

When Alone

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The author died in 1990 of cancer. Only recently was this essay discovered by his family and submitted for publication.

The ballroom was crowded with people having a good time, dancing to a wonderful band. Ahead of me in the hallway walked a tiny woman in white slacks, her shoulders hunched, her white hair cut in a bob. From the ballroom came a familiar tune—"Begin the Beguine"—and suddenly a wonderful thing happened. The woman, unaware anyone was behind her, began to shimmy. She snapped her fingers and did a quick and graceful step—back, shuffle, slide.

Then, as she reached the door to the ballroom, she paused, assembled her dignity, and stepped through. That visual fragment has returned to me many times. I think of it now as I reach another birthday and an age when most people would not believe that I, too, still shimmy.

Younger people often think folks of my years are beyond romance, dancing, or dreams. They see us as age has shaped us: camouflaged by wrinkles, thick waists, and graying hair. They don't see all the other people who live inside, because custom dictates that we present a certain face to the world. We are the wise old codgers, the dignified ones.

No one would ever know that I am still the skinny

boy who grew up in a suburb of St Petersburg, Florida. Inside, I still think of myself as the fourth youngest child of a large family, headed by a wonderful German mother who possessed great inner strength, and a father who sometimes had too much to drink but still loved us all.

It doesn't matter that my parents are long gone, their large family of seven children now only four. Thirty-five years ago, I left St Petersburg, young at heart. And I am still the romantic teenager who longed for love, the young adult who aspired to social respectability. But whom shall I tell?

Nowadays, I attend meetings, sit at my word processor, and write and draw. No one would ever guess that I once dreamed of being a famous singer and guitar player. I think back to all the mornings when I drove to my military job (44 miles one way), of the song lyrics I would make up and sing to music from other songs. The lyrics were there, and so was my heart.

We are like the woman in the hallway, in whom the music still echoes. We are all the sum of all the lives we once lived. We show the grown-up part, but inside we are still the laughing children, the shy teens, the dream-filled youths. There still exists, most real, the matrix of all we were or ever yearned to be. Birthdays come and go but in our hearts we still hear "Begin the Beguine." And when we are alone, we dance and sometimes cry.