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Same Blood

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SAME BLOOD

Bethany Deidel

Sometimes grandma turns on her Latin music and shows me what rhythm is. One foot forward and shift the hips, slowly but with command. You have to shake your hips more, she says. That's where it's at, the rhythm, in your hips, in your blood. You have my blood, so it's in your blood. She asks me, do you have the rhythm like me?

At eleven, I don't even have hips yet.

But the hips don't matter and neither does the rhythm. It's the blood that matters.

When grandpa died, grandma stayed in her room and cried. When she finally came out, she came out different: weary and older, but resolved. At fifty-eight, she was still young with a lot of life left. She would keep on living.

After grandpa died, grandma would try to tell me about what happened to him. It wasn't his fault; things were just hard; he wasn't being selfish; he was a broken man, tired of working and working and it never being enough. That's how life is sometimes, she would say. You live and it's a good life, a beautiful life, full of love and family, but you can't keep up and you get tired, so you stop. She wanted me to understand, or maybe just listen. Her life was passing too, and she had things to share. She wanted to be heard by someone, by her own blood. It was then, and not until then, that she taught me how to dance.

First it was the cha-cha and then the jitterbug. That's how she met grandpa, the jitterbug. Grandma would spin me and pull me and spin and pull and pull and spin. A little more tension, she'd say. It's a give and take dance. You've got to give some. You can't just let me move you like a doll. And so we shared the dance. That's how compadres should be, she'd say, and then tell me again how her compadre Laura left her after grandpa died because helping grandma was too hard. Laura had been her friend since they were confirmed together more than fifty years ago. Grandma showed me a picture once, their dark skin, black hair, white dresses, and wide smiles. They looked like sisters. They were there for each other's weddings, their children's births, when money was low, but when grandpa died, grandma cried most of her days and Laura didn't understand, didn't know how to help grandma, so she stopped trying. She didn't visit grandma anymore, stopped taking her chili and Christmas cookies. But when you're compadres with someone, you stay even when you don't understand, grandma would say.

Grandma calls me her compadre now even though our visits are infrequent; two, maybe three times a year. We go on walks and we talk; grandma tells me her life in stories—the Wonder Bread factory, the furniture store she owned with grandpa, years of dancing at the Legion, trips to visit friends in Grand Junction, San Francisco, New

York. My age doesn't matter. She started telling me her stories around the same time she started teaching my chubby legs, not yet grown out of their baby fat, how to feel the rhythm. And each year she tells me a little bit more.

Just this summer she told me how she met grandpa. We were young, she told me. He was twenty-nine and I was twenty-five, just a little older than you are now. We were at a Catholic social, she said, and he asked me to dance. We danced all night. Grandma would have danced every dance anyway. Months later they were married, and they kept dancing after they were married. Every Saturday night for fifteen years we danced at the American legion, she said. He wasn't the greatest dancer, but I could lead him. I was the only one he could dance with.

The summer before, on our walk around the lake, she tried again to tell me how grandpa died, a different story. Your grandpa had a gambling problem, she said. He would take the money we made at the furniture store to Central City, to Harvey's, to the blackjack table. He came back empty every time. The doctors think it was depression, she told me.

Grandma came back from visiting friends in New York to find that she was alone, just a note from grandpa saying he loved his wife, his daughter, his son, his granddaughter, and that he would be able to take care of them better if he wasn't there. She tells me this and she cries. After eight years, she still cries and people don't understand why she still cries, why she hasn't moved on. People don't know the hurt, she would say.

But grandma still dances. For her sixtieth birthday she danced all night at the bar. And when she turns seventy, she'll do it again. These old legs are wearing out, she'd say. But she's still young on the inside and when she dances she's saying, Look, I'm still alive, still moving. When she dances, she's doing what she does best. When she dances, she enjoys the music in her. And I can tell my stories, she'd say.

Grandma's not good with words. She uses a mix of Spanish and English, and her emotions come out in Spanish. Beseme, kiss me, she says to my dad when they argue, kiss my ass. Or she calls me her little girl, *mi jita*, when she wants me to know she loves me. But she speaks best when she dances. She rolls her hips and says, hard things happen. She rolls them the other way, keep living. She spins me and pulls me and spins me again, remember the people you love, remember your family; give and take and give and take. She spins me in and hugs me, keep loving even when you don't understand.

I shift my hips, the rhythm is mine, grandma. I shift them the other way, because it was yours. I spin and spin and spin, we have—we are—the same blood.