Pirouettes
By Shauna Brock

I used to dance.

I was never very good. But I love falling into the music, moving this way and that, spinning and leaping, while being caught by invisible hands of rhythm and blues. I’d dance to everything, from Disney musical numbers to the hardest rocking metal songs. The world was my stage, my arena, my stripper pole. I didn’t care who saw or who laughed because I danced.

When I was five, I had a bunch of those skater skirts that twirled up around my waist when I spun around and my mother was always begging me to wear white underwear with my white tights because the world could see the cartoon drawings and polka dots when I started to spin. I didn’t care. In my scuffed Mary Janes and my second-hand dresses, I climbed trees and raced my bike and swirled in circles until I fell, dizzy, and the sky spun counterclockwise above me. I spun and I was different but it was okay because I danced.

Until, one day it wasn’t. I only danced by myself. Where no one could see.

I remember sitting in history my junior year of high school. The gay students had taken to the halls, protesting the shutdown of even the idea of the Gay/Straight alliances. And I sat still, ashamed to join them because who I was – it wasn’t included in their dance.

Two years later, walking across the campus in Austin, days before my first class would start, my eyes landed on a bright pink flier and a two-letter word that saved my life.

Bi.

Consciously, I know it wasn’t the first time I’d heard it but it was the first time I remember seeing it in a positive context. The first time it had ever settled in my mind as something real. Something ... me.

My first support group meeting, I danced with the building, trying to find the open door. I found the bathroom, ducked inside, met the eyes of someone who looked as petrified as me. We didn’t speak. She was sitting at the table when I scurried inside. She smiled when I took a seat.

There was the dance when I came out to my parents. When my mother - who thought I was lesbian - came out to me as bi and I remember wondering why she couldn’t have just said the word to me when I was growing up. Why she couldn’t have just said that whatever I was feeling, it was okay, and given me my word? Then there was my father dancing with traffic on I-15 on the way into town and how glad he was when I told him I was bi because he was so fucking worried I’d come home from college to ask for money.

I’d found family. We went to coffee shops and listened to local bands and went to clubs and danced and sat out in parked cars, talking until the sun came up again. Everyone was welcome. Swingers and doms and subs and transmen and transwomen and gender queer and cis and non-binary and we held hands and fought against Governor Bush together and we held hands while waiting on results from Lawrence v. Texas and no one was turned away.
Arms open. Everyone danced together. And sometimes it was only the women and sometimes it was only the men but we were there. For each other. And I knew that outside of my circle, outside in the world, there was judgment. There was a new dance to learn.

Bi now! Gay later!

Fence posts.

Confused.

You don't belong here.

Faker.

But then I met her. And this time, when I started spinning, it was in reverse.

I don't like that you're bi, she said. Are you sure you aren't a lesbian? You've never been with a man, she said. I can't trust you, she said. Because the ones before, they all left me for men.

I can't trust you, she said. Faker, she said.

Why can't you just be normal? she said.

I put my shoes in a drawer. I stopped twirling.

The day we cleaned out what had been her grandmother's bedroom, we boxed things for her family and closed the door, but she allowed me the skirts that had been her grandmother's and I donned them, spinning like I had when I was five. The fabric didn't fly up to my waist, and with each wearing, each spin, I found holes to mend and the need to patch unpatchable fabric. Small stitches of the finest thread still created runs. Seams weakened by dust and age split and split and split again.

When I left, I packed them. After the fights, the bruises, the lock over my heart and the seventy pounds that stopped what little dancing skill I carried, I packed them, hauling them back across country. They hung in my closet. Gathering dust. Weakening at the seams until they were cut apart to become rags that wiped away mess.

But, you know what? I still have my dancing shoes.