

## Dancing on the Ceiling

It must be the most popular song in the whole world, he thought.

His cousin, before the fire, would have said that every song is just an old song sung in a new way in the same way stories are just old stories with new names or twists that make you forget you heard that one before.

But, oh, what a feeling when you're dancing on the ceiling.

How do they do that? Paul wondered. Why the ceiling? he asked.

Lionel Richie like the white rabbit that Alice tailed, or some genie, materializes disembarking from a red Ferrari, appearing with a flanking pair of pasteurized troubadours, entering a towering apartment building in some indiscriminate city and stepping into an elevator that leads to who knows where.

Friday night meant *Friday Night Videos* and probably most kids around the country would be watching the same flipped world at the same time (unless they had cable, which meant they watched when they wanted). Millions of people like him would follow Lionel's red tunic down the hall, past unmarked doors that could only open to other doors, and finally into the room and up the wall to the ceiling.

What a feeling when you dancing on the ceiling. Not *a* ceiling but *the* ceiling.

It wasn't their first time, as they—his sister and cousins—had already seen the world turned upside down by Turbo in *Breakin 2: Electric Bugaloo*.

Lionel doesn't do this alone but beckons all to enter the room populated by people in blacks, whites and grays, heeled and studded, horizontally striped or zebra printed, some in sequin and others in second skin metallic leather. The gelled and

molded sculptures on their heads reference reality but look nothing like anything he had ever encountered in his world. In the middle the trickster, Mr. Richie, in his red tunic, invites everyone to dance on *the* ceiling.

Before the fire Paul's cousins and sister would usually watch *Friday Night Videos* together, as their parents would collect the kids and deposit them at one of the houses before hitting the bars. The ritual of watching videos included spreading blankets out in front of the TV like Aladdin's carpet, overlapping the varied patterns, a faux rustic colonial quilt clashing with the bold fonts of the decade—*The Empire Strikes Back* superimposed over patchwork.

The pop and chips and Hostess cakes were divided and lined up on the coffee table that had been put to one side which was covered with rings and stains from previous weeks—annual rings of sorts. Pillows taken from every room were piled in the middle of these patterned and frayed blankets.

Songs deemed acceptable by his older sister, Stephanie and cousin, Poncho, the elders and critics of the group, were enjoyed collectively—Prince's "Kiss" or Run DMC's "Walk This Way"—and it was expected you knew at least some of the lyrics. The undesirable songs were used as a running game where these critics, Poncho and Stephanie, would choose one of the kids to stand on the couch and lip-synch the worst of the rotation, anything from "*Like a Virgin*" to "Who's Johnny?" by El DeBarge. It wasn't enough to just mime the words; it was expected to get into to character, to become a mirror image, preferably in a funhouse mirror.

"Dancing on the Ceiling" looked like confetti, like the inside of a piñata. A world operating with different temporal and spatial conventions. Like a dream, the story begins in the middle of a moment devoid of context—in a hallway passing

unmarked doors—then is consumed by what appears to be perpetual dancing, perpetual motion, only to end with the dissecting lines and patterns in static rest on the ceiling. With the law of gravity subverted, the only norm of this world is to dance or not dance, a binary system, or rather the feeling when you're dancing on the ceiling or the feeling when you're not.

The night of the fire—the previous New Year's Eve, Janus rearing his ugly face again, presaging the way his life would change—his father, aunt and uncles and their spouses had been at a bar together waiting for the ball to drop and usher in a new year, a new time.

A story of uncontrollable falling down.

A drunken man in a white suit bumps into Paul's mother, who then spills her drink on his jacket. The crimson stain registers and wakens him from his stupor, reminding him of the day and time and the importance of his white sport coat.

The man punches his mother in the face. Paul's father grabs the man by the lapel and his uncle with a flurry of jabs bursts the man's nose, splattering his own blood across both breasts of the white coat like a propitiatory covering.

The stained white suit's brother, the bartender, emerges from behind the bar with a Louisville Slugger but Paul's other uncle grabs and cinches the bartender with his laborers biceps before he reaches the fight.

Glasses fall from the bar. A stool is broken and a large mirror shatters as it falls to the floor.

The owner of the place throws everyone out.

It's 11:50 and it's too late to reach another place to see the clock turn 12, to witness Janus turn his head.

The crowd turns on Paul's family.

His father pleads with the mob—it wasn't their fault. It's just bad timing, he says.

He meant Time was the culprit.

But the crowd converges on them and the men find themselves warding off blows from every direction. Someone grabs his aunt by her hair, jerking her head back and forth.

The bat appeared again and one of his father's ribs is cracked before the police arrive and take the whole family off to jail as the instigators of the fray.

They were still in holding cells when news of the fire finally reached them—that the house had been set ablaze and that his sister and cousins were consumed in a living funeral pyre.

After the initial questioning in a squad car down the street from the fire, Paul was taken directly by social services to an emergency childcare center.

The next time he saw any of them again was at the courthouse shortly before the custody hearing scheduled from 11am-12pm.

They all looked pretty much the same as the last time he saw them—in suits and ties and dresses.

His father had only two suits—one thin, warm weather suit and a tweed for winter—and wore the same thick sport coat from New Year's Eve.

They were allowed to speak to him for a moment before the proceeding.

Did you notice the lamp? his father said.

The lamp was on, Paul said, but it had been on.

Was there smoke? Did you see fire?

I'm not sure, he said.

They were brought into the courtroom. He didn't listen to his father and uncle's explanations but knew they would argue that Poncho and Stephanie were well above the babysitting age in the state.

His mother had the faint trace of a black eye even though both of them were puffy and reddened from her tears.

When called to testify, Paul was moved to another hard chair and the lawyers confirmed that they wanted to hear him in open court. As they asked him about what had happened the night of the fire and he heard the court reporter typing each word of the question simultaneously with its asking, he tried to recall what exactly happened.

A plastic lamp melted and ceased to be a lamp but an impression, he thought.

A fire started upstairs, he said, from the lamp.

They asked about the Fridays they were left alone, the frequency and the length of such nights. He didn't tell them about *Friday Night Videos*, or how he waited all week for the night, how he even longed to be transfigured into the most obscene pop song. He had thought this week might have been Wham!

The judge peered into him and Paul tried to evoke what he knew about families, to project a warmth he had never known, as if he could will himself into a world full of the ordinary—curfews, Sunday dinners, parental guidance, kisses and embraces that dance their way out of frame as the credits roll:

**Lionel Richie**

**“Dancing on the Ceiling”**

*Dancing on the Ceiling*

**Motown Records**

To see it again was his very next desire.

He had seen the plastic lamp begin to melt when he had gotten up to use the bathroom in the middle of the night. He didn't tell his older cousin or his sister, never attempted to wake them, but got close to watch the fire grow, spread and then dance its way up the wall and engulf the room and start on the remainder of the second story of the house.

Oh what a feeling, when you're dancing on the ceiling.

Fear broke his gaze on the fire and he raced down the stairs and out the back of the house.

From the neighbors' lawn he saw the smoke billow out of the seams of the house and the fire flicker and pirouette in its windows.

He waited for the rest of the kids and when they didn't emerge from the smoke he started for the back door, but George (Jorge) Santiago, the Puerto Rican man from across the street, caught him on the way and held him with his machinist arms, holding him as they watched his family be obliterated.

The commercials have commenced in the TV room in the foster home—commercials used to signal a pause allowing them to run to the bathroom, Paul, Poncho and the younger boys peeing outside, even in the snow, and the girls talking loudly, taking turn in the lone toilet upstairs. The ads played but no one listened, even if they were just in the kitchen grabbing bringing more snacks.

White noise.

Muzak.

Busy talk in the background.

But now in this TV room of the foster home, the *Carpet King* appears, a commercial that hasn't changed much since the 70s. The catchphrase is The Carpet King Rolls Out the Red Carpet, and every commercial ends with the same footage of the *Carpet King* pushing a giant roll of red carpet down the biggest set of steps in the state.

The story of the red carpet goes back to ancient Ephesus which in expectation of a visit from the Emperor during a water shortage, turned to wine to clean the streets of the luxuriant city; the people wantonly emptying wine jars and wine skins on its marbled causeways. The Emperor loved the oxblood hued marble streets and declared they needed to be red henceforth. Wine alone wouldn't suffice; more was needed than a reddish hue, or a reference to red. Rather the streets themselves must

become the vivid oxblood of the Emperor's mind, thus the carpets were rolled out as a fitting tribute to his royal personage.

The red carpet will always be with us.

The carpet will always remind Paul of the feeling of dancing on the ceiling. The feeling will forever be coupled with the moment the lamp lost its shape and his life became a dripping remainder of a night with no beginning and no end.