



Falling into Lakes & Other Misadventures in P.E.

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like crazy. I couldn't help noticing that our African instructor's body was totally built for this, but my white classmates with their dainty derrières were definitely not cut out for this. South Asians, I suppose, are somewhat better endowed in that department, but are saddled with inhibitions against anything remotely suggestive or vulgar. Not that African dance

On the day of the race, positioning four crew shells roughly equidistant from each other at the imaginary starting line turned out to be quite a feat. As soon as one was in the right place, the wind and water would conspire to move the others out of place. Eventually we were all lined up. The judge blew the whistle and four shiny crew shells began to slice through the water at the highest speed we could muster—higher than I was used to during our more relaxed practice sessions.

is vulgar, exactly. One can easily imagine the roots of such dancing in ancient fertility rituals, for instance, which is true also of belly-dancing in the middle east. Prudery was our unfortunate inheritance from the scriptural faiths, and in that sense, the untamed and uninhibited nature of African

dance is admirable.

So yes, reader, I did it. Except that a couple of friends from Yanvalou got wind of it, and showed up outside the dance studio on the second day. They couldn't believe that I would actually do it, so they showed up to see for themselves. Some friendly teasing followed, but I was mortified and decided that was the end of that.

Unfortunately, I couldn't cop out of the class because I was down to the wire and needed the P.E. credit to graduate. So I found another way. There was an African drummer, Senegalese I think, playing the djembe for the class. He also had a bass drum, but the djembe requires both hands, so he wasn't really using the bass. Hey, I was a drummer—maybe I could be of use! So by the next class, I had befriended him, and the poor lonesome drummer was very happy to have a sidekick to accompany him and play the bass. Nobody seemed to mind, so I played the bass drum for the rest of the quarter—and still got P.E. credit since no one came to check, and the African dance teacher didn't really care. Phew! Two quarters down, two more to go.

At this point, I'm in my last semester at Wellesley, and I really need to finish up my remaining two quarters. Despite my sailing misadventure, I was still enamored by the lake. As it turns out, a fresher named Jenny had joined Yanvalou as a dancer, and she was recruiting rowers for dorm crew. She and I lived in the same dorm, and each dorm had a crew team that would train for a semester, and then have a race at the end—a friendly intramural pursuit which would cover my two remaining quarters of P.E. Jenny was the coxswain for my dorm—i.e. she was like our captain and coach. She was petite, but more chirpy and spirited than anyone else I knew, exactly the kind of person who can both motivate people but also be tough when necessary. And since she was basically a friend from Yanvalou, I figured

she would cut me some slack—or maybe she'd be a drill sergeant and help me stay on track and get the P.E. credit I needed. Either way, it seemed like a good idea. Besides, the idea of being on the lake was incentive enough.

Now, dorm crew practice took place twice a week at 6 a.m. Why this ungodly hour? Because the real athletes, the varsity athletes, needed the lake for their own practice sessions after that. So my chirpy coxswain Jenny would call me at 5:45 a.m. and drag me out of bed: "Nausheen! Wake up! It's time for practice! Let's go!" Jenny knew that I needed the P.E. credit, and if I overslept and missed too many practice sessions, I wouldn't be able to graduate. Bless her chirpy little heart, she would make sure I got up, and walk me to the boathouse like a dog on a leash.

Crew was a very different beast from anything I had ever tried before. The long and sleek wooden crew shells gleaming on the water were a beauty to behold. Each one seated eight rowers, with the coxswain perched at the stern. The wooden seats roll back and forth with the rowers while their feet remain strapped in place at the footrests. As you grip the handle of the oar and lean forward, the seat moves forward with you, and the oar pivots on the outrigger and moves backward through the air to the starting point of its stroke. Then as you pull the handle towards yourself and roll backwards, pushing away from the footrest with your legs, the oar slices into the water and makes its sweep. All of this has to be perfectly synchronized. Being out of sync with the others means that you might find yourself being helplessly tossed back and forth by the rhythmic momentum of the team. Also, being out of sync means that you might be sliding backwards while the person behind