



Thong and Dance

On a beautiful June evening in St. Louis, Missouri, I sat with my five-year-old daughter, Lily, at the Municipal Opera of St. Louis, a huge outdoor theater in the middle of Forrest Park, on the edge of the city proper. A mild wind rustled through the leaves of the trees as the orchestra began to warm up, and my body tingled with goose bumps as I remembered how, every summer, from the time I could sit still, my mother took me to "The Muny" to see musicals and ballets. It always served as a refuge from the materialistic humdrum of my suburban youth. Later, as a professional dancer, I performed at The Muny, and that was almost as magical as being a rapt child in the audience.

As we waited for Meet Me in St. Louis to begin, Lily dropped her ice cream cone. When I bent down to clean up the mess, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I looked up, and there, looming before me, was an enormous woman wearing pink spandex pants and a Hawaiian shirt. She shook her head. "S'cuse me, Miss," she said. "Are you aware your underpants are sticking out?"

I took in her pursed lips, her seventies perm, and her bulging, expectant eyes as she waited for me to act. Though she'd surprised me, I looked her square in the eye. "Don't worry about it," I said calmly.

"Well," she boomed back, "I'm not worried, but the people sitting behind you sure are! Y'ought to be ashamed." She strutted away, her mission complete; she had successfully scolded me and, pray God, saved me from my wicked ways. That's when I remembered I was in the land of Budweiser and pork rinds, not back in Los Angeles, home of the rich, famous, and bulimic, where a visible thong is not only acceptable, but fashionable.

I looked around, and no one was paying attention either to me or to my underwear, so I returned to my task as Lily, giggling, chanted, "Your underpants are showing. Your underpants are showing..." This was my reward for trying to be trendy.

It all started over a year ago at my daughter's preschool. Though some of us mothers were hovering around forty, the majority was in their late twenties to early thirties. Even if we weren't size sixes anymore, we forty-something mothers all had various degrees of style, talent, and grace—along with a tired acceptance that fashion and perk were out of the question at nine o'clock in the morning. The younger moms were different. They bounced in wearing platform clogs—and even dressed down in jeans, they looked stylish in their tight T-shirts. I envied their slim waistlines and narrow hips.

One morning, a toddler tripped and landed on his face, and I watched in awe as his young mother bent down to pick him up. Lily and I were sitting on

a nearby bench with a perfect view of her low-riding corduroys dropping still lower, and lower, exposing the prettiest backside of a thong I'd ever seen.

"Look at the pretty flowers, Mommy," Lily said, pointing to the cluster of pink fabric flowers rimming the top of this mom's rear end. I was shocked. Didn't she know her ass was practically hanging out, or did she just assume my daughter was talking about the roses blooming on either side of the bench? I blushed and wondered if I ought to whisper to her to pull up her pants, but then I realized this visible G-string was part of an outfit. It was designed to show. My Costco eight-for-ten dollar briefs felt, suddenly, shoddy.

That night, I couldn't sleep. The thong haunted me. I tried to imagine myself wearing one, and it wasn't a pretty picture. My thong rested on top of hips that spilled over the sides of my trousers. Instead of a long, cello-like waistline, the straps were engulfed between folds of skin that created a murky division between my waist and hips. I tossed and turned, wondering what had happened to the svelte me of twenty years ago, the girl who ran with a fast crowd to Studio 54 in thigh-high boots and mini skirts. On the rare occasion I did dress up these days, when I asked my husband Brian how I looked, he usually said "cute."

Cute? When I was in my twenties, I was a hottie. Now, I'm cute? That's the thanks I get for carrying his child. I turned over again and purposely whacked my husband in the leg.

"What's wrong with you?" he moaned.

"I'm sick of all the pretty moms at Lily's school. I'm sick of their perfect bodies. I'm sick of my body. I don't want to be in my forties; I want to be in my thirties. I want to bend down and have a thong with flowers showing above my perfect ass, too!"

"I don't know what the hell you're rambling on about," he said, turning away. "But if you want your body back, stop eating chocolate and lay off the bread. Now go back to sleep."

I lay there quietly, stunned by my own resentment. Why was wearing a thong important to me anyway? Had living in Hollywood finally reduced my normally lofty values to a mere obsession with how I looked in underpants?

Yes, but I started to suspect that it was deeper than that. I longed for a few more years to feel young, cool, and hip—at least between the hours of eight a.m. and nine p.m. I wanted to disguise myself as a young mother, fool myself into believing that I didn't have a fatty lump the size of a golf ball on my ribcage, that I didn't suffer chronic back pain, that I didn't fatigue halfway through the day because I couldn't keep up with work, grocery shopping, and

schlepping my daughter clear across town for the one fabulous dance class in all of Los Angeles.

Though I would never resort to tummy tucks or liposuction, I suddenly understood that Brian, in his sleepy wisdom, was right. So the next morning, I woke up early and, after drinking two glasses of water, I swore off carbs and, in one grand gesture, threw away all of my Hershey Kisses.

Then—and here's where it gets a little drastic—after being retired from the dance profession for over a decade, I arranged to meet my friend Christina at a jazz class she'd been begging me to go to for months. That first class back, I stood in the rear of the room, clad in baggy workout clothes, and for ninety minutes I stumbled through exercises and dance combinations, praying I was invisible. Shaken out of retirement, soaked with sweat, and thoroughly exhausted, I felt humbled—and at the same time, exhilarated.

Dance had always been in my life. It had been my mother's passion, so I began lessons at six years old. By age ten, it was my passion, as well. Amid the rosin dust, steamed mirrors, and smoke from my teacher's ever-burning cigarette, I'd found my home away from home. It wasn't just that "Everything was beautiful at the ballet," which was true enough, but dance filled a void. Hard work and discipline replaced endless hours cruising the mall. Learning new steps and perfecting them became more important than getting my ears pierced.

That day, when my middle-aged self stood in the back of that class, surrounded by serious, young dancers, I realized if anything could turn back the clock, this was it. I became a regular. And six months later, when I could see a clear distinction between my hips and waist, I bought my first pair of low riding pants—and I bought thongs, lots of thongs. I also bought new bras, good ones that lifted and separated what was left of my nursed-out breasts. I added a few colors to my mousy brown hair and got a new "do." This mini transformation took years off my psyche, if not my actual age, and I felt fabulous.

Back in St. Louis, after the musical, Lily and I returned to my father's house where I rushed to the phone, imagining how Brian would laugh when I told him about my run-in with the thong police.

"I hate to tell you this, honey, especially when you're looking so hot in them," he chuckled, "but according to The New York Times, fashionably speaking, thongs are on their way out."

Oh well, I thought, at least my husband is calling me hot. And more importantly, I'm dancing again. And to think I owed it all to an inspirational sliver of flowery nylon.