

If Skies Were Beige

It sends shivers down my spine, the booming crack of a bat. My dad used to play. Not in a team or anything, but with his brothers, when they were kids sharing a tee-ball set. He told me about how they used to sneak out of their rooms past their bedtime to watch old game tapes. They had to turn the sound all the way down and stare in silence so as to not wake up their parents. Black and white static snow glowing over young faces in a dormant living room. He'd go on and on about the greats. Babe, Yogi, Lou ... It was all so — overwhelming. Monument Park, the crowd, the pride of the Yankees. He took me to as many games as he could afford. I was even allowed to swear inside the stadium. For a while, I thought I'd join a team in middle school. The girls played softball, but I couldn't care less; it was baseball or nothing. With some distance, I see now that our conversations about baseball were terribly ironic. It's almost laughable ... almost. Little by little, we started missing games and what had seemed like a short hiatus grew indefinitely. We completely stopped going; I completely stopped watching. The last time we saw them play, he got us seats right next to the dugout. When I leaned forward, I could see players chewing gum, crushing unshelled sunflower seeds and chucking them by the pound. We lost the game, 5 - 4, but winters are colder in Boston, so it balances out. That's how I saw it.

It was my fault we stopped going. I just wanted to give all my time to something I loved. It had nothing to do with *her*. It was for my dad to begin with. He read to me a lot; still does. He was a linguistics professor at Columbia, Phonetics and Phonology. Naturally, I decided to become a dancer. It made perfect sense to a seven-year-old. It makes perfect sense now.

See, “ballerina” comes from late Latin “ballare” which means “to dance”. Something about the bounciness of the word “dance” made his shoulders roll backward. The downward flick of the tongue couldn't be silenced. “Dance”. The tongue would stop the air flow within one's mouth and the sound would come from exhaling, releasing the pressure. “Dance”. The sibilance echoes

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between your teeth. You can almost hear the hissing of sand under a gust of wind. The entrancing ebb and flow of a single syllable. It pumps up the chest, lifts the chin, and most importantly, points the toes. Interestingly enough, he disliked all “z” sounds. They felt bizarre to the taste. Like fresh lemon zest, a certain tartness would spike his taste buds every time he’d say “nose” or “toes”. “Clothing” was fine, but “clothes” felt hoarse to the ear. The only exception was “honey bees” as they danced to communicate. I was naturally pushed towards “dance”. It really had nothing to do with *her*.

I remember the score vividly. Tchaikovsky, the Nutcracker Suite, Opus 71a. The Waltz of the Flowers filling the Koch Theater. My dad got invited by a friend to see the New York City Ballet on Christmas Eve. Before I knew it, in the golden darkness of the auditorium, silhouettes rose under our charmed gaze. Beguiled smiles came over the audience. Swirling petals, legs crossing, leaves in the wind, arms reaching for the sky. Amidst the rosy figures, a single flower burgeoning. Her white tulle dress floating as she leapt, wave over the seashore.

“Dad, who is that?” I asked, tugging on his jacket.

He softly shushed, “She’s the principal dancer, her name is Annette”.

“Annette? Kinda like mom’s name?” I whispered.

“Honey, don’t talk. Just watch”.

Torrential stream, an ocean flooded the auditorium. Rose-colored sight. Ripples of pastel motifs welcomed whoever dared to venture into their depths. The slightly asynchronous nature of their movements reminded me that they weren’t perfect, and yet they were. Lines and curves split the air every which way like ink splashing across a sheet music with every note building upon each

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other, the Waltz sweeping across the stage. I couldn't tell if the score was guiding them or if the shifting mass was conducting the orchestra with every flick of the leg, every gesture of the arm. As the second act reached its finale, the sound took on more and more colours. The principal dancer paused for an instant at the apex of her *jetés*. The *manège* revolved as she burst through the rising vibrations of brass and strings. Then, she landed ... silence ... static — thunderous applause. The Waltz had reached its apotheosis and the curtain unraveled in its golden luster. The many-hued flowers vanished as swiftly as they came only to reappear, one by one, for their standing ovation.

Running back that mental tape of Annette dancing, I noticed that, for a split second, the façade had cracked. A certain stiffness in her smile. I couldn't tell at the time. I didn't notice until I stood up there alone. The pressure — it consumes you. My arms trembled with every measure. Inhale. The somber void of the stage turned red under the heat of the spotlight. The scorching beam cascading down, coursing through my body, straightening my spine so that my lungs could expand and contract. Exhale. The resounding thump of a heart beating at the height of a performance, knowing that it would have to be done again and again, dreading that it might be over soon. Truly, a beautiful act through and through.

My dad took me backstage. I hung onto him as tightly as I could. He stopped in front of a dressing room, knocked twice, paused, and knocked again. *It's open; come in.* There she was, removing her makeup. She saw his reflection in her lighted mirror, dropped everything and hastily jumped into his arms.

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“I’m so glad you could make it!”, she said embracing him. “Oh! Sorry about that”.

She hadn’t quite taken all the makeup off her cheek bones leaving white stains on the collar of his jacket.

“Who cares. You were ... I mean ... I can’t even find the words. Annette Nowak, Principal Dancer of the New York City Ballet.”

“Stop it *Rich*. It’s so recent. No need to make a fuss about it,” she said. “More importantly, who is this behind you? Is that the “Alice” you’ve been raving about? Don’t be shy. I don’t bite”.

She got on her knees and gently held my hands as if to warm them.

“You are so beautiful. Annie must look at you all day”.

I shook my head “no”. Annette leaned back and looked at my dad. Her grip got tighter, warmer. Her skin felt familiar, so did her voice.

“How is she? We haven’t seen —”

“You know ... It takes time”.

I could hear him fiddle with coins in his pockets. Annette looked into my eyes, pairs of jades reflecting the mirror’s light.

“Tell me. Would you like to dance?” she asked.

The metallic jingle fell silent. I looked around the dressing room. On the counter, needles and thread spools and rolls of carnation pink ribbons waiting to be sewn and wrapped around Annette’s feet, hiding thick patches of reddened skin. The vague mustiness of wood floors and towels damp with sweat. A can of unscented hairspray next to an opened jar of Tiger Balm, half empty. Her eager eyes waiting for my answer. She had invited me into her world, but I couldn’t bring myself

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to say anything. I just smiled; so did she. “Well, if you ever want to learn, ask your mom if she could show you some moves. Okay?” I nodded slowly. Annette glanced at *Rich*. I felt his hand caressing the top of my head.

“Every time I look at you is a reminder that I failed, and yet ...” I can’t stop watching her. Its ... its ... unnatural, seeing her like this. Day and night, asleep at my bedside. I used to watch recordings of her, dancing. She met Annette at the School of American Ballet. They were *friends* long before attending the academy. Annette and Annie. I close my eyes, but I still see her arms spanning wide, branches of a leafless tree. Her swan like neck extended as she took the stage in her black feathered skin. Her *fouettés* stable as if her feet were deeply rooted into the ground. Vein like tendrils scrapping her knees, dragging her deeper into the black vinyl flooring. She was all thorns, no rose. Annette and Annie. They were truly made for the stage.

She had to abruptly drop out of school due to an accident. She wanted to end it, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it, not with the way Richard looked at her, not with the way he would wrap his arms around her. It’s not that she couldn’t dance after. It wasn’t physical. It just ate away at her, the fear that, somehow, she had lost something she couldn’t get back. Then one day, I opened her dimly lit bedroom, crawled under the bed covers and asked her if she could teach me how to dance. She woke up slowly, steadily, and I met my mother for the first time at the age of seven. We started my lessons in a small studio a friend of Annette’s owned in Greenwich.

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Her tears don't fool me. I can still feel the weight of her voice towering over me. A great swan whose feathers had been plucked. She'd tell me "Spotlights don't wait. They aren't fixed in time ready for you to make a grand entrance. When you find one, you take it". She'd shout the steps over and over.

"Faster on those *chaines*. Faster. Stop! *Arabesque*. Give me thirty-two *fouettés*. Don't move from that spot. Fix a point in the distance. Don't forget to smile. Come on Ann..." She would pause often. Not a sound as I spun on the tip of my toes. "I mean Alice ... Come on Alice! Be more dynamic. Get a fucking grip! From the top".

I keep looking at her hands. The palm was bittersweet. It would nurture at times, sooth my qualms, wipe a tear, embrace tightly. Then, out of frustration, it would grab the nape, sink the nails. Never hard enough to leave marks, but hard enough that it would sting. The very next day, soothe again. She smiled during my first recital. He cried; he never cries. I still don't know how she felt that day. We don't talk. Maybe it was being close to something she had grown estranged to. Both of them actually. My dad was blindly happy. He wasn't there in that studio to hear the sporadic rhythm of her voice hammered into my synapses.

"Poised in demeanor. Break the bone. Bathe in ice. Cry an ocean. Trod the air. Fly, float, falter, but only in weightlessness. In all things, grace. Set your being alight. Show them grit but hide it inside until the curtain turns into a pall. Inhale the applause. Brava Alice! Now faster. Smile for them. Pull the strings inwards. Ethereal in essence. Lyrical in movement. I do not want to see effort or straining or pain on those lips. All dimples, all good. Brava Alice! Now faster. Set fire to *pointe* shoes. Warp them. Stitch them. Clean those blisters. Shave those calluses. Brave through the chafed and hardened skin. Brava! Do it again Ali —"

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“Get up Alice. Stop dragging your leg Alice. Why are you drooling Alice? Lift your legs. What is wrong with you? Talk to me! Say something! Please say something! I’m sorry. I love you. I’m sorry”.

He’s smart my dad. Sometimes blind, but real smart. Not “tell you a bunch of confusing words you’ve never heard before” smart. He’s “help you understand something you could never grasp” smart. A great snowy owl; all winter in the temples. He was the first one to notice the quiet slurring. He said that there was something weird about the way I talked, that words were starting to melt together in the middle of my sentences. “I *love* you” gradually turned into “I *lo* you”. “Can you *pass* me the salt” turned to “Can yo *pss* me the salt”. It was quiet. Almost unnoticeable. At that point, I could still dance, but it was different ... I’m sure she noticed. She must have. Mothers have a sense for this kind of stuff. She must have.

The worry lingered in him in a nagging way. You know that gut feeling you get when a bee circles around you and you think it’ll sting. The inkling of pain. So, we went and did some tests. One. Two. Three. After the fourth visit to the neurologist, a doctor took my dad outside the exam room. I tiptoed my way to the door, got close to its opening and heard parts of the conversation. Words like “fees, drugs, fingers, shaking, knees, legs, atrophy, swallowing, never, again”.

Nothing good ever happens in hospitals. I know that people have kids here, but that’s not necessarily good. You don’t know until they grow up, until you grow up. The worst thing about this place is the boredom, the apathy that gnaws away at every corner of this room. All day, silhouettes flashing by through pristine beige hallways, entering and leaving the colorless periphery. Drops of saliva wiped away, needles poking at your insides, the beeping of a heart monitor, the blue tint of windows no one can open. Above me, a ceiling I can’t reach. I miss the

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ceiling of the Koch Theater. I imagine its large spherical chandelier shining at the center of the gold-paneled veil and then, I open my eyes. “Beige” is such a boring color sonically. I mean you can hear the bravado in “red”. It’s burning embers and warmth. “Blue” is cold, but larger than life. Every summer, dad would show me pictures he took when he visited Chefchaouen after graduating. The walls are all skies, all seas. “Beige”. There’s no music to it. No bark, no bite. I think “beige” is contagious. That’s why people stop visiting.

I can’t stop thinking about it. The bounciness of the word. It’s engraved in a network, jolted. We don’t mention it anymore — “dance”. She sleeps close to me; he talks baseball. On good days, he puts on a game. Often, music. Nothing that could be labelled as “classical”. My dad and I, we speak in Johnny Cash and Bob Dylan. My mother, Igor Stravinsky and Sergei Prokofiev. It’s a different wave-length. Dad tends to turn the volume a little bit too high, but I like it that way. It gives some color to the walls. When the sound reaches the hallway, they ask him to turn it down. I reply with a cutting smile, as clearly as possible, “I am going to die soon”. That shuts them right up. Doctors don’t know how to react to sass. They know clenched fists red with hemoglobin and mitochondria bursting with anger. They know pin-drop silences and succinct chuckles slowly turning into long-winded sobs, patients they refer to as “lawn mowers” in their private lingo. I don’t know that for sure, but I think it’d be pretty funny. I don’t pretend to be tough. I’ve mowed my fair share of lawns. I’m not old enough to regret anything, yet too young to forget. I’m in-between, but I can’t complain. Some people come to the world only to age for a minute. Others live well beyond their expiration date. After anger and sadness, I don’t know the appropriate response, so I give everyone cheek. That’s my fun.

Most of the time, he reads to me. Nothing too long or too short. Mostly happy endings. Actually, that’s the wrong word ... *optimistic* is more accurate. Given his dislike for the letter “z”, my dad

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had spent a lot of time reading in Latin and taught me a few things. He didn't speak Latin fluently. A dead language is useless in that sense, but he liked translating in his head as he read along. "Keeps the machinery from getting rusty," he said. Over time, I also got prickly about certain things like expressions starting with "post" like "postpartum" and "post mortem". Nothing good ever comes after "post". He agreed.

I do find solace in the fact that some words sound exactly like the meaning they are given. "Death" leaves no place to the imagination while "amyotrophic lateral sclerosis" lets you run wild. It might be a fractured hip, maybe an exotic flu from some far-off corner of the world or even a fancy way of saying that I just have a bad cough. If you think about it, "silly" sounds silly. "Love" sounds like "lo" could last forever but is abruptly cut off by "ve" which can't stay in the mouth for too long as one's incisors might sink too deep into the lower lip. Lo – ve. I know its only one syllable. "Love. You say it all at once. You mean it all at once," he said. I know that, but it always seemed like you needed two.

Two. Two ... "two" also sounds silly. I wish I had a sister to share this kind of stuff. Someone who could fill the empty space. An intermission, a breeze to alleviate the shortness of breath. She'd understand her more than I do. She'd take some weight off my shoulders, straighten my posture. My dad thinks of sounds. My mother's thoughts have limbs of their own. They move and stagnate. My mind is colored in shades and tones and hues. I'd like to think that my sister would've seen the world in scents. She'd hate the smell of Tiger Balm. She'd hear the sound of rain and dream of petrichor, the air fresh with particles of soil and grass and misty melancholy. Sometimes, we'd fight like siblings do; like I assume they do. We'd speak in earth-shattering door slams screaming "Get out of my room!" and "Mom loves me more than you!" Sometimes, smiling, we'd

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acknowledge each other and say something cheesy, but true. Something along the lines of “you’re my sister and nothing will ever change that” or “I will always be there for you”. The type of line an actress would say in the last scene of some indie movie that ends heartwarmingly well. A Jim Croce song playing in the background. Any song will do, but preferably *Time in a Bottle*. The last shot showing two girls sitting on a dark grey tiled roof in a “beige” neighborhood. Arms tightly wrapped around each other. Eyes wide open. A fiery sky. Morning glory. Musing. My sister wouldn’t be a replacement, but someone they could love like parents their children.

I remember the first time I saw my dad truly angry. I was six, almost seven. We went on a trip — well if you can call going from the Bronx to Long Beach a trip. I have to admit it’s great there in early October when fall permeates the beach. The crowds are gone. The breeze isn’t too red or too blue, just naturally right. He liked driving South. Maybe he knew that if he kept going, he’d reach Cape May. He could say hi to old friends, breathe the salty gale, walk through familiar streets, look at a house that was no longer his home. Maybe go fishing. Probably not. Maybe walk by the lighthouse. Yes, the lighthouse. Once, dad showed me pictures he took when he drove by before graduating. The place looks straight out of a 60’s postcard, the hand-drawn ones. I asked him often why I hadn’t met anyone on his side of the family. *Honey, there isn’t anyone to meet*. I think most people want to leave most places and coming back just feels ... odd.

We’d reached the shore and these two girls, about my age at the time, were building a sand castle. My dad told me to join them while he’d set up lunch. I went over to them in my red polka dot swimsuit — real vintage tastes my dad — and asked if I could play. They looked at each other. One of the girls took a bucket full of sand and poured it over my head. My dad saw the whole thing. He knew I’d cry so he ran to pick me up, took the bucket out of the girl’s hands and threw

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it at the castle, crumbling to pieces. His arms clasped around me, he walked into the water to wash away the sand in my hair, the girls' wails and their parents outcry drowned out by waves crashing, taking the destroyed kingdom into their depths. I think of that castle a lot. I dream about it. I see a girl standing in the middle of a stadium. A crowd is shouting their lungs out "Come on! Move those fucking legs. You're useless out there. Get the hell out!" She wants to leap, and rise, and fly, but as soon as she moves forward, she crumbles to pieces. The movements engraved in her muscles erased like a sculpture made of sand continuously losing mass, reaching nothingness. As sunflower seeds sprout around her and bloom into light, I hear the clamor of a baseball field stampeding with a wild iron horse.