

BALLERINA

“I have muscles here,” my eight year old granddaughter, Naomi announced proudly, pointing to her deltoid muscles “and Will [her eleven-year old brother] has muscles here,” pointing to the midpoint on her upper arm where biceps are tethered. We were on our way to her twice weekly lesson at the School of American Ballet at Lincoln Center. My granddaughter is not shy about showing off her physical prowess. Whether on the soccer field, the track, at the ballet barre, skipping down the street, or doing flips on the raised grass sculpture at Lincoln Center, her every movement is a hymn to athleticism. Later, as I sat waiting for her lesson to end on the fifth floor of the Rose building, I watched as a parade of senior students glided by me on feet that seem to float just above the floor, their rod-straight backs, long slim arms, perfectly proportioned legs, and swan-like necks setting them apart from older mortals like me with our pot bellies, fleshy arms and sagging shoulders.

I first fell in love with ballet when my mother took me to see *The Red Shoes* and then, Robert Helpmann’s *The Tales of Hoffman*. I must have been about eight at the time. Moira Shearer was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen, and the dream sequences were spellbinding. The darker implications of those movies were lost on an eight-year-old. All I could imagine was myself in Moira Shearer’s body, dancing through a phantasmagoria of diaphanous color.

It was about a year later that I met my first real ballerina. Mimi Logvanoff was the daughter of my mother Freda’s Toronto Sunday School teacher, Phyllis. Phyllis had married Boris Logvanoff, a white Russian, and had gone to live in Russia only to be forced to flee to China when the Bolsheviks closed in. Mimi and her brother were born in China until the family fled again, this time to Toronto, when the Japanese invaded. After Boris’s death, Phyllis moved to our town of Springdale, a suburb of Stamford, to resume her friendship with Freda and ended up marrying a widower with a distinctly pedestrian name and pedigree: Ralph Pye, a portly, genial retired member of the Springdale police force. Phyllis always reminded me of a cheerful chipmunk with bright, twinkly eyes and a hearty laugh. Their home was for several years the place where we went for dinner on Thanksgiving to enjoy all the holiday trimmings that we couldn’t get in our own home: peas with mashed potatoes, squash with pearl onions, cranberry sauce and of course the turkey and stuffing. Mimi, however, had remained in Toronto on her way to becoming a star dancer with the National Ballet of Canada.

Freda took me to see Mimi dance at the City Center when the company came to New York on tour. It was my first live ballet, and like so many little girls, I was immediately smitten. But meeting Mimi backstage was an even bigger thrill. Here was a flesh and blood ballerina, the most exotic creature I had ever seen, with luminous brown eyes, long curly hair like Moira Shearer's--only dark brown--a heart-shaped face, that rod--straight posture and the grace of a young gazelle. Her slightly foreign accent and Russian name lent her an air of authenticity, for of course, it Russia from which all of the great ballerinas came. I decided right then and there that I wanted to become a ballerina and bugged my parents to pay for lessons until they relented.

My first ballet teacher, Connie Bennett, was an acquaintance of my mother's who lived on the working-class street over the hill from ours. She had formerly been in the circus and was now middle aged and heavy, though in tights you could tell she had the muscles of--well, if not a ballerina, at least a gymnast or one of those women who rides around the ring barebacked standing on a horse. I think my mother had chosen Connie because the lessons were cheap. She offered them in a room in her basement that she had outfitted with floor to ceiling mirrors and a barre. I was crestfallen. A chubby ex-circus performer was not my idea of a *real* ballerina and besides, her name wasn't Russian. My third disappointment was in learning from Connie Bennett that we were required to buy flimsy little slippers that had a single strap across the instep and that we could come in shorts if we wanted to. What? No toe shoes, no tutus? Nevertheless, I spent the first year of my ballet career in Connie Bennet's basement room along with a half dozen other little girls in varying states of pre-pubescent plumpness, awkwardly practicing first, second, third, fourth and fifth positions, learning how to curve one's arms like a swan, and making leg movements that were signaled by some strange lexicon: *plié*, *rond de jambe*, *arabesque*. But when was the real ballet going to start? I asked myself. All we were doing was holding onto the barre and making our legs go in different directions. When were we going to wear toe shoes and tutus and perform on a real stage?

By the next year I was ready to give up the fat circus performer. I wanted a *real* ballet teacher, one with a Russian name whose pedigree harkened to a genuine ballet school that trained professional dancers like Mimi. We finally found Madame Alexandra Denisov. She had been a dancer with the American Ballet Theatre and she had a Russian name! Here was the genuine thing and I didn't even have to travel all the way into New York City. She gave lessons right here in Stamford.

I was bubbling with excitement as I went to my first ballet class with Madame Denisov. Now I would be able to become a *real* ballerina and appear on a *real* stage. In our first class, Madame Denisov described the apparel that we would have to buy. “*You must ave black leotards and pink tights,*” she told us in a thick Russian accent. This was more like it, I thought—“*but youv vil not be going en pointe for a few years. You ave to be twelve years old before your bones are strung enough to go. And eef you get to be good enough, you may even be recommended to audition at the School of American Ballet, zee most prestigious school in the country.*” Much to my disappointment, our shoes had to be the same kind of flimsy slipper that Connie Bennett had required us to get. Nevertheless, I was thrilled when my mother took me to Capezio’s to buy my first real ballet outfit. There, on the counters were piles of black, white, pink and purple leotards, boxes containing those glorious, coveted toe shoes and in the glass cases rows and rows of tutus of various sizes and colors.

Madame Denisov’s class was the real thing. She had a live pianist who accompanied our lessons, not music from a gramophone record as in Mrs. Bennett’s class. And Madame, herself, was much stricter than Connie Bennett, as I imagined a *real* ballet teacher should be. For the next four years we girls expanded our French vocabulary to include not only *plié, rond de jambe, and arabesque*, but *tour jeté, assemblé, développé pirouette, grande jeté*. But as the instructions became harder and harder I found my body rebelling against the stretching and lifting that was required. “*Meez Dreany, Allongé! Allongé!*” Madame would bark, but try as I might, my legs refused to *allongé*. “*You need to swrretch your leg along zee barre,*” she ordered, tugging at my leg until I felt as if I were being stretched on a torture rack. My *jeté battus* were not the graceful leaps that most of the other girls were able to execute, their legs moving in and out of each other as smoothly as the paddles on an electric mixer. Mine kept bumping into each other. Moreover, my attempts at *arabesque* felt as if I were trying to lift buckets of cement. I increasingly felt like a cow in a field of hopping rabbits. For a few years I hid from myself the knowledge that I was simply not built for ballet. I just had to get to the age where I could go *en pointe* and dance in a performance on a *real* stage in a *real* tutu.

Two years after seeing Mimi Logvanoff perform on the stage, Freda announced that Mimi was moving to Springdale. She had quit the stage after divorcing an alcoholic abuser. So she was going to be living in my own neighborhood! I could hardly wait to see her. For the next few years we interacted frequently. A whiff of the exotic still hung about her. She continued to move with the grace of a gazelle and to talk in that vaguely foreign way. I continued

to think of her as a ballerina. Mimi eventually married a businessman and had two children whom I babysat for occasionally until they moved into Manhattan. When she invited me to come to lunch in her high-rise mid-town apartment, I was again thrilled. I had never been in Manhattan before except on an elementary school field trip to the Museum of Natural History and a trip with Dad to see silent movies at the Metropolitan Museum, and I had never gotten to see how *real* New Yorkers lived. It seemed the height of sophistication. But as time went on, I came to the reluctant conclusion that Mimi was no longer a ballerina. She had become just another ordinary American housewife.

In the meantime, I soldiered on with my ballet lessons, and, at the age of fourteen, finally got to go *en pointe* and wear a *real* tutu. Well, it wasn't the short kind, but a longer version that ended mid-calf. To my bitter disappointment, however, the dance recital, the culmination of my four years as a *real* ballerina was held, not on a stage, but in the high school gym. Mostly we girls tottered around on our toes shoes while striking swan-like poses with our arms. *Tour jettés* and *arabesques* on toe shoes would have to come later. After the performance, the parents stood around sharing pleasantries and congratulating their daughters with bouquets of roses—except for mine. My mother hadn't thought to bring any. It was then that I overheard one of the parents saying to my mother, "Oh, Mrs. Dreany, how wonderful it must be to be an artist, and you have such a lovely family." Just as they were congratulating my mother a gasp went out from somewhere in the room. Suddenly, all eyes were riveted on the center of the gym floor. There was my four-year old sister, Denise, in her new pink organdy dress twirling around in the center of that large circle of parents and daughters, her dress held high over her head. My mother had forgotten to put on her underpants. Along with the realization that I didn't have the body for ballet, this was the last humiliation. The next fall, when classes started up again, I wasn't there.

It was during my senior year in high school, while I was waiting for a train to Manhattan one morning, that I spied Lynn on the platform. She was carrying a large bag like one used for athletic equipment. Lynn had been in my ballet class and we had gone through junior high and the first year of high school together. "Hi Lynn," I said, "I haven't seen you around for the past couple of years so I thought you had moved away." I remembered that she had missed the prom and would be missing our graduation. "Oh," she said. "I go to the School of American Ballet and I get my academic lessons there." For a moment that old green plug of envy welled up in my throat. Lynn, I realized, had been among the "chosen" ones. "Wow," I said. "What is it like? How often do you have to practice?" "Six hours a day, five days a week," she replied. I

realized then that to be a ballerina you needed not only to have a body built for the profession, but a single-minded dedication to nothing else.

I looked at my exuberant granddaughter, exquisitely attuned in mind and body to a ritual I could never master. She would never go on to become a professional ballerina. She has too many other interests—but I could bask vicariously in the dream that I once harbored as an eight-year old.