



**Adventures with a demanding teacher, a flirty ex-boyfriend, and Red Lipstick Woman**  
 by **Diana Rico**

**\* My Salsa Diary**

**Not too long ago, after having spent seven years on the floors of L.A.'s salsa clubs, I was struck by the exhibitionist desire to dance in front of an audience. For some people, this is normal. I am not one of those people... or so I thought. As a child, I was so shy that my merciful mother used to pull me out of piano lessons whenever recital time loomed. On the other hand, my dad has told me stories of how, as soon as I could walk, I would jump up and dance to jukeboxes in coffee shops. So somewhere inside me was this Latina Ginger Rogers dying to get out. And when 3rd Street Dance, the midtown studio where I was taking salsa classes, announced it was offering a half-year workshop that would lead to a group performance at its annual Christmas party, I stunned myself by signing up. I actually kept a diary of the experience, which I'm happy to share, because I'm not so shy anymore.**

**July 25, 10:20 p.m.**  
 OMG, I just committed to performance classes once a week for the next six months. Raul Santiago is teaching—he's diminutive and demanding. My intuition is telling me to do this. Scary! I think it'll be good for me.

**August 1, 11:30 p.m.**  
 There are exactly eight guys and eight gals in the performance class (including the dangerously sexy dancer I call Red Lipstick Woman—*ay!*). We are of every shape, size, and ethnicity—from Latino, Anglo-American, and African-American to native Russian and Japanese. To Raul, we're all pieces of wet clay, waiting

to be shaped into something marvelous. We wait patiently while the wheels of creation turn inside his head. Then he starts moving us around, directing us to make a half-turn here, bring up an arm there. I'm living out a fantasy I've had since I fell in love with Fred Astaire the summer after high school.

**August 8, 11:40 p.m.**  
 Tonight Raul was showing the "ladies"—as he calls us—how to do some big styling moves with our arms. I'd never before felt bold enough to take up space with my arms. But I was wearing my red kimono top with fluttery handkerchief sleeves, and I used them to

express myself flamboyantly. It felt unbelievably good. It's fun to be a showgirl!

**August 22 11:05 p.m.**  
*¡Ay!* Raul changes things constantly! Sometimes I feel like crying because I'm absolutely certain I'm never going to get it. But there really is such a thing as muscle memory, and if I keep repeating the moves, eventually my body will get it. This is hard.

**August 29, 3:30 a.m.**  
 I can't believe how happy I feel, just from learning our routine in performance class tonight! We are becoming a team, sharing what promises to be a long-term experience

and goal, and working together. I am even learning some things from Red Lipstick Woman. Turns out she is extremely open and friendly, and she moves beautifully, having studied ballet once upon a time.

**September 5, 4 a.m.**  
*(my new bedtime, apparently)*  
 My technique is improving, and I am holding myself differently—even in the car. I am lifting my breastbone toward the sky. I feel as if I am presenting my heart to the world. Tonight I was getting pleasure from all the physical sensations of guys leading—the way Jersey Boy gives me a little bit of a counter-windup before spinning me, or how Mr. Swing Dancer touches my lower back to guide me through the cross-body lead. I love the whole nonverbal-communication aspect of dancing with men. Subtle, sexy, *delicioso*.

**September 14, 8:40 a.m.**  
 The Magic Doctor—whom I go to for chiropractic treatment, hypnosis, and nutritional



advice—told me that the spot on my breastbone that I have been thrusting upward when I dance is my “high heart,” a very refined, high-vibration part of my heart chakra.

**September 18, 10:20 p.m.** I was surprised when my mother expressed interest in coming to the Christmas party where I’ll perform. Never in a million years would I have thought my parents would want to come. Best Girlfriend told me, “It’s clear they are very proud of you. Maybe you just don’t see it.” Am I really so mired in neurosis that I can’t even see when I’m being loved?

**September 20, 2:30 a.m.** It was bound to happen in this insular L.A. salsa world: I saw my ex-boyfriend with another woman tonight when I was parking my car outside the Sagebrush Cantina. (Thank God I looked and felt hot in

my new white stretch jeans and sixties halter top!) I saw all his dysfunctional behavior. He came up to my car, beaming and flirting with me and leaving his poor date behind in the dust. I felt sorry for her. I thought of fleeing, but I’m damned if I’m going to let him own the salsa turf.

**October 3, 11:35 p.m.** Costume angst! The guys are set: black pants and vests, crisp white shirts, red ties, and bowler hats—very Bob Fosse—esque. But Raul hasn’t found the right mix of sleek/sexy/modern he wants for the “ladies.” Then tonight, Red Lipstick Woman came in wearing a black leotard-style top with long, slit sleeves and subtle glitter, and Raul flipped. Supersexy! Tomorrow we’re all going to the Beverly Center to try on that top and see what else we can find. Eight “ladies” and one macho dance

teacher with strong sartorial opinions—*iveremos!*

**October 4, 8:35 p.m.** We found the tops in all the sizes we needed, then we ran around the Beverly Center pulling black skirts and pants off the racks and holding them up for Raul to shake his head at, yes or no. Finally he spotted what he was looking for: a slinky black evening skirt with an asymmetrical hemline and black fringe. Miraculously, it looked great on all of us. Costumes: check! Except that I now desperately need new dance shoes. Mine are trashed.

**October 17, 6:40 p.m.** I custom-ordered wonderful dance shoes—sexy, strappy sandals completely covered with black glitter. I got a two-and-a-half-inch heel, the highest I can stand to move in—anything higher hurts my hip and throws me off bal-

ance. They are the shoes of my dreams, and I cannot wait to use them.

**November 7, 9:35 p.m.** I am very excited that my parents will watch me perform at the Christmas party! They have no idea what a good dancer I’ve become.

**December 6, midnight** Tonight I went for a private lesson with Raul. I was worried about dancing with El Maestro or, rather, for him. I knew he’d be watching me with his critical professional eye—scarier than any group. But he made it easy and built my confidence up. He is a perfectionist in the best sense—he really takes pride in his work—and he’s taking time and paying for rental space to give us all private lessons this weekend because he wants us to look as good as possible.

I admire that and his directing abilities, which are gentle and persuasive. When he tells me I’m hitting it and doing well, I know he really means it.

Anyway, after a lot of practice, we just sat down and hung out for nearly an hour, talking. He didn’t know I am Puerto Rican—he is half, and half Cuban. Well, that got us going. Friday nights are when I am loneliest, so I felt healed and happy after spending this evening talking about *arroz con habichuelas* and traveling in South America.

It also felt very Latin, just hanging out and talking and not rushing off somewhere—so relaxed and without a purpose or goal. When was the last time I felt that—being with someone and not on a schedule?

**December 9, 10:35 p.m.** I invited Best Girlfriend to our dress rehearsal and told her about how my mother used to pull me out of piano class before a recital. She said, “That was mistake No. 1. Because if she’d let you do it, you would have seen that it’s no big deal.” She also gave me a new name: Salsa Vixen! We have been rehearsing well, and I feel the strength of the group, the knowledge we have now, and I can see how pleased Raul is with his creation. This is one of the most powerful things I’ve ever done.

**December 15, 11:20 p.m.** Raul stepped up rehearsals to twice a week, and we were all relieved. He’s still inventing new moves! I can’t believe how he worked it out so that everyone would get to do solo and group stuff, so some parts are all girls and some all guys and some all together. He covered every possible combo. Seven minutes of pure sizzle!

**December 16, near midnight** Dress rehearsal was pandemonium! We started late, and there were lots of hangers-on watching, which I guess was

good for us. Raul was working on a movie set, so Peri, the owner of the studio, and Laura, the other salsa teacher, gave us fresh feedback. Peri talked a lot about the “lines” that we make with our bodies and how to use props. Laura had astute technical notes. They spent a lot of time with the guys, who are more timid about playing it up than we salsa vixens are. We went off to the side and put ourselves through the drill over and over again, determined to drum the moves into our muscle memories.

**December 17, 7:35 p.m.** I’m so stressed! I went to pick up my new dance shoes and had the most hideous encounter with the store owner because the heels are too high—I can’t even walk in them, much less dance. And tomorrow’s our performance! He told me it “didn’t matter” that their two-and-a-half-inch heel is actually three inches! I don’t think he intended to be, but he was mean and arrogant. I sobbed in my car afterward. I couldn’t even drive for 20 minutes—I had to compose myself and expel his evil energy.

**December 18, 10:15 a.m.** Today’s the day! I am totally exhausted and freaked out. I managed to book an emer-

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gency acupuncture session with the Magic Doctor and as he worked, I asked him to focus on some of my stress points. “I already did,” he said. I hadn’t even noticed. Lying on a table with needles stuck in me for an hour helped.

Can I dance in these shoes?

Can I just let it go and live with them tonight? More worrisome: I hope my ex doesn’t show up. Thankfully, he hasn’t been around the dance studio in ages, so he probably won’t. Best Girlfriend says: “Pearls before swine.”

**December 18, 4 p.m.** I lit candles all over my house and prayed to every deity I could think of: Oshun, Elegua (to open roads for me), Yemaya (my protective mother goddess), all my ancestors, the spirits of Fred and Ginger. I dedicated my dancing to Ganesh, the elephant-headed Hindu god who removes all obstacles. I’d bought a tiny dancing Ganesh statue yesterday. I packed him in my jewelry case so he would accompany me to the studio. I’m ready!

**December 19, 4:30 a.m.** That was an INCREDIBLE, INCREDIBLE experience. The studio was jammed with more than 100 people: our families, friends, other performers (mostly teachers and pros). They put our troupe in a little room to dress. I polled everyone on his or her level of nervousness, trying to assess my own. Jersey Boy, who has performed before, declared in his Tony Soprano voice: “I’m not nervous—I’m excited. And

I use that energy to propel me forward.”

Then Raul came in and told us the lineup. Of all the performers, we would be on last: headliners! He had us join hands in a circle and bow our heads. Raul asked God to bless us and said, “These people

have been working really hard.” I was moved to tears.

We went out to the main room to watch the other performers. I spotted my parents and their friends on the other side of the room... and then I saw him—my ex—holding hands with a mousy blond who was clearly smitten. I gathered up my pride and determined that dancing perfectly was the best revenge.

Finally, it was time for us. The performance went by in a flash, yet it was all as clear as slo-mo. I kept a big smile on my face the whole time; the excitement carried me like a rocket. And I managed to stay upright on those heels. People cheered us on. We were stars. As we rushed off the stage to great applause, the first comment I heard was: “It looked like you were having so much fun!” We were. It was the biggest endorphin high I’ve ever had. I wanted to do it again.

Afterward, the regular Christmas-party dancing commenced. My parents were beaming; I could see (finally!) how proud they were of me. Gradually everyone left, except for our group. We’re so bonded, we couldn’t bear to go home.

**December 20, 7:35 p.m.** I feel tremendous power and self-respect (both newfound) that I have earned as a result