

Here's a sneak preview of

TWITCH

A Girl's Quest to Prevail with Tourette's, OCD
and an Insatiable Craving for Twizzlers

Consider Running with Scissors Meets Rocky –with a TWITCH

By Annette Racond

Chapter 1:

I Love the Nightlife

At the disco, I'm like everybody else.

Inside Flanagan's, every movement is accepted, embraced and even celebrated. The head bobs, shoulder scrunches, and chirping sounds I've endured since age six don't draw attention here. The dance floor represents freedom, a sanctuary where I can let loose without restraint. The kaleidoscope of lights and animated crowd serve as welcome distractions from my unyielding belief that I'm not okay.

As Diane and I step inside our favorite haunt, we marvel at the mesmerizing mirror globe hanging from the ceiling by a strand of metallic thread. Disco balls are a law (albeit, unwritten) in Miami in 1977, the era of Donna Summer and my junior year at North Miami Beach Senior High School.

"Got a brilliant idea, daaling. We gotta tawk." Diane says as we head to the Ladies Room. She gets a kick out of imitating my New York accent.

I dig around my purse for a handful of Hershey's kisses before stepping inside the rest room. Sugar is my crack. I never leave home without it. Maybe the reason I've never been more than seven pounds overweight is because my body is in perpetual motion.

As usual, the minuscule bathroom inside Flanagan's is at capacity. With only four stalls, it takes just five or six permed heads to fill the space. Diane and I step into chemical warfare as half a dozen large and loaded die-hard disco divas spray obscene amounts of Arid Extra Dry, AquaNet, and Jean Nate cologne into the air. All fight for primping space in front of the cracked mirror above the sink where they roll on layers of Maybelline lip gloss and apply jet black eyeliner with heavy hands.

"Que linda," shouts one woman giving the once-over to a humongous female squeezing herself into rhinestone-studded jeans two sizes too small.

"Si, que linda. Que linda." Although I've never met Linda, it appears everyone else in Miami has made her acquaintance.

“So, taaawk.” I humor Diane by accentuating my accent.

“Keep twitching for two minutes without stopping. Maybe you’ll run out.”

“Of twitches?”

“You could.”

“You think?”

“Dunno.”

“Wait for a stall, then go in and twitch on purpose. Don’t hold back. Who knows? Be right back, daaling.”

Maybe this is the moment my life will be transformed. *Cosmopolitan* magazine says that positive thinking is synonymous with a positive life. They definitely wouldn’t lie to their devoted readers. Plus, Diane insists I’ll find a cure for my twitching when I least expect it, and I certainly don’t expect anything much from this kooky idea.

Eleven years from now at age 28, I will be diagnosed with Tourette’s syndrome.

As I wait for a stall, Diane fights through heavy cigarette smoke and an amped up crowd to make her way to the emergency exits. This, she assures me, is standard operating procedure for agoraphobics. Thank goodness Flanagan’s has functional emergency exits that, unlike many other establishments, open and close with ease. Otherwise, we’d be dancing in Diane’s living room because she’d have few other options.

Diane makes it back to the bathroom in record time.

“Doors are all A-OK, so we’re good to go.”

Diane is a prisoner inside her own home like I am a prisoner inside my own body. I took an instant liking to Diane when I bought incense from the candle store she worked at in Miami, before her agoraphobia became crippling. Even though we don’t share the same condition, Diane knows what it’s like to be different. It’s nice to have an understanding friend, an ally in life who wants to see me thrive.

After waiting five minutes, I secure a stall for our experiment. I commence with twelve reps of left-to-right head sways and hair flips, moving onto head bobs, hiccup sounds, and shoulder scrunches. Afterwards, I throw in neck rotations and start the twitching sequence all over again. If someone planted a video camera inside the stall, my actions might be attributed to a demonic cult. Consider the Exorcist. Or maybe I look like a personal trainer testing out a high-intensity cardio regimen. Jane Fonda has yet to make her mark on the aerobics scene, so this is my chance to make a name for myself.

“Time’s up.” Diane yells through the crack in the stall.

I’m tired, dizzy – and still twitching. Apparently, I possess an infinite supply of twitches.

“Okay, try this.” Tense your whole body until you can’t move. Pretend you’re a statue.” I follow Diane’s instructions, devoting full concentration to tightening every muscle in my body. After a few seconds, my twitches explode like an overcooked batch of Jiffy Pop.

Attempting to ignore a twitch is like trying to suppress a sneeze in the height of allergy season or resisting the urge to scratch a fresh patch of mosquito bites. The compulsion to twitch demands my immediate attention, refusing to be brushed aside. It’s hard for me to remain focused and present in this terminal sneezy and itchy state.

I feel like a puppet because I have no control over my own body.

As we shuffle out of the bathroom, a heavily perfumed attendant sticks a tip jar in my face. Hopefully, she isn’t planning to use the money to purchase more of her signature scent. The smell of Lysol is more alluring.

Diane never accepts defeat or lets setbacks spoil her evening. She refuses to allow me to lose faith either. Four years my senior, Diane complements me. My auburn perm nearly touches the hips of my petite five-foot frame. Diane, who has eight inches on me, boasts shoulder-length blonde hair that looks like silk with to-die-for green eyes. Everyone mistakes her for a *shiksha*, even though she’s a nice Jewish girl from Miami.

I’m dressed to thrill in my purple Betsy Johnson mini-dress, peacock-feather earrings, and what feel like twelve-inch heels. The dance floor beckons.

“Hola, mamasitas.” A short, stubby cocaine dealer-type wearing a collection of silver chains as long and thick as jump ropes greets us outside the restroom. His two gold-plated front teeth have carved out initials and his discolored Hawaiian shirt is drenched in sweat. His hazy, bloodshot eyes creep us out.

“Let’s dodge this guy,” says Diane as we scurry past him.

The crowd is engaging in their usual antics – kicking, twisting, twirling, and revealing lots of skin in honor of Jive Talkin’. The buxom blonde standing next to me near the dance floor sings off-key and off-lyric.

“Jive stalking, now kiss off and say goodbye.” She bastardizes the Bee Gee’s hit single, while tugging at her red fishnet stockings.

Since my twitches have been part of me for so long, being in motion is my natural state - my essence. I'm more at peace disco dancing than I am staring at the stars. Due to my relentless repertoire of twitches, stillness remains a mystery to me.

The pulsating tempo of K.C. and The Sunshine Band swallows me up, taking me outside myself. I take the band's advice and make "Shake Your Booty" my theme song. Albeit not by choice, I'm all about moving and shaking – and that even includes my booty.

Before jumping onto the dance floor, I order a can of Tab and grab a seat at the bar where I'm compelled to scrunch my shoulders up and down, while making chirping sounds. I wait for Diane to return from checking the emergency exits again. In the interim, I gobble up handfuls of popcorn from the small bowls scattered across the bar, hoping my exaggerated chomping motion is camouflaging my shoulder scrunches.

A twenty-something guy sits next to me wearing a sweaty T-shirt reading "Do Me." He flicks his long, skinny tongue in and out of his mouth like a snake. Is he trying to get popcorn kernels off his tongue or is he just plain ole nuts?

Hopefully, it's the former. Yet I can't stop mimicking his behavior. Now unable to keep my own tongue inside my mouth, I flick it up and down, and then from side to side. It's common for me to pick up bizarre mannerisms from strangers, contributing to my repertoire of twitches. I can't stop. What's even more frustrating is that my twitches constantly change and transform into new ones without notice.

Flanagan's allows me to maintain my own internal walls, filtering out any chance of experiencing true intimacy with another human being. I cherish the solitude and solace I find between the walls of a loud, brash and anonymous disco. When the magenta, tangerine and ruby lightning bolts strike the translucent dance, it's like an electrical storm igniting my spirits. These intense rays of light that spark the otherwise dim room awaken my soul. The disco gives me license to be me.

Life is better under the mirror ball. Alicia Bridges sings it best when she belts out: "I LOVE the nightlife. I LOVE to boogie."

Diane decides she wants to chill, so I jump onto the dance floor alone. I stare at the glistening mirror ball like it's at a sea of stars. I'm grateful and relieved to be just another face in this rambunctious crowd.

Diana Ross puts my sentiments into music. "The time has come for me to break out of the shell... I have to shout... that I'm coming out." I put every ounce of energy into embracing

the lyrics of this song as I jump, dart and slide around the dance floor. Diane, who is now standing on the perimeter of the dance floor, gives me the thumbs up.

After five or six songs, I crave another can of Tab.

“Was that you dancing with John Travolta in Saturday Night Fever? The bartender must have noticed me. He chuckles, handing me my soda. What’s more, he doesn’t charge me. He does, however, give me a high five after he gets my generous tip. My head bobs coupled with my erratic hip thrusts do resemble some of the seductive dance moves in this first-class flick.

After gulping down my soda, Diane and I take another bathroom break. It’s time to apply an extra coat of mascara and fix my smudged eyeliner. Maybelline can’t take the heat.

Diane has her own bathroom ritual involving a gemstone she purchased from an online psychic from Brooklyn. She parades around the bathroom attempting to balance the jade stone on her head to gain equilibrium in her body. She never leaves any stone unturned – especially jade stones.

“This gemstone is the real deal... straight from Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. The one I got from that lady in Sedona was a fake.” The stone falls off Diane’s head when she turns to face me.

“Better luck next time.” Diane is all about positive energy.

When DJ Martinez spins “I’m Your Boogie Man,” I race to the dance floor where I spin and flap my arms like a penguin. As the evening progresses, my wink tic becomes more pronounced and attracts attention.

Towards the end of “I’m Your Boogie Man,” a well-dressed guy joins me on the dance floor. My wink tic probably gave him the courage to approach me. His tight black Levis and neatly pressed shirt are a good look for him. Although I initially take him to be considerably taller than I, his platform shoes add an extra three inches. His big brown eyes emit rays of kindness and make up for his lack of stature.

I maintain a tough veneer because the last thing I want to convey is vulnerability. If I don’t reveal my true self, I can’t be rejected for who I am. If I’m funny and pretend to be happy, no one will know the underlying shame I carry with me.

I give the disco guy a glib nod. I wonder if he notices my shoulder scrunches and elbow jerks or am I successfully blending them into the heavy bass? What if he notices? Yikes. I try to

brush aside these negative thoughts. This could be my shot at happily-ever-after. That sounds like a much better spin.

The next song up is “I Feel Love.”

“I love this song,” I him. I wonder if he wants to continue dancing with me. Diane tells me to repeat positive affirmations whenever I’m running low on confidence. She learned this strategy at one of her agoraphobia-therapy phone sessions.

“I’m okay just as I am,” I say this silently ten times.

The smile on my dance partner widens. Looks like “I Feel Love” is also among his favorite tunes and he, indeed, wants to continue.

On the dance floor, I tell him that Flanagan’s is the best place in the world and where I spend my free time when I’m not in school or working. I tell him I love to laugh and write funny stories and I also make beaded jewelry. I ramble on so much he doesn’t have a chance to get a word in, yet he never interrupts me. Finding a true gentleman is no easy feat. He makes a concerted effort to listen to everything I say, even though the music is blaring, and people keep bumping into us. I have a strong sense that he’s the one.

We dance continuously until 3 a.m. when the lights go on.

“It was fun dancing with you.”

He nods, still all smiles.

“What’s your name?” His smile remains.

I don’t fill up the pause. According to *Cosmopolitan*, silence is healthy in relationships.

“Lo siento mucho, no hablo ingles.”

Although I don’t speak Spanish, I live in Miami where I stashed a few words into my Espanola arsenal as a means of survival. And I have heard those seven words many times before – I’m very sorry, I don’t speak English. Our bright future fades into darkness.

Diane and I exit the club in silence. After dropping her off, I ruffle through my glove compartment in search of my “Wild Cherry” eight-track tape. The other hand holds my jumbo pick that I rip through my now tangled perm. A single elbow remains to manipulate the steering wheel.

I slip “Wild Cherry” into the boom box that I keep on the passenger seat of my slick red Celica. “Play that Funky Music” has a steady and methodical beat that’s ideal for camouflaging intrusive twitches. Given my constant and involuntary movements, remaining present and focused behind the wheel is challenging and probably not ideal for driving.

Why has my body turned against me?

Chapter 2: Santer's Coming to Town

The following Tuesday, I'm extremely fortunate to get a promising phone call from Diane. Her voice is ultra-enthusiastic as she tells me that a girl in her agoraphobia support group shared the name of a Santera with a flourishing Santeria practice in Miami's Little Havana.

"She could help us both, daaling. The woman lives in a one-story house with exit doors in the front and back of her house, so it's a safe place for me. You must come with."

"And exactly who is this Santa Maria lady? Santa's beloved wife? Don't tell me she works with magic elves."

"She practices Sant*ER*ia, not santa maria," says Diane, emphasizing the "er." "She gets rid of internal demons. That could be our problem. The girl in my group swears she's a good Santera, and not into that black magic stuff. Her name's Maria Rodriguez, and she's a good witch like in the Wizard of Oz."

"The whole thing sounds ridiculous... and stupid. But I'm totally desperate. So, you've got me. Plus, you're right, you never know."

"Maria's daughter says her mother is the greatest healer ever. She performs miracles. This is our ticket."

"Of course her daughter's gonna say that. But whatever." Diane can be a bit naïve. Maybe it's because she didn't grow up in New York City like me.

"And since we were referred, she'll give us a two-for-one discount on our first visit. Her daughter said her mother can get rid of your twitches, no problem. We're really lucky that she has an opening on Friday. Please come with, daaling."

How can I refuse?

On Friday night, we pull into a driveway filled with rocks, leaves, and twigs that lead to a house resembling ramshackle hut. We march up to the door dressed in ratty attire because Maria Rodriguez's daughter told us our clothes will be ripped to shreds as part of the ritual. We're told to bring a change of clothes for the post-ritual ceremony and that the clothes have to be white.

I don't own a single white garment, so I score an off-white shirt and shorts at JC Penney's one-day sale that's actually every day. This is probably the only occasion I'll wear white, including to my own wedding. White clothes aren't intended for people like me who eat chocolate-syrup straight up.

When no one answers the door to Maria's place, Diane pushes it open to find an elderly lady dressed in a floral *schmata* and fluffy pink slippers inside. Her gray hair is packed into a bun covered by what looks like a stretchy spider web. She sits behind a folding table, while a younger woman, presumably her daughter, stands beside her. The daughter introduces herself as Elaine. Her mother, it appears, has no grasp of the English language. So, Elaine translates.

Maria motions for us to enter a small room with large paintings of what looks like saints, along with religious statues and other artifacts displayed along the circumference of the room. Scattered all over the floor are shells, twigs, and what could be pigeon feathers or maybe they're from chickens or roosters. I can't tell one feather from another.

Elaine asks Diane and me to pick up handfuls of the contents from the floor and haul them at the wall with intention.

"Internal demons... YOU GO," yells the daughter. "Throw... throw good, throw hard, and demons will go." I figure Maria Rodriguez borrowed this ritual from one of those tarred-and-feathered Western flicks.

Maria then takes a red ballpoint pen and scribbles crosses on our heads. Luckily, she doesn't use a Sharpie. It takes forever to wash off Sharpie ink. Besides, doesn't Maria know we're Jewish? The name Diane Wasserman is a dead giveaway. Despite this oversight, I'm still all in.

We're escorted into the bathroom where Maria reaches into an industrial-size garbage can that seems to be loaded up with the same contents on the floor in the other room. However, there is the addition of mud. She pounds these ingredients onto our scalps.

On a shelf are dozens of scented oils. Maria mixes three or four of these scents into the palms of her hands and rubs the oil onto our heads, on top of whatever is already there. To finish off her magic, she whacks us with a straw broom and then pours cold water over us. The mud in my hair now seeps into my eyes. If nothing else, I figure a cold shower might be just the remedy to scare off those stubborn demons.

Maria then cuts our clothes with a kid-size scissor and rips off any remaining material until we're down to our underwear. We're told to jump into some rendition of an herbal bath.

Diane volunteers to go first. When we're done, Maria hands us our shopping bag with our white clothes and asks us to change into them. We're told to leave the white clothes on for two full days without showering, at which time the demons will be whisked away and we'll be cured.

At the end of the two days, my internal demons share a message with me: "You smell. Take a shower, girl."