

## Partner Wanted

Jennie Orvino

Kyle and Christina

Gustavo and Jesica

Richard and Marianne

Rafael and Isamar

Fred and Ginger

Jennie and \_\_\_\_\_

For the last twenty-two years, every wishbone broken, birthday candle blown out, or coin tossed in a fountain has come with the same request from me to whoever is in charge of wish granting. You're not supposed to reveal what you wish for or it won't come true, so they say. But since my divorce in 1996, the wish has not come true anyhow, so what the heck? I wished for an intimate relationship, a sweetheart, a temporary yet passionate fling, a friend who was fun to kiss, or, at least, more than three dates with the same person. As the Valentine's days came and went, the plea to the universe became more humble—but I didn't compromise in the type of person I longed for.

He needed to be no smarter, wealthier, more beautiful, younger at heart or more enlightened than I, but merely *equal*. I'd not ask something of another person I wouldn't require of myself. I wanted someone to relate to

who was, at least, in my same stratum—freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, bronze, silver, gold. I didn't require a sugar daddy or a Ph.D. candidate. But, as a Baby Boomer and a peace activist since the age of twenty-two, I wanted a lover who shared my values. And who could make me laugh. But something switched when I entered my seventh decade.

I called my party “Spectacular Seventy,” which reflected a change of emphasis from my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday bash, whose invitation was titled “Sexy Sixty.” Disillusioned by years of unsuccessful and even disastrous online dating with OK Cupid, eHarmony, and AgeMatch.com, I put faith in my own survival skills and creativity. How magnificent could I be on my own? I had been able to visualize, plan, and execute whatever the project was—from planting a gorgeous garden to purchasing a home for the first time in my life. I had dared semi-retirement with only a moderate nest egg and a loving network of support to devote myself to something that appealed to me since I was a toddler. I felt my hunger for a romantic partner slowly transforming into a hunger to excel at partner dance.

I still remember the tune of a ditty my father crooned to me, “Dance with the Daddy with the hole in her stocking, with the hole in her stocking...” as I rocked from side to side on the kitchen counter top with my hands clamped tightly

around his thumbs. At kindergarten age, I balanced with bare feet on my father's shoes as he stepped us around the living room to the scratchy music of his 78s stacked on our Motorola phonograph. Years later, we danced to "Blue Tango" played on those same thick records, and he taught me how to *really* follow, turn, and dip.

Loving admiration for my first partner inspired my quest for the perfect partner in life, as well as my perfect match on the dance floor. I was driven to constantly improve myself, and determined to become the best dancer I could be:

- At the "Singles Mingle" in a conference room at the Marriott Hotel, a six-couple formation shows off West Coast Swing moves to funky blues, and I, second row center, lean forward in my chair thinking, "Wow, I want to do that!" Five years of classes follow.
- At a hilltop dinner party in San Anselmo, two invited guests dance in an Argentine tango embrace with interlocking footwork that has the rest of us swooning, and not just from the Montepulciano d'Abruzzo wine. Her leg slips through the slit in her scarlet skirt to caress his leg, first below the knee then slowly, slowly, up and over. "Wow, I want to learn that!" Three years of classes follow.

- With a newspaper coupon for a free lesson in hand, I push open the door to a new, but classic, dance center near Santa Rosa’s Railroad Square. Immediately I sense that this is “not your parents’ Arthur Murray.” The teachers are young, enthusiastic, and could easily appear as models in a Macy’s catalog. What’s different here from other places I’ve studied is a proprietary program of group lessons and personal instruction, along with the opportunity to enter competitions with a professional partner—my teacher. “Yes, yes. I want that!”

At each of these stages of dance endeavor, I came to the same crisis point. In the passionate, exclusive world of Argentine tango, I found that a woman who had a regular partner, whether spouse or colleague, advanced quickly; those of us who didn’t, struggled to find someone to practice with. I’d seen a fairly good gender balance in classes for easier, more popular dances like swing or salsa. My experience with Argentine tango always featured a preponderance of followers. I remember asking my classmate Paul to take a private lesson with me to prepare for my birthday dance, and he said, “OK. But don’t tell any of the other women or they will all be begging me to do the same.”

When classmates and I ventured south to the Sausalito *milonga* (Argentine tango dance party), it was not uncommon to observe stunningly-dressed women race across the dance floor to nearly come to blows over *snagging* an available leader. When three or four followers could get a guy to cooperate, we would load the good sport into the car with us, not unlike a mannequin an individual might use to illegally drive in the carpool lane. This gentleman was our guarantee of a few dances each during the evening. At a *milonga*, it is courteous and customary to dance three times with one person before moving on. I can still feel the cold metal of a folding chair against my back while I waited, sporting plenty of cleavage and a slick-lipped but fading smile.

My perceived rivalry with other women, and lack of a partner of my own, caused me to quit tango and enter a virtual “dance desert” for a year. It was not until my best friend, an adventurous cowgirl, lured me back. “Come to Monroe Hall on Sunday nights,” she urged. “You don’t need a partner for line dancing. It’s easy and fun.” Prepared with a new pair of Bloch suede-soled sandals, a little black dress, and my doctor’s recommendation for weight-bearing exercise to relieve lower back pain, I pushed myself out to the ballroom floor yet again.

During my happy childhood, one of the ways my parents made their love for each other visible was the way

they danced. Notorious as the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers of family weddings, they made observers believe in the power of partnership. Within their graceful waltz and fox trot, they communicated with slight gestures and eye contact. They alternated between giving space and taking space; he asserted, she surrendered. My handsome, modest father often repeated the dance truism, “It is the first job of the leader to make the lady look good.” My parents died within a year of each other, both aged seventy-three, my father first. The only thing I remember from my mother’s funeral Mass was a single sentence in the eulogy from my cousin Kym. “Now they will be dancing again together in heaven.”

The blessing of 1960s college mixers was that a young woman didn’t need a partner to make her look good. All it required was a sense of rhythm, hours of listening to the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, or Chubby Checker’s “round and round and up and down we go, oh baby, makin’ with the shakin’ to and fro...,” and having enough stamina for long sets of doing “The Twist.” But after I acquired a taste for, or perhaps an addiction to, ballroom dancing, new skills were a must. This desire to become a beautiful and inspiring dancer paralleled my need, after two dissolved marriages, to understand what makes a partnership work, what level of commitment, power sharing, and trust is necessary.

But isn't it true that in order to learn how to behave and grow in a relationship, you need to *be* in a relationship? In order to progress, compete, or simply go out social dancing, you need *another body* to cooperate. Together we learn how to create energy in a frame, feel the negative and positive connection through a rumba's *banquera* opening, and learn to stretch into the hourglass torso shape that makes a pivot turn so thrilling.

I don't get tired of practicing. Lucky to have a place to study that is open during the day as well as in the evening, I can fit my lessons and technique classes around my chores and freelance writing. My life is organized around my dance schedule. It's like being in grad school or training for the Olympics. My ambition to wow onlookers and judges mixes with self-doubt at every new level of achievement. I ache for dancing when I'm away from it. When I travel, I visit sister studios who welcome me as part of a community that shares, at least, a common teaching syllabus, and tolerance for ambitious older dancers like me.

February 2019 marked the beginning of my seventh straight year of private lessons and group classes at Arthur Murray Dance Center in Santa Rosa. During that time, I've attended at least one district showcase a year, a couple of four-day competitions situated on Hawaiian islands I had not previously visited, and numerous in-house "recitals" and

competitions. In our sports-like medal system, I moved through the Bronze levels, and recently graduated from Associate Silver to Silver One. To celebrate my anniversary, I brought a bottle of champagne (matched by staff with several more) to our Tuesday night party, and a toast was raised after viewing a slideshow of my dance action shots spanning, well, seventy-two months! The studio's penchant for costume events assured plenty of laughs; and the snowball dance gave me an opportunity to partner with old and new friends, including one who pronounced me her "role model" and another who said she aspired to "be like you when I grow up."

Then why, when all this hoopla was over, did I have to seek solace and cry while soaking in my hot-as-I-could-stand-it bath?

Jealousy, or more correctly *envy*, is the emotion that rips me up. I want to be the woman who can afford several private lessons each week, who can register to be coached by each and every visiting master teacher, who puts down the bucks to attend the Dance-O-Rama competitions that sparkle from Prague to Cancun to Maui, and who can afford the Swarovski crystal-bedecked gowns packed in the suitcase. For all these activities, I would dance with my teacher as I have since the day I started at the Arthur Murray studio. It's a unique privilege I've enjoyed—to connect with and learn

from a series of talented young men, and I mean *young* as in a two-generation gap between us. I've been treated with respect and pushed to excel, and I mean pushed, in spite of my occasional complaints. I trust that this combination of physical exertion and memory challenge is going to keep me fit and Alzheimer's-free.

And yet...what I seek and have not found is a fellow student, at my level, who wants to practice with me on a regular basis. I witness other students who've found the partner who "fits." They work out on the periphery of our ballroom hour after hour, week upon week, testing choreography, advancing in their technique and ultimately looking great in performance—because they study together. It's easy enough for me to stand before a sign-up grid for an upcoming studio showcase and write my name in the space where a dance style intersects with the name of an instructor. Rumba, cha-cha, swing, bolero, mambo, Viennese waltz, fox trot, hustle, merengue, nightclub two-step—these are some of the dances I know. But without a partner, I can't sign up for the same array of dances for "Amateur Couples" or the Amateur Couples 3-Dance competition.

I know I'm not the only woman who can't find a partner, just like the thousands who swipe left and swipe right, scanning the virtual universe for romance. Years of advertising at [Dancepartner.com](http://Dancepartner.com) were about as successful as

my sojourn on Match.com. Yet being in that cohort does occasionally soothe me. I've taken inspiration from the endless optimism of the dating game to declare my intent—my campaign—to find maximum dancing with minimum expense.

I replaced my homemade black-and-white business card with a professionally printed and designed “Dance Partner Wanted” card. Carrying this 2x3-inch smiling color portrait and my contact information, I have commenced social dancing in earnest. Thursday night bachata and Sunday night salsa at the Flamingo Hotel; at Monroe Hall, choice of Friday, Saturday, or Sunday nights for ballroom and West Coast swing; Tuesday night tango at the Park Point Club in Healdsburg; Saturday night dance party at John Ross's The Ballroom in Rohnert Park. I've visited other schools, too—Dance Arts and the Arthur Murray center in San Rafael. With a myriad of opportunities, Facebook groups, and new venues coming to my attention every week, this quest may be quixotic, but it's the one that has seized me and won't let go. There must be someone out there, of compatible height and enthusiasm, who would love to waltz with me.



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The preparation begins with a late afternoon power nap, and a light meal that includes lean protein. If I'm feeling slim and confident, I wear a skirt with one of my off-the-shoulder DanceShopper blouses that requires a bra with hooks for rhinestone straps (purchased separately). If I'm feeling a bit iffy or it's daytime, I'll wear leggings and an upscale T-shirt that clings to my hips just enough to accentuate Cuban motion, and a neckline that shows off a delicate gold choker purchased in Firenze. I definitely put care into my eyebrows, now sparse with wayward white strands needing to be tamed, and always wear mascara and eye shadow, subtle to dramatic, depending again on the occasion. I employ the eyelash curler I started using in eighth grade when I wanted to cover up puffy eyelids from newly acquired contact lenses. Add lipstick, but first a wax pencil to fill in the fine lines that feather the color. My naturally curly hair, with a good cut and freshly washed, provides blessedly little trouble. I'm ready.

Decades of dance memories, and a hoard of wishes for the kind of intimate partnership I witnessed growing up, prove to me that my joy-to-hassle ratio so far is good. With a glance toward the full-length mirror to check my overall look, I grab my shoe bag strap and open the door one more time.

