

THE MAN
WHO COULDN'T DANCE

Jason Katims

*The attic of Gail's house in Connecticut. ELIZABETH sleeps in her crib.
ERIC and GAIL enter.*

GAIL: Not too loud.

(They walk to crib. Look in.)

GAIL: Eric, this is Elizabeth.

ERIC: Oh my God. She's really . . . ugly.

GAIL: What?

ERIC: The kid is like a raisin or something.

GAIL: *(To ELIZABETH, whispering.)* Don't listen to him Elizabeth. He's jealous. *(To ERIC.)* I've been wanting so much for you to meet her. It's like it would make the whole thing real or something.

ERIC: God. She's a beautiful little raisin, isn't she? It's what was behind door number two.

GAIL: What?

ERIC: I don't know. All night I haven't been able to shake this feeling. It's like I'm visiting the life I could have had. A baby. A house in Connecticut. A subscription to *House and Garden*.

GAIL: You won't let me outlive that one will you?

ERIC: Come on. Gail. *House and Garden*.

GAIL: I put it in the bathroom in the bathroom for *you*, you know. I remember how frightened you used to be of bathrooms without reading material.

ERIC: Don't make me into some sort of like neurotic old boyfriend Gail.

GAIL: Are you going to deny your severe fear of bathrooms?

ERIC: Bathrooms are frightening, horrible places. Cold. Lonely. Sterile. But you should not use that to make me into some kind of little anecdote. Like a chapter of your life that was some little situation comedy. Do not mistake neurotic fears and obsessions for light comedy. Very dangerous, Gail.

GAIL: I don't want to get into a discussion like this now, Eric.

ERIC: What kind of discussion is it, and when *would* you like to get into it?

GAIL: A discussion about us. And never. They're waiting.

ERIC: They're fine on their own.

GAIL: What is that supposed to mean?

ERIC: What?

GAIL: They're *fine* on their own. *Fine*?

ERIC: It doesn't mean anything.

GAIL: Are you saying that my husband is attracted to your girlfriend. Is that it?

ERIC: Wooo. Hold on Gail. All I said was they're fine on their own.

GAIL: Fred and I happen to be very, very happy. Together. He's not interested in some twenty-three-year-old music student and her stupid thesis on Todd Rundgren.

ERIC: You seemed very interested over dinner.

GAIL: Who the hell would write a thesis on Todd Rundgren? Is she going to hand out T-shirts and loose joints at her orals?

ERIC: She's just a date, Gail. A date.

GAIL: It didn't sound like that on the phone. "She's beautiful. She's intelligent. She's not hung up by society's rules." These are your words. I think you should grow up.

ERIC: Why?

GAIL: Why should you grow up? Are you asking me why you should grow up?

ERIC: Yes. I'm interested in hearing about it from someone who thinks she has.

GAIL: That is what people do. They get married. They have kids. They remember their ideals fondly. They try to stick to them in their own way. They donate to public television. They get by.

ERIC: Don't cry, Gail. Please do not cry.

GAIL: Oooh that gets me. What makes you think I'm going to cry?

ERIC: Because you regret your choices. And now you're going to cry.

GAIL: I regret my choices? Fuck you.

ERIC: I'm sorry. I said what I thought. I broke the unwritten rule between us since we broke up. I'm supposed to smile, and talk to you like I'm really interested in just the right amount of sugar to put into the pecan pie recipe.

GAIL: I can't believe you said that thing about *my* pie.

ERIC: I liked the pie. I thought it had a little too much sugar. I just don't understand why everyone who makes pecan pie is obligated to put too much sugar in it because every other pecan pie has too much sugar in it. It's like a world doomed

to repeat its horrors. I eat that pecan pie and I think we're just marking time until the next goddamn Holocaust.

GAIL: Are you saying I baked a Nazi pie?

ERIC: Not intentionally.

GAIL: You shouldn't have criticized my pie in front of company.

ERIC: Gail, I am the company.

(A beat.)

GAIL: Oh am I glad that you are not the father of my daughter. I am so happy to not have to worry for her about your inconsistency, your stubbornness, your uncanny ability to make the most politically and philosophically interesting choices leaving yourself and your loved ones in the shit heap. Let's just spend the rest of the night playing Pictionary. All right?

ERIC: This is the fourth time tonight you brought up Pictionary. Are you forcing me to play fucking Pictionary?

GAIL: It's just a game, Eric. Or am I wrong. Is it actually going to join forces with pecan pie to cause the next Holocaust?

ERIC: It's a waste of time. People sit around and solve meaningless little puzzles and form arbitrary alliances for no other reason than to pass time. Well, time is passing well enough for me without games, Gail. Fred wastes enough of my time talking about his fucking boat. Does he really think I care about his fucking boat? All right, great. He bought a motorized flotation device. Does he really think I want to go on for hour after hour about it?

GAIL: So good. It's good to know how you feel about Fred.

ERIC: How do I feel about Fred?

GAIL: I always knew you didn't like him.

ERIC: How can I like him or not like him? I don't know him. I know his boat. I could draw the blueprints for his fucking boat. I don't know *him*.

GAIL: It's so goddamn easy for you.

ERIC: What?

GAIL: It's so easy for you *not* to play Pictionary. You're funny, verbal, provocative. Do you know how intimidated my husband is by you?

ERIC: Play fucking Pictionary, Gail. Play your heart out. I'll stay here with Elizabeth.

GAIL: You belong with Elizabeth.

ERIC: Purity-wise?

GAIL: Maturity-wise.

ERIC: (*Change of tone.*) You don't love Fred.

GAIL: What?

ERIC: You don't love Fred.

GAIL: That's it. I demand that you play Pictionary, Eric. I goddamn insist.

ERIC: Why did you marry a man you didn't love?

GAIL: I never said I don't love him.

ERIC: Christ, Gail. Tell me you love him. Please.

GAIL: YOU GOT ON THAT FUCKING BOAT. The crucial point. The pinnacle time. The absolute quintessential turning point of our relationship and you're on a fucking boat to fucking Saint John.

ERIC: That has nothing to do with it.

GAIL: It's got everything to do with it.

ERIC: You make it sound like you made some kind of choice between two men. Like it was me or him.

GAIL: It was.

ERIC: It was? Come on Gail. It's a huge world. If it were a choice between me or Fred most women would just fucking shoot themselves.

GAIL: You threw it away.

ERIC: I never threw you away.

GAIL: Not me. It. Everything. Eric you're such an asshole. Everyone's goddamn guru. Living by your values. True to yourself. The ascetic. The Twentieth Century Philosopher. Eric, I have a question for you. A real question. Why are you working on a farm? Why? It's like I'm supposed to admire you or something. I'm so sick of your untraditional paths. The Farm Boy from Bensonhurst. You're wasting your intelligence. You're wasting your intelligence to pick vegetables. There is nothing to admire about that. It's stupid.

ERIC: You're right. Why work with my hands to produce a reasonably priced source of nourishment for my fellow human beings while I could be getting fat and playing Pictionary.

GAIL: I gained four pounds. *Four*. Don't you dare say I'm getting fat. And there is nothing wrong with playing Pictionary, you goddamn all-knowing fool. You lost me.

ERIC: I know.

GAIL: It pisses me off. It really pisses me off. That thing you said about me regretting my choices. At least I made a choice.

ERIC: But you do regret it.

GAIL: I love Fred, Eric. I do love him. Not like I loved you. But we have these things together. This family. This feeling. This sureness.

ERIC: I don't consider your need for structure your strongest trait.

GAIL: Look, Eric, I don't think I can have this conversation with you. I'm sorry things had to happen the way they happened. Let's go downstairs.

ERIC: Right. I'm sorry.

GAIL: You're just being yourself.

ERIC: That's what I'm sorry for. I should say good-bye to Elizabeth. Who knows when I'll see her again.

(ERIC walks to the crib. He looks down. In a moment he bends over to her.)

GAIL: Eric! She'll wake up.

(But ERIC lifts her into his arms. When he turns back his face is flush with tears.)

GAIL: Eric. What is it?

(ERIC cuddles ELIZABETH. He puts his lips to her forehead. He places her gently back in the crib.)

GAIL: What?

ERIC: It's um. It's this thing I need to tell you. I can't dance, Gail.

GAIL: You can't dance. This is why you're crying? Eric, a lot of people can't dance.

ERIC: I don't know why I can't dance. But it's—I can't. I can't make my body move in these ways that the music is demanding that I move. It's just so goddamn embarrassing. The situation. I mean, standing in public around hundreds of people who are displaying their purest, truest selves. I mean, it takes them no more than two drinks and their souls are out there on the dance floor. Their goodness. Their sensuality. They're sharing and loving. I watch that, look at

that. But my body fights it. I start to analyze the music. The rhythm. The time signature. I understand the theory of dancing. The *idea* of spontaneously sharing in this moment that exists now and only now. The give and take with your partner. Two mirrors on a land where gravity holds you to this point and then leaves you free. And that the universe happens right there and then. Like, truth. I understand this intellectually. But Gail, I never have experienced it. I can't dance.

GAIL: How did Elizabeth make you think of that?

ERIC: When we were together. There were all these times when you would arrange for us to be in these places. These parties. And invariably there would be a band, or music playing and invariably people would start dancing.

GAIL: I would arrange this? Like I did this to you?

ERIC: Invariably you would want to dance. And I wouldn't dance with you. I wouldn't dance with you, Gail. And I could see the hurt register on your face. I could see the anger build within you. I could see that this just wouldn't do for you.

GAIL: Why didn't you just say I can't dance. Why didn't you just tell me?

ERIC: Because it was the dam holding the water. If I let that out. That one thing, everything would follow. I couldn't dance. I couldn't have a normal talk about the weather with a neighbor without getting into a conversation about God, love and eternity. I mean, after all, the weather has these huge connotations. I couldn't act correctly in social situations. I couldn't sacrifice truth for a relationship. I couldn't hold you when you needed to be held because I wanted you to be stronger. Because I wanted to be stronger. I couldn't ask you for the warmth of your touch out of need. I couldn't let myself. I would only ask for your touch out of strength. Out of

something that wouldn't become sick and interdependent and symbiotic. I wasn't able to do these things. I don't know, Gail. I mean, you marrying Fred didn't really say anything to me. It was like something in this continuum. This cycle. I mean, it was this thing that happened in my life. The love of my life got married to another man. It didn't seem permanent. But the fact that Elizabeth . . . The fact that this angel . . . this unbelievable gift isn't mine. And will never be mine. This is killing me.

GAIL: Oh my God, Eric. You're human.

ERIC: I'll never have a daughter, Gail.

GAIL: Yes, you will.

ERIC: I'm thirty-seven. I have done nothing but make myself more isolated, unavailable, and unappealing. Believe it or not, it's difficult picking up women with this type of conversation. I work for four dollars an hour, Gail. I never earned a college degree. I can't bring myself to work for someone who is not producing something with some kind of goodness. That rules out ninety-eight percent of job openings. And the other two percent pay approximately four dollars an hour. I am not really going to change. I don't know why this is. People think I make these choices. But you've got to believe me, Gail, I have no control. I can't dance.

GAIL: I never knew you *couldn't* dance. I always thought it was that you *wouldn't* dance.

ERIC: Could you hold me?

GAIL: I don't think so, Eric. I mean, I don't think I would be able to let go.

ERIC: Yeah. You're right. *(Pause. ERIC wipes his eyes.)* Gail, there were these things that you needed. Just to breathe you needed them. And it was so clear that there was no way I

was going to provide you with them. And it was this thing that I did. This thing that I did. It wasn't that horrible. You needed to find someone. I felt that you needed me off the continent. Please believe me, Gail. When I got on that boat, I was thinking of you. Not of me.

GAIL: I believe you.

ERIC: Well, this is a sign of times to come. The first time we had a conversation where your eyes stayed dry and mine didn't.

GAIL: I cried.

ERIC: We better get downstairs before Marie tells Fred about her orgy with the British invasion.

GAIL: There was one time you danced with me.

ERIC: I don't remember.

GAIL: On my wedding day.

ERIC: I couldn't have.

GAIL: You did. I remember it clearly. I remember thinking how strange it was to be in this wedding gown. On my wedding day. Dancing with you. And you weren't my groom.

ERIC: Oh yeah. That. I wasn't dancing, Gail. I was walking. I convinced myself that I was walking very slowly and sideways. It was the only way I could do it.

GAIL: Eric, maybe one day . . .

ERIC: Please don't say it.

GAIL: Right.

ERIC: Gail, I cannot stand Marie. I can't stand her. Please, find something to say to her about me so she won't expect me to sleep with her tonight.

GAIL: I'm sure you'll do just fine on your own.

ERIC: She was just an excuse to see you. I figured, I'd call with this woman in my life. I'd be less of a threat to the home. It was really stupid of me.

GAIL: No. It was human.

ERIC: Thank you for showing me your daughter. She is absolutely the single, greatest thing I've ever looked at in my entire life.

(*They are about to leave.*)

GAIL: Eric.

(*ERIC turns. GAIL walks up to him slowly. She puts her head into his chest. His arms fold around her.*)

GAIL: Eric, you are Fred Astaire. You are Fred Astaire.

ERIC: No, no. Sweetheart. I'm Eric.

GAIL: You are Fred Astaire. Just move the slightest bit. You have nothing to prove to anyone. Just move a little slowly. The slightest bit. Don't worry.

ERIC: We should go down there.

GAIL: In a minute. Just one minute.

(*GAIL rocks back and forth musically. ERIC makes a slight movement trying to follow her. In a moment, he relaxes. He is dancing. GAIL reaches over, still holding him, and pulls the light cord.*)

BLACKOUT