W.D. Ehrhart

The Summer I Learned to Dance

I thought we were going to make it until I saw the car coming up Park Avenue from Ninth Street. At the bottom of the hill, Park Avenue takes a ninety-degree turn to the left, and we were going to reach the turn just about the same time that the other car reached it.

"There's a car coming," I said.

If we cut the turn tight to hold the road, we would hit the other car head-on. If we stayed in our lane to avoid a collision, we were going too fast to make the turn. There appeared to be no solution. In one of those terrible moments of revelation that come only rarely in a lifetime, I suddenly understood what all those dead poets I had to read in English class were trying to tell me. In about two seconds, I could be as dead as they were.

My grandfather died, but I'd been so young that I could barely remember his funeral. Old Mrs. Crouthamel dropped dead right in the middle of church one Sunday morning, but the angels had come for her—she'd even said so just before she keeled over—and who can argue with angels? My cat died, and we buried it in the backyard by the garage. Death was supposed to happen to old people and pets. It wasn't supposed to happen to me.

All sorts of things were happening that weren't supposed to happen. When an accident happens, time is supposed to slow down, but it didn't. I saw that car coming, had just about enough time to realize we were in big trouble, and then I had blood all over me and Ray's body slumped over my right shoulder. I never saw the other car go by. I never saw the tree stump we hit. I never felt the impact or heard the crunch.

It was a Friday afternoon only a week after school had let out for the summer, and we were just out cruising. Cruising was what you did if you had any style at all. It meant you didn't have to ride your bicycle like a kid, or ask your parents to take you, or explain where you were going or why. You

could go any place you pleased any time you wanted to for any reason or no reason at all. A car was everything. Even it if wasn't yours

This one belonged to Rich Sharp. It was a 1949 Chevy, one of those humpbacked rolling turtles the size of a tank. The paint was gone, the tires were bald, and Rich always had to park it on a hill because the starter wasn't too dependable, but so what? Rich was driving and I was riding shotgun, my feet up on the dashboard, smoking cigarettes and flicking the ashes out the open window.

Two months earlier, I had wanted to go to a dance one Saturday night at St. Isadore's Church in Quakertown, but my mother had said, "I don't see why you have to go all the way to Quakertown to find something to do."

"It's only seven miles, Mom," I said. "For crying out loud, they've got priests and nuns for chaperones."

"There's plenty to do in Perkasie," she said.

But there was nothing to do in Perkasie, a town of fewer than five thousand souls, and that included the cemeteries. A town with no traffic lights and only one cop car. Even the nearest movie theater was three miles away in Sellersville. I was fifteen years old—sixteen in another four months—and I wanted to dance. Martha and the Vandellas were calling out around the world, "There'll be dancing in the streets," but no one was dancing in the streets of Perkasie.

That Saturday night, I had told my mother I was going over to Jeff Alison's house to mess around, but I didn't go to Jeff's. Instead I hitchhiked to the dance at St. Isadore's. There I met a girl from Quakertown named Andrea Jenkins, and when we danced a slow dance together, it made me feel as if the freedom I desired was mine for the taking, if only I were bold enough to take it. Later Rich Sharp offered to give me a lift home, and I eagerly accepted because it was really cool to be pals with someone who had his own car. He dropped me a block from my house, so that my parents wouldn't see me getting out of a car, and they were never the wiser for the finest night I had ever lived.

That was easy, I thought, and I had done it again the next Saturday night, only I didn't have to hitchhike because Rich

was waiting for me up on Seventh Street by Benner's grocery store. I was no longer just a kid with a bicycle.

Rich and I both worked in the bathhouse at the borough swimming pool. We had to give people wire baskets for their clothes, then the bathers would change and give the baskets back to us to keep while they went swimming. It wasn't much of a job, but it paid eighty-five cents an hour, and we got to mess around with the girls who came to the pool. Debbie Hendricks and Lynn Godshall were only thirteen, and they acted like it, but they had the bodies of sixteen year-olds. Cheryl Wynn was a peach. It gave us something to think about. The day of the accident, Rich and I had the afternoon off, so we jumped into Rich's car and cruised over to pick up Ray Thompson and George Evans. We went by the Dairy Queen, but there were only some kids with bicycles hanging around, so we drove up to the Farmers' Market in Quakertown. It was a good place to go if you didn't have much money. You could walk around and look at the hog maws and skinned rabbits, and maybe there'd be some girls to look at too, if you got lucky. But there weren't any girls that afternoon, and you can only look at hog maws and skinned rabbits for so long, so after awhile we left.

Coming out of the parking lot, Rich put his foot on the brake pedal and it went right to the floor. He pumped it several more times, but nothing happened except that we rolled right out onto the road into the path of a pink '56 Ford. The Ford expected us to stop, and when we didn't, the Ford had to swerve into the opposite lane to avoid broadsiding us. The driver laid on the horn and so did Rich. He shook his fist at us as he disappeared down the road, and we shook ours back at him. There was a service station about half a mile behind us, but we only had fifty-seven cents between the four of us.

"No point in going there," said George.

"I bet Ricky Meyers would fix it for us," said Rich. Meyers, who dated George's cousin, was a mechanic at his father's Texaco station.

"Drive back to Perkasie?" said Ray.

"Sure," I said. "Just go slow. We can make it."

The first six miles were easy, a country two-lane road with a few shallow hills and no stop lights and not much traffic. We made it to the top of the ridge overlooking town with no problem. Then we started down the long hill into town.

"Downshift," I said as we started to pick up speed.

"I did," said Rich.

"Jam it into first," I said.

Rich tried, but the gearbox only howled like a meat grinder chewing on ten-penny nails. Those old cars didn't have synchronized gears. You had to be at a dead stop to get into first. The engine drag in second gear slowed us down some, but not much. By the time we ran the stop sign at Ridge Road, we were doing about thirty-five miles an hour.

It was a blind intersection until you were almost on top of it. Rich was riding the horn, and we were all hollering out the windows as we shot through the intersection just ahead of two cars approaching from opposite directions on Ridge Road. I got a good look at the face of the woman driving the car on my side. Her eyes were as big as saucers and her lower jaw was somewhere down below the dashboard. I waved to her as we flashed by.

We were gaining rapidly on a car that had just turned off the ridge onto Park Avenue. There was a blind curve to the right coming up fast. Rich was still all over the horn, and we were all screaming to beat the band, but the car wouldn't speed up or pull over, so we had to pass it. Rich crowded him as close as he could, but we were still out in the wrong lane all the way around the curve. As we came up even with the driver, I could have leaned out and patted the man on his bald spot, but instead I hollered, "Move over, Mister, we don't have any brakes." Then I grinned and waved.

We hit the steepest part of the hill with that ninety-degree turn waiting at the bottom. That's when I saw the car coming up from Ninth Street. It was a station wagon. Even in second gear, we were doing forty or forty-five by now, cranking about seven thousand rpm's, the sheer weight of the car dragging us down the hill, the engine screaming louder than we were, begging for mercy.

And then I was sitting there covered with blood and Ray was draped over my shoulder like one of those skinless rabbits. The windshield in front of me had a big hole in it. I didn't know why. I couldn't tell where the blood was coming from. I didn't feel any pain. I lifted Ray's head. When I let go of it, it dropped. I looked at Rich. The steering wheel was broken, and Rich was bleeding from his chin and chest. "Let's get out of here," I said. I tried to open my door, but it wouldn't budge, so I followed Rich out the driver's door with George right behind me.

I crossed the road and headed for the nearest house. An old woman came out just as I reached the porch, took one look at me and screamed. Then a younger man came out, took one look at me and disappeared back inside. I put a hand to my throat and came away with a handful of blood. That's mine, I thought, but I didn't feel any pain.

A couple of cars had stopped by now, and somebody pushed me down onto the porch steps. I couldn't understand what everyone was so excited about. The man who had run back inside the house came out with a dish rag or something and somebody put it against my neck and told me to hold it there.

The house didn't have a telephone, so people started running from house to house, trying to find somebody home in a house that did. They looked like actors in a bad foreign film on late-night television, their gestures overdone, their words disconnected from their lips. Rich sat down next to me, holding a cloth to his chin. The cut on his chest was just a scrape. George was walking around talking to people. He didn't appear to be hurt.

"Is Ray dead?" Rich said.

"He looked dead to me," I said.

"I'll go see," said George.

"What if he's dead?" I said.

Rich looked at me as if he didn't understand what I was saying. The cloth I was holding had become saturated with blood and the blood dripped through my fingers as I held it. After awhile, George came back. "I think Ray's alive," he said.

"I thought he was dead," I said.

"I think my car's totaled," said Rich.

"We almost made it," I said. From where we were sitting, you could practically see Meyers's Texaco. I still didn't feel any pain. I didn't feel much of anything except a dull throbbing in my neck and a kind of lightheadedness that was not at all unpleasant. It reminded me of how I felt when I was dancing with Andrea.

Judy Harbison's car came down the hill and stopped. "Oh, my God, what happened?" said Judy as she and Pam Major ran over to where Rich and I were sitting.

"I totaled my car," said Rich.

"I think Ray's dead," I said.

"I don't think so," said George.

"What are you doing here?" said Rich.

"We were just out cruising," said Judy.

The girls sat down on either side of us, and Judy took my bloody right hand and held it in hers, stroking it gently as if it were something rare and precious. She was a year ahead of me in school. She dated seniors, and even college guys, and she had never paid more attention to me than you would pay to your kid brother or a cousin you only see on holidays. I was beginning to like the idea of being in an accident.

After awhile, Chief Nellis drove up with his lights flashing and his siren wailing. Right behind him came an ambulance, also with lights flashing and siren wailing. Ralph Daggett, one of the ambulance crew, ran over to me, took the bloody rag away from my neck and whistled. Then he took a large wad of gauze and jammed it hard against the wound.

As if someone had turned on a very bright light and shined it directly into my eyes, my head suddenly filled with pain. Then he started wrapping me in gauze, wrenching my head this way and that way and this way again, as if he were wrestling with it.

"Goddamn it!" I shouted. "What the fuck are you doing.?"

"Your father would be ashamed if he heard you talking like that," said Mr. Daggett.

"Get away from me!" I hollered. My head felt like the clapper of a very large bell. Mr. Daggett shook his head slowly, as if a great sadness had descended upon him.

Ray had been knocked unconscious. They put him on a stretcher and loaded him into the ambulance. Then Rich and I walked over and climbed in with Ray. When George tried to climb in with us, the ambulance crew told him to go away. It took us several minutes to convince them that George had been in the accident, too. Then we waved goodbye to the girls and off we went.

Perkasie didn't have a hospital either, so the ambulance had to take us to the emergency room at Grand View hospital in Sellersville. The doctors and nurses looked George over and told him to go home. They stitched up Rich's chin and released him, too. Ray had a huge lump on his head, so they admitted him for observation.

I got the worst of it. The car had been going fast enough to throw me into the windshield when it hit the tree stump, but not fast enough to throw me out. My head had punched a hole through the glass to my shoulders, then I had fallen back into the seat, shredding the underside of my jaw on the jagged glass, leaving my jugular vein exposed—Mr. Daggett told my parents he could see the vein pulsing—though miraculously undamaged. It took Dr. Wynn, Cheryl's dad, five and a half hours and sixty-two stitches to clean out all the glass and sew me back together, but the blood had come mostly from shallow cuts, and none of the cuts had done any real damage. "You were lucky," Dr. Wynn said. "If your jugular vein had been severed, you would have bled to death in minutes."

But I had not bled to death in minutes. When I woke up the next morning, I was in the Intensive Care Unit. A few hours later, they moved me onto a regular ward. My parents were waiting for me.

"I thought you were working yesterday afternoon," my mother said, one eyebrow raised.

"They changed the schedule," I said. "Rich was giving me a lift home, but he had to get something at the Farmers' Market, so I went with him."

"You went to Quakertown?" she said.

"For crying out loud, Mom, it's only seven miles."

I spent the rest of the day entertaining a steady stream of friends. I went home the day after that, and a week later I was

diving head-first off the three-meter board at the pool. The following week the stitches came out, leaving me with an ugly knot of bright red scars.

And beautiful scars they were, too. The next time I went to St. Isadore's, Andrea asked if she could touch them. She reached out her hand and gently rubbed her fingertips over them, as if they might begin to bleed if she touched too hard. "You could have been killed," she whispered. Then she kissed me on the mouth, her lips lingering against mine just a moment longer than they needed to, her breath sweet.

"I know," I said. But in one of those beautiful moments of revelation that come only rarely in a lifetime, I suddenly understood that all those dead poets were wrong after all. My scars were the proof. I had danced with death and lived to tell about it, and now I was dancing with Andrea Jenkins. I knew I could do whatever I pleased. I knew I would live forever. □

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I Drink My Coffee Black

All I wanted was a cup of coffee. I was just sitting there waiting for the water to boil, taking an occasional potshot out the window—then WHAM! I was sprawled out on the floor head over heels in a silent confusion of dust and debris and shredded clothing. Just like that. There was no noise. I don't remember hearing an explosion at all. It was too loud and too close, and it happened much too quickly. Only the impact registered.

God, was I sick. I mean I was just sick. Is it possible to think calmly in a moment of intense panic? I remember thinking quite coldly, "I'm hit bad," while simultaneously what was left of the inside of my head kept screaming, "Oh no, not now, not now, not after all I've been through, oh not now . . ."

See, this was February 5, 1968. I'd been in Vietnam almost twelve months to the day. And I'd been through a lot of shit: twelve months in a Marine infantry battalion, nearly two dozen

combat operations, scores of patrols and ambushes and LP's, Con Thien, battalion scouts, rocket attacks, firefights up the ass—and not a scratch. Not so much as a stubbed toe.

I was going home in less than a month. Hell, I didn't even have to go on this operation, the captain had told me—too short. "What the hell," I'd figured, "why not? Can't do diddlysquat in the rear but sit around and mark days off my short-time calendar and get nervous. Might as well be with my buddies."

It wasn't quite as simple as all that, I suppose. In Vietnam, there were really few things worse than having time on your hands. Time to think about what was going on there. Time to compare the real America—the one you'd enlisted for—with the one you saw napalming villages and plowing up rice fields with tanks and running around with your rifle and your face shooting anything that moved. Time to think about those articles you kept reading in *Stars 'n Stripes* about protest marches and VC flags in Times Square. Time to imagine what miniskirts looked like on real girls and to wonder if the girlfriend you'd gotten a "Dear John" letter from six months ago was wearing one—while every bearded hippie in Trenton fucked her eyeballs out, and her just loving every minute of it with flowers in her hair. Oh goodness yes, I was more afraid of slack time than I ever was, or will be, of combat—though it was never put in so many words. Or even thoughts. Not then.

And I guess there was more than a little macho involved—the "I'm a Marine, I ain't scared of a good fight, and even if I am you'll be the last to know about it" kind of thing. Whistling in the dark. One more test.

And I really wouldn't have felt right letting my buddies go without me. Life gets very simple in a war. You eat, you keep your weapon clean, and you love the men you share every moment of the long night with because they're all you've got. The only ones who'll ever understand. The ones who hold the other pieces of the Queen of Hearts, one piece to a man.

It's like when you were a kid and the whole gang trashes old Mr. Bowen's garage, and everybody gets caught but you, and they all have to clean up the garage—and you feel so guilty watching them that you finally climb out of the bushes and shuffle over and pitch in.

So it wasn't really "What the hell why not?" though it certainly felt like it at the time. And besides, nobody realized it was going to be this bad. Christ, how nobody realized . . .

We were just going to bail out the army again. Our battalion had come down to Phu Bai from the DMZ–a little rest and refitting after a long stretch in the boondocks. And then the MACV advisory compound in Hue radios down that they're taking small arms and light mortar fire—nothing heavy, but can we send up a column to check it out? That was about 0430 on January 31. By the time any of the Americans in Vietnam figured out that a major North Vietnamese assault—the Tet offensive—was under way from one end of the country to the other, our two companies had been caught in one mother of an ambush barely half of us would survive.

And even then I wasn't hit. And I mean everybody was getting hit. Captain Bachelor. Major Murphy. Sergeant Todd. That first day alone we lost nearly half our fighting strength. It took us all day to fight our way six blocks north from the edge of the city to the MACV compound on the south side of the River of Perfumes. We actually got across the river briefly, but we couldn't hold the bridge and had to fall back a little before nightfall while we still had anybody left alive.

And even then I wasn't hit. Not that day, or the next day, or the next day, or the next day. And everybody was getting hit—some guys two, three times. One gunner from Alpha got hit three times in less than an hour.

After that first adrenaline charge across the bridge, all the fighting in the next few weeks was on the south side of the river, the side opposite the old city—the citadel of the ancient Annamese emperors that a few weeks later would turn up in everybody's living room every evening for a week. We had to set up in the MACV compound, a few hundred Marines in a little pocket of a city swarming with two thousand well dug-in NVA regulars, pushing out slowly from there, one building at a time. (Fucking small arms and light mortar fire, my ass!)

The scouts had taken a building right across the street from the MACV compound on the third day—a real nice place, formerly the mayor's residence or something like that. Kind of

beat up at the moment but real nice just the same: three-story concrete and stone, canopied beds, paintings on the walls, iron bars on the windows to keep out satchel charges.

But for the next two days we couldn't get any farther–or rather we couldn't hold anything we took. Daylight, we'd dash across the street to the next block, fight our way through it house by house, kick open a door, flip in a grenade, leap in shooting, on to the next floor, then on to the next house, Charlie giving ground slowly and stubbornly, waiting for night. Then, all in one big assault, they'd push us back through the block, across the street and right into the mayor's house. Net gain zero. Casualties many.

After two days of this, the battalion CO–Lieutenant Colonel Mike Gravel–standing in the doorway of the mayor's mansion, puffing on a cigar and stroking a five-day stubble of gray whiskers, looking just like Robert E. Lee in olive green–finally decided, "Bullshit, this is crazy. Let's get some flame tanks and do this right." Hooray for the colonel! And we meant it.

That was why I wanted a cup of coffee. There wasn't much else to do the morning of February 5 because the flame tanks–giant armored flamethrowers on treads, really mean–were over by the stadium supporting Alpha company, and we couldn't have them until they were done there. So I was just relaxing. Passing time. Enjoying the pleasures of urban warfare.

You think that sounds a little flippant, maybe not quite an accurate reflection of my feelings at the time, but you're wrong. For a whole year I'd fought in the boonies. With a few exceptions, like Hue and Da Nang and Saigon, Vietnam was the boonies. Thatch-roofed hamlets, rice fields, water buffalo, dirt trails, sand barrens, bamboo jungles, mangrove swamps; boonies. Right out of *National Geographic*.

Then, all of a sudden, a city. Paved streets, concrete houses, a university, a stadium, big cathedrals, and all the little goodies that accumulate in cities. A new kind of fighting, and we paid for it, but there were definitely amenities and I was enjoying several of them that morning. Most notably the roof over my head and the big overstuffed armchair I was sitting in while I waited for the water to boil.

See, when I found out we were going to stay put and do nothing for a while, I just pulled that big easy chair over to the window of a second-story bedroom and then sat down to watch the war—sweeping the windows and doors and shadows and angles of the buildings across the street, looking for movement, every now and then firing off a round or two at my imagination or just to keep 'em honest over there. Hadn't had much sleep lately. After a while I started getting a little drowsy. A nice cup of coffee was just what I needed.

Now every C-ration comes with a lot of things, but four of the things you get are a plastic spoon, a packet of coffee, a big can (maybe with crackers and jam and cocoa), and a little can (maybe bread or date pudding). To make coffee, you empty the big can—put the stuff in your pocket or eat it—bend the lid back into a handle, and fill it with water from your canteen. Then you take your can opener (which you also get with every C-ration meal) and make a few air-vent holes around the bottom of the little can which you've also emptied. You bend the little can slightly at the open end so the big can will sit on it, and that's your stove. You're supposed to get a heat tab with each meal but usually you don't, so you just take a little piece of C4 plastic explosive—it won't blow up if it's not under pressure—put that in the stove and light it. You put the big can on top of the little can, and when the water boils you pour in the packet of coffee, stir it once or twice with your plastic spoon, then sit back and drink your coffee. If you like cream and sugar, you can add them too, because every C-ration meal comes with a little packet of each. I always gave mine away because I drink my coffee black.

I had gotten about three-quarters of the way through the preceding paragraph when the lights went out. Sixteen tons. Just like that. Wally and Hoffy, in the room above me at the time, said later that they saw the gook fire. (Gooks. That's what we called the Vietnamese. All of them. Years later I heard that "gook" is a kind of pidgin word derived from a word meaning "foreigner."). Turkey just leaned a B-40 rocket launcher out the window of a house across the street, drew a quick bead and pulled the trigger. Wally and Hoffy stood there with their

mouths hanging open. Like watching a bad dream. They thought it was headed right for them. But it wasn't. . . .

Survival in combat is very much a matter of luck. You can dig the deepest hole in Indochina, but if Charlie drops a mortar-round into it, there it is. All kinds of fluky stuff like that. There are, however, certain precautions one can take to improve one's chances in the lottery. One of them is to make it a rule never to fire two shots from the same place if you can help it. I'd been sitting by the same window all morning. I could have sent Charlie a telegram: "Shoot here." And waited for an answer.

Most of the casualties we took in Vietnam got it in the first few months of their tour (tour, really, that's what the military called it, a tour of duty: see the sights, visit Chinatown) or the last few months. Guys got it in the first few months because they hadn't yet learned enough to avoid it.

And guys got it in the last few months because they couldn't suppress just a little longer the exhilarating illusion that they were actually going to take their little piece of the Queen and get out of the game ahead; because they couldn't stop thinking about that big freedom bird full of plump stewardesses leaping off the runway out of Da Nang, next stop San Francisco; about Mom and Dad and hot running water and cold beer from the tap in the bar down the street (right there!—not a hundred yards away, any time you want it) clean socks and clean sheets and cruising through town and no blues and never jerking off again because little Suzie Creamcheese gonna sit on your face till the cows come home and who knows what all the hell else can make a man who's come so far just that once forget completely the bullet that's been waiting a lifetime to meet up with him in a dark alley, just sit the fuck right down like it was his own kitchen back on the block, shrug his shoulders, and make a cup of coffee. ☐

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Purple Heart

for Dave Connolly

The wraith of a shadow shivered the air
the way whatever was green around us
always went silent
just before the bullets arrived.

I never got used to the terror
of sudden beginnings
or sudden conclusions,
the random ways people die,
so I knew what I felt this afternoon
was a fact.
And I knew what was coming.

But this time nothing happened.
Only that barely perceptible shiver,
and the world going on as before.

Spooky, I thought.
Then Lisa called to tell me
you'd had a heart attack.

Which of us could have imagined
middle-aged men with failing hearts
when we were young and strong and afraid
to imagine we'd see tomorrow?
Who could have told us
the terrors still to come?

But the shiver I felt was no coincidence.
Rise from your bed, my friend, and walk,
for the world is still a dangerous place
and I need the few friends I can trust.

Heather

for Frances Tomelty

The afternoon we walked among
the churchyard's weathered
tilting gravestones, heather
tumbled wild and purple on the barren
moor surrounding Haworth, slate-green
and solemn under threatening clouds.

You picked a sprig of heather for me,
saying it would bring good luck,
then told me of your childhood
in Belfast, of that bloody civil war,
English exile, and your broken marriage.

Your letters hadn't ever quite conveyed
the private heart where sorrow lies
the way your eyes revealed that afternoon
what words refused to say: even as you spoke,
you tried to spare me that particular burden.

Were you thinking I would turn away?

I know there's little I can do for Ireland
or you

except to care. Here:
this sprig of heather is for you.

The Sergeant

Alongapo, The Philippines, 1968

At night in the Seven-Eleven Club,
you watch the sailors dressed in white
fresh from the waters off Viet Nam
get fleeced by the hostesses, brown
sensuous girls who dance with the sailors
for drinks containing no alcohol.

The girls can dance all night and never
get drunk, and at closing time the sailors,
who think they're about to get laid, get
shown the door and stagger back to their ships.

What do they know about loneliness,
those beautiful sailors in white,
sitting on ships on the blue beautiful sea,
launching beautiful bombers
into the beautiful sky,
firing beautiful five-inch projectiles
at places and people they'll never see?

In the morning you wake to a shabby
room in a cheap hotel with a hostess
who's charged you nothing but love,
the war in Asia, a war in America,
you in the middle, twenty years old,
cupping the breast of the only
forgiveness that makes any sense at all.

The girl awakes. She wants you inside her.
The two of you wash the night from your mouths
with slices of sour green mango.

William D. Ehrhart
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