different than look at food porn on the internet after work. She decided that she wanted to dance. She used to dance, but after a series of soul-crushing, and self-esteem injuring events she had stopped. She has become rusty.

So, she decided to take classes. It was the afternoon of the first class that she had come across the three minutes morsel.

Three minutes. I just don't believe it. But, I need a plan. I am going to decide in advance that I will not permit myself to decide whether I would sleep with the next man I meet.

Poor girl didn't realize what she was setting herself up against. He was a *dance teacher*. Balance, hip motion, grace, a certain know-how were his areas of expertise. In this case, his training had served him well providing him dangerous tools, especially against someone just breaking out of a self-imposed exile.

So, she showed up to the studio, ready to dance, ready to have her fantasies fulfilled. Becoming, identifying as, a dancer seemed like something she could do under the right instruction. She jumped right in, on beat, and forbade herself from looking assessing any of the

men nearby. If she felt her mind wandering, she promised herself that she would think of something decidedly unsexy. Like rice.

Her thoughts, however, had nothing to do with the way that her body reacted to the instructor in his presence. Before he even spoke, before he introduced himself, it was as if someone had flipped a switch within her. It was as if puberty and menopause joined forces to do battle with her right there on the dance floor.

She was hot, then sweaty, then nervous and stricken simultaneously by the urge to wrap herself up tightly to hide and to rip her clothes off to relieve the unparalleled heat that rose within her, taking her over.

She couldn't make eye contact with him for fear that she or something else might ignite. She concentrated hard on following his instructions without looking directly at him and she tried to focus on the music. Then, glad that she had planned ahead, she thought about rice.

That night she dreamed that she was in a kitchen she didn't recognize making rice pudding. She stood over the pot adding fragrant spices like vanilla bean and cinnamon and she tended it lovingly. Sweetness filled the air and her mouth began to water. She just wanted a little taste. But when she tried to lift the spoon to her mouth she woke up, her sweaty sheets sticking to her.

The next week she showed up to class feeling anything but sexy. Eating rice 5 days in a row can do that to a girl. She concentrated on trying to learn what she was being taught. He moved through the students offering correction and encouragement. When he reached her, he began coaching her on this week's steps. Then he stopped abruptly.

“You have to look at your partner. Dancing is about more than knowing what steps come next. There has to be a connection; there is give-and-take between partners. But first, I need you to look at me.”

She directly at him, then said to herself, “Rice. Rice, rice, rice, rice, rice.”

That evening she went home and ravaged her pantry with a hunger as deep as the Grand Canyon. Nothing looked good to her in there, but the desire to fill herself was like nothing she had experienced before. It was like there was a fire in her stomach. She had to smother it with something.

Just then, Uncle Ben caught her eye. Her mouth began to water enough that it required more frequent swallowing. She pulled the box from the shelf so hard that she spilled some on the floor. She dug around for more ingredients. Chicken stock, bread crumbs. She needed to go shopping. She opened the fridge and found a languishing bottle of white wine, some cheese, a little bacon and some flaccid parsley.

She took the arancini to her bed and ate it there tucked beneath her covers savoring each creamy-crunchy, salty bite. She licked her fingers, sucking at their tips until she fell asleep.

The next morning she woke up confused, a little greasy, yet sated. She had fallen asleep without turning the lights out, without removing her contacts, without even changing into her pajamas. She was lucky she woke up on time; she hadn't set her alarm clock. It was one of those mornings when she knew that she had had an out-of-this-world dream, but couldn't remember it at all. She hopped out of bed and she whistled her way to the bathroom, through the shower and all the way to work.

Her coworkers noticed something different about her, a radiance. She thought to *herself*, *I've got to cook more rice.*

She had so much energy at the end of the day she decided to splurge and take another dance class that evening.

When she got to the studio, she changed into her dance shoes and waited for class to begin. Despite her determination not to, she glanced toward the instructor. He looked preoccupied. When she noticed the pressure change in her chest from an over-zealous heart she focused.

Maybe I can get some horchata on the way home, she thought.

She had a great lesson. Just before she left, the teacher grabbed her by the elbow and said just above a whisper, "I see a lot of improvement. You must be practicing at home. Keep it up."

Over the next few days, she found herself thinking about all of the things she could do with rice. She read a Wikipedia article to learn about its history. She learned about new varieties, a whole world opening to her. Once she discovered forbidden rice on some random food blog, she knew that she had to try it.

Funny how the word forbidden can make you want something more than you ever would have otherwise, she thought.

That night she invented a curry for the sole purpose of eating it with the forbidden rice. She had read that it goes well with plums, so she got some of those for the curry. She also

decided that she needed to feel the sweet taste of cinnamon on her tongue and to feel the fire of cayenne on her lips.

Again, she had dreams she that she didn't remember, but she woke up all wet, her clothes sweat-pasted to her body. Yet she felt refreshed, like the embodiment of an upbeat Tony! Toni! Toné! song.

She ate that curry for days.

The next time she went to dance class, she was confident, ready to take on some new turns. During class, when it was time for her to dance with the instructor, She noticed bags under his eyes big enough that a TSA agent might try to poke and prod them if he had to go to the airport.

“You okay?” she asked him,

He looked at her intensely, then answered “Yeah. Just tired. Listen, you sure I haven't met you before? Outside of here. There's something about you that's very familiar. I just can't put my finger on it though.”

“... I don't think so.”

The lesson resumed, though she was a little worried. She felt bad for wondering whether she would catch the cold it looked like the teacher was just about to succumb to.

The next week, there was a substitute teacher. He began, Vince isn't able to be here today, he's feeling a bit under the weather. My name is Billy and I will be teaching the class

today. Disappointment overtook her and she tried her best to learn something new, but she just couldn't get into it. So thoroughly did this disappointment saturate her that she didn't even eat dinner that evening. She just went to bed.

Her appetite didn't return the next morning. In fact, she was three days in when she realized that she had been eating nothing but Corn Flakes for the past three days. She had dropped a pound or two and her coworkers were asking her if she was okay. Her sleep was shallow and she had no dreams. The day before her dance class, she wondered whether she had, indeed, caught the illness that had stricken the teacher. Her cupboards full of rice, she decided to make soup, a version of Italian wedding soup, subbing in her favorite pantry staple. She relaxed into the ritual of chopping aromatics and bringing the stock to a simmer. She let the scent wash over her. When it was done, she sat before a steaming bowl, her appetite still not back to normal. But when that first sip of soup passed her lips, she couldn't stop. She made up for the days that had passed. She ate the whole bowl of soup. She licked the spoon. She tipped the stockpot so that every last drip fell into her mouth.

That evening, she dreamed that she was on *Dancing With the Stars* dressed in a costume that hugged her like a lover she had known since the beginning of time. She stood in the middle of the stage when music began to play. Then Vince, dressed like a matador danced onto the stage and led her through a fiery dance of give and take, of predator and prey.

She didn't remember the dream until class started and that same song began to play. When it was her turn to dance with Vince, he grabbed her, hard, by the arm. I had a dream about you last night. We danced to this song. It went like this.

With that, Vince led her through the steps from their shared dream. And suddenly, she understood those which had come before.