



Saturday Morning With You

Yubeen Cho

Another Saturday morning with you.

Only you have the power to wake me up at 7 AM on a weekend.

For one hour out of the 168 of the week, I lie safely in your arms, in your heaven. You are like the embrace of a tango dancer—passionate, accepting, in harmony.

I can see you peek out from the dense morning fog. Your dismal and monochromatic looks are deceiving to the eye. My heart—it knows better though. It can perceive beyond the rugged peelings of your deteriorating walls and past the musty stairway that threatens to make the usual abundance of oxygen a scarcity.

Thump, thump, thump. My heart's radar detects that you are in close proximity as I heave up the last step. Your name's familiar, battered letters, "Culture Shock Dance Studio," is the perfect love spell for me. Literally head over heels, I eagerly push through your double doors into your embrace.

There is a flood of warmth that melts away the morning cold. Your booming music permeates my ears, erasing away my regrets about that horrendous calculus test yesterday. The light is almost blinding, almost as bright as my grandma's beaming smile during *Chuseok* (Korean Thanksgiving) morning, singing to me her special Korean breakfast menu. Your bubbly banter in the lobby echoes the endless bickering between the most stubborn man in the world, my dad, and his teacher, my grandpa. But I know that to someone else, that same warmth conjures the aroma of freshly-baked gingerbread cookies Christmas morning or maybe it is the tenderness of a family during an intimate Hanukkah prayer. Because that is precisely what "Culture Shock Dance Studio" is—not only is it the crux of my heart, it is the thread that brings our diverse Culture Shock Community together with our shared love for dance.

Unlike the fresh smell of the lobby of the studio, the dance room is a completely different story or should I say . . . odor. Not to mention that the wooden floor is buried under enough dust to give the entire world a dust allergy.

But it is in the clammy, sweat-filled air that breathing comes the easiest to me. A needed breath of "fresh" air. It feels particularly liberating to feel like I can belong without having to conform. It is only through strutting and dancing across the filthy floor that I am able to see and learn to love my most raw self.

My movements were free, unfiltered in contrast to the masks we are compelled to wear in order to be "approved" by society. In fact, it was inside this place of potential peril for my lungs that I felt the most *alive*. Culture Shock also gave me a second family.

Our mini community consisted of people of different cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and identities, united by our love for the dance floor. It taught me the value of vulnerability as I could begin to appreciate people for their unique stories and experiences as individuals. Culture Shock had become our home.

But the harsh reality is, as Joan Didion observes: “Life changes fast. Life changes in an instant,” sometimes for better but sometimes for worse. Or, it can be something unbelievably crazy like a global pandemic. And now, Culture Shock has been forced to close its doors thanks to the notorious Coronavirus. I remember the way my heart *thudded* to the ground when I first heard the news, twisting my insides into a rigid knot. Before the storm of despair, however, my initial thought had been *so, can a place go to heaven?* Because to a certain extent, I had always considered Culture Shock to be alive, because it was far too energetic, far too meaningful to far too many people to merely call it the name of a dance studio in downtown San Diego.

Regardless of the unfortunate events, *thank you*. Thank you, Culture Shock Dance Studio, for being a sanctuary to me and the rest of your people. Students, professors, doctors, athletes, and immigrants were only a few of the often burdensome and heavy titles we were able to let go of for that one hour and simply surrender to the music. You have taught me that I must stay true to be myself in a world dominated by constant judgement and criticism.

You inspire hope and empathy into my vision of the future. Our everlasting friendship has encouraged me to open my arms to the ones I love as you have done for me and become their safe haven. Indeed, the Coronavirus might have stolen our physical stage, but your radiating light on my life is eternal. A dancer at the core, my heart always beats to your rhythm as I will continue your legacy by working to create a more understanding and accepting world.

Prying open my eyes at 7 AM every weekend was a struggle to say the least. When I think about it now, though, I truly miss you so much. How I wish I could run my smooth hands across your weathered walls one more time! And the things I would do to have just one more hour of pure bliss and infinite freedom.

If only I could spend one more morning in your warm, melodious embrace.
One last Saturday morning with you.

