

DANCING WOUNDED

a short story



KJ HUTCHINGS

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Dressed top to toe in black Tara walks towards the neon lights, following Harriet and a group of chattering girls in high heels through the doors. Looking down at her boots, she passes between the parting wall of eagle-eyed bouncers and into an alternating darkness and glare, almost stumbling down the stairs. They enter what looks like a crypt or dungeon and head in the direction of the loud throbbing music, which vibrates like a sickening palpitation. In the main part of the club, people hunch over high tables, forehead to forehead in an effort to hear their conversations, flicking cigarette ash on the floor and looking achingly aloof. Others pose and dance on the stage against a backdrop of swirling psychedelic smears and acid burns. Lights pound around the enclosed darkness, sprinkling colours on the heads of all the dancers crammed together, their bodies shimmering and their arms pumping manically. Harriet grabs Tara by the wrist and leads her to the bar, carving a determined swathe through the dancers.

Darling used to tell Tara what to wear to places like this and she soon learned how to mimic the dances, how to stand aside with a mask of composure pressed over her incomprehension, and even what bottled beer to drink. Darling liked her to wear heels when they went out. She always obliged this preference even though the shoes made the bones in her feet ache as the night wore on. In the end, under his direction, she had become exactly what he said he wanted, on the outside at least, but by then it was too late. He'd changed his mind again, and she'd never seen it coming.

Darling isn't his name of course. Tara always called him Darling because she never liked his real name, which is Wayne. It sounded like a whine, she always thought, the preface to a complaint, and it rhymed with pain, insane, vain, drain. It was not the sort of name she had ever imagined for her future husband. Now, she cannot envisage a husband at all.

Harriet thinks going clubbing is the best way to get over someone: get drunk and find another someone as fast as possible. "There's always another man around the corner" is her friend's motto. Tara hasn't seen Harriet in ages. Darling hadn't liked any of her friends, especially Harriet.

Tara watches several couples press together under the swirling lights, smiling and flirting. All this effort, she thinks, and all the unhappiness that comes later. There really is little point to it; little point to the trendy clothes, the perfume and make up, the posing and strutting. Darling used to swagger around a club as if he owned the place and it was in his natural habitat. He often disappeared on a quest to see someone about some pills or powder, whichever he came across first, leaving her to chat to his friends' latest girlfriends. Except it was often impossible to talk: the noise swallowed what she tried to say in big greedy gulps, making her feel disconnected from everyone and everything around her. So usually she had just stood there, drinking her beer and trying to look unbothered, when all she wanted to do was go home or at least find a nook where the noise didn't drill into her skull, where the smoke didn't choke her or make her eyes itch and where there were fewer sweaty, zombie-like bodies lurching around. She had often longed for bed and a book, the glow of late night TV.

A man at the far end of the bar catches her eye and smiles. His eyes remain on her as he lifts a bottle to his lips to take a lengthy gulp of beer. On his arm glitters a silver identity bracelet.

Tara turns away, sudden tears stinging her eyes. She had bought Darling a similar bracelet for his birthday last year. It used to hang from his wrist like a chain of armour until he lost it recently on a foreign beach. 'You loved that bracelet,' she said when he told her of its disappearance, imagining it washed out into the Mediterranean. He nodded sadly as they both looked at his bare wrist.

On the day he got back from the trip to Spain she had said over and over on the telephone that she loved him and had missed him. *I've missed you, have you missed me?* When he said he loved her too, his voice sounded strange, husky and strained as if each word had been forced out of him. He told her he'd had "the best time ever" and spent the week dancing, drinking, off his head, and talking about music with "amazing people". She had gone to bed wrapped in uneasiness, tossing and turning all night.

He came to see her the next day at her parents' house. 'While I was away I did a lot of thinking,' he told her. 'Everything has become... the same.' He knelt before her and held her hand like an awkward and reluctant suitor as she sat on her bed. 'I want to focus on my music, my DJ'ing, my career... I want to be the owner of London's top venues and nightclubs... I can't do that and focus on us at the same time. I don't think I have time for a relationship. I don't know... Perhaps I've gone mad,' he tried to laugh but failed. 'Say something.'

For a moment shock had flattened her. She had gawped at him, lost for words. Was he really doing this now? Was it really happening? After a lengthy silence she had said at last: 'But it's my birthday in two weeks.'

On the morning he left for Spain, joining his best friend Hugo on a week-long DJ'ing gig in Barcelona, he had told her earnestly: 'I don't just love you, Tara. I'm *in* love with you. Don't forget that.'

He used to say he liked having her as a girlfriend because it meant he could relax, undistracted, and focus on his music, focus on becoming famous, a millionaire, a force to be reckoned with, the best DJ in London. No, the best DJ in the world. Every day he used to say *I love you Tara, I love you*; words that stitched together a familiar pattern, as comforting as a quilt, which she had gratefully pulled around herself.

'Happy birthday,' Harriet shouts as she hands Tara two shots of vodka. 'Drink up! It's party time.'

After downing the drinks, Harriet pulls Tara to the dance floor. The DJ is behind a glass screen, earphones pressed to his left ear, wiggling his hips and punching his arm in the air. The heavy thuds reverberate through Tara, making her feel almost breathless. Bodies brush against her, elbows and shoulders encroach on the small area she tries to keep for herself. She adjusts her movements to the rhythm of the tunes, looking down at the patch of floor below her, watching her black boots move repetitively. It's as if her feet are not a part of her. She does not really hear the music and is

instead far more aware of the enveloping crowd. They cheer each time a tune blends into another, elated by the seemingly seamless transition, saluting the DJ with their waving arms and cries, their exhilarated faces bobbing manically as if drowning within the rapid rhythm of monotonous beats.

Tara keeps her arms by her sides, picturing monochrome record sleeves patch-working the double bed in Darling's room; his precious vinyl collection, much of which she'd bought for him. Some of them are probably still covered with a film of ash, brown speckles of hash and discarded grains from cigarettes. He used to pull out a sheet of Rizla paper and set about softening what looked like a malleable brown pebble with the flame from his lighter, and would then place the brown sprinkles along the guttering of the paper, expertly sealing it with the tip of his tongue, twisting the ends, and lighting it with a flourish. He did this many times each day.

Darling also has a set of technics. Tara bought them for him too. He paid her back a few days ago; or rather, his mother paid her back the two hundred pounds he'd owed her for nearly two years. He never had any money for very long, although he had plenty of plans to become wildly rich. She'd also bought a TV and video recorder for his room, bought countless cinema tickets and meals in restaurants, drinks in bars and take-away meals. They always saw the films he wanted, ate in the restaurants he chose, and like a fool she had paid for it all out of the salary from her office job. Darling said he didn't have time for a pointless nine-to-five job; he had bigger fish to fry, better things to do with his time.

Maybe that was why they'd always done what he wanted; anything other than what interested him was considered a waste of his time. They would spend hours in record stores but he never had the patience to let her browse around a bookshop in his company. She never complained when they went to clubs and pubs but the one time she took him to a theatre to see a flamenco performance, he had snickered and whispered all the way through it, embarrassing her and annoying the people in the neighbouring

seats. When she'd invited him as her guest to a friend's wedding reception he had tried to take command of the DJ's music, which had embarrassed her further. Visits to art galleries and museums had been cut short because Darling got bored; he couldn't see the point of the exhibits. They were too still, too quiet, lifeless. On such occasions, she wondered what on earth had happened to her life, and the person she used to be.

'I still love you,' Darling had said in her bedroom that day, still holding her hand, 'but I'm not sure in what way.'

Tara sat on her bed staring at him. She pulled her hand away. In the midst of the edible silence she heard something break deep inside her, like a bone being snapped in two.

'I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt you,' he continued. 'I just think we're too different.'

The way he said it implied their dissimilarity was no longer a good thing. It used to be. They used to pride themselves on being opposites but in love nonetheless.

They had met in a pub. She had been flattered that someone like him – so confident and popular – had asked to buy her a drink, and then asked her for a date. He told her he was a music writer, a producer, re-mixer and DJ who played in famous clubs all over the world and had his own music studio. Little did she know it was all lies and his "studio" was in fact a corner of his messy bedroom in his mother's high-rise council flat.

'I know,' she replied. 'We are very different.'

'I've felt like this for about a year...'

'A year?' Tara bleated.

He nodded bashfully.

'That's a long time,' she had said at last. 'You never said anything. I wish you had.'

A year ago they had rented a cottage in the West Country with Hugo and his girlfriend of ten years, Trudy. Hugo and Trudy broke up six months later because Trudy wanted to settle down and start a family, whereas Hugo was happy with his party lifestyle. Then Darling's older brother broke up with his live-in girlfriend. Tara and Darling made couple number three. Didn't such things always happen in threes?

Hugo is the music star. He is everything Darling wants to be. Darling DJ'd a couple of times in a pub in Islington last year, but Hugo is a career musician, a producer who even has his own record label. Hugo has achieved enough success and recognition to be flown around the world to DJ in top clubs. Trudy was meant to accompany Hugo to Barcelona, but after the split Darling went along instead. Darling told Tara that Hugo had collected girls during their week in Spain, leaving him to pace the luxury hotel's corridors, with plenty of time to think, while Hugo entertained a series of one-night stands in their shared room.

'Have you met someone else?' Tara asked him, her heart clapping.

'No!' he insisted, looking insulted, but also embarrassed. 'How could you think that?'

When Darling told his friend about his intention to split up with Tara, Hugo had apparently urged caution and told him not to do anything too hasty. 'Are you sure you want to do this? Are you absolutely sure?' he had asked Darling on the flight home from Spain. 'I mean – she lets you do whatever you want.'

In her bedroom Darling had sighed and jerked his fingers through his dark hair. 'Look, I'm not saying anything is beginning or ending,' he said to Tara. 'I just feel life is passing me by. I want to write my music. I want time for myself. I need to think things through. But I want us to stay friends. Let's meet up in a few weeks. A month or so. Just to see.'

'It's my birthday in two weeks,' she said, tears filling her eyes.

A girl with disheveled peroxide blonde hair and dazed eyes stumbles past Tara and Harriet, knocking them with her sharp elbows. The girl's mouth is gaping and blood drips from her nose and down her chin, staining her smiley face tee shirt. Bizarrely, her feet are bare. She continues to make her way through the crowd, bumping into people.

'Did you see that?' Harriet yells in Tara's ear. 'Drugs, I bet.'

Tara looks down at the floor. Under the swirling lights she can make out the trail of blood, and the smudge of a partial footprint.

Sweat begins to run down her chest and back like condensation. She has to get away. She wants open space, silence and fresh air. She wants to feel cool air upon her, feel it fill her lungs. Tara doesn't want to dance in the thumping darkness or prop up bars and nor does she want to be around people who stumble through their lives off their heads, far more wounded than she is; she's done that for too long already. She's never liked this sort of music or this kind of scene. There is nothing for her here, nothing that interests her. She's a square peg and she doesn't care anymore. She doesn't want to waste another minute of her life. And it's her birthday – she can do what she likes.

'Harry, I'm going home,' she shouts to her friend, thinking of the many times she had wanted to say that to Darling when he took her to some dive or other, but never did.

'But we've only just got here!' Harriet shouts back.

'I know. Sorry. But I really want to go home.'

'Are you feeling ill?' her friend asks, frowning at her.

'No, I'm fine,' Tara insists. 'I just want to go home. You can stay. I'll call you tomorrow.'

She makes her way through the haze and finds the stairs leading back up to street level. She quickly climbs the staircase, weaving between people and

exits into the night, gasping like it is the first time she's breathed properly in years. Within seconds she sees a taxi and rushes towards it, and it stops abruptly to let her in.

When Tara reaches home she tiptoes up the stairs so as to not wake her parents. In her bedroom she takes off her boots, strips off her black clothes and pulls on her pale blue dressing gown. It used to hang on the back of Darling's bedroom door. He posted it back to her several days ago; or rather his mother sent it from her office. It had been wrapped in brown paper and when Tara opened the package the smell of stale cigarettes had filled her bedroom. There was no note. She had flung open the window to clear the air, and thrown the dressing gown into the washing machine. It now smells like new, clean and fresh.

She reaches for a notepad and pen and begins to write. She feels like Darling's identity bracelet – released, liberated and free of him. She realizes that whatever broke inside her that day has actually set her free. She does not want to meet up “just to see” and she doesn't need time to think things through. She already knows. She suspects she's known, deep down, for far longer than a year, but concealed such inklings under layers of timidity, denial and repeated utterances of *I love you*. She has wasted so much time.

Tara cannot pinpoint exactly where this strength, this decisiveness and clarity, is coming from, but it's blazing within her nonetheless as she writes the letter; her thoughts are no longer drowned out by noise, bright lights and meaningless distractions.

She folds the finished letter, which she began with “Dear Wayne”, and slips it into an envelope. The next morning she goes to the post office to buy a stamp and then pushes the letter into the postbox.

In her letter she explained it all quite clearly to Wayne so there is no ambiguity, no uncertainty, only a definite ending even his drug-addled brain can understand. She doesn't want to be with someone who doesn't want to be with her, plain and simple. She will not be put on hold while he tries to

make up his mind or hedges his bets about the other girl – Tara knows there is one, somewhere, perhaps waiting for him in Spain. Whoever the girl is, Wayne is not sure about her either. There had been an attraction, but evidently no thunderclap moment or love at first sight across a crowded bar or nightclub. Tara feels a little sorry for her.

Tara knows she will never see Wayne again because, as he rightly said, they are too different. They have nothing in common; there is no point. “That is why we can never be friends,” she had written in her letter.

The truth is, they can never be friends for the simple reason she does not like him enough, and she realizes she probably never did in all the time she was with him. This she omitted from the letter, but the realization of this fact is like a lightning bolt of insight.

Tara crosses the street and starts to walk home, stopping to browse in a bookshop along the way. She’ll have more money to spend on herself from now on, and more time too. She’s free to do whatever she wants.

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