

**Caroline Allen**

## Chapter One

In which the main character realizes that the old adage from the cheerful poster from the days of yore (her childhood in the sixties), "Today is the first day of the rest of your life," is not only true, but depressing. So much better was the poster of the Siamese kitten struggling to right itself on a horizontal bar, back legs and tail dangling in the air "Hang in there baby!" with it's eyes wide open, as if astonished to even be alive, what's more grasping a bar mid-air because life itself depends on it. But "Today is the first day of the rest of your life," either means: the rest of your life is going to be a lot like this one; or stop wasting time wishing you were doing something else and just do it. After 56 years of hanging in there, the main character feels that either meaning is true and they are not mutually exclusive, the struggles of yesterday are the same struggles of today-- with variations, to be sure, because life is better at middle age than it was in childhood, she has more power and money and personal freedom and self-knowledge; but still she finds herself that same ten year-old girl of a summer afternoon wondering, "What's the point of all this?"

Which, in a ten year old is a bit sad, but probably just means that she has nobody to play with, her mother's at work, her sister is off with her own friends, and she's bored. In this particular fifty-six year-old it means

she's lost her focus, she doesn't feel like writing about her adolescent self and all the trauma of her first love, her painting isn't particularly exhilarating, and though she's proud of having gone to a dance class and actually moved her whole body, she knows it was a way to avoid writing. And it gave her that Ventura Feeling.

Ventura Feeling: noun. 1) A sense of astonishment at how weird and uncool and dated and provincial every building, person and pair of shoes one lays one's eyes upon is. 2) The horrible realization that one belongs there without really fitting in. 3) A state of driving through streets which trigger memories that are both vivid and banal, as if Ventura were only capable of creating vibrantly mediocre experiences. 4) The suspicion that fascinating new art movements and musical groups are blossoming three thousand miles away. 5) A sort of blank unknowingness.

Now she must ask herself, "What was it about the dance class that gave her that Ventura Feeling?" She goes over the sequence of the morning's events. There was the stop at the light after the exit, staring into the distance at that same bright pink house with the tall palm tree in the yard. How many times has she sat there in her air-conditioned Honda and thought about painting that pink house, wondering where she would set up the easel, where she would park the car, if anybody would bother her on the street-- when suddenly the light changes and she drives on and forgets all about the pink house with the palm tree! She parks in the Carl's Junior parking lot next to the dance studio. She sees one of the regular dance class patrons sitting in her car talking on a cell phone with an ear bud in her ear. A friend who used to go to this dance class calls the woman, "The Angry Pixie". She also calls the class, "Prancey Dancey", which our main character, let's call

her Sheila, has always found objectionable, accurate though it be. Now Sheila finds herself at the doorway staring into a large room with a padded orange floor, the kind of floor made for martial arts studios, and many people standing up, sitting down, stretching and talking. It's a big class today, about thirty people, maybe more.

The teacher, a tiny muscular woman with brilliant blue eyes and blonde hair calls everybody to stand in a circle. She's smiling and making announcements when a big bald man breaks in and says, "This is a very special day. I happen to know it's somebody's birthday" and he stares at the teacher. The teacher says, "Thank you, Len," and then announces that it's not only her birthday but also the birthday of another person in the class, the beautiful Maureen, a pale willowy woman with long thick yellow hair rolled into a bun. The two birthday girls stand in the center of the circle and the class sings Happy Birthday. Then the class does The Whoosh, where they all bend down with their arms to their sides, swing their torsos up so they're standing upright with their arms in the air like young gymnasts and all together yell, "Whoosh". They repeat this three times. Then the teacher says she's at least ten years older than Maureen and Maureen denies it and the teacher says she's turning 53 and Maureen is turning 41 and Maureen says she is not, she's turning 46, and everybody is so shocked because they both look so young. Truly dancing keeps one looking good. That, thinks Sheila, and not getting fat. She, herself, has gotten fat. But she prefers not to dwell on it.

"Today we're going to work on strength," says the teacher. "Because I love strength. I love my body's strength, I love the strength of my will, the strength that brought me here to Ventura, the strength that's kept me going." People clap. "And along with strength we have flexibility, those two go perfectly together."

Sheila is glad to be there but thinks about how weak she's been feeling lately, and stiff, and that this class may be just what she needs or it may be much more than she needs and maybe she should just take it easy. But as soon as the music comes on and she recognizes the song she knows she won't hold back, not now anyway, she's just so full of how that music wants her to move, and the teacher leads them into stretches and bends and arm circles to warm them up and pretty soon they're jumping and kicking and prancing around the room and the music changes and they're all kicking up their heels, mingling, making eye contact as they goofily sing along with Mary Poppins' "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious."

Sheila loves this kind of silliness and participates whole-heartedly, but there's a part of her that stands outside the group and notices that Len, the big man, is making the face he often makes when he free-dances, a sort of prissy, nose in the air, chin up, affectation of an old lady at a tea-party with an exaggerated hand-flap. Len, a tall, broad-shouldered giant of a man has recently taken to adorning his smooth bald head with a thin scarf across his forehead, a long tail flowing to the side. He sometimes wears robes. Len has dated or tried to date many of the women in the class and has hinted that his feelings are hurt when he feels that the women in the class aren't as friendly with him as they are with each other. Sheila sees him dancing toward her and smiles; he's making the funny teaparty face, long upper lip, eyes half-closed. Then he shimmies up beside her, leans over to rub his shoulder against hers and laughs, "hehehe" with a lecherous intonation and raise of the eyebrows. He quickly pops back into the prissy nose in the air flappy-hand character. They both move on. That shimmy rub and her acceptance proved she wasn't prejudiced against him; now she can avoid his gaze with a clear conscience.

Sheila remembers how her old boyfriend never danced, how he was a musician and thought people looked funny when they danced, "like fish flopping," were his words. Her step-father, in reference to this comment, said, "He's an asshole." Well, yes, he was an asshole. His most salient feature. Assholetry. Asshohedom, Assholistic? The quality of aggressive self-confidence based on sharp and mean-spirited criticism of others. She must've liked it at the time. If he could see her now! Skipping around with these sweet, sad, nutty people-- Angry Pixie is doing her best to express joy, smiling broadly, softening her angry eyes, waving happy energy around the room. Beautiful, winsome, 46 year-old Maureen follows close behind, dancing like a real dancer, Sheila thinks. But aren't they all real dancers? That's the problem. They are on one level, and aren't on another. There are so many experiences in this one room, who can follow or separate any one from the rest? Sheila sees herself dancing like a real dancer in the mirror, blushes at her own self-regard, wondering how it is that she can feel so beautiful, so at ease in the movement, so happy with her plump middle-aged body and its curves. She doesn't think everybody's beautiful. She knows that the man who has cerebral palsy and jerks up and down and side to side in a frenzy of spasmodic inflexible movement is not beautiful, and the poetry he writes and recites before classes is not good poetry, though it's earnest and sends good messages about living life to the fullest. She admires his spirit. She knows that there are only a few beautiful dancers in the room, the ones that actually hear the music with their whole bodies, who have a fluency in dance from years of practice, and that she is one of them, though it's shameful to admit this knowledge, even to herself. She loves the idea of everybody being beautiful in their own way, but deep down inside she doesn't feel it's true. We are separate and different and unequal, she thinks, and this leaves her with the unenlightened, the un-Buddhist, the ones who are living under the delusion (so say the enlightened

ones, and she believes them) of being separate when really all things are inextricably connected, right down to the very atoms and subatomic particles they share. How does one become conscious of one's mingling neutrons or electrons or whatever it is that's flying around into everybody else's? If else were a word one could appropriately use in such a situation. Why this insistence on separation? Why not feel the connection and rejoice in it?

Now she's spinning. She loves spins more than anything. She adds leaps to the spin. This is the closest thing to flying she knows, except in dreams, and the speed and precision, the power and lightness of her body, call forth a few seconds of ecstasy as she spins on that invincible core at the very center. The teacher walks toward her, too close, she flinches, almost falls, makes a quick adjustment, keeps spinning-- but something has changed. Instead of the spins propelling her, she's consciously pushing the spins. Spell broken. She will keep dancing and when the teacher says "Now for some strengthening moves" and lunges forward and bobs up and down to really put pressure on the thigh muscles, Sheila goes down but holds back just a little. She's not going to hurt her self. Her Self. Self Self Self. She's suddenly exhausted and walks to the water dispenser in the back of the room. She shakes a small white paper cup out of a stack, fills and drinks, fills and drinks, looking out upon the other people moving, following along. She's happy to be alone there in the corner drinking her water, but suddenly, when they move onto a new dance, just as happy to join again.

How can she be connected and not connected at the same time? She stares at the different faces, most of them people she's danced with for years. Sad faces mostly, sad or haggard or a little uneasy, all so human, trying to stay healthy, get happy, just like her. She quit for years and came back, hadn't missed anybody, not

really, and she knows she could quit again and not miss them. What kind of person dances her heart out in the company of people she feels almost nothing for? Is this normal? And when they look at her with that sugary love in their eyes, but more often than not, don't look at her at all, does it mean anything? We're all just hanging in there, she thinks later. The teacher calls for the dancers to move into a tight crowd in the center of the room, still dancing, singing words about love and gratitude. There's a sweetness in it all that lifts Sheila's spirits, even as she stands just outside the circle, moving to the music, feeling her otherness, almost embracing it, but wishing, wishing...

The end of class, a woman insists on another Whoosh, so they do it. Sheila sometimes lingers for the chit chat on the benches while people clean their feet with baby-wipes, put their shoes back on, adjust whatever needs to be adjusted to venture out into the world. But today she can't. Outside alone is much better, where the cool shadows of the palm trees stripe the bright sidewalk and a breeze blows in from the ocean. Who else cares if my mother is dead? Sheila finds herself thinking. Who else cares that she died at 56 and that's why I'm taking trips to Europe and Iceland and New Zealand and buying dresses and shoes and hats with the money I inherited and should be saving for retirement? Who else cares that she lived a tragically short life? Why do I feel the need to tell people this? Why do I linger here, Mom is dead, Mom is dead. I'll die too. Enough already, do the work! At which point Sheila fantasizes about the perfect day, the one that's not the first day of the rest of her life, a day that's just a fantasy for the one thing she could imagine herself happily doing right now: She's in the living room with a morphine drip (she's never had a morphine drip, but considering how much she likes Vicodin she's sure she'd enjoy it), all three dogs are sitting on her lap, the t.v. flickers in the dim light of the living room as she watches hour after hour of a streaming comedy that's not

really very funny. She longs for a state of effortless euphoria and a story with a happy ending. She knows her earnest but smug college students would snippily denounce that as "a First World problem," and she thinks, "Fuck them! I just want to quit everything." Oh dear, she remembers a time from when she was living with that old boyfriend she's been writing about off and on for ten years. She says to herself: "Before I know it I'll be writing in my diary, 'I hate everybody!' When probably all I really mean is: I'm bored, I wish I had someone to play with." But that doesn't seem right either. If she could write the first chapter she'd want to be sure everybody knew that the main character turns out all right, at least she gets to live beyond her terrible twenties and have First World problems.