

# *While We Were Dancing*

— AN ESSAY BY —

ROBERT GOOLRICK

**I**t was the 1980s when the lights in the vast, unformed, and limitless space of our young lives went out. We had arrived in New York City, college over, and most of us had no idea how we got there or what to do with no one to judge our performance. There was no grade point average. There was only this, this being, this relentless freedom, and the fear that came with not being told what to do.

Then the spotlight hit the mirrored disco ball, and it beckoned us, called us from the drudgery of our first jobs, our first awful apartments, and we found ourselves in the most marvelous city on earth in the most marvelous time that ever was.

And the pulsing music began, and we moved with the music, and the music and the lights and the throbbing bass took hold of us and of our bodies, and they did not let go for a decade, and that was our lives; we knew who we were as long as the music played, and we hoped that it would never stop. In fact, we believed it never would. We spent the nights searching for our sexuality. And the drab jobs we went to each morning were only what we did when we had kissed the revolving moon goodnight and gone home to the drab apartments to hang up the sparkling clothes and sleep for three hours before we put on the sensible suits to go and do whatever it was we did to earn the money to pay the piper.

We did have jobs, of course. We went to them. Our parents were very proud. And relieved. So we made sure to do our jobs well, to live by day beyond reproach, our shirts pressed, our faces shaven, our spreadsheets and media reports flawless. We called home on Sundays, we wrote thank-you notes, we were perfect angels, until we heard that bass line, until the first

dimple of that fractured color from the giant disco ball caught our eye, and then we were demons for what we called fun. The money we got paid went for clothes we couldn't afford and drugs we believed were not bad for us. On the dance floor, classes mingled, the famous and the obscure, drag queens and bankers, and we could tell, as we danced at four in the morning, our desks waiting four hours away, that society was losing its grip, and we laughed about that too.

*What's wrong?* screamed the headlines. *What's wrong with society?* And shamefaced, coming home at five so drunk we couldn't pronounce our own addresses, in the company of somebody whose name we already couldn't remember, we could have answered, *You want to know what's wrong with society? We are.*

Still, despite all appearances, we believed we were good people. We didn't steal or murder, at least not in the conventional sense. We worked hard. We were faithful to our friends. But we were in our midtwenties and making more money already than our fathers ever dreamed of. And so we lived lavishly, without thought, without fear.

It all seemed so easy and so harmless. And it was fun. I have to repeat that. It was fun.

And then, suddenly, it wasn't so much fun anymore. First came hints that a disease was about in our land, and then it became full-blown AIDS, and suddenly the lights went out and the disco ball stopped spinning and the party was over. Just like that.

In *The Fall of Princes*, I wanted to look back to that time and to acknowledge the signposts, the tsunami of money that made us feel invincible, the dance of death under the spinning, flashing lights. These are the markers of my generation.

Looking back, I see that many are dead and lost, and those who remain, the living, they have never recovered from the great fall from the mighty heights. Their lives go on, but they have been forever changed. The loveliness of love will be forever fraught, weighted with the guilt of not dying. They will always be dialing phone numbers in their heads that no one will ever answer.

It was a generation, a whole generation of bright young men and women who thought there was no more tomorrow, only more of today, an infinite expansion of wanting and an infinite answer of getting.

It occurred to them too late, far too late, that what they thought was inevitable was not even remotely possible. And so they fell, their lives a never-ending plunge. I know. I was one of them.