

# Step Lovely

For *T&C*'s beauty and health director, a single dance class led to the dissolution of her marriage and, as told in her new book, a renewal of spirit and self. **BY JANET CARLSON**

In her twenties, Janet Carlson was a junior editor here at *Town & Country* as well as a successful competitive ballroom dancer. She gave up dancing after seven years to start a family and pursue her magazine career. Twenty years later she seemed to have it all: a handsome, talented husband, two beautiful daughters and a job at *T&C* as the director of beauty and health coverage, after stints at other magazines. But despite her successes, she felt a terrible void. Her marriage was deeply troubled, and she lived with a sense of isolation in the very midst of her life and the lives of her children. Then, on Valentine's Day, 2001, her husband, Peter, surprised her with a gift: a ballroom-dancing lesson. And everything changed.

Soon, taking weekly lessons, Carlson rediscovered the joy, passion and confidence she hadn't even realized had been missing for so long. She also found that ballroom dancing contains the secrets to life and love: the give-and-take of dance, with two bodies in rhythm and harmony, mirrors the reciprocity of human relationships. Total trust between partners is as vital on the dance floor as it is in a marriage. Gradually, reembracing dance allowed Carlson to put more heart and honesty into her work, find more time to be with her children, give up a marriage that was beyond salvaging and, ultimately, rejoice in her innate balance, poise and optimism.

"I've been dancing steadily since that Valentine's Day," says Carlson, now fifty-three. "Ironically, Peter set me free by giving me this most important gift. Dancing didn't save our marriage, but it did help me accept that the partnership wasn't working and that I could let it go. Today, because of dance, I can say unequivocally and gratefully that I am alive at last."

Below is an excerpt from Carlson's memoir, *Quick, Before the Music Stops: How Ballroom Dancing Saved My Life* (Broadway Books; \$19.95), out this month.

**CONTROL IS A BEAUTIFUL THING** in ballroom dance—or any kind of dance—because with it you can master technique, and that frees you to be the artist creating something spontaneously divine and wonderful, something others enjoy watching. So how come control has such a bad rap in real life, in relationships and around the house, not to mention in the habitat of the psyche (as in: "She has control issues")?

I've lived in my home for fifteen years, most of that time with a husband, thirteen of those years with children. I have maintained the house more or less successfully. Okay, it's been extremely messy for a long time, the kind of messy that means you can't invite people over, or let the Con Ed man in without apologizing as he trips over stuff in the cellar, or find anything you need without putting out an APB. It got this way not only as our family grew but also as Peter and I became more careless with each other and stopped being the happy couple puttering lovingly about our home. The decor is a mix of frayed flea market, Ikea and Toys "R" Us. I pick up incessantly, and I sigh a lot. That's life with kids and two working parents (and

Illustration by *Sarah Wilkins*



then one) and lately no budget for a cleaning person. But these days I am developing my systems, routines and juggling methods that seem to work well enough, judging by the health and happiness of my kids—though not yet by their habits of house-keeping. We're gradually getting to that in between doing the homework, practicing the flute, walking the dogs and sitting on the couch all three in a cozy row, watching TV. That's quality time for me, and so is bedtime, which in the earlier days would take a full hour because both girls would start talking; they'd tell me what was going on in their lives, fill me in on their frustrations, hopes and wardrobe problems. There's not a chance I'd trade this for tidiness.

I'm thoroughly absorbed in being the best mother I can be and in keeping my current life together as I dissolve the previous one, but every now and then I find myself yearning for alone time. I need to refuel. Am I nuts that I'd rather be alone than have a social life? Since Peter left I've had a few dates, and they were actually not as bad as I'd feared. At first I assumed my antisocial tendency was a shortcoming. But now my attitude has shifted to: it makes perfect sense, thank you very much. I get up at 5:45 A.M. and power through the day on adrenaline, stealing an hour to dance at lunchtime, and I come home at seven to throw together some dinner, do homework with my daughters, listen to their accounts of the day, sign permission slips, pick up a zillion little things that have landed on the floor since morning, avoid returning phone calls, finish the laundry, do the bedtime thing with my sweet girls, take a quick bath to punctuate the day and fall asleep in the tub.

When I get to be alone every other Friday evening into Saturday morning, it's just me and the dogs—Cookie, the muscular, dainty and neurotic pit-bull mix with soulful eyes, and Rizzo, the imperturbable Rottweiler. I can be with them and still feel the benefits of being alone. Why is that? What is it about dogs? Is it merely that they don't speak? During this time, I wander around, tidying, and I turn on the television to watch or listen to CNN as I defrost a salmon fillet and make some salad. I think, I stare out the window, I write, I ride my exercise bike, I stretch my hamstrings, I pull everything out of a drawer or a closet and reorganize. I talk on the phone with my best friend, Julia, who also wanders around her house, picking up while we chat. It's all very desultory. I love it. I doubt I'll ever learn to meditate, but my Friday nights may do the trick.

It has now been almost a year since Peter moved out, and in this year I have enjoyed slowly, in baby steps, reclaiming the house. No more having to discover a paring knife jabbed into an apple core left on the sofa at midnight for the kids to sit on in the morning or tolerating a giant heap of photo equipment gathering dust for months in the foyer and blocking passage. A nice

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of 100 percent of the household maintenance (guess I shot myself in the foot in this regard, and I will very reluctantly admit that Peter did more than I claimed he did and I wasn't all that neat myself). But the cleaning and ordering do give me a nice false sense that my life is more in control. I'm trying to tap into the old Zen aesthetic I used to cling to as a young, single woman: empty fridge; shoes and Champagne stowed in the unused dishwasher; one toothbrush in the holder; not a thing out of place; not many things in the apartment to begin with—just a sofa, a coffee table, a bed and hardly any mementos. Kids and a Zen aesthetic are, of course, antithetical, so that degree of neatness is a distant fantasy now. Sometimes I tell myself it's better to appreciate the glorious messiness of a full life—but don't stop picking up, whatever you do, just in case the doorbell rings.

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**IN BALLROOM DANCE**, two people dancing can be like two people having a conversation, but often enough, dancing is a one-man show—the man pulling and pushing his partner around. This is like when one person dominates the conversation, which then becomes a monologue. Although I didn't know it at the time, Yuri, my former teacher, a Russian with control issues, was one-person-dancing, and I was along for the ride. He was in control. Period. That's one reason I didn't stand a chance of being a good student, let alone a good dancer, with him. With Bill, my current teacher, it's always two-people-dancing. I like his idea of dancing, in which the woman is not simply following and the man is not dominating. Ballroom dancing is less old-fashioned than most people think.

The trick of good partnership dancing, in my opinion, is to walk a fine line of control. You need to be in control of yourself, your body and your emotions without succumbing to the temptation to try to control your partner or to be in charge of the “us” as it moves. I often see professional partners in the studio standing, facing each other, not dancing, because they've stopped to argue about who's doing what wrong. There's friction. He thinks he's right, she wants to get her way, or vice versa.

And yet, even if you stick to self-control, there are pitfalls. I found them in myself. There's functional control, the kind that allows you to master the fancy footwork and stay balanced in

contrast to the occasional sadness I feel is the sudden elation that overtakes me at the realization that comes in the living room: I can redecorate! So I've been restoring more of a sense of order at home. It's very slow going, because now I'm in charge

an outrageous pose, and then there's dysfunctional control, which I can personally assure you is nothing more than clear and embarrassing evidence of your own complex psychological defense systems. This control is a sleight of mind by which you delude yourself, the illusion being that you are the master of your universe and your future. This kind of control, fed by past traumas, is used as a pain-avoidance maneuver.

Take the waltz, for example, a lovely, lilting dance everyone recognizes: one, two, three, one, two, three, swooping romantically to wistful music. In order to have the lilting quality, you have to use your knees and your feet to propel yourself up and down while traveling around the room. It was a big day for me when, in trying to learn this, or rather in being frustrated by consistently failing to get it, I discovered that I'm not in charge of gravity. Seriously. I had never before accepted that I was in any way a control freak until Bill urged me for the hundredth time to let my weight go in the waltz. I tend to hold on to my mass for dear life, tensing my quads and torso in an ancient fear that letting go means total collapse—death! That day when I finally confronted the paradoxical command to let go but survive, I released my weight in reckless abandon during a downward whoosh—one, two, *three*—and I felt an extraordinary ease while traveling through space. Wow! I realized right then that I'd been expending tremendous energy both in keeping myself off the ground and in bringing myself down to earth. How inefficient: gravity can do that for me, and isn't it perfect that a micromanaging working mother would think she controlled even the forces of nature?

One of the great things about learning a big lesson like this through the physical body is that I can't ignore it. There it is.

I can give up that silly control, let go and survive. The proof is there, right out in the open, on the floor. Me, my skin, my bones and my muscles showing me everything is going to be okay. And I can do it again and again. A useful side effect of such a lesson is that I can make fun of myself. Oh, the baggage I've brought onto the floor—suitcases full of wariness to make my dancing heavy.

No surprise that when I came back to dance in my forties, I got busy managing my various body parts, heel here, shoulder blades there, tummy muscles engaged, and I assumed I had to take care of everything myself. Did I even realize that there was a man right in front of me dying to help out?

There's a figure called the Hover Cross, in which the woman

ideally acts a bit like a slingshot—if she can trust her partner and surrender. For a long time I couldn't give in. Instead, I naively tried to manufacture the look of the figure by using my own muscles and willpower. Bill kept stopping after the Hover to say, “Hmm, do you think we could try that again?” He said I felt like a lead weight; his biceps were killing him. I wanted so badly to rise to the challenge. “I just need warning when you're going to do this step,” I said. “Or more training.”

“Ah, the trainer asking for training” is all Bill would say.

Let's try again. And again. Once more. Eventually, after many attempts and after noticing that Bill's arms cradled me no matter what, I found the courage or lunacy to give in ever so slightly. Then a little bit more. Finally, I was a veritable rubber band, my spine amazingly pliant. I was overcome with exhilaration. I'd had no idea how good it could feel to give in to my elasticity, get fairly horizontal and let my partner support me through the danger. I'm supposed to support him in other figures, don't worry, so it works both ways. Now I try to be like this in all the dances, even the tango, which is much sharper and therefore kind of scary.

I often slip back into old habits, but there are times when I can enjoy being cared for—it feels womanly! Plus, I see that it gives the man a kick to do his job. Two points for my inner tango goddess.

Trust is hard, though. The surrender it demands was (is) counterintuitive for me. Physically, for example, it means dropping defenses, thinking of my skin not as a protective barrier but as an organ of communication with my partner. No dance offers more of the heady pleasures of surrender, trust and faith than the quickstep. In this spirited, zany dance, the woman runs backward incredibly fast without looking while the man steers. I'm a rational person; I was sure this wasn't smart when I first tried it with Bill. His eyes would light up at the opening bars of speedy music, and I was like a horse being backed into a trailer. But after a time, racing around the room backward grew less scary. Practice again softened my stiff resistance, and I've come to feel safe while surrendering my safety—my tight mind more willing to try new things. Not bad for an old broad! I'm prouder of that than I am of my muscle tone. To me, this is the big payoff of dance: giving up control in order to get, ultimately, exactly what you want, or at least something you want more than a false sense of security. Sometimes now, I run fast backward without knowing where I'm going and find it kind of thrilling. From the cheerful quickstep, I'm learning that if I saddle myself with the need to know the outcome before I set out, I'll be chasing a mirage and spoiling my own fun.

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