

## From **“THE BOY WHO DANCED BALLET”**

By Tom Erhard

His name was Clarence Miller, and I can't think of a single person in Dover city who could stand him. It wasn't that he was bad looking. I mean, Clarence wasn't any Tom Cruise or anything; but he wasn't creepy. But in Dover City, roles were clearly defined from the moment you were potty-trained. Girls were sweet and docile and wore pink hair ribbons. Boys, on the other hand, were brash and blustery and played football and were masculine down to their jockey shorts. You had one of two choices in Dover City: you could conform and be accepted, or you could be different and weird. I chose the former. Yes, I conformed. And I was going with the varsity quarterback, Greg Wilkes. Greg had everything Dover High expected a guy to have: looks, a certain kind of bestial charm, and a killer instinct on and off the football field. Ironically, it was through Greg and his “pass plays” that I found out about Clarence. It was after the last game of the season, and Greg and I were parked. Dover High had won that night, which put Greg in an especially amorous meed.

I just wanted to sit there and talk without ... you know ... football. But that's all Greg wanted to talk about. I finally screamed, “Can't we talk about something else for a change?” And that really set Greg off. I can still remember those words: “Well, what d'you want me to do? Give up football? Would you rather have me take ballet lessons like that fruity Clarence Miller?” I questioned his tone, but he came back with, “Let's not waste any more time on Clarence and his ballet. I can think of better things to do.”

And so, Clarence was shoved to the back of my mind as I grappled with Greg's affections. When I got back to school on Monday, the entire student body was buzzing with ridicule. I really didn't worry about it too much until fifth period government, which I had with Clarence and about ten football players. The minute Clarence walked into the room, I knew there was going to be trouble. I saw an almost imperceptible tightening of Clarence's jaw as he sat down. But he said nothing, just opened his books. “Oh, the strong, silent type,” Chuck whispered to Ron.

“Better watch your step, because we don't need any fairies prancing around this town,” Phil added.

Why didn't they just leave him alone? He was no threat to them. Or was he?

Fall dragged into winter. December has always had a bad effect on me, and that year it was particularly rotten.

One especially bleak day I had a fight with Greg over the phone. He had made the mistake of making too many cracks. "Have you heard the latest about Clarence?" he asked. I was sick of it ... because ... somehow ... I saw something of myself in Clarence. I shouted, "Why don't you just keep your big mouth shut!" slammed down the phone, flung on an old jacket and a pair of snow boots and stomped out into the gray afternoon. I don't know how long I wandered around, but I ended up outside the dance studio. I went in. And there was Clarence. All alone on the stage in a black leotard. He was just standing there, under the pitiless spotlight, his head bent and his hands folded in front of him. And then there was music pouring out of the speakers. With the first lilting, heartbreaking strains, Clarence began to dance.

When it was over, I was crying. O got up from my seat and walked slowly toward the stage. Clarence was wiping his face with a towel and he looked out. He wasn't startled, although I'm almost sure he hadn't seen me till then. I wanted to thank him, to apologize, say something ... anything ... but the words wouldn't come.

"Cathy," he said, "Get out while you can. I think you know what I mean."

I knew exactly what he meant. I turned and left the studio.

Two days later he was dead. It seems that Greg, Chuck Kilmer, Ron Smith, and Phil Denison had a few beers and decided to play chicken in Phil's dad's car, with Clarence as the opponent. Clarence's car went into a ditch, and Clarence was thrown into the icy road. An accident, of course. But I had nightmares for six months, thinking of those strong dancer's legs crumpled beneath the December sky.

After I graduated that spring, I got out of Dover City. I'm living in Denver now, the editor of a local magazine, and I have prospects of even better things in the future. And some day, when I'm famous enough to merit an interview, I will secret a little smile and reply, "Well, see, there was this boy named Clarence Miller, and I can't think of a single person in Dover City who could stand him."