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Sweetheart

by Sue Hitchcock

You are a stone overweight after the birth of your second child, so you enrol at a class – a class in International Folk Dance, actually. Well you might as well have the pleasure of exciting music, why make it a chore. The school hall is in Bounds Green, only two stops up the line on the local train. You arrive with another lady, who was looking for a Scottish dance class, but, not finding it, she joined and became my partner for the next decade.

The group gathered in the hall consisted mainly of middle-aged women and only two men. One was a tall skinny young man who was with his wife, the only other woman of my age. The other was an older chap who seemed to be in charge of the tape recorder, finding the right music. He was no taller than me and his shiny scalp only carried a fringe, back and sides of grey hair. He was of course the teacher's husband. The class was a joint enterprise and he only danced when someone was short of a partner.

The teacher was a dynamic and charismatic woman, not beautiful, but vital in an inspiring way. Her friend, sister Ann Marie taught at the same Catholic school with her and they often danced together. You learned a few dances, not without tripping yourself up on your own clumsy feet, trying to do the vine step. Still you got the idea and got hooked.

Four years pass and the friendship you have with the teacher's husband has become warm, more than you planned. Each summer there is a folk dance garden party. You are happy to bring your husband and pretty little daughters in their wide skirted summer frocks. A wonderful evening was had by all, but you drink more punch than is wise.

A goodnight kiss might not be inappropriate, but you delight in it more than you should. The meaning did not go unnoticed by your dearest dance partner.

Why the affair lasted so long is surprising. Did you and he enjoy the secrecy? Guilt was the background against which your need for otherness, apartness and what seemed to you like more love than you had ever known existed.

How many years passed and you never tired of him, always discovering some new mutual interest, some new pleasure, a new secret joke. Then came the inevitable day.

“I don’t know what to do. I’ve been offered a promotion, but it would be in Stevenage, too far away for us to meet. I don’t have to take it. What do you think?”

You knew this day would come, but it was still a shock. How could he explain refusing the promotion? Going public about our feelings would be devastating to our families and we both felt guilty from the beginning. It had to be the end. You were too broken up to disguise. You confessed. You slept in a separate room for months, but domestic pressures brought back a sort of normality.

Being in love, you know...it’s not like having a canary in a cage. When you lose one sweetheart, you can’t just go out and get another.