Can't Dance

John Mort

Sitting in the airplane, they waited only a few minutes before several smiling customs men came aboard to demand their cigarettes.

"And if some *pot* should appear in the bag, mates, no questions will be asked," said one of them.

Another walked up and down the aisle with an aerosol bomb, spraying liberally above their heads.

"Is that deodorant?" asked Porter.

The man smiled. "Right, mate."

Porter walked down Darlinghurst, looking at the cars, jostled by the crowd. He was drunk. The wind whipped low from the roofs, bringing the smell of salt and the more familiar shock of rain. Porter stared into the black sky. Beneath the eaves pigeons roosted. They stuck their beaks into their wings and purred. The wind pushed him beneath an awning, and then inside to a long, inadequately-lit lobby. The carpeting was red, white and blue.

"Are you a member, sir?"

"I'm an American."

Porter signed a register and walked through the lobby. A band played Dixieland, "Mississippi Mud." The band was loud and the room full of people. Some tried to dance to the music, but the room was too crowded, too hot. A waitress in blue slacks, a red and white, candy-striped blouse, smiled at Porter. "There aren't any tables, sir. You can sit at the bar."

"I'm just looking."

"Perhaps you'd care to go up a landing."

"What they got up there?"

"Games."

"No."

"Shall I get a drink for you, then?"

"All right."

"What would you prefer, sir?"

Porter smiled. "Tequila. You got tequila?"

The waitress nodded and went off to fetch Porter's drink. The band stopped playing, thanked the audience, and announced it would return after a short break. No one noticed.

Porter sank back within a shadow and listened to the talk. It was loud, about the War and not about the War. After a few drinks, the Americans lost their shyness and began quarreling with one another. Their girls consumed great amounts of liquor, and like pickups everywhere, took exception to all that was said.

Porter was tired and slightly dizzy. Tomorrow he would go to the beach, he thought, and perhaps it would be better. He was not sure the people about him were having fun, but there was little doubt they were more skilled than he at attempting it. When his drink came he downed it, thinking to return to the hotel. Perhaps there were late movies on their TV.

He stumbled across a turned-up corner of the carpeting. He reached out to steady himself and his hand skidded across a tiny, one-legged table. He tried to focus upon the eyes of a girl. Her eyes were shining; she looked at him, startled, and then away. Her face was thin. Her hair was as black and sleek as a crow's feathers.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'll buy you another drink. Are you alone?"

"I suppose I am."

"I suppose I am, too. You wanta talk?"

Her shoulders arched forward. "I can hardly understand you. Are you . . . from the South?"

"Southern California."

"I see."

"You're right. Arkansas. What's your name?"

"Helen."

"Porter. That's my name."

"Just 'Porter'?"

"Porter. I'm drinking tequila."

"I see."

"You can have something else."

"That will be fine."

He did not know quite what to say. He had never known what to say. Ignorant of girls, yet somehow instinctively distrustful of them, he had said nothing.

"Are you quite sure you want to sit here?"

"If you don't mind. Why the hell not?"

She shrugged. "You're probably quite nice."

"Goddam right I am."

The drinks arrived. Porter took a bite of lemon and a pinch of salt, bidding the girl to likewise: finish the drink with a single swallow.

She grimaced. "All you Americans want to do is get drunk."

"Can't dance."

"You can't?" She was interested. "I . . . used to. Why can't you?"

"I'm not . . . oh Lord. That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean?"

"Jesus. I'm too drunk for this. I meant, there's nothing else to do."

". . . How do you know?"

"Because it's too wet to plow. Another drink?"

"To plow?"

"Forget it. I'm drunk."

"You surely are."

They finished several more drinks and then sat, stupid, grinning at each other. The band returned and began to play "Sweet Georgia Brown," loudly and badly.

"Why do you come here?"

"I was looking for someone."

"A GI?"

"Perhaps I'll tell you."

"What?" he shouted, above the band.

"Shall we leave?" she screamed.

The words hung in the air a moment before Porter could pluck them out and understand them. Then he stood and walked to her side of the table. A query rose in her eyes as she gathered her coat about her to stand, awkwardly, grasping his shoulder with an arm. "I'm such a cow," she said, and the band stopped.

"You're—"

"I am, love."

"I'll be goddammed," he said.

Outside the rain fell. The wind blew the rain into their faces. Above the pigeons chuckled. Porter looked at Helen and smiled; blood rushed to her face and she leaned against him. Without a thought, gone beyond his wily Arkansas wishes to a drunken, instinctive knowledge, he bent his head and kissed her. Her lips were dry, her face wet. Her hair was damp and unfamiliar and he jerked back into the rain, ashamed.

"What, love?"

"I don't know. Does it hurt to stand?"

"No. Do you think it should. I'm seven months . . ."

"Jesus. Let me get a taxi."

It was not a movie, he thought. It was not a movie or the girl would not be pregnant and a taxi would appear merely by raising one's arm to yell, "Taxi!" Still, something made him feel as though he were on film. He decided that a girl, any girl, would do that to him. He tried to be full of good cheer and manliness. But it was necessary to write the script as he went along. Before him as he walked, ate or smiled or pulled a trigger, was a camera.

He stood at the curb and searched for a taxi. The rain rolled from his skin like oil and the whole world slid. He held high his head, so if there were a camera across the street, it might zoom in for a close-up of his wrinkled wet face. He accepted and then shrugged off the rain; it rained everywhere he knew but in Arkansas. There the corn died beneath the bleach of the sun.

There was no taxi. He glanced back to catch Helen's smile; it bothered him for her to stand. He thought to suggest she return within until he could find a taxi, and turned from the curb. Then, in the corner of an eye, he caught the great hulk of an omnibus, melting and steaming its way down the drenched streets. It was strangely colorless in the rain. He motioned to Helen, suddenly enjoying himself, enjoying Helen: the red, white and blue neon flickering before her face, lending her smile an erratic wet beauty. He took her hand when the bus stopped, helped her up the steps, guided her to a seat.

"You're drenched," she said.

"It's fun, though. Isn't it fun? When I was a kid I used to listen to the rain, on the chickenhouse roof. Tin roof. You ever listen to the rain on a tin roof?"

"No, Porter."

"You should some time. Wow."

"What, love?"

"It's so damn strange, bein' here. Like I feel I'm part of somebody's geography course."

". . . me?"

"You're fine. I don't know who the hell you are, but you're fine. But, you know. I'm a statistic. I'm one of the Americans who goes to Australia on his R & R."

"You're not a statistic. You're drenched."

"It don't mean nothin'."

"I have some dry clothing in my flat."

"Is that where we're going?"

"I thought perhaps you might like a drink."

"One more for the road. Are you sure it's all right for you?"

"I can do anything."

"So can I. You're goddam right."

They rode awhile in silence. Then the bus began the first of a long series of hills and she pulled the cord. "There," she pointed, motioning to a high-gabled, tile-roofed building. "I live there."

"Nice neighborhood."

They got out of the bus and the rain hissed about them on the pavement. She guided him through an ancient, shadowy lobby to the elevator. A flat black, wrought iron cage creaked slowly down.

"Lift," said Porter.

"Begging your pardon?"

"Lift, that's what you call them. I saw it in a movie."

"I call them elevators."

The evening had grown older and they sat at opposite ends of Helen's sofa, listening to an American jazz recording and balancing wine glasses. Porter watched Helen and smoked a menthol cigarette, curling his tongue around its green, stale candy taste. Outside it continued to rain, but Porter felt warm and comfortable in the borrowed clothing. Helen asked if he wanted more wine. "A little," he said.

Helen's apartment was an old woman's assemblage of deep browns and reds. A thick oval throwrug lay beneath a heavy oak coffee table. The ceilings were very high. On the living room walls hung two pictures, one a reproduction of a cubist reflection, the other a painting of Helen's. The latter captured a creamy, blurred image of a man lying face down in a bed. One arm clutched at twisted sheets. The other dangled over the side of the bed, and its hand, curled upward, brushed an ashtray.

Helen returned from the kitchen with the rest of the wine. She sat beside Porter, poured his wine, and set the empty bottle atop the coffee table.

"Would you like to go to the beach tomorrow?" asked Porter.

"If it's fine." She giggled: "They'll think we're married." She stretched out upon the sofa, lay her head in Porter's lap.

"Am I comfortable?" he asked.

"You're a number one GI."

"Yeah. You live here by yourself?"

"Yes."

Her eyes left him for a moment, and when they returned they were warmer, shinier. He stroked her hair. "Such long black hair."

"Such a gentle boy. I can't believe you ever killed anyone."

"I can't either. Sitting here, right now . . . who was the guy in the painting?"

"Someone."

"I feel like like he's looking at me."

"How can he? His head is turned."

"It's like he's looking through the back of the painting, clear to the War. And 'round the goddam world again."

"He was . . . no one."

"He knocked you up."

"Yes. Please don't talk so."

He kissed her. "Porter . . .?" she said.

"Where is he now?"

"In jail. In the stockade?"

He nodded. "Where are your parents?"

"In Melbourne."

"You tell 'em?"

"No. Perhaps I will. But don't let's talk about it. Porter, help me up?"

He stood and gave her his hand.

"I want to take my bath," she said.

"Oh. I'll go, then."

"No, no. Stay. Please stay."

She went into the bathroom, and soon he could hear water tumbling into the tub. He sipped the wine and put some more records onto the spindle. He stretched out upon the couch, listening to the rain and to the ancient American jazz, studying the man in the painting. It seemed suddenly sad the man could never turn over, never awaken. Had he even seen his painting?

At length Porter walked to the window, balancing his drink and peering through the half-drawn blinds. Light filtered up from the streetlamp two stories below. The street glistened with a dim, circular aura of rainbow; he watched as a taxi glided slowly by. His mind was a rainbow, a curve of light, a wheel spinning in a vacuum of time. He listened to the rain. It gathered with the wind to storm the glass, made rivers down the panes.

"Porter. Will you come?"

"What?"

"Come inside, Porter."

He opened the bathroom door. Overturned and half-empty, old and forgotten, smells assailed him. "Christ," he said, staring at her back, at her black wet hair. Helen's arms were crossed before her, to cover the nipples and baby fat of her breasts.

"I know I'm an old pregnant lady, and not very handsome. But I can't reach my back."

"Okay."

"The soap," she said, pointing to the faucet.

He lathered her back. Again he felt the camera upon him, and looked up at the cracked plaster of the ceiling, as though to discover a lens there. He shrugged the camera away, and very drunk, full of wonder, let his eyes dwell upon the small body grown big. In his mind he held an image of himself, standing upon a promontory, overlooking happiness.

Her hair clung to his fingers. Porter divided it with his hands to put each sheaf where her arms were. He massaged the muscles by her neck; they were tense but smooth. He slid his hands beneath her arms and washed her ribs and then, moving her hands, the drooping points of her breasts. "Please," she said. "Be gentle. It hurts so."

"Gentle," he repeated. He put away the soap and poured water down her back from his cupped hands. She giggled. "You've washed many backs?"

"First one," he said. He was done, but continued to pour the water, running his hands down her plump even flesh, dumb blind and drunk, feeling only the warmth of her in an eddy of steam. He stopped.

"You're very nice," she said. "I wish I weren't so bloody . . ."

"So bloody pregnant."

"Yes." She sighed. "Can you pick me up?"

"Can't you get up?"

"It's so hard."

"All right."

She turned to lie down in the water. Her breasts rolled into themselves like syrup settling; her great belly lurched to push her almost flat against the porcelain. Porter looked at her legs. They were short and sturdy, rising to fat above the thighs. He stared.

"Am I . . . so awful, then?"

Her eyes were afraid. "No," he said. "You're lovely. I just hadn't expected this."

"Pick me up?"

He bent to place his arms beneath her, then stood again, to remove his shirt. His senses reeled and marched away before him. The camera fought for a good angle, drew in for a close-up. Steam boiled beneath his eyelids and his body was dry, nervous. He ran his tongue across his lips and picked her up. He gasped.

"I'm so heavy. A thousand stone."

"Close," panted Porter, feeling her wet skin against his dry.

"You're strong. You may put me down now."

"No." The jazz had shut itself off; only the whisper of rain against the windows could be heard.

"Where are you taking me, sir?"

"Damned if I know." He struggled with the bathroom door. It opened and he staggered within to deposit her, as gently as his aching arms would allow, upon the bed.

"I'm so wet."

"We'll fix that." He knelt upon the bed and drew the bedspread up around her. The bedspread became damp and he dropped it to the floor. He turned back the sheets. He held her breasts in his hands.

"Slowly, love."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

She strained with red-rubbed arms to hold him. She screamed, and in a chastened voice repeated, "Slowly, love. Oh, slowly."

Above them the camera withdrew. In the dim light they made love. Outside the rain fell.

He lay awake, listening to silence. There was no light; in the living room the candle had burned itself out. He puffed at a cigarette, his lungs a delicate, spent patron of the stiff black air. Across the room the cigarette glowed dully in the mirror. He inhaled through the cigarette, watching for his face to surround the glow in the mirror. But it did not appear.

Helen lay upon her back. Her breath came hard, drawn short and fitfully, over a dry tongue. He touched her; he held his hand where slept the unborn child. Where was the father? Was he asleep now? Beaten to a bloody rest? Dead?

Porter rose and quietly pulled on his trousers. He padded into the kitchen, turned on the small bulb atop the stove. He found a bottle of ginger beer in the icebox and sat at the wooden dinette table, sipping the soft drink. Above the sink and through a tiny oval window the sun winked its first light.

"Porter? Where are you, love?"

He found another bottle of the ginger beer and returned with it to her bedroom. "I want to go out and get some cigarettes," he said. "Watch the sun rise. You sleep."

"Please don't go, love."

"I'll be back."

"You'll come back?"

"Sure. I'm not . . . I'll come back. I'll come back and we'll go to the beach." He kissed her and opened the blinds above the bed. "Look," he said. "The sun's rising. It's going to be warm and sunny."

She smiled. "I'll be waiting."

The sea was rough and they sat far back from the beach, watching the swimmers and the surfers, the children playing games. The sand was white, the sky an oiled blue. Far out in the bay a steamer moved for the open sea. Beyond the ship the hills descended into the water. Beyond the hills the sky was troubled.

Before them quantities of gulls screeched and scolded, swooping for crumbs, peanuts and popcorn, flying out across the bay to grumble over their lunch. They were too lazy to fish. The gulls were huge, gregarious birds, preened slick and oily and fat. Bevies of them strutted down the beach, to waddle a crooked course between the receding waves and the moist sand. Occasionally one would misjudge the speed of an incoming wave, and half-fly, half-hop the distance to uncovered sand.

As Porter watched the children play with the gulls, an image, dreamy and without terror, filtered into his thoughts. He could see the red and yellow flash of mortars, striking the beach, dropping upon the lazy couples and the children running. Great clouds of sand spewed up from the earth, to bury the dismembered bodies and descend in a grainy mist upon the street by the shore. Traffic stopped, cars crashing one into the other. Sirens curdled the morning. And when it was all over, the gulls circled and swarmed, screeching, scolding.

"You look very pretty this morning."

"I have a beautiful man."

"But when I leave. What will you do then?"

"I'll write you. Will you write me, Porter?"

"Yeah."

"You shan't."

"Yeah, I will."

"If I should come to California, might I see you?"

"I won't be in California."

"Where, then?"

"I don't know."

"You should go to college."

"Maybe."

Before them a child of perhaps ten threw pieces of hamburger at the gulls. He threw the hamburger high into the air, and gulls swooped to outdistance their fellows, catch the hamburger in mid-air. Then the child threw the hamburger only a little way into the air, forcing the gulls to swoop very low and catch the meat directly before his face. The child paused each time longer before throwing the hamburger, making the gulls hover awkwardly, desperately vie one with the other for the child's offering. Soon the child tired of feeding the gulls and sat, bending over his sack of hamburger, playing in the sand.

"What did you do when you lived on a farm, Porter? What did you do when you were a child?"

"I worked my ass off."

"Were there no girls?"

"No. Just manure."

"Manure?"

"You know." He motioned. "Manure."

Again the child stood. He threw two pieces of hamburger, and immediately the gulls returned. The child paused a moment before casting the next piece, as though measuring the amount of greed in the air. At last he threw a piece of meat, and a gull swooped low, gracefully down to pluck the meat from its arc. The child pulled on a string, and the gull fell to the ground. It lay with its beak down, coughing, its white wings beating at the white sand. A thin edge of blood trickled from its torn throat. The child pulled the string taut and placed a hand upon the gull's neck. The gull beat its wings once more furiously and made a sickly, strangled noise. The child pulled the gull's beak apart and tore out the hook. A thin pink membrane hung to the barbed fragment of bait. The child nudged at the gull with a bare toe.

"Porter. Oh love, do something."

Porter cast his eyes away to sea. "What can you do, Helen? The gull's dead. The kid's happy."

Fog rolled down across the airport. Porter sat in his seat to look down the long, silvery wing. He smoked his pipe to make a fog of his own, watched the electric forklifts and the tiny men of the ground crew, running in circles. The pipe had been Helen's going-away present. It was an excellent pipe which she had purchased with her own money. He had given her the rest of his money, nearly two hundred dollars, and said, "You get your ass back to Melbourne. Your parents'll take you."

"Write me, love," Helen had said.