

Fex & Heather at the club ...

The “Dirty Dozen” dance club was located in Chinatown near the Kung-Fu club where Mr. Moto liked to work out when he wasn’t working for Foxy. Saturday night at the Dirty Dozen was “Couples Contest” night. Fex and Heather were popular contestants and had won the sweepstakes five different times. Some of the losers on those occasions accused Fex of bribing the judges, a tactic he was not above using, but the fact was that Fex was a good dancer, and Heather was exceptional. As a couple in full swing, they were mesmerizing.

For a man his size, Fex was surprisingly agile, and what he lacked in finesse he made up for in wacky improvisations. He was shamelessly egotistical, enjoyed attention and he doted on Heather, partnering her well.

Heather, it turned out, had wanted to be a professional ballet dancer as a young girl and teenager, but an untimely growth spurt put an end to her hopes for a career. Just when talent scouts were scouring the neighborhood dance studios looking for likely protégés, Heather had shot up five inches, and was at her gangliest. She had one audition, but failed miserably when the swan she was playing suddenly couldn’t walk *en pointe* to save its life.

So she went the other way. Tap-dancing made a virtue of her loose-jointed gangliness, and it seemed she embraced every pop dance craze that came along, past and present—the twist, the frug, the jitterbug, the Charleston, the Mashed Potato, the Watusi, the Swim, the Locomotion. She picked up some Latin moves along the way—the tango, samba, mambo, cha-cha-cha. Fex could not possibly keep up with all of Heather’s moves, but at least he was game.

She and Fex had even entered a ballroom dancing contest on a

whim—not at the Dirty Dozen, of course—and won a third-place plastic trophy in the waltz. Fex wore rented tails on that occasion.

On other occasions Fex often wore his rust-colored silk suit with a white silk breast-pocket handkerchief alongside the ever-present ascot tie. When dancing he preferred two-tone, low profile Italian shoes—brown and white. His Pompadour was always impeccable, no matter how hard he sweated.

“Hey, Baby, I got a good feelin’ about tonight.”

“Me too, baby. I’m gonna strut my stuff!” Heather was impressive while sitting down, let alone while strutting.

Fex parked the car and they walked over gravel and potholes toward the entrance.

“Evening, Mr. Fex. Evening, Miss Heather.” Jeshawn James, the beefy doorman and bouncer with a shaved head and Mr. Clean pirate earrings, opened the black steel door by means of the welded, bent re-bar handle, and Fex ushered Heather into the din.

After a few hellos to some of the regulars, and quick drinks at the bar, Fex pushed a path through the crowd until he and Heather were at the edge of the open dance floor. He spoke a few words to the attendant, who wrote their names on a clipboard, looked at the clock and gave them each a number.

Fex tapped his toe impatiently, not even bothering to look at the other dancers.

Just as she did at the houseboat, Heather swayed her hips in time to the music, while stretching her arms with feline grace.

Finally, the announcer called several numbers, announced the next tune, and Fex and Heather took the floor with three other couples.

The DJ spun a scratched vinyl disk of the Golden Oldies song, “Mashed Potato Time,” with Dee Dee Sharp. From the outset Fex and Heather stood out from the other dancers, and not just because of their height advantage.

Fex stood straight up, on the balls of his feet, then bent forward at the waist and began swiveling his two-tone Italian shoes back and forth to the beat of the music, inside-outside-inside-outside, heels almost clicking. He lifted first one foot then the other, toes swiveling all the while, heels still almost clicking, legs flaring out then closing in, arms bent at the elbows, elbows close to the ribs, fingers snapping time.

Heather more or less followed Fex’s movements, but she was vastly more fluid, covered more of the floor and her arms gyrated easily to the saxophones and Dee Dee’s rhythmic singing. She was dancing circles around Fex, figuratively and literally, and yet their moves were somehow harmonized, in synch.

By the end of the dance they both were sweating, half-delirious, and the crowd was watching only them. The announcer’s voice came over the PA system.

“Well, folks, the judges have already tallied their votes and it’s a unanimous decision. The winners of the Golden Oldies Mashed Potato Contest, and the hometown favorites, are ... Heather and Fex.”

With that the crowd burst into applause as Fex grabbed Heather by the waist and twirled her off the floor.

“Hey, baby, you were great out there.”

“Aw, Fexie, you’re just sayin’ that.”

“No, I mean it, baby. There ain’t nothin’ like you around here. Next thing you’ll be dancin’ the Nutcracker.”

That was precisely the wrong thing to say. Heather slumped immediately, turned on her toe and jostled her way to the ladies room.

Fex was left alone in the crowd, wondering aloud, “What did I say?”

By the time Heather returned she was ready to leave. “Let’s blow this joint.”

Reluctantly Fex took Heather by the arm and they left the club. Jeshawn was nowhere to be seen. The Continental was parked under a sodium vapor lamp that threw a dull yellow fog over the lot. It was the kind of light that was supposed to discourage criminals. Fex turned the key and the big V-8 caught, warbling at idle. Fex pulled on the headlight knob but only one light was burning.

“What the hell is this? Manny just changed them headlights last week.”

He left the engine idling and got out to check the left-front headlight. As he bent over to inspect it he saw crumbs of safety-glass on the dirt parking lot.

“What the hell—”

Before he could finish the sentence a long, flat tire-iron swung sharply through the damp night air and rapped Fex across the back of the head. He dropped like a butchered bull, face down on the gravel.

Heather heard running footsteps fading into the dark, superimposed over Fex’s moaning. She screamed, then yelled.

“Hey! Hey! What’s goin’ on? Hey, come back here, you bastard.”

She jumped from the Lincoln and ran around to Fex’s side of the car where he was rolling and groaning. His red hair was matted with a dark splotch of blood and a lump was growing out of his skull.

“What the—?” Fex tried to voice his consternation, not to mention his

pain, but couldn't really form words.

No one came to their rescue. Jeshawn had apparently stepped inside the club and was lost somewhere in the blast of noise—checking IDs, maybe, or shmoozing with the regulars, or using the john.

Fex and Heather just sat together on the gravel, backs against the fender of the idling Lincoln. At least there was warmth emanating from the cast-iron exhaust headers just beyond the tire well. Heather held a tissue against Fex's head until the bleeding stopped.

Finally, when Fex felt stable enough to stand up and take a few steps, they got back into the Lincoln. The engine was still running. Fex took his time working the controls, as if trying to remember how to drive a car. Subdued on many counts, he drove slowly out of the parking lot and back across town to the houseboat. Heather muttered obscenities all the way home.

Fex was not about to call the cops or go to a doctor. He didn't want anyone to find out about this. But as Heather was helping him down the ramp to the dock, and before they reached Berth #27, he spoke to her in ominous tones, almost whispering:

“We gotta call Owl Man and Heron Man in the morning, baby. They'll know what to do.”