



GRAPEVINE

by Shasta Grant
& Anne Rasmussen

Lexi hadn't set out to ruin anyone's livelihood. In fact, if a sudden squall of unseasonable rain hadn't forced her to shelter under the leaky, cockeyed awning of Party-4-Less, clutching her purchase of cocktail umbrellas and tissue paper garlands to her chest, she probably wouldn't have seen the studio next door. But as she huddled there, trapped by the downpour, the flyer in the window caught her eye: *JOIN JANEEN'S JAZZERCISE!*

Jazzercise. It seemed almost unbelievably corny, the stuff of another era, and yet here it was, tucked away in a strip mall, promoting itself unironically in Comic Sans and fluorescent clip art that was probably older

than she was. She posted a photo to Instagram and pushed the door open with a jingle for an inside shot.

The dim, hushed interior wasn't as hilariously retro as she expected, just a long mirrored wall with a snap-together dance floor, like she'd seen at weddings or bar mitzvahs, some folding screens to change behind, and the fuggy-clean smell of sweat. In the mirror, she looked ridiculous—phone outstretched in one hand to frame the shot, her other arm locked against her side to prevent an avalanche of party supplies. When a voice called out from the back room as she fumbled for the exit, she froze. Packets of cocktail umbrellas fluttered down.

From the neck up the woman who greeted her (Janeen, presumably) looked to be in her forties, or even fifties, but she'd kept a slim dancer's body. If you put a bag over her head, she'd pass for mid-twenties, Lexi thought, and then immediately felt terrible for thinking it.

“Are you accepting new students?” she asked, as if to atone, and the woman smiled.

It had just been something to say, the clumsiest of exit strategies. Lexi could tell the woman didn't expect her to return, but the more she thought about it the more brilliant it seemed.

Some days it felt like everything worth doing had already been hashtagged to death, but there was something pure and unpretentious about Jazzercise. Just a bunch of women doing goofy dances wearing colors not found in nature.

She'd grown up watching her grandmother doing the *Jane Fonda Workout* on VHS (was that even Jazzercise?) beckoning Lexi to join in. Meemaw's wood-paneled living room filled with the scent of Prell shampoo and sweat as they danced across the shag carpet, Jane calling "Grapevine!" from the TV screen as Grandpa and the whole framed gallery of dead relatives surveyed the scene with perplexed expressions.

Lexi had quit dancing with Meemaw in fourth grade. That year she'd switched schools and the popular girls had circled like sharks, sizing her up with calculated menace, smelling her uncoolness, like blood in the water, from miles away. She could probably still do that routine by heart, though, if someone counted out the beat.

By the time the next class rolled around there were seven of them. Lexi had only meant to invite Sydney along, to cheer her up after a recent breakup. Then Syd invited her cousin Carolyn, who discovered a discount activewear site where they could order astonishing combinations of hi-cut belted leotards and jewel-toned tights for practically nothing. And Carolyn's

roommate Nora wanted in after an evening spent boozily scrolling through pictures in search of the holy trinity of spandex and neon and eighties flair. Nora declared Jazzercise “The Platonic form of AquaNet,” whatever that meant, and now here they were, heading across the parking lot like a bunch of *Flashdance* extras, ready to dance themselves into some kind of elusive happiness.

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Business was booming in a way that Jill had never seen before. Oh, she knew these young girls found the whole thing ironic but what did she care as long as each of them paid their twenty dollars?

After the first class with the outrageously dressed troupe of girls, Marianne, one of the regulars, pulled her aside.

“Who are they?” she asked, patting her face with a hand towel.

Jill shrugged, wishing she could take credit for making it happen. “One of them came in here the other day to ask for a class schedule and now here they all are.”

Had Jill noticed the look of concern flash across Marianne's face, maybe she could have predicted what would come next. Those girls with their thigh gaps, their boobs that didn't need holstering. Who could measure up to that? And while Jill had kept Marianne and the others in reasonably good shape over the years—legs toned, arms strong—there was only so much you could do to fight time.

When her mother, Janeen, opened this franchise of Jazzercise, Jill was just a young girl. She remembered watching the classes through a crack in the door, the music pulsing, her mother's long legs covered in pink stirrup tights, the shiny leotards in a rainbow of colors. Enraptured, she had watched her mother and the other women, fingers snapping, arms swaying, sweat darkening their leotards under their breasts.

At sixteen, she got certified and began teaching her own classes. Janeen and Jill had poured everything into this little studio. Their strip mall neighbors came and went: State Farm insurance, Stride-Rite shoes, Parties-4-Less. They were the only remaining original tenant. The studio wasn't a home away from home, it was home. When Jill's ex-husband accused her of loving Janeen's Jazzercise more than him, she couldn't argue, and she let him walk away.

The new girls only wanted nostalgia to a certain degree, she knew that. Jill made small changes in response to their suggestions: online bookings, more contemporary music, a fridge of cold-pressed juices for sale. They seemed disappointed to learn she wasn't Janeen, so she said, "Oh you'll probably see her around here soon." She didn't tell them that Janeen was her mother, that she was currently housed at Pleasant Meadows off Route 11. She didn't tell them that the director of Pleasant Meadows called her the day before, expressing concern about Janeen's settling-in process.

The girls seemed to multiply and soon the studio felt small, the faithful regulars pushed to the back of the studio so the girls could be closer to the mirror, both scrutinizing and admiring themselves. One day Marianne and Helen found a red thong left behind on the floor in the changing area. They picked it up with a pen and dropped it on the front desk. "I don't know how anyone can wear underwear like that," Helen said, and they all laughed. Jill pushed the thong into the trash can with a clipboard.

"I'm sorry I have to cancel my booking for tomorrow," Helen said. "I'm going into the city to do some shopping with my daughter," she added.

Helen hadn't missed a class in years, except for when she and her husband took their yearly Princess cruise. Jill almost asked Helen if

everything was okay, was about to ask if she still enjoyed the class, but then Helen was already gone, the door jingling as she left. When the studio was empty again, Jill sat down on the metal desk chair. She could remember going with her mother to the office furniture warehouse and picking out this very chair, how she had swiveled around and around at the warehouse until her mother told her to knock it off.

Jill opened the spreadsheet of tomorrow's schedule and deleted Helen from the eleven o'clock class. It was the first time she allowed herself a flicker of concern about the changes she'd made. She told herself it was natural to let the studio evolve, that she was modernizing it in a way her mother never could. She rolled the chair over to the small fridge and grabbed one of the green juices, sniffing it before taking a sip. She made a face even though there was nobody around to see her displeasure, and then she tossed it on top of the red thong.

On a whim, Marianne tried one of the green juices. Not at the studio, of course—she was too self-conscious to drink it in front of Jill and the in-crowd. She bought it furtively at the natural foods store across town, cracked the bottle open right there in her car.

What exactly had she been hoping for, she asked herself as she hurried back for an overpriced bottle of water and a package of ethically-sourced fair-trade chocolate to mask the vile taste coating her tongue, some kind of fountain of youth?

It had tasted like a mix of grass clippings and self-loathing. She wondered how on earth anyone choked it down. But try telling that to one of Jill's new girls.

Marianne didn't hate them. She didn't. You couldn't pay her to be in her early twenties again: the uncertainty, the desperate bravado, the way the world took your optimism, your vision of a future self and reflected it back to you, funhouse mirror style, in the form of older women who resented you for it. No thanks. She'd ceded the front row to the girls right away; she'd rather not be standing in front of them having a goddamn hot flash while they peered around her to check their own reflections, wearing clothes that dated back to the advent of her puberty, styles that in retrospect she was glad her parents had forbidden.

To be honest, she preferred her invisibility over Jill's new visibility. She bristled at the way they looked at Jill, like gleeful anthropologists stumbling across a lost tribe, like Jill was some kind of hilarious fossil preserved in eighties amber. She hated how they egged her on. Even more, she resented the way Jill seemed to blossom under their gaze. Jill embraced the jokes at her expense, dug up an old disco tape of Janeen's, talked about Janeen like she was a peer, a fun older sister rather than a very angry woman who was in danger of being kicked out of her retirement community in spite of the months of coaxing and facility tours, the complimentary meals eaten, the spreadsheets upon spreadsheets crunching the numbers, the staggering cost of elder care that was still worth the effort of moving her out of the cramped condo she'd shared with Jill.

But she wasn't being fair. The girls didn't know what they didn't know—how could they? And as for Jill, didn't she deserve to have some fun, a chance at a second young adulthood (or first, if Marianne was being honest)? If the girls walked Jill through setting up an *OKCupid* profile, giggling their way through the sex Q&A, picking a flattering picture that showed off her body but not too much of her face, what business of Marianne's was it?

Still, it stung when she showed up one day to find one of the girls, the willowy one with the blue-black hair and the septum piercing, leading the class through a routine and Jill nowhere to be found. Jill had a family emergency, the girl explained, and had texted to ask her to lead the class. Marianne reflexively checked her own phone but there were no new messages from Jill.

The girl's name was Brittany or Brittnie or one of the thousand and one ways to spell that name nowadays. Marianne had heard it first in high school; one of the sophomores had gotten pregnant and brought the baby to school to show off. Everyone had passed baby Brittany around, declaring that they wanted a baby now too, she was just that perfect with her toothless yawn and her eyes screwed shut, her quivering chin glossy with drool, the strands of black hair plastered to her skull like a miniaturized comb-over. And Marianne had played along, pretended not to be horrified by the prospect of teen motherhood trapping her here forever. Maybe it was *that* Brittany leading the class now, all grown up. It seemed fitting, somehow, Marianne's pubescent life come full-circle, but after doing the math in her head she realized that there was no way. *That* Brittany would be in her thirties by now.

To be honest, Marianne resented the girls because they reminded her of who she'd been at twenty: so determined that college was her ticket out of here that she couldn't help but pity anyone who stayed. And upon her inevitable return a few years later, pulled back home as though slowly circling a drain, she could barely bring herself to make eye contact with all the people she'd relegated so confidently to the rear view mirror. Her counselor had suggested more exercise as she waited for the Lexapro to kick in. And Jill, who'd just been a skinny little high school freshman when Marianne had left for college, was already leading her own classes when she returned, always glad to welcome another customer into the Jazzercise fold.

She wondered what the girls made of Jill's "family emergency" which meant of course Janeen, though none of them knew that. All drama in Jill's life inevitably pointed back to Janeen, no matter how carefully she curated her *OKCupid* profile.

As one song bled into the next, Brittany launched into what could only be described as a high-camp imitation of Jill, calling out to the girls one by one in an exaggeratedly enthusiastic voice that made the whole group burst into giggles, whooping and gasping for air as they cycled through the routine. No one seemed to notice as Marianne collected her things and left.

I could have told Jill this would happen. After Marianne left, Helen followed. And one by one, the other regulars left too. Did she think skinny young things never came through the door before? Never forget your base, I should have told her. And as I would have predicted, had I been kept advised of goings-on, the novelty wore off for the girls. Onto goat yoga classes they went. Oh, I kept up on all the trends, had watched them come and go for decades.

When Jill came to visit me with blue highlights in her hair, swiping through pictures of men on her cell phone, I should have told her that she was acting like a fool, that if she wasn't careful, she'd lose everything we'd worked so hard for. But it wouldn't have mattered, Jill never listened to me. It was certainly not my idea to park me in that facility and yet here we were now, moving me back home. And it wasn't because of that spat I'd had with the director. No matter what Jill said, I knew it was because there was no more money.

Jill had replaced all our old posters and flyers with newer, sleeker ones. She said one of her girls helped her make them with a computer program. She put that fridge in the corner with those overpriced juices that we were stuck with. What I never told Jill: I didn't really care about this Jazzercise studio. Oh, I enjoyed it enough, I suppose, but it wasn't my dream. I could have been a real dancer. I had performed on cruise ships throughout the Caribbean and in small shows in New York City before I met Jill's father. I had my heart set on Broadway, but things didn't pan out that way. Jill was never as talented as I was. For her, Jazzercise was as good as it was going to get. Maybe that's why she loved it so much.

Now we were joining the ranks of the shoe store, the insurance company, probably soon the party store. "We had a good run, Ma," Jill said as she removed the posters from the walls, unsnapped the floor square by square. I remembered opening the studio, how proud I'd been. I wanted to take the sign down—didn't want *Janeen's Jazzercise* on the front of the strip mall when Janeen's Jazzercise no longer existed, but neither of us could get up there to remove it and we couldn't afford to pay someone. I wondered who would move in here next. Whose dream or compromise was about to begin.

Jill had advertised a final week of classes—sort of a going out of business sale, but nobody showed up. Not Marianne, not Helen, not Alice or Brenda or any of the other regulars, not the girl who made the posters, or the one who started the whole thing to begin with, parading her group of friends through the door and then whisking them away when they got bored. Jill was disappointed, I could tell. So I said, “Oh fuck ’em, Jill, let’s do one last class anyway.”

And we did. We put on our tights and our leotards, I spritzed my hair a bit with some hair spray and Jill put a tape in the tape player. We stood side-by-side in front of the long mirror and snapped our fingers. I couldn’t do much else, but I counted out the beat for Jill—*five, six, seven, eight*—and watched her lean body move through the routine, so familiar to both of us it felt like walking through your own house at night, no need for lights, no need for extended arms, just your own body and memory working together to move you through the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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