

A photograph of a ceiling with a decorative, brown, patterned wallpaper. A single light fixture hangs from the center, featuring a glowing yellow, bell-shaped shade. The ceiling shows signs of wear, including a prominent crack in the upper left corner. The title 'DANCER ON THE CEILING' is printed in large, white, serif capital letters across the middle of the image.

# DANCER ON THE CEILING

By Mark Nutter

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I sat facing Mona in our breakfast nook. Silently. You could cut the tension with a knife.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm tired. I think my allergies are acting up."

"But what's really wrong?"

Mona exhaled deeply. "Okay, Blake. Everything about you repulses me. I've grown to hate the way you dress, the way you sound, and the way you smell."

"Mm-hm." I blew on my coffee which was steaming.

"Also, the way you pop your chewing gum, the way you laugh at stupid jokes, the way you reach inside your shirt to scratch your armpit.. "

She went on for several minutes. By now my coffee had cooled, and I took a sip.

"Mona, what's the real problem here?"

She stared at me as if the answer were obvious.

"You don't dance," she said.

I couldn't help it. I laughed so hard I spit coffee in her face.

What was worse, I couldn't stop laughing. Every sip I took went into Mona's face. I couldn't stop laughing or drinking coffee, either one.

After five minutes, she'd had enough. She wiped her face with a napkin, rose from the breakfast nook, and left the kitchen.

I followed her into our bedroom, where she was throwing clothes into a suitcase. I managed to catch my breath and say, "Dance?"

"Yes."

This brought on a whole new wave of laughter, a wave that continued during our Uber ride to the airport.

It wasn't until she was headed down the jetbridge to board the plane that would take her to her sister's home in Indianapolis that I shouted, "Mona, stop!"

She stopped.

"Are you seriously leaving me because I don't dance?"

"Yep."

"But..." I said. I thought about how much I hated dancing. Waltzing, foxtrotting, Western line dancing, disco dancing--each new kind of dancing I thought of doubled down on my hatred. And yet...

I couldn't lose Mona. I hated the idea of losing her more than I hated any kind of dance.

"Mona?"

"What?!" She shouted to be heard over the other passengers who were cursing her as she blocked the jetbridge.

"Would you come back if I--learned to dance?"

"Yes!" shouted an angry businessman trying to get to his seat.

"Let her answer," I said.

"What kind of dance will you learn?" she said.

"Well... "

For Mona, I would've donned a tutu and taken a ballet class with five-year-old girls--no, I wouldn't have done that. Neither would I have put on a kilt and done a Highland fling. I wouldn't have done any kind of dance that required me to put on a skirt. On any other kind of special dancing garment. No kind of dancing in any kind of dancing garment, period.

Except...

From my subconscious, a memory bubbled up.

Fred Astaire. "Royal Wedding." That number. Me watching it. Me not hating it.

"I'll learn how to dance on the ceiling! If Fred Astaire could do it, I can do it."

I'm pretty sure Mona heard me as the flight attendants dragged her onto the plane.

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After a Google search, I learned Fred Astaire was faking it. In that scene in "Royal Wedding," he did not in fact climb the walls and dance on the ceiling. He danced in place while the entire MGM Studio complex rotated around him. At that time Fred was big box office, and MGM wanted to keep him happy.

I needed a teacher. But who?

A song lyric popped into my head:

OH WHAT A FEELING

WHEN WE'RE DANCING ON THE CEILING

Another Google search told me the "oh what a feeling" singer was Lionel Ritchie.

I went to his house.

Lionel Ritchie could not have been nicer. He met me at the front door of his spacious Los Angeles home, a glass of cold chardonnay in his hand.

"White wine?" he offered, as I followed him into his living room.

"No thank you, Mr. Ritchie. I want to ask a favor of you."

"Shoot," he said, as he poured himself another glass.

"I'd like you to teach me to dance on the ceiling."

Lionel Ritchie threw his head back and laughed, a huge warm laugh that was no doubt a factor in his meteoric rise from lead vocalist with the Commodores to solo stardom. He also had the courtesy not to spit wine in my face, the way I had spit coffee in Mona's face. This was certainly another reason for his success.

"All you have to do, Blake, is dream. Let yourself feel light as a feather. Picture your feet gliding smoothly across the ceiling. Imagine it, and you're there."

This was not the practical advice I was looking for.

"But how do I deal with gravity?"

"Gravity is a state of mind."

"No, it's real. It's what makes things fall."

He laughed another Lionel Ritchie laugh, this one less robust.

"My friend, you're a jokester."

"I'm not joking. I can't get my girlfriend Mona back unless I dance on the ceiling."

"Don't you get it, man? It can't be done. It's a metaphor for feeling happy."

"But when you sang about it, you sounded so convincing. Like you were actually dancing on the ceiling."

"That was an illusion. I stood still and sang, while the recording studio rotated around me."

He was so nice, offering me white wine and everything. But I wasn't going to let Lionel Ritchie stomp on my dream.

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If I were the first human to really dance on the ceiling, I'd be like Roger Bannister, the first human to run a mile in under four minutes. I was determined to be the Roger Bannister of dancing on the ceiling.

Progress was slow. For weeks I would follow the same practice routine. I'd climb to the top of a step ladder, turn my body upside down, plant my feet on the ceiling, push the ladder aside, and fall on my head. I did this about two thousand times. The only part I got better at

was climbing the ladder, which I was able to accomplish in under two seconds. Everything else that followed remained unchanged: turn, plant, push, fall on head.

After many unsuccessful attempts, I realized what was missing. Music. How can you dance on the ceiling without music?

Here are the results:

Classic rock. Climb... fall on head.

Polka. Climb... fall on head.

Waltz (and every other kind of music). Climb... fall on head.

I never gave up. I was desperate to win Mona back. And even though I was certain it was only a matter of time before I danced on the ceiling, I thought as a teaser I'd shoot a video of me dancing on the ceiling in a very small house, one where the ceiling and floor were four feet apart.

"You're scrunched up in a doll's house," she texted me.

"This is just a taste of what's coming."

"You made a promise you can't keep. You'll never dance on the ceiling."

I refused to give up. But after a particularly challenging day falling on my head to big band hits of the 1940s, I needed a teacher more than ever.

Yet another Google search yielded, after about ten thousand references to Lionel Richie, another ten thousand sponsored ads: "Dance on the Ceiling and Lose Weight Fast!" "Can't Dance on the Ceiling? Maybe it's not your fault. I can help. ( I am a certified life coach.)"

These ads were shady. I didn't need a con artist, I needed a reputable teacher of ceiling dancing.

That's when I had my brilliant idea.

I requested information about ceiling tile sales in the United States. Where was the biggest market? I found a manufacturer who was happy to tell me, provided I bought four thousand dollars worth of acoustic tiles.

I spent another four grand on toe shoes and got additional information.

Then it was a simple matter to graph the location where ceiling tile sales and dance shoe sales intersected.

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Wheeze, New Mexico was a pretty little desert town. The locals and the artists who lived there shared a common trait: they reacted with hostile silence when I said the words "dancing on the ceiling."

One old codger outside the tavern seemed less hostile because he was drunk and wanted to get drunker.

Ebeneezer--not his real name, but I decided to call him Ebeneezer since I enjoyed saying Ebeneezer -- Ebeneezer used his index finger to point at his open mouth.

"Aaagh... " he said.

"Well, that's a start. Ebeneezer. If I give you money for alcohol, will you give me information?"

"Aagh... " he said, still pointing.

"Oh, Ebenezer, Ebenezer. Very well. Here you go, Ebenezer."

I gave him a twenty-dollar bill.

"Now, Ebenezer. Who around here is buying ceiling tiles and dance shoes?"

He used his 'I-need-a-drink' finger to point at the horizon.

"So what am I supposed to do, start walking into the desert? Can you give me any more information, Ebenezer? Huh, Ebenezer? Can you?"

But Ebenezer had gone back into the tavern.

I started walking into the desert.

As parched and delirious as I was—at one point I saw Fred Astaire selling cold lemonade for five cents a glass--I knew the four teenage girls who ran up to me and began undressing me were real. As they burned my clothes and gave me a black robe and toe shoes, I thought, *sorry, Mona, but I'm enjoying this*. I enjoyed it so much that I was only half aware of signing my worldly assets over to someone named The Grand Rodney.

The teenage girls led me into a giant airplane hangar. The interior of the hangar was covered in acoustic ceiling tiles. Hundreds of people in black robes lie on their backs, their legs in the air, their toe-shoed feet moving in unison as if they were doing a time step.

At the far end of the hangar sat The Grand Rodney, a black-robed corpulent man, atop a throne made of teenage girls.

"Welcome, Fellow Dancer."

"I'll get right to the point," I said. "I want to learn how to dance on the ceiling."

"We will all dance on the ceiling. We will be given dance lessons by our Intergalactic Masters. They're coming soon."

I had my doubts about learning to dance on the ceiling from intergalactic masters. But as I'd already given The Grand Rodney my worldly possessions, I figured he knew what he was talking about. Incidentally, I hung on to my cell phone. I wanted to keep Mona informed of my progress.

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"I'm telling you, Mona, this is the real deal," I said. I was talking to her in the desert, far from the hangar. Phone calls were prohibited. If you were caught making a call, you would be The Grand Rodney's footstool for a week.

"It's a cult," she said.

"Come on, you could say that about anything. Fantasy football is a cult."

"No, Blake, that's not a cult. People in black robes, getting dance lessons from aliens--that's a cult."

"I'm doing this for you, babe... Mona?... "

She'd hung up.

I'd show her. Boy, was I ever ready to dance on the ceiling. The Grand Rodney had said our first lesson would be today. I ran back to the hangar. I didn't want to miss any of the lesson, even the first few minutes when the alien dance teachers made small talk.

The hangar was quiet. Everyone was still on their backs with their legs in the air.

I grabbed one guy by the foot and shook him.

"What did I miss?"

He didn't answer. His leg was stiff like he had rigor mortis, which he did. His leg, and his other leg, and the rest of his body, and everyone else in the hangar--everyone was stiff and dead--except for the teenage girls who were still bent over being The Great Rodney's throne. You could still see the impression of Rodney's ass on them.

Rodney had disappeared. I thought, too bad I hadn't asked him for pointers on encouraging mass suicide. That, more than ceiling dancing, seemed to be his forte.

It was then that the roof of the hangar ripped open and a white shaft of light shot down at me. The last thing I remember is being lifted up off the ground, feet first, the blood rushing to my head...

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"Hey, Mona, is this a bad time?" I shouted.

I'd tracked Mona down to her sister's apartment in Indianapolis. Her sister wasn't there, but Mona was. She was slow-dancing with some sinewy Indiana guy in a tank top.

"You can't just walk in!"

"Check this out," I said, as Sinewy Guy chased me around the room. As I ran, I was able to hijack Mona's sound system with my phone. I turned off whatever slow sappy song they were dancing to, and put on--what else?-- *Dancing on the Ceiling*, by Lionel Richie.

Before I danced on the ceiling, I warmed up by dancing on the walls, just like Fred Astaire. I was too fast for Sinewy Guy.

Then I moved up to the ceiling.

Sinewy Guy tried to grab my head, but I was out of reach. Thank goodness her sister had high ceilings.

Mona squealed with delight.

"See, Mona," I said, breathless. "The aliens taught me. They're really nice aliens. Most of them have had hip replacements, but what do you expect from a lifetime of dancing."

I did a few spins. I'd had the foresight to duct tape my robe to my body. I wouldn't have minded flashing Mona, but Sinewy Guy was a different story.

"The aliens want to help humanity evolve to the next level, which is ceiling dancing. I don't think Rodney really believed in them. He was just a con man who got off on stealing people's life savings and sitting on teenage girl furniture."

"I love you, Blake!" she shouted.

I was so excited I leaped in the air--upside down, of course--and landed back on the ceiling in a spot where the plaster was cracking. The ceiling gave way, and I crashed through the hole, landing on the ceiling of the apartment above...

...which was also weak. I crashed through that ceiling, too... ...and crashed through another three or four ceilings... ... until I crashed through the roof of the building and soared into the sky...

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And so here I am. In space. A dancer on the ceiling, without a ceiling.

I'm afraid if I stop dancing, I'll plummet back to Earth.

That's okay. I like it up here. I miss Mona. But I guess that's a price worth paying since I'm now embodying the next evolutionary step of the human race. I'll keep dancing up here, waiting for the rest of humankind to join me.

And I sure as hell hope the solar system isn't just rotating around me.

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