

Running Upstairs

Ian Spencer Bell

The first time I saw *Nutcracker* I was six. Mom drove me into Washington to the Warner Theater. It was black outside. Mom's white Honda was cold. The theater lobby was a shock of red and gold, a jewel case. The carpet was slippery underneath my saddle shoes. I held my ticket close to my thigh. I didn't want to bend it. Mink and cashmere sauntered past the red-velvet rope, down the aisle, toward the curtain. I went the same way.

A horn called out. Mom told me it was a trumpet, like her father's, the brass one on top of the old upright. Other instruments called out, too. Mom laid a hand on my seatback. The red-velvet chair smelled like roses and baby powder and hand cream.

And then the chairs drank in the light from the chandelier and clapping began, a few hands at first, then the entire room, palms thundering. The music started. The curtain lifted. Air from the wings and backstage breathed onto the orchestra and the audience, and it was very cool. I was suddenly very hot. In the winter months that followed, I stared out of my bedroom window at the white yard and dreamed about being a dancer onstage in all that red and gold.

It's been a decade since I danced in a *Nutcracker*. Still, in the fall, I find myself kicking up leaves in Central Park and whistling the overture. *Nutcracker* is the one sure thing on a dancer's calendar. I think of the forty-two performances I would dance, painted black as the serving man or masked as a mouse, at Pacific Northwest Ballet, where I trained. I think of gluing eyelashes on my best friend while she hunched over the makeup table, crying from fatigue. I think of sitting in the bathtub at midnight, watching pieces of plastic snow swirl down the drain.

I quit ballet because I felt I had grown away

from it. I didn't want to be docile and gallant. I didn't want to be a *Nutcracker* Prince skipping in circles. I replaced my ballet habit with yoga. Yoga is like ballet, a demanding physical practice that leads the mind to a meditative state. Both practices are physical expressions of unity. Ballet, however, works hard to perfect what yoga aims to liberate: time, space, body, mind, and soul.

I've been thinking back to the first time I practiced yoga. I was sixteen, in eleventh grade at North Carolina School of the Arts. My friend Jen took me. She'd taken me to see Mark Morris' company a few months before. She sang Ani DeFranco and made that little blue car of hers fly. Then we eased into a parking space in front of a small cottage near Wake Forest.

A middle-aged woman with hennaed hair opened the front door just as Jen was about to knock. She said *namaste* and told us to take off our shoes and have a seat. A woman with a gray ponytail and a man in hiking shorts sat in half lotus, eyes shut, on Mexican blankets on the floor. We sat next to them. Jen tucked her legs underneath her, sat up tall, closed her eyes. I looked around: dripping red and yellow candles, pots of aloe and jade, a gold tapestry over a velour couch.

Someone said Om. I heard running upstairs. I remember a gentle sun salutation, tabletop, cat and cow. In corpse pose, I opened my eyes and looked right and left, trying not to move my neck, trying not to make a sound, trying to see what the women were doing. They were still. Afterward, the hennaed-haired woman asked us to stay for tea. It was hard for me to talk about my experience. I used words and expressions like "amazing" and "like new" to describe how I felt. I couldn't speak in full sentences. I was in bliss.

Last night, my yoga teacher told me that forward bending brings up the past. She said that memories are our teachers and that our teachers are everywhere. I was in seated forward bend when an image of Julie Kent dancing Sugar Plum Fairy came to me. That image of Kent dancing the *Nutcracker* pas de deux is more than two years old.

Kent was bending backward in a bend so deep I wondered if she was going to touch the floor with the back of her perfect round head and that French twist and tiara. It seemed that her head was going to dip into some part of space that had never existed before. Her leg was extended in front of her, and she was holding the hand of her strong partner, Marcelo Gomes, and then she turned into a back attitude and the dance went on.

I had seen the pas and danced it dozens, maybe a hundred times combined, during my short ballet career. But I had never experienced any part of the pas like that. After that performance, I met a friend for tea. It was hard for me to describe Kent's dancing. I used words and expressions like "amazing" and "like new." I was talking about how I felt about myself. I didn't speak in full sentences. I couldn't. I was in bliss.

I asked Kent if she would speak with me. I wanted to know what ballet and ballet dancers achieve. We sat down in the office of her husband, Victor Barbee, who is the associate artistic director of ABT and a former principal dancer with the company. Barbee pulled out a chair for me before he left the office. Kent, wrapped in a fleece blanket, sat across from me. Gold flip-flops dangled from her toes. The leaves on the trees outside the office window along 19th Street were golden also.

"Ballet hits on a human level. It's haunting, revealing, different than entertainment. Essential human experience is what people come to see when they come to the ballet. I equate it to seeing my son and his relationship to animals." The leaves on the trees fluttered. "To hold onto great art – not entertainment. That's what I advocate for. Natasha [Natalia] Makarova wrote me a *merde* note for my first *La Bayadère*. It said, 'Someone once said that beauty could save the world. What a responsibility you have.'"

We were silent. We stared at each other. And then we grinned. I thought I might cry. "I have that card on my night table. I advocate for art – for the soul of the world."

The leaves outside the window began to fall. "For *Lady of the Camellias* I thought, I have to sacrifice my time as a mother to do this ballet. Someone said of one of the performances – not just the usual 'That was so beautiful' – but 'That changed the way I feel about dance and myself.' That's what you hope to achieve as an artist: to fuel the positive energy of the universe."

She looked around the room, at the pictures of her children and her home in the Berkshires, the socks and sneakers on the floor, the stacks of ballet books, and the framed artwork. She looked back at me. "Every great civilization strove for beauty."