

# **LONG LEGS** **and** **TALL TALES**

**a showgirl's wacky, sexy journey**

**to the Playboy Mansion and the Radio City Rockettes**

**KRISTI LYNN DAVIS**



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## Foreword by Maurice Hines

When I was asked to write a foreword for this wonderful book, it brought back all the joy I had choreographing and getting to know Kristi Davis and the fabulous Rockettes. Since then, I've choreographed for many, many dancers but I must say Kristi and the Rockettes were and still are some of the best all-around dancers I've ever worked with. Pure joy, that's the only way I can explain how I felt walking into the rehearsal room and seeing those wonderful dancers all warmed up and ready to dance their hearts out. A choreographer's dream.

Kristi Davis was special in that, even though she knew how to blend in as the Rockette dancers are trained to do, individual charisma will always shine through. Ms. Davis was certainly one of those dancers. You will experience that love and charisma in every page of her story, *Long Legs and Tall Tales*. I'm proud to have been asked to be a part of Kristi's dancing life.

Kristi, you're fabulous!

— Maurice Hines, director, choreographer, and Tony-nominated star of stage, screen, and television

## Foreword by Suzanne Sena

Reading *Long Legs and Tall Tales* has been such a fun and enlightening and enjoyable experience! Once upon a time, a girl from my home town was living her dream, and it inspired me to do the same. Kristi Davis takes us from her humble Michigan beginnings to her show-stopping performances in Vegas and worldwide.

From Midwestern model student to performing in the Flintstones extravaganza at Universal Studios to becoming a member of Playboy's Girls of Rock and Roll to fulfilling her ultimate fantasy as a world-famous Rockette and then teacher and mentor of "The Rockette Experience," Kristi shares the dreams, the drama, the delight, and the despair. Readers will vicariously experience her ups and downs, including the good, the bad, and the harrowing life of a professional dancer, and be grateful for the ride.

Kristi and I grew up in the same Michigan town and attended the same high school, where we both performed in musicals. Our paths crossed only during these occasions, but our lives have been forever linked by a shared mutual friend, who also went on to perform professionally.

Like most Midwesterners, and people outside of Los Angeles and New York, I didn't know that performing professionally was an option, so I pursued a more traditional career in public relations and marketing. Still, my love of performing drew me back to the stage, and soon I was being paid as a professional actor, a voice-over artist, and a television spokesperson in local and regional markets, all the while continuing my traditional "9 to 5."

One day, our mutual friend forwarded me a "newsletter" written by Kristi, outlining her day-to-day adventures in Hollywood and touring with Playboy's Girls of Rock and Roll. I was fascinated to no end; Kristi was just like me; yet, while I was working in offices, she was working full time as an entertainer. (Coincidentally, our mutual friend had just been awarded a coveted position singing professionally on world cruises.) I remember thinking, "Hey, if she can do it, why can't I?" Kristi's words reminded me that it IS possible to achieve your dreams, and, by gosh, I was going to start aiming higher with my own.

I became an entertainment professional because I admired her success. Now, it is an honor to be among the first to read of her experiences—to laugh at the humor, to join in the fun, and to

empathize with the frustrations. Kristi outlines what I, too, experienced—that being catapulted “suddenly” to great heights is both fabulous and foreign. There are no overnight success stories—as Kristi and I both know, success comes from a long road of hard work and commitment, overcoming challenges and emotional roller coasters. Fame is not the objective, nor is money—which is good, because it’s rarely consistent! We do it because we love it, because it’s in our souls. It’s not for the faint of heart, but it can fill your heart tremendously!

Whether you’re an industry insider or you’re still reaching for the stars, Kristi shows you what it’s like to reach for them, to finally touch them, and then to savor the feel of them and go beyond them.

High kicks of praise for this behind-the-scenes memoir by the star who inspired me to follow my dreams! A page turner from beginning to end. A must-read for anyone with show business aspirations or a dancing career in the making, as well as those curious about the life of a professional entertainer. I didn’t want it to end.

— Suzanne Sena, national news anchor  
and Emmy-nominated host

## Don't Skip This Introduction

There are three reasons you might want to read this intro: 1.) I'm going to explain how the book is written so you don't get confused; 2.) I'm going to clarify that this book is *based on* a true story (tightly, not loosely); and 3.) it's so short, in the time it takes you to think about whether you should skip it to get to the juicy stuff or just read it you could have already finished reading it. Here we go:

1.) The book includes a "Prologue" followed by 3 "Acts" within which are various "Scenes" like a theatre play (clever, eh?) plus what I call the "Final Scene." The story starts out in the final scene, which takes place a little bit in Florida but mostly in New York City and covers the last few months of my career but mostly the last two days. Everything else is a chronological flashback. So you'll read a final scene (which is short) and then you'll read a flashback scene (which is long). The final scenes and flashback scenes alternate throughout the book. You'll get the hang of it. By the end of the book, the flashback scenes catch up with the final scene, and you'll see how it all fits together.

2.) I say this book is "based on" a true story instead of is a true story, because my faulty memory could have gotten some of the details wrong (and I did purposefully alter a few details that were overly embarrassing or potentially incriminating). For the most part, and to the best of my knowledge and ability to confirm facts, it's true (at least from my perspective at the time). What is not true are some of the names. The famous people I name really were those people. So were most of the directors and choreographers. But I did change the names of my castmates and a few others (and "Celebration Magnifico" is not the real name of the company I worked for, but it's a darn good name and someone should snatch it up right away). My hope was that, if people recognized themselves in the story, they'd smile and want to shake my hand and not slap me upside the head. (Except for maybe two people, but I still tried to treat their situations responsibly and respectfully.) However, since I did not ask everyone's permission, and you can never be sure how people will respond, I just changed the names. I truly thank and honor everyone who played a role (both enjoyable and challenging) in my story. I hope I played a positive role in theirs.



3.) See, you're done. Now just read the Acknowledgments so you can see who I thank (maybe you) and you can get to the juicy stuff.

## Acknowledgments

I fully recognize that I couldn't have accomplished my dreams without the help of many people. First of all, thanks to all the audience members who spent their hard-earned cash (or trust funds or stolen credit cards) on theatre tickets. Without an audience, performing a show just isn't the same. Entertaining you has been my pleasure. Thanks for applauding and cheering and laughing (mostly at the appropriate times).

Thanks to all the producers, directors, choreographers, agents, and casting people (many of whom are named in this book) for creating spectacular productions, for recognizing the value of theatre and the arts, and for taking a chance by hiring me.

Thanks to A.G.V.A., S.A.G., A.F.T.R.A., and A.E.A. for helping to keep this profession professional.

Thanks to Morningside Writers Group in Port St. Lucie, Florida for critiquing my work and being the first people who weren't friends or relatives or even my demographic to tell me my story was worth telling. (Except for that one old grumpy guy who stared at me like I was from outer space. But secretly, I think we liked each other.)

Thanks to all my dance teachers, especially my childhood dance teachers, for fostering my talent and my love of sequins.

Thanks to the visionary Russell Markert, founder of the Rockettes, for appreciating long legs and tall ladies; the fantastic Radio City Rockettes; and Radio City Music Hall for giving me a dance experience beyond my wildest dreams.

Thanks to all my fellow cast and crew members who lived the dream with me on stage and off. You've been like family.

Thanks to my gracious peer review team—Dr. Marybeth Lima, Jenny Dewar, Karen Kasteel, Steven Goodwillie, Genia A. Sherwood, Jennifer Dowdle, Cami Elen, Laura Teusink, and Phil Randall—for being my guinea pigs and muddling through the rough version of the book. Your feedback, encouragement, and emotional hand-holding were invaluable.

Thanks to the mega-talented, three-time Emmy Award-winning costume designer, Pete Menefee, for allowing his spectacular sketch to grace the cover of this book (and for creating costumes so luscious and lovely they made me swoon).

Thanks to my mentor and official editor, Ken Wachsberger, for believing in this project and for suffering through more stories about G-strings than an editor ever should.

Thanks to Kendra Englund for being my lovely and loyal best friend since high school and for sharing this love of musical theatre.

Thanks to my Grandma Elsie for suggesting to me back in the early 1990s, “You should keep a journal in case you want to write a book someday.” I did it, Grandma! (I’m sure she’s smiling up in heaven.) Thanks also to my writing role model, Grandma Merle, who loved to take pen to paper and continued documenting her own memoirs (15 volumes in all and she never left her small farm town in southwest Iowa) until she died a few days short of her 99th birthday.

Thanks to my wonderful parents who paid for a million dance classes, drove me to those classes day after day and year after year, sat through seemingly endless hours of dance recitals and amateur performances, babysat my kids, and traveled all over the country to see me perform professionally. You deserve a huge round of applause.

Thanks to my sister Cindy, the professional screenwriter, for her wise advice and wacky sense of humor, and sister Jen for being a smart, strong, and inspiring woman.

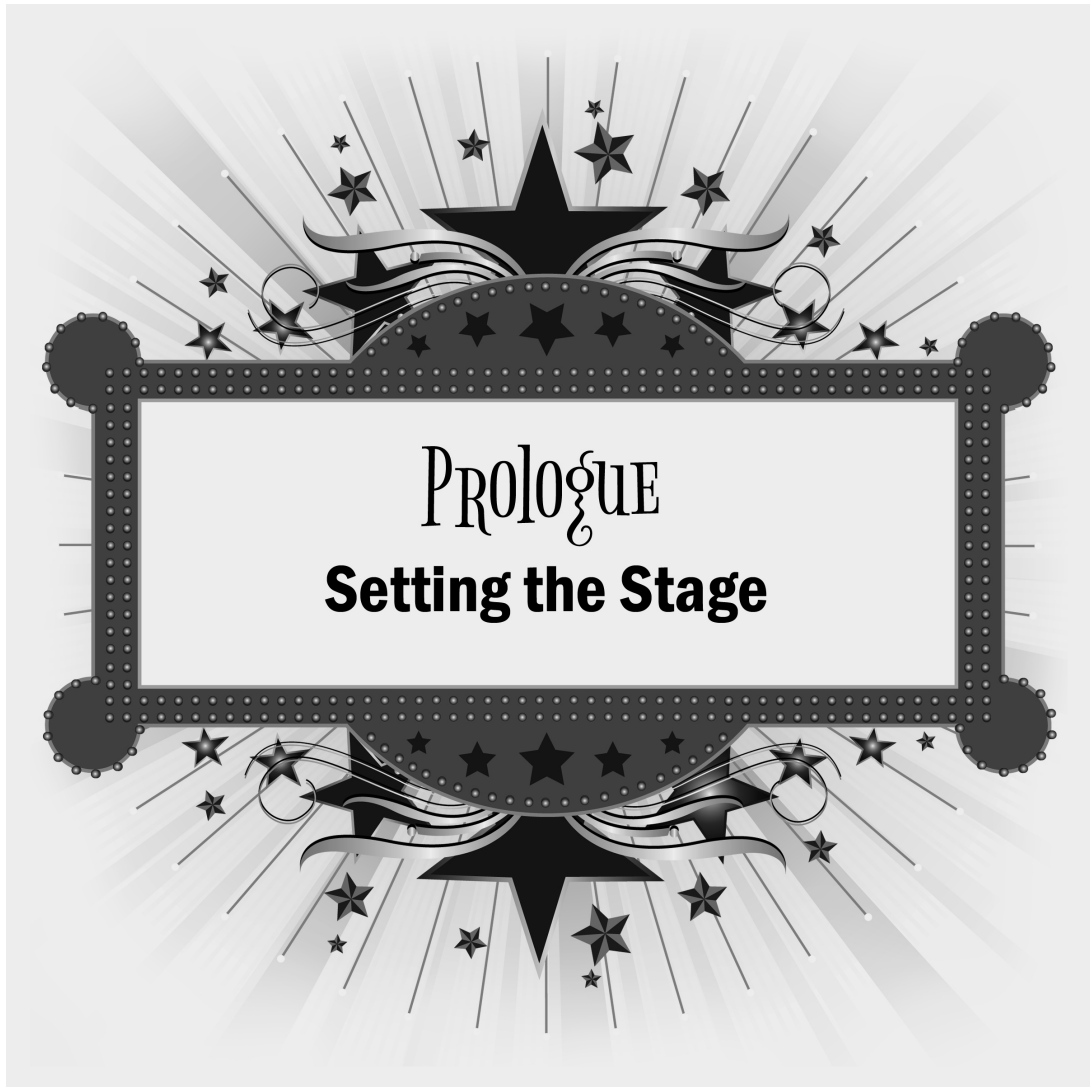
Thanks to my incredible children, Kieran and Kara, whom I love more than feathers and fishnets, and that says a lot.

And, finally, thanks to Dave Boutette for being The World’s Best Husband and my cheerleader throughout this crazy process.

Mmmwaaaaah! I love you all.

# **Dedication**

To everyone with a dream, may you have the courage to pursue it.



Kristi Lynn Davis

*"If I ever got a chance to get a group of American girls who would be taller and have longer legs and could do really complicated tap routines and eye-high kicks...they'd knock your socks off!"*

— Russell Markert, Founder of the Rockettes  
(Originally the Missouri Rockets, 1925)

## **Final Scene: Florida, July 1-August 9, 2002**

Like many Americans and international connoisseurs of culture, I have been knocked sockless by the Radio City Rockettes. But if perchance you've spent most of your life hiding under a rock on a deserted island, and upon hearing the term "Rockette" (thinking your ears need a good cleaning) you clarify, "Did you say Rock-head?" I'd animatedly articulate, "The Rockettes are the world's most famous precision dance troupe—a bevy of tall, leggy beauties acclaimed for their intricate, unison tap dancing, eye-high kickline, and gorgeous gams. They are the synchronized chorus line supreme, and their theatrical home is none other than the renowned Radio City Music Hall in New York City, where they've been amazing and amusing audiences since the 1930s." And if that weren't enough to sock it to you, I'd rave, "The Rockettes are referenced in movies, TV sitcoms, best-selling books, magazine articles, cartoons, and even the board game *Trivial Pursuit*. They are a household name and as integral a part of Americana as baseball, hotdogs, and apple pie." So enthusiastic am I about these luscious ladies that I'd continue to rhapsodize until you implored me to "Put a sock in it!"

As a devoted fan growing up in the suburbs near Detroit, I watched the Rockettes perform on national television for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade every year without fail. At the end of the sparkling, spectacular performance, the camera panned across their fair faces one by one, each woman brightly beaming for her personal close-up. My sister and I delighted in discussing which dancers were the darlinest. A Thanksgiving without the Rockettes was like a Thanksgiving without turkey. In the last seven years, however, I had come to know more about the Rockettes than the average American. Let it be said with certitude that I knew the Rockettes intimately. Like

## Long Legs and Tall Tales

you-know-the-holes-in-your-underwear intimately. For I was a Rockette.

This was a big deal to me, as becoming a Rockette was my fantasy world come true. As a kid, I used to go gaga over those old Hollywood movie dance extravaganzas (à la Busby Berkeley and the Ziegfeld Follies, circa early-ish 1900s) in which a million stunning showgirls in lavish costumes formed intricate kaleidoscopic, geometric patterns and were escorted around sensational stage sets and staircases by debonair men in tuxedos and top hats. It was a world of razzle dazzle and romance, and I loved it. Appearing as a Rockette was about the closest I could get to living my life in a magnificent musical. It meant I had made it as a dancer. The Rockettes were the cream of the crop, the top of the skyscraper, the peak of perfection. In short, they were the Big Time.

But life goes by fast, and soon, instead of getting a kick out of life, you're getting kicked out of life. Before you know it you're a ninety-nine-year-old rickety rocker in a rocking chair, about to kick the bedazzled bucket and bemoaning, "It's over already? But, but, but I feel like I just got here! Why it seems like just a blink of an eye from birth to grave, from opening night to closing night, from overture to finale. I want an encore!" In this insidious way, the end of my career snuck up, caught me by surprise, and bit me in my aging buttocks. (I was only thirty-six, but for a dancer that age meant the end of life.)

Of course, I knew subconsciously that the final curtain was about to fall, but the reality of the situation didn't hit me until I returned to perusing the audition notices after taking a year off for maternity leave. A year spent singing and dancing in my Florida home to a literally captive audience of two small children under the age of four was all well and good, but I was ready and anxious to get back to a real stage and an audience that could wipe their own bottoms.

Like a virgin, reliving the excitement and anticipation of the very first time I touched a *Backstage* newspaper in search of performance opportunities, I eagerly turned the pages only to be rudely awakened to the discovery that everyone wanted eighteen to thirty-five-year-olds. "But I was thirty-five just last year before I had the baby! What happened?" I blurted aloud, my tykes wide eyed over their ranting mommy. Time had flown by faster than I could count "a five, six, seven, eight." That's what happened. Somehow I had forgotten or failed to realize that, like a carton of milk or a can of tuna, a dancer

came with an expiration date, and I was already spoiled goods. Thirty-five seemed like such an arbitrary number, but you turn thirty-five and all of a sudden you need mammograms, prenatal testing, and are no longer desirable as a dancer. The consolation prize is that you are now of age to run for president of the United States, but it's not a likely transition. (Although Ronald Reagan, Sonny Bono, and Arnold Schwarzenegger made the dubious leap from acting to politics.)

One moment I was reaching my peak and the next I was over the hill. "At least I still have the Rockettes," I reminded myself, temporarily relieved. "But I want to leave looking good and at the top of my game. I don't want to be one of those decrepit diehards the younger girls make fun of. Don't want people begging me, the crinkly old lady, to get the heck off the stage." While proud to be performing at my age, particularly post pregnancy, I preferred not to pathetically persevere past my time. I robotically retrieved my youngsters' runaway Cheerios from the floor as I continued my internal debate.

Many of my fellow thirty-something Rockettes were also getting married, buying homes, and birthing babies. We were all hanging onto our jobs by a thread trying to keep the dream (and the health insurance) alive for as long as we practically could. But our priorities were changing and so were our bodies. Dancing professionally and child rearing were like oil and water (for me, anyway). They just didn't mix. Having taken maternity leave last year when my daughter was born, this year I was required to either plop out another papoose, take a leave of absence, or actually do the show if I wanted to keep my job. As an almost thirty-seven-year-old mother of two, who was apparently too old to audition for other dance gigs (news to me), I now knew that once my Rockette contract ended, my dance career was completely kaput.

This perturbing possibility was smacking me right in the face, because the Rockettes were currently fighting to protect our positions and maintain our cushy contract with Radio City. All spring and summer long, my phone had been ringing off the hook with gossip from the Rockette cross country hotline. Being the lone Rockette outpost in the swamplands of Florida, my calls were coming in third party from New York through Vegas. My computer was bombarded with conflicting e-mails from multiple sources. My mailbox was loaded with persuasive letters from Radio City and Cablevision (who had bought out Madison Square Garden, owner of Radio City) and



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opposing rhetoric from A.G.V.A. (American Guild of Variety Artists), the union representing the Rockettes, and retaliation from enraged Rockettes. Our boisterous battle made the morning television news shows and CNN. Matters were coming to a head and the tension was thick. There was even talk of a strike.

One of the main issues up for discussion was Radio City's demand to dissolve the notorious "Roster." Many Rockettes had to re-audition every year to maintain their status, but, for umpteen years, there had also been a Roster of forty-one women who were considered permanent employees of Radio City. That is, they could remain Rockettes forever and ever amen, barring they didn't blow up like a balloon (in other words, as long as they met their weight requirement) or become incapable of kicking to their bifocals. So there would be "girls" pushing forty or even fifty years old, which is ancient in the dance world, still pumping out those Christmas shows and cashing in.

These rostered Rockettes had first right of refusal for any and all job offers. As such, the Roster was a cash cow and possibly one of the best gigs in New York, because you were virtually guaranteed work for approximately three months leading up to and during the Christmas season *every year*. These privileged gals could do a gazillion shows a day and get double or triple overtime. They'd make so much money they could kick back and eat bon-bons the rest of the year and then simply crash diet before the first weigh-in come fall. (That's an extreme scenario, but technically it could be done.) As you might guess, these were most coveted positions. And I had one of them.

Understandably, Radio City disapproved of having to cater to the Roster. In fact, they assured us that the very future of the Rockettes rested upon its elimination in favor of yearly, open auditions so that the creative team could choose the most capable individuals for each production. I could see their point. If I were in charge, I'd certainly want to hire the best. But the message some of us heard was, "There are younger, better models out there, and if we have to use old has-beens in the lineup, our show will suffer to such an extent that the Rockettes will decay into nothing more than a historical relic, like pet rocks." Ouch. I felt like the devoted wife of many years being traded in by my wealthy husband for a newer, hipper, prettier woman. It was an emotional issue; it hurt to be one of the few to have earned a spot on the prestigious Roster only to be told that the Roster would be the downfall of the troupe. It also hurt to have our job security threatened

and our status and privileges revoked. But times they were a-changing. As compensation, Radio City was offering us each a buyout package commensurate with our respective years of service. And we still had the option of auditioning to be rehired; Radio City guaranteed that many of us would indeed be given our jobs back.

Let's be clear that I'm not here to call Radio City and Cablevision the bad guys; perhaps their actions *would* ensure a higher quality product that would keep the Rockette franchise afloat. They've employed oodles of excellent entertainers for years on end, and I'm eternally grateful and proud to have been one of them. I'm telling you what went down, because it demonstrates just how fiercely competitive and uncertain showbiz can be and how it favors the youngsters. (Thank goodness I wasn't a gymnast. My career would have been over before I got my first period.) Frankly, I'm also telling you, because this sensitive situation gives me a dramatic beginning (and ending) for this book.

So, in the name of preserving the legacy of the Rockettes, Radio City was determined to disband our cherished Roster and all its power and privilege therein. We knew that Big Daddy Cablevision and their lawyers would be a tough contender against our union that represented the pool of "variety artists." Our fight felt like a ninety-five pound weakling trying to kick sand in the face of a three-hundred-pound muscle man. I generally rooted for the underdog, but this time I wasn't placing any bets. A.G.V.A. had taken good care of us for years and was making valiant efforts on our behalf, but I sensed it was only a matter of time before my time was up.

And so it was under such suspenseful circumstances that I received a crucial call from Rockette Headquarters at Radio City. "Kristi, you're next on the list to teach the Rockette Experience. Can you be in New York in two weeks?" The "Rockette Experience" was an afternoon-long workshop open to aspiring dancers in which they would learn fragments of real Rockette repertoire from a real Rockette in the real Rockette rehearsal rooms in the real Radio City Music Hall. The participants would then proceed through a mock audition followed by a question-and-answer session with the real Rockette. I had put my name on a waiting list to lead this event, and the opportunity had arisen just in the nick of time.

This bit of business wasn't necessarily reason enough for me to be Manhattan bound. But this was a much more personal, vitally important mission, because, here's the kicker: this would actually be my

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first, and probably last, appearance as a Rockette in New York City at Radio City Music Hall. “What’s the big deal?” you ask. The big deal is that you don’t feel like a real, bona fide Rockette unless you’ve been on the Great Stage at Radio City Music Hall. Standing on this sacred spot is a Rockette’s pilgrimage to Mecca. Even though I had logged in approximately 1,200 shows and 240,000 kicks as a Rockette, I still needed to perform at the Music Hall to feel my experience was complete.

Of course, as a rostered Rockette I had been offered opportunities to dance at the Music Hall but had turned them down, for what I thought were good reasons at the time, to perform elsewhere. In the back of my mind, I always thought I’d get around to it someday. With the contract deadline looming overhead, however, my instincts told me that someday better be *now* or it may well be *never*. When presented with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, it’s best to stand at attention, salute your good fortune, and shout, “Yes, Sir!” Nothing was going to keep me from this final hurrah, this grand, spankin’ finale, this apropos ending to my fairy-tale adventure. And, to be honest, as a mostly-stay-at-home mom, going to the grocery store alone was a thrill these days, so a solo visit to New York City seemed practically orgasmic. How could I pass it up?

Heeding the call from H.Q., I mustered the troops and briefed them on my upcoming deployment. “Kids, Mommy is being sent on special assignment and has to go bye-bye for a little bit.” In response to this entertainment emergency, I left my precious progeny in the hands of my husband and boarded a flight to JFK International Airport in NYC to do the divine deed, most likely my final duty as a World Famous Radio City Rockette. I settled into my seat, took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and tried to relax for the ride. *You’ve come a long way, baby*, I realized, reflecting back to my humble beginnings in the world of show business.

Kristi Lynn Davis

## Dolly Dinkle's School of Dance

*"People have asked me why I chose to be a dancer. I did not choose. I was chosen to be a dancer, and with that, you live all your life."*

— Martha Graham, *Blood Memory*

My mother would say my obsession with dance started in my infancy. She tells the story of how, as a baby, I bounced in my car seat to the beat of "Hey There, Georgie Girl" playing on the radio. I believe I first felt the rhythm long before that. Surely, I swam to the beat of my mother's heart as a mere zygote in her womb.

You see, I am convinced that I was born to be on stage. My genetic makeup dictated a life bound to the theatre. My first step on stage was an answer to a divine calling to entertain the masses: "Lo, an angel in an Armani original appeared in the heavens before me and said, 'Go forth and kick thy long legs to thine eyes and tap thy large feet loudly upon the earth, for thou shalt be adorned in sequins and glitter and all that sparkles like a star.'" Be it a call from the Hollywood heavens or a chromosomal defect, my fate was to be an entertainer. It was as useless for me to fight the urge to perform as it would be a bird to squelch the urge to fly. I only wish I had realized this from the beginning.

What I did discover early on was that I was different from most people. Never quite fitting in with the crowd, I felt special, extraordinary. Although extremely shy and insecure in many ways, I had a spark inside waiting to be kindled. Bursting to be seen, to be heard, to be noticed, I was a dreamer, and I fantasized about the fascinating people, places, and experiences that were in store for me. While I marvel that I made it as far as I did in show business, even as a small child, I knew that my life was meant for something big.

I really owe a round of applause to my mother for she had a dream, too: she envisioned her beloved preschooler on stage tip-toeing about in a frilly tutu. When I was four, she took me to the local civic center for my first ballet lesson. The classroom was located in the bowels of the dark, dingy basement, and I grasped onto her leg as we marched down the empty stairwell. All Mom's visions of twirling tulle were shattered when I was spooked by the tubby teacher in tights towering over me in the creepy underground classroom. To make matters worse,

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all the budding ballerinas were given star-sticker attendance books, and that creature-teacher-from-the-dark had the nerve to give me a used book left by the last defector. That horrible experience not only left my spark unkindled, but also completely snuffed out my interest in dance class for years to come.

While I had no desire to return to the “dungeon of dance,” I still loved showing off for an audience. Despite having only thirty minutes of ballet instruction under my belt, I started creating and performing my own routines on the front porch of my grandmother’s Iowa farmhouse. Although my mother had given up taking me to ballet class, she bought my younger sister and me black leotards, pink tights, pink ballet shoes, and pink tutus. My sister would tie her tutu on over her pants and pound on her toy drum, while I, dressed perfectly in all the appropriate dance attire, would prance around to her erratic rhythms. The hardest thing about being a dancer back then was getting my costume off in time to make it to the bathroom.

\*\*\*\*\*

I continued this impromptu method of dance for five years, when, at the age of nine, I finally decided I was brave enough to try taking classes again. To be safe, I was going to take my sister and some neighborhood friends for backup. If our new teacher was as scary as the last one, at least we’d outnumber her.

This time my mother enrolled us in the illustrious Josie Grey’s School, nee, “Basement,” of Dance. Josie was an entrepreneurial mom who figured out how to make a few bucks underground without leaving home. A small section of her basement, with a couple of ballet barres hung on the walls, served as the studio. Josie undercut the real dance schools around town; at two dollars per half-hour class, the price was right. Plus, she lived so close that Mom didn’t have to drive us. We used to walk the six blocks to her house wearing our ballet shoes and squishing fallen berries underfoot along the way.

Josie filled that “Bargain-Basement-Discount-School-of-Dance” niche for all the not-so-serious and not-so-rich kids who just wanted to dance for fun. She could have cared less if we wore our street clothes to class or even if we wore the proper dance shoes, and she accepted children of all shapes and sizes. You’d easily see a 5-foot-6-inch, 200-pound heavyweight dancing next to a featherweight nymph of a girl. Josie let us talk and laugh and giggle all through class. She offered such an affordable and relaxed atmosphere that we wanted to take

everything, and we did: tap, jazz, ballet, and even baton, which we begged her to teach us.

Josie taught in her street clothes and played the accordion in class. Tap was her forte. I was sure she had been a professional tap dancer in her younger years. Perhaps she had accompanied herself on a sparkly, royal-blue accordion, her name spelled out in white felt letters down the side. I could picture the crowd going wild as she vigorously played a polka, her feet rhythmically striking the ground in time to the music. Whether or not Josie was ever paid a dime for dancing, I couldn't say, but she knew more than I did and was so unintimidating and casual that I loved going to class.

The atmosphere at Josie's was anything but serious, due to the fact that her own four rambunctious children were home while she taught. "You guys better shut up and stop that fightin'," she'd shout at them. "I ain't comin' upstairs again!" She often left class to attend to some domestic disaster generally preceded by earth-shattering crashing sounds and screams. It wasn't uncommon to have one of her three young sons or her only daughter come bounding down the basement stairs unannounced to dance a few steps with our class and then return upstairs to watch afternoon cartoons when they'd had enough.

Jazz class was a riot. We learned to twinkle, Lindy, sugar, camel, sashay and Shorty George. Josie chose the upbeat Tina Turner song, "Proud Mary," for our dance. We lined up behind the lead girl, and, one at a time, on our specific count, raised our arms up in a "V." I anxiously awaited my turn thinking, "One, two, three, four, five, six, SEVEN, eight." It was hard not to count out loud. On the part of the song where Tina sings "Rollin', rollin', rollin' down the river..." the even-numbered girls would lean right and roll their arms while the odd-numbered girls would lean left and do the same. It was more fun than I'd ever had before.

Our tap class was learning the waltz clog to the song "Daisy." The waltz clog is a simple, standard, old tap dance that has been massacred by millions of amateur tappers over the course of time. I caught on to the steps quickly. At least I thought I had gotten the steps right. It was nearly impossible to hear my own sounds in that class full of beginners, for the noise level was deafening. The walls reverberated with a hodge podge of scuffing and banging and sliding of taps across the cement floor like nails on a chalkboard.

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Every kid seemed to be in her own time zone, performing some variation of the steps to the beat of her own drum. Not only that, but everyone was joyously beating the heck out of their shoes. If you stomped as hard as you could, those suckers produced some major decibels, especially in that tiny basement where the sound waves echoed off the walls. Let's face it, giving a kid shoes with noise makers on the bottoms is just asking for trouble. Getting the class to keep their feet quiet long enough to explain the next step was a huge accomplishment for Josie. Time and time again, she found herself shouting over the noise. It's a wonder that teaching tap didn't send her straight to the loony bin.

When we finally finished the dance, Josie made a shocking announcement: "For the recital you'll be doing the entire number while jumping rope, so bring one next week." Luckily, I was one of the best rope jumpers in my Phys Ed class at school. I was fairly confident about the tapping and even more secure with jumping, but tapping and jumping rope at the same time was another story. Performing the waltz clog was hard enough without worrying about tripping myself with a string.

The other challenge was to make sure I stayed on my designated spot and didn't hop-shuffle-step-step too close to my neighbor and clash ropes. I know, because absent-minded Lilly whacked mine regularly. She'd wander off her spot, tapping so close to me that her rope would hit mine. Then I'd have to get it spinning again and figure out where we were in the choreography. Lilly was a hazard on the dance floor. She was like a driver who can't stay in her own lane.

Ballet was Josie's weakest subject, but we learned to point our toes, do knee bends without sticking out our behinds, walk on tiptoe, and "sashay" across the floor. A lot of rules and numbers seemed to be involved: Ballerinas had to know first, second, third, fourth, and fifth position. For first position, we had to stand with the heels of our feet touching and our toes open to form a straight line. Our legs had to be perfectly straight and our bottoms tucked under. It was difficult to stand like that without falling over, and some of the girls tilted like the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

Josie knew nearly as little about baton as she did ballet, but we learned enough to keep us happy. She taught us how to do the majorette march, how to wrap the baton around our necks like a choke hold, and how to jump with our legs split apart while quickly passing

the baton through them. Josie also showed us the one-handed figure-eight twirl, which was pretty easy, but the maneuver in which we attempted to twirl the baton using one hand and only the thumb of the other hand was so hard that we had to practice at home. Our most daring trick was lifting one leg and tossing the baton underneath it and up into the air. Fortunately, the baton wasn't too difficult to catch as it could fly only so high before hitting the low basement ceiling.

As if shimmying about in our weekly classes wasn't amusing enough, performing in the recital was about as thrilling as life could get. Our show was held one evening in June in the auditorium of a nearby middle school. On show night, the classroom that served as our dressing room hummed with restless chatter punctuated by cries of dismay from girls who discovered their mothers had forgotten some of their costume pieces.

Our cheap and cheerful costumes, ordered from a catalog, were sequined and beribboned and just to die for. Josie had instructed all of her students to buy sheer-to-the-waist nylons to wear underneath, but a couple of girls ended up with reinforced girdle nylons, which created the unsightly appearance of dark underwear hanging out below their leotards. Several dancers wore black ballet shoes while the rest of us were wearing pink, and everyone's hair was styled differently. Some girls left their stringy tresses down and in their eyes. Others had them pulled back in a ponytail or two. The dress code was a free-for-all, but Josie didn't seem to mind.

At seven to nine years of age, we were the most advanced kids Josie taught, and we felt like hot stuff on stage. Decked out in our red-and-blue halter tops and shorty shorts (which we also wore for tap and baton to minimize costume expenses), we did "Proud Mary" proud. Several of my classmates concentrated so hard they forgot to smile, and the audience could see their lips counting the beats, but I was beaming with a grin so wide I could have been a commercial for toothpaste.

Performing our jazz dance was pure joy, but our baton routine made me nervous because of the baton toss. I was worried about not catching it, and with good reason. In Josie's basement we could throw the baton less than three feet before it would rebound off the ceiling, but on stage, we could hurl it miles up in the air before it would ever hit anything. Having that super energy that comes with stage fright, half the class used way too much force and over-tossed their batons during the show. There was no way they were going to catch those



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whirling dervishes. Batons were flying every which way, rolling around the stage, thumping to the ground, some even bouncing unpredictably on their rubber ends when they landed hard enough. The audience members should have been advised to wear helmets in case one came spiraling in their direction. Hardly a moment went by when there wasn't a frantic girl weaving through the other twirlers trying to capture her runaway baton and return to her position. If your baton traveled all the way off stage, you could pretty much guarantee that the number would be over by the time you retrieved it. I just prayed I'd make it through the song without my baton going AWOL.

I was one of the few who survived the majorette march without incident, but I didn't fare so well with the tap. There I was, front and center, confidently clogging and rope jumping, the audience in the palm of my hand, when La-La Land Lilly took off from the back row and headed my way. I had no idea what was about to hit me. All of a sudden, her rope whacked mine and sent it flying out of my hands and across the stage. I scrambled to recover it, carefully dodging the revolving ropes around me. The sparkle left my eyes and anger set in. I was mad. I was mortified. Lilly was lucky I didn't use my rope to strangle her.

In addition to being humiliated on stage for the first time, I also had my first taste of personal stardom. Our ballet class, clad in green gypsy dresses trimmed in red sequins and white ribbon, performed the Tarantella. Being the most flexible, I got to stand center stage and hold my leg up over my head with one hand and shake my tambourine with my other hand, while jumping around in a circle. I was the hit of the recital. It was a very heady experience.

I wasn't the only one who stole the show, however. My stiffest competition came from the three-year-olds. The baby ballet class sang "I Am a Coffee Pot," which went something like this: "I am a coffee pot. I get oh so HOT! When you fill me up, have another CUP!" Their arms served as handles and spouts, and they pretended to percolate by jiggling their bodies, wobbling their heads, and smacking their lips. During the show Josie stood in the wings doing the choreography in case they forgot what they were supposed to do. Many did forget, and they were so mesmerized by the audience that it was hard to tell who was there to watch whom. The tots stood frozen in their tutus like deer in headlights until Josie, whispering loudly from the wings, broke their stupor and reminded them to point their toes once or twice and tiptoe

around in a circle with their arms overhead. Most of the time, they were either spellbound by the audience or craning their necks to see Josie on the sidelines.

The tiny tap class, irresistible in their yellow-and-black striped bee attire, performed “Be My Little Baby Bumble Bee.” They flapped their wings, buzzed, did a few heel steps and maybe even a shuffle or two. A couple of bees, in complete control, led the number like little troopers and shouted the lyrics loudly enough to make up for all the petrified insects. Their parents loved them no matter what they did or didn’t do. The kids could have stood on stage in their darling costumes and simply farted, which was about the only thing some kids actually did, and the parents would have been elated.

Josie and her children did a family number in the show à la the Osmonds or the Jackson Five, but it took some coaxing to get all four kids on stage. The music started, and they were still waiting for the two-year-old to join the bunch. Josie rolled her eyes and shouted, “Elliot, get over here!” Someone finally pushed him on stage. The number was a real crowd pleaser.

The recital ended with Josie playing the accordion and half singing, half speaking her traditional closing song: “This is the end of our show. That’s all the dancing tonight. This is the end of our show. It’s been a delight.” The production was quite amateur, but I didn’t know any better and was having a ball being on stage with my friends. After the performance, I was swarmed by people complimenting me on my trick in the Tarantella. My adoring parents brought bouquets of flowers, and I felt like an absolute star.

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Dancing with Josie got me off to a great start, but two musicals during that first year really rocked my world and sent me flying into theatrical heaven. The first was a high school production of *Godspell*. The inspiring songs and dances captivated me. I’d never seen or felt anything like them. The second was the movie *Jesus Christ Superstar*. I was haunted by the music and overwhelmed by the emotions stirring within me. The songs seemed to touch the depths of my soul. Perhaps entertainment was worth more than just a laugh with my friends.

*Superstar* so moved me that, at the ripe old age of nine, I mounted a full-scale production of the musical. I easily recruited the neighborhood girls to be cast members, but the boys were more of a challenge. I tried to coerce a few of my friends’ little brothers by bribing them with

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cookies, which always worked when we needed a groom to play “Wedding,” but even the party I promised after the performance wasn’t incentive enough to get any boys to dance with us. The result was an all-girl cast for a show comprised of mostly men (Jesus and his Twelve Disciples, King Herod, Pontius Pilate, Judas). I really wanted to play Jesus but felt guilty giving myself the lead role, so I cast Frieda Snodgrass, who most looked the part and was willing to memorize all the songs and fake die on the cross at the end. Only Lynnette Bulman, who played Mary Magdalene, got to play a woman. The parents brought their own chairs and sat on our lawn to watch the production held on my front porch. I’m sure the adults were chuckling at us, but I took the show seriously. The cast party we threw at the end was almost as much fun as the show itself.

Entertaining the neighbors was a great start, but I longed for bigger opportunities so I formed the “Katherine Street Supremes” and took our show on the road. We made it as far as a talent show at a popular campground about an hour away. Sporting our old recital costumes, loads of bright pink blush, and powder-blue eye shadow, we boogied to Leo Sayer’s “You Make Me Feel Like Dancin’.” Afterwards, we met some other contestants in the ladies’ room, and they fawned over us and told us how great we were. My fire was fueled. I was getting a rush from all the attention and adulation. I had been bitten by the showbiz bug and hungered for more.

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By the time I was ten, Josie had taught me all she knew, and I yearned to learn more difficult moves. So I moved out of the basement and up a few steps to a real dance studio situated above ground and about five miles from my house. It was here where I met Hattie Dallas of Hattie Dallas’s School of Dance.

You know those little local dance schools like “Miss Lulu’s Dance Academy” or “Twinkle Toes Conservatory of Dance and Tumbling” in the middle of a strip mall between a pizza place and a dry cleaners? Those are what we in the “Biz” refer to as “Dolly Dinkle” studios. My image of the fictitious Dolly has always been modeled after Hattie Dallas: She is a dance mistress who has looked fifty for the last thirty years and has a fabulous body, perpetual tan, penciled eyebrows, and thick, Egyptian-like black eyeliner. She bats her false eyelashes and smiles too widely. Like Josie, she plays the accordion.

Hattie had a mystique about her that fed my childhood imagination. I was certain she hadn't revealed all the secrets of her past. Was she once a famous gypsy dancer traveling the world and performing in exotic places? Did some romantic liaison ultimately lead her to the Midwestern suburbs and the demise of her dance career? I sensed that she'd lived a life of adventure, and I wanted to live it, too. I could only fantasize about what breathtaking performances she'd given as I was too much in awe to ask for her resume. She was glamour personified. On the inside cover of the recital program book, Hattie was always pictured engulfed in a luxurious fur coat or swathed in a feather boa. To me, she was as alluring as any movie star.

The happenings at Hattie's were equally captivating. It would be perfectly normal, for instance, to find a girl in a red, white, and blue sequined leotard performing back walkovers in pointe shoes while twirling a baton affixed with lit sparklers. In addition to the traditional forms of dance—tap, jazz, ballet, and pointe (or “toe,” as Hattie would say)—such classes as tumbling, cheerleading, Hawaiian, Tahitian, baton twirling, and clogging were also offered. Hattie's was a one-stop shop for entertainment, and I was enthralled by it all.

Referring to a show (or performer) as being “Dolly Dinkle” generally means the show (or performer) is amateur in nature and borderline corny. “She's so Dolly Dinkle!” for example, would probably be stated with an air of snotty superiority and eye rolling by a more refined professional. Technically, the Dallas productions (and performers) were amateur, but they were packed with pizzazz and had great audience appeal. Hattie loved to use all kinds of tricks in her recitals. If you could do running back walkovers, aerials (no-handed cartwheels), handsprings, or standing back tucks (somersaults in the air), if you could walk on your hands, wrap your legs around your neck like a pretzel, do the Russian splits suspended in the air by two burly guys, or perform any other form of bodily contortion, she would use it in the show every year without fail. The Dallas gals were known to utilize strobe lights, glow-in-the-dark costumes, and Tahitian dancers juggling flaming coconut shells. Anything went if it brought the house down.

Hattie Dallas's School of Dance had aspirations well beyond your quintessential Dolly Dinkle school, and the whole Dallas family was involved in this pursuit. Hattie had a beautiful, twenty-year-old daughter, Skye, who shared the teaching responsibilities with her

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mother and was my main teacher. She had lovely long brown hair and wore big diamond studs in her ears. Her voice was deep and permanently hoarse from shouting over the music all those years, but it sounded Marilyn Monroe-sexy on her. She and Hattie vacationed in Florida every Christmas, which helped maintain their gorgeous golden skin color (a highly coveted look back then). Skye was careful to get a perfectly even tan (including the hard-to-reach-spots like under her arms, which she tanned by lying on her back with her arms over her head), and her sun-kissed appearance made her all the more enchanting. Hattie also had a lanky teenage son who taught gymnastics classes but favored magic and was pictured in the recital program book in his goofy magician's outfit. Even Hattie's mother, who was no spring chicken, played her part by running the busy office and answering scores of inquiries.

In addition to the Dallas family, Hattie employed a small group of girls fresh out of high school to teach the classes she and Skye eschewed. These second tier teachers were young and green, but they all had tiaras and sashes and titles like "Teen Miss Southeast Main Street Deli." To me they were extremely beautiful and talented. One had a strong southern accent and was always popping her gum, a skill I desperately but unsuccessfully tried to master in order to be like her.

The school itself was nothing fancy but, oh, the tales it had to tell and the dreams it harbored within its walls! You entered the front door into a lobby, which led to one large studio and two small studios separated by a pull-out accordion partition. The lobby was festooned with trophies and newspaper clippings of Dallas students winning awards, evidence of the competitive atmosphere. "Teen Miss Tap Dancing Terror" was succeeded by "Tiny Miss Over-the-Top" who was shoved aside by "Little Miss Syrupy Sweet" all of whom lugged back trophies (some larger than they were) and gleefully displayed them at the studio for all to see. My first time entering this place, I could only imagine how glorious it must feel to have your picture on the wall of fame.

Being cute, tall, and naturally thin with long legs, I looked the part of a dancer, and the Dallas duo saw potential. (It didn't hurt that I was disciplined, polite, and well-behaved to boot.) They shoved me into ballet quicker than you can say "plie," and I started to get serious about dancing. I dove head first into rigid Cecchetti ballet training, taking two levels simultaneously. I had some catching up to do if I wanted to join

the other good dancers my age who had started classes when they were barely out of diapers.

In order to move from one level to the next, I had to pass an exam in which I executed specific ballet exercises for a panel of somber ballet experts. The exams were achingly tense and deafeningly quiet. It was a stressful and solemn setting, not for the weak at heart. I had to be perfectly dressed in the required leotard, pink tights, and pink ballet slippers, my hair in a neat bun. I had to study my French terminology and know the moves on my syllabus down to the last minute detail including head and finger placement. The process was rigorous, torturous, and perfect practice for my professional life to come. I couldn't have strayed any farther from the happy-go-lucky atmosphere at Josie's Bargain Basement.

The training was undeniably tough, but something incredible happened when things finally came together, and I was properly aligned with every body part in the right place at the right time. I could balance, turn, leap, glide, jump, and soar through the air. The transformation was magical: "And unto this day, in the city of Deerfield, a dancer was born..."

By the time I was eleven, my identity as a dancer was solid, and although I continued taking jazz and tap classes, which were always a lot more lighthearted and fun than the ballet, I really considered myself a ballerina. I was ecstatic when Skye allowed me to start taking pointe, but the day I was fitted for toe shoes marked the beginning of the end of ever hoping to have presentable feet. The satiny pink slippers had ribbons that laced around my ankles and a wooden box into which I stuffed my lamb's wool-wrapped toes. The box allowed me to stand on the very tips of my tootsies. Bubble wrap would have been a lot more helpful than that meager lamb's wool. I held back the tears in class as my feet would bleed and my toenails would fall off from being bruised so badly. Soon all my toes were as callused and bent out of shape as a crusty old lady's. Oh, the agony of the feet! It's a wonder that Child Safety Services doesn't deem dancing on pointe child abuse and arrest all the ballet teachers of the world. In spite of the excessive pain, I was dancing on pointe just like the beautiful, diminutive ballerina who twirled on tiptoe when I opened the lid of my musical jewelry box.

Soon I was dancing with the favorites, the "cool" girls, and they fascinated me. They were excellent dancers and gymnasts, and some even did solos in the show. They took every class offered including

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Hawaiian and Tahitian dance, which made them even cooler. They always sported the latest, trendiest, prettiest leotards and a matching ribbon or flower in their hair. They were generally good students, cheerleaders, piano players, athletes. They did it all. They would rush into the studio, McDonald's bags in hand, and stuff french fries into their Big Macs before cramming the whole concoctions into their mouths and heading off to class. The cool girls knew survival tricks I didn't know, like how to pee without taking off your dance clothes: pull leotard crotch over to the side, yank down the top of your tights, and carefully go. They were so popular, self-confident, and downright amazing, I was too shy to even try to infiltrate their clique of coolness.

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My life revolved around the almost daily classes, but the recital fed my soul and sent my spirit skyrocketing. I could hardly wait for spring to roll around, for the end of winter signaled the beginning of performance preparations, the most thrilling of which was the distribution of costumes. I had high hopes for my jazz outfit, as my class was dancing to a hit song, "Pinball Wizard," performed by one of the greatest rock bands of all time: The Who. I held my breath as Skye tore open the precious parcel holding the much-anticipated wardrobe. My balloon deflated as she handed me a plastic bag containing a sleeveless turquoise-blue leotard, a shiny silver waistband, and matching arm and leg bands embellished in metallic fringe. That was it? A glorified leotard with tinfoil? I had created better costumes using Mom's sewing scraps and a stapler.

But it got worse. There at the bottom of the bag was the headpiece. It was a turquoise-blue, ski-mask-style hat with a silver foil fountain spewing out of the top like a whale spouting water. When I slipped it on, my entire head was covered, like a nun with a bad habit. I think we were supposed to resemble pinballs bouncing about, but I felt more like a pinhead.

Once the costumes were doled out, a professional photographer set up shop at the studio, and you could pay to have your picture taken. For an additional fee, you could have your photo included in the program book. The cool girls always had their pictures in the book.

The Dallas ladies also sold advertising space above, below, and beside the snapshots of their dolled-up performers. Your image might end up next to an ad for Angelo's Pump and Pizza, or the Cutting Edge Hair Salon, or the Legal Offices of Steele, Conn, and Lye. I felt

sorry for the girls who found themselves smiling radiantly under the Paul Berrer Funeral Home. The juxtaposition of dancing cuties and a funeral parlor promo seemed inappropriate, but it certainly made death look like something to celebrate.

Even though I wasn't jumping up and down about my costume, I did get my picture taken, sans head cover, but only to stick in my own personal photo album. I didn't feel worthy of joining the beauties in the book, or think the half-page spread was worth the financial investment, so I passed on Mom's offer to pay for the spot. Still, I was a bit envious of the girls, enveloped in lace and sequins and ruffles, whose images graced the pages of the prestigious publication along with some sentimentality submitted by their adoring parents. "You're our little star! Always stay as Sweet as you are! Love always, Grammy, Gramps and Little Brother Johnnie." Hattie wrote testimonials for some of her favorites, and they were full of equally gushy prose. You knew you had made it to the top if you had a statement written by the hand of Hattie.

When the glossy booklets returned from the printer, I devoured mine like I was reading *People* magazine hot off the press. I scrutinized every word, name, face, and figure. Where did I fit in among all these beautiful, talented girls?

One student, Myrtle Hightop, was a tough act to follow. The text next to her picture claimed, "Myrtle has studied dance for 13 years. She does Ballet, Jazz, Hawaiian, Tap, and Tahitian. She also twirls baton, two batons, flags, hoop, 20 knives, and fire baton. She has 1,500 trophies, 3,000 medals, and 150 beauty titles, and recently passed her Grade III Cecchetti Ballet Exam." Wow! I was impressed by her bravery. (How many kids are fearless enough to twiddle burning sticks and razor sharp cutlery?) But her bulging collection of prizes seemed a bit far-fetched. I did the math: Fifteen-year-old Myrtle would have to have won an average of 100 trophies, 200 medals, and 10 beauty titles per year since birth. Her story didn't seem to add up, but to me the program book was the gospel; therefore, it must be true.

The recital was a three-hour marathon of semi-organized chaos, once again held in June at a high school auditorium. Dress rehearsal was scheduled for the night before the show, and my favorite part of the evening was watching the other numbers. I marveled at the precocious six-year-old soloist, a Shirley Temple look-alike, who appeared to have been swallowed by a doily, as she tapped and warbled



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to “Sweet Georgia Brown.” I snickered at the eldest Waldorf sister, who made funny faces when she danced, mouthing “Ooooh!” and “Ahhh!” like she was judging her own performance.

One of the most memorable acts was the jazz dance by two of the unnaturally pliable cool girls in which one slowly and painstakingly bent over backwards to pick up a handkerchief off the floor with her teeth while the other did a back bend, grabbed her own ankles, and rolled around the stage like a human wheel. Their duet wasn’t complete without the crowd-pleasing back handsprings and back tucks. I, too, never tired of watching them defy gravity.

The tumbling classes were the most boring, even duller than the three-year-olds who were at least funny if someone cried or wet her costume. The tumblers dressed in plain-Jane unitards and then, to music, lined up to do somersaults, straddle rolls, cartwheels, and round-offs across a row of mats. The littlest ones had to have their bottoms pushed to complete their forward rolls. The most talented kids went last and attempted to do handsprings but often ended up landing smack on their behinds, or flying out of control into the wings where the next class was waiting to go on. Sometimes at the end of this dismal display, the whole class would form a human pyramid for its bland finale.

The highlight of the show was Skye’s jazz solo. As the lights dimmed, she appeared, a vision in white. Her plush halter-topped, bell-bottomed pantsuit was studded with rhinestones and perfectly complemented her sparkling, pearly-white smile. She kicked to her ear and leapt like a deer. With a magnificent face and physique and dance skills to match, Skye didn’t need a gimmick to keep the attention of the audience for the entire three-and-a-half-minute song. She was stunning and captivating all on her own.

For the most part, the Dallas crew was busy dealing with the technical aspects of the show, like sound and lighting, so the army of overly made-up, restless children was corralled and shouted orders to by a bevy of stage mothers. During the actual performance, the menagerie was contained in the band room until it was time to perform. The kids who were in only one dance and waited, in costume, staring at trombones and tubas for several hours, were nearly out of their minds with boredom or stage fright by the time they saw the audience.

Many of us were in multiple dances, and a select group of kids had to change costumes so fast the stress could have given a five-year-old gray hair. Several minutes into the show, the door to the “dressing room” flung open and a flurry of crazed volunteer moms flew in dragging girls by the hand and yanking off their costumes en route. The children stood gasping for air as they were manipulated like puppets: their next outfits were thrown on, shoes were changed, hats were pinned, and hair was fixed. “Go! Go! Go!” screeched the dressers in panicked voices as they pushed the performers back on stage without a second to spare.

The music wasn’t audible in our crowded holding spot; consequently, we had no way to ascertain which number was currently on. We were completely reliant upon the helpers to retrieve us when it was our turn to perform. After sitting for what seemed like an eternity, a frantic adult came bursting in and yelled, “Military March, you’re on!” and my classmates and I cautiously ran out the door, our tap shoes sliding across the slippery linoleum floor. We were herded through hallways and hushed as we entered the dark, backstage area.

Waiting in the wings, I caught a glimpse of the girls smiling on stage. In a few minutes, I would leave the safety of the sidelines and step into the sacred zone of entertainment. My heart pounded; my body buzzed with nervous energy. Excited to finally take my place in front of the crowd, I was also terrified of making a mistake.

But once I hit the stage, adrenaline rushed through my veins. Wearing makeup and costumes and dancing for applause was like nothing I’d ever experienced. I belonged in that theatre. It felt right. Nothing short of being in love would ever make my heart race like it did when I performed.

All year long, we rehearsed and prepared for that night, that one chance to get it right and win the approval of the audience. Our entrance was spectacular: three perfect military time steps, turn, and lunge. I couldn’t have been happier. At least I was delighted until we formed two straight lines, one of which queued up directly behind me. Where my head was when I started to change formations eight counts before the rest of the class I don’t know, but it certainly wasn’t focused on the show at the Southeast High School Auditorium. I flapped around toward the back curtain, but no one was following me. Then the blunder registered. Oh, God! What have I done? My face flushed and my tear ducts swelled. With a forced smile, I finished the number,

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devastated. After the show, I could see the look of empathy on my mother's face. I cried and cried. But my gaffe didn't stop me from wanting to keep on dancing.

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When I was thirteen, Skye realized her dream of creating a serious ballet company in residence, the New York City Ballet of the Detroit suburbs, so to speak, which she christened the "Southeast Ballet Theatre." No doubt she intentionally and strategically spelled theatre with an "re" instead of an "er," thereby lending an air of foreign superiority to the title and making it instantly known that this was a major dance force with which to be reckoned. This fledgling troupe was intended to be as rigorous and intense as a real professional ballet company. That other Dolly Dinkle tap and jazz fluff paid the bills at the Dallas School of Dance, but the Southeast Ballet Theatre was now Skye's true passion and artistic mission.

Company placement was to be determined by audition. In order to avoid scaring away dancers from other schools, the evaluation was held offsite in a public recreational center. Having never auditioned before, I was plagued with anxiety. But I desperately wanted to be in that company.

On the big day, I donned my pink tights and my black, sleeveless leotard. I twisted my ponytail into a tidy bun secured with an extensive selection of hairpins and ensnared in a light-brown, cafeteria-style hair net, to prevent any rebel strands from escaping. My hair was tugged back so tightly I appeared as slant-eyed as a woman with a Hollywood face lift. For the final touch, I shellacked my head with a can of Aquanet, the cheapest and most powerful, impenetrable hair spray known to womankind. Aquanet was the secret weapon of ballerinas and old ladies alike. With their coifs doused in the mixture, grannies could walk two miles to church in a windstorm and still arrive looking as if they'd just left the beauty salon. Ballerinas could spin like a tornado; their hair remained unshaken and as perfect as when they'd entered the room. I discovered, in my overzealous application of the magic potion, that one too many sprays of Aquanet turned a hairdo into a helmet.

Satisfied that my hair wasn't going anywhere, I headed over to the Recreational Center. The place was drab, dreary, and deserted. I was about an hour early, so I decided to use the extra time to warm up. Stretching turned out to be a redundant gesture, however, as my

nervousness made my muscles as loose and limp as a strand of cooked spaghetti. The other dance hopefuls started straggling in, and soon the entire studio reeked of Aquanet. (A whiff of the miracle solution transports me right back to my childhood dance days.) As the bewitching hour neared, I finally pulled out my pointe shoes, which I hadn't wanted strangling my toes any longer than was necessary. In my jittery state, I tried several times before tying the laces properly. After adjusting the seams on my tights to ensure that they were running straight up the backs of my legs, I was ready. There was no turning back now.

The audition was run as if we were complete strangers to Skye, even though every one of the ballerinas trying out was from the Dallas School. Skye referred to us not by name but by the specific number each of us had been given to pin onto our leotards. The atmosphere throughout the evaluation was somber, quiet, and tense; the minutes ticked by like I was waiting for water to boil. But throughout the experience I controlled my nerves enough to concentrate and pick up the ballet combinations. What a pleasant relief when the afternoon was finally over.

A few days later, a formal acceptance notice arrived in the mail: "CONGRATULATIONS! You have been selected to be a member of the SOUTHEAST BALLET THEATRE, as a Major Dancer. As you know, it is a new company, and with your help we plan on making it the finest company in the Mid-West." Not only had I been accepted into the "SBT," but I had also been selected for the Major Company, while the "minor" dancers were relegated to the Apprentice Company. Lest anyone forget their status, each subdivision had its own required uniform: The Major Dancers donned royal blue leotards while the Apprentices wore pale blue. Naturally, pink tights, pointe shoes, and a waistband made of quarter-inch elastic (used as an indicator of hip misalignment) were mandatory for everyone. Dressed accordingly, we rehearsed each and every Wednesday night for three hours. The attendance policy was strict: A measly two absences were allowed per year.

I arrived promptly, properly dressed, and a bit apprehensive for the initial meeting of the Southeast Ballet Theatre, for the first order of business was the dreaded "weigh-in." The ballerinas lined up like cattle being sized for market value, except in this case, bigger was not better. Skye stood, clipboard in hand, recording the official pounds and

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ounces of each dancer, measuring their worth by weight, or lack thereof. My five-foot-seven-inch frame housed a ninety-four-pound weakling. Even though I was skinny and passed inspection, standing on that scale to have my tonnage assessed was nerve-wracking, embarrassing, and felt like an invasion of my privacy.

With the amplitude of each dancer duly noted, we began work on our first annual production of the world's most pervasive ballet, that Christmas-time favorite with a title that makes every man shiver: *The Nutcracker*. I was familiar with the ballet, as my mother once took me to downtown Detroit to see a professional rendition. I didn't understand why the little girl, Clara, would want an ugly, nut-crushing soldier toy for Christmas instead of a pretty baby doll, but few ballet stories did make sense to me. I relied heavily on the written explanation in the program book.

Skye cast me in the "Waltz of the Flowers," the grand, climactic number performed by the "corps de ballet" (a.k.a. the "ensemble"). In the dance, we did a lot of chasing each other around in circles. The cascade of floral tulle was quite lovely to watch, but the stampede of wooden toe shoes resulted in unwanted knocking sounds masking Tchaikovsky's famous score. Silencing our steps was a skill in and of itself.

I longingly watched as other dancers were chosen for the passionate Spanish dance, the strenuous, gymnastic, Russian dance, and the exotic Arabian dance where supple girls bent their bodies in ways nature never intended. My special role was one of six "flutes" in the *Danse des Mirlitons*. It didn't have the spice, sultriness, or shock value of the other dances, but I loved the section where we crossed arms, held hands, and piqued as a synchronized unit. As is the prerogative of the artistic director, Skye gave herself the sweetest part of all, the Sugar Plum Fairy. During rehearsal one night, a journalist from the *Suburban Press and Guide* took photos; of all the fascinating performers, only two other flutes and I were immortalized in the newspaper.

Before long, I moved up in the ranks, rising to the top like cream, eventually even replacing Skye as the most famous of all fairies. In addition to taking over her Sugar Plum role, I played Princess Aurora (Sleeping Beauty) in *Sleeping Beauty*, pricking my finger on the spindle of the spinning wheel and falling dramatically to the floor. I played dead for so long before Prince Charming awoke me with a kiss that my leg

actually did go to sleep, and I was well into my solo before the feeling in my appendage returned.

There were plenty of talented girls at the studio to play the female characters in our ballets, but it was such a struggle to find qualified dancers for the lead male roles that sometimes, at great expense, Skye even shipped in a professional. With such a dire shortage of testosterone around the place, the Dallas women were always on the lookout for unsuspecting guys they could lure in and snatch up for partners. Dads, brothers, the mailman, or any able-bodied male, for that matter, didn't dare set foot in the door of the studio, or the next thing they knew they were on stage in tights and a dance belt (the equivalent of a jock strap) bench pressing a teen ballerina. Watching a grown man attempt to do ballet wasn't half as shocking as seeing him wear tights. I never did get used to that; it was impossible not to stare at that bulge. It takes a secure fellow to tiptoe around on stage for an audience with his rear end and private parts shrink-wrapped for all to see.

That was the terrible fate of Roger, a poor, unwitting, thirty-something, long-distance runner, who made the mistake of joining our ballet class to improve his flexibility and, much to his wife's dismay, ended up as the Fairy King Oberon in our production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Luckily, with his taut and toned physique, he looked about as good in tights as could be expected of any man.

Playing Queen Titania, I was Roger's partner in the ballet, and although he couldn't dance to save his soul, he was tall, muscular, strong, and could grab me by the waist and lift me over his head on cue. He held me with a death grip; my back had the bruises of his fingerprints to prove it, but at least he didn't let me fall. As King Oberon, Roger had to do some of that ballet-pantomime-acting in the show. I never did figure out what he was communicating, but I think he was supposed to be mad, because he shook his fist a lot. We attended the same church, and, when I saw him there, I blushed under the eyes of God, embarrassed that I had a pretty good idea what his family jewels looked like, having seen him in tights.

Roger also danced with Belinda, another one of our prima ballerinas, and was partnering her on stage the day it happened. No one could stop talking about it. There she was, spinning in circles, her back to his stomach, legs wrapped around his waist, arms high in the air and back arched like a hood ornament, when her breasts just plopped right

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out of her costume. Skye laughed hysterically. Belinda seemed to take it all in stride, but I knew if that ever happened to me I would keel over and die. Perhaps the cortisone shots she received to assuage her aching feet had numbed her feelings of modesty as well.

Like Belinda and the rest of the Dallas elite, I practically lived at the studio, taking classes four nights a week and attempting to teach tap to rambunctious toddlers on Saturdays. Dance was now my life. It gave me a place in the world. To me, the human race could be separated into two categories: dancers and normal people. Once I dubbed myself a dancer, I never wanted to be normal again.

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The Dallas School of Dance closed its doors during the summer, so, in order to get our dance fix, a couple classmates and I attended a two-week Cecchetti ballet conference held at Michigan State University. We lived in dorms and took ballet classes all day long except for the one allotted jazz class. Jazz dance was the dessert at the end of a healthy meal of ballet. We knew it wasn't really good for us but it was a special treat after a hard day of "real" dancing.

The ballet classes were stressful and required full concentration at all times. Unlike at Hattie's, where we repeated the exact same exercises all year and could perform them in our sleep, at the conference, we were taught new and different combinations for every class, so we had to focus, pick up, and execute the steps with lightning speed. Some teachers would demonstrate the choreography using their hands as feet. Others would just tell you the moves in French without demonstrating at all: "Jeté, temps levé, jeté, temps levé, glissade, brisé, assemblé, changement!" We were separated into small groups to perform the combination for the rest of the class. You couldn't let your attention wane for a second or you'd be in the center of the room, fumbling about, looking like a numbskull in front of all the others.

The guest teachers patrolled the rooms, hunting for sickled feet, poor posture, and other violations. I got busted. "You must SEW the elastic bands to your ballet slippers. Never PIN them," scolded ballet mistress Madame Martinez. Petrified and ashamed, I completed the lesson and then ran in search of needle and thread.

My ballet classes made me so uptight I could no longer absorb the combinations and was paralyzed with fear of making a mistake. Something had to be done to put me out of my misery, or I'd never last the full two weeks. Reminding myself why I started dancing in the first

place, I decided to lighten up, have fun, not worry, and try to enjoy the experience. My method worked, and soon I was dancing with more joy than fear.

Scholarship auditions to attend the next workshop were held; to placate Skye, I reluctantly entered for my ability level. Even though I hated the idea of competing and dreaded being judged on my dancing, I smiled and made the best of the situation.

The conference culminated in the Awards Ceremony and Performance during which the winning contestants were announced. Skye and Hattie attended the event, which was held in a large auditorium at the university, and we all sat together awaiting the verdict. As my category was called, my heart pounded, and my legs turned to jelly. I didn't expect to win, but, confident I had done a good job at the audition, I allowed for the possibility. "And the first runner-up is ... Kristi Davis!" I could hardly believe my ears. Another ballerina was awarded the scholarship, but I didn't care, because I had won *something*. It was the first time my abilities had been acknowledged outside the Dallas School. Maybe I do have talent!

My prize was only a bouquet of flowers and prima ballerina Margot Fonteyn's autobiography, but I couldn't have been more proud. They noticed me! At our celebration dinner, I called home to tell my parents the good news, and it took a long time to convince my mother I was telling the truth.

The following fall, I took first place in a Dance Masters of Michigan competition, where we were judged not only on ballet but tap and jazz as well. Second place went to another Dallas student, Dorissa, a champion baton twirler who could spin like a top. She'd throw her baton miles up to the heavens, turn a dozen times in a second, like a blender on high speed, and catch that whirling stick without batting an eye. This girl could even maneuver her baton using only her elbows and lips!

My winning streak made me a star at the studio, but, still shy and insecure, I never felt like one. My change of status was apparent, as Dorissa and I were pictured for free in the Dallas recital program along with a caption listing our titles. In addition, Skye and Hattie requested a solo picture (also gratis) of their new celebrity. In my sequined, snow-white tutu, I posed on pointe in a beautiful attitude derriere. Hattie wrote the accompanying text, and I knew I had finally made it to the top of the Dallas School of Dance.



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Having proven my competition potential, Skye and Hattie decided I should enter the Miss Suburbs Pageant. There wasn't much in this world they loved more than a beauty queen, and even I was mesmerized at the thought of garnering my own sparkling rhinestone tiara. After all, my lovely mother had been Homecoming Queen in high school, my winsome Aunt Wilma Jean had been the Iowa Beef Queen, and my darling Aunt Nancy had been crowned Iowa's Favorite Farmer's Daughter. Royal blood flowed through my veins! My dad quickly squelched the idea, however. "You're NOT wearing a bathing suit on stage?" His stern inquiry made it clear this was a rhetorical question. Ah well. I was never much interested in competing anyway, so I didn't press the issue. Ninny Boil, another girl from my class, entered, won, and had her picture (in gown, crown, sash, and with trophy) added to the collection of photos on the studio's Wall of Fame. The Dallas pair had now fostered royalty, and my measly Dance Masters triumph was a distant memory.

Unless you were being crowned something prestigious enough to get your picture in the paper along with a statement about hailing from Hattie's, the Dallas gals were not big on their students skipping class for non-dance-related activities. Missing for track meets, piano concerts, cheerleading, or anything that didn't resemble a coronation was frowned upon. So when in my junior year of high school, I landed my first lead role in a musical (Ado Annie in *Oklahoma*) and would have to forgo a few ballet company rehearsals, Skye adamantly said, "NO!" I was forced to choose between the Southeast Ballet Theatre and the Rogers and Hammerstein show about cowfolk.

Quitting the ballet company that meant so much to me was a horrifying prospect. I lived and breathed pointe shoes and tutus. But this was a LEAD ROLE IN A MUSICAL! How could I turn down the opportunity? Having already played the best fairies and other prima ballerina parts, I opted to stretch my wings and try singing and acting as well as dancing. This difficult decision did not go over well with Skye. Not at all. One thing led to another, and I realized I needed to leave the Dallas studio for good. Leaving my dance home and the teacher I had idolized for so long was heartbreaking, but it was now Oklahoma or bust.

Playing a main character in a musical was foreign territory for me. I'd waltzed around with the ensemble before, had the odd line here and there, even danced the dream ballet solo in *Carousel*, but this was real

responsibility. I had pages of dialogue to memorize. I had to sing alone. Sure, I had been singing in choirs for years but not solo. And I knew nothing about acting. I begged my best friend's mom, a community theatre actress and director, for private coaching.

My character, Ado Annie, was a promiscuous, goofy, simple country girl who was always ready for a romp in the hay. This floozy sings about how she "just cain't say no" to men and ends up "in a terrible fix." The performances would have gone off without a hitch if it weren't for the not-keyed-in musical director. Perhaps his mind had wandered off to wondering why in God's name he'd relinquished his fantasy of being a famous jazz musician to teach insolent teenagers and where to numb his despondency with a stiff drink. I couldn't say for sure, but he was not paying attention and forgot to give me the starting note for my solo, which began a cappella. I waited. And waited. And waited for that critical, guiding tone. It never came. Finally I gave up hope of any musical help, and commenced breaking the awkward silence by singing. Regrettably, when the orchestra started playing, we were in different keys. Horror! Hot flash! Eventually, after some vocal floundering, I was able to sync up with the tune. I was beyond embarrassed but had to snap out of it quickly. That's part of the excitement of live theatre: Stuff is bound to go wrong, and you just can't get too keyed up about it for the show must go on.

The best part of the performance was curtain call. Lining up the length of the stage, the entire company held hands and took a bow together. The curtain lowered while the crowd was still applauding, and we all cheered. I held back tears. It felt so good! This was a team effort and a lot more fun than sitting in the corner alone after a dance recital, patting myself on the back for a job well done.

My senior year, I landed another choice part, Hedy La Rue in *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. My best friend was cast as Rose, the serious, female ingenue, and I played the sexy, dumb, funny sidekick who spoke in a squeaky voice and flitted about in high heels. Fearful of opening my mouth and releasing discordant notes in public again, I took a couple of voice lessons from a local voice teacher. Luckily, I only had one solo in the show, and it was corny so I could ham it up and hide my lack of training. I truly loved the musicals.

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Although devastated about quitting Hattie's, I couldn't bear to stop dancing, so I moved to her rival studio, Priscilla Prescott's School of

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Dance. You couldn't be more of a traitor than to leave Hattie's for Priscilla's, but Priscilla was the only other good teacher in town. I felt I had no choice. Still, the decision was difficult to make, as changing studios is like denouncing your citizenship to your native country. The instant you register for lessons somewhere, you swear an automatic allegiance to that place. You know not to become too friendly with a kid from another dance facility, and if one were to corner you at school, to reveal only your name, rank, and serial number. "They tortured me, and I told them about plies and shuffle-off-to-Buffalos! Dear God! I told them about Buffalos!" There was no telling the dance secrets you might spill if bullied, so it was best to just avoid dancers from other studios, if at all possible.

It was common knowledge that Hattie and Priscilla were arch enemies. The competition between them was so fierce, if the two somehow ended up in the same room they would surely pull each others' hair out in a down-and-dirty catfight. Back at Hattie's, Priscilla's name was spoken in hushed tones if someone dared ever speak it at all. When one of you-know-who's best students, Ninny Boil (yes, the same Ninny who won the Miss Suburbs Pageant), defected to Hattie's, the Dallas gals were more than happy to offer her asylum. Acquiring the competition's *crème de la crème* was a major coup, and there was much rejoicing. For her treason, Ninny was rewarded with the red carpet treatment and lead roles, but she could never show her face at her former studio again. So, as a deserter entering Priscilla's for the first time, I felt like I had to look over my shoulder to make sure the Dallas clan didn't have spies following me.

Surprisingly, Priscilla was not at all fearsome. She was classy, trustworthy, and not interested in having her students compete. She commanded respect, because she treated you respectfully. Her hair was perfectly coiffed, and her dancer's body was thin and toned. Someone said she had danced with the Royal Ballet in London. She could have been royalty herself as posh as she was. Her students were required to have two years of ballet before being allowed to take jazz, which annoyed some people but cut out the riffraff. The atmosphere at Priscilla's was like a library compared to the three-ring circus at Hattie's.

It was hard changing studios and starting over after all those years at Hattie's. I didn't know the girls at Priscilla's and was too shy to make many new friends. Accustomed to playing lead roles, I had to start back

at the bottom and move up the ranks. On the up side, Priscilla was an extremely wonderful person, and she helped me improve my pirouettes, which had been troubling me for years. Still, I never really got into my groove there.

My momentum seemed to be fizzling out, making it all the more surprising when my mother received a phone call from out of the blue. “Mrs. Davis? This is Priscilla Prescott. I think Kristi has the potential to be a professional dancer, and I am willing to help her if she’s interested.” Mom and I were flattered and floored, knocked down and tickled pink. Nevertheless, I only considered this preposterous idea for a nanosecond. I truly didn’t believe I was that good. Although obsessed with dance throughout my childhood, the thought of doing it for a living had never occurred to me. Dancing professionally seemed like a lark, not a viable vocation. I didn’t know any professional dancers and hadn’t the slightest notion of how to go about becoming one even if I were crazy enough to want to try. Hence, Priscilla’s generous offer, while tremendously appreciated, was rebuffed.

Performing was my soul food and dance was my identity, but I was also an excellent student from an academic family. My parents were stable, scholarly types, and I always assumed I’d follow in their unfancy footsteps. I knew I’d become a college graduate as surely as I knew I’d grow up to be a woman. As valedictorian of my high school class, I was expected to do great things—to lead the people of this nation, earn a Nobel Prize, end world hunger, or discover a cure for cancer. At the very least, I was supposed to do something that would make my parents proud. Something as frivolous as dance, I reckoned, did not fill the bill.

So, with my passion for performing smoldering on the back burner, I ended up a stone’s throw away from home at the University of Michigan where I schizophrenically flip-flopped from engineering to business school to finally settling on a degree in psychology for lack of a better option. Before long, however, I was itching to dance again, so I auditioned for and joined a student-run dance company called Impact Jazz Dance. Little did I know, this one ostensibly minor decision would cause me to meet a young woman who would jazz up my life tremendously and wildly impact my future dance career. Her name was Jenny.

On the surface it seemed that Jenny and I couldn’t have been more different. She was an outspoken, lanky, 5’10”, Bohemian, ultra-

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feminist, worldly, New York City native, who had apprenticed with the American Ballet Theatre in New York. I was a shy, curvaceous, naïve, Midwestern, Disney-esque, ex-cheerleader, sorority girl trained at a modest local dance school. It seemed we had little in common except our love of dance. She regarded me with slight disdain due to my affiliations with the Greek sorority system and my prior relationship with pom-poms, but I found her fascinating, though a tad intimidating.

As our time at Michigan came to a close, my friends and I ruminated about life after college and began preparing, like the other seniors, to get a job. What on earth was I going to do? Following the herd, I bought the proverbial interview suit: an expensive, conservative, gray wool blazer with knee-length matching skirt, high-collar ruffled blouse, and sensible black pumps. Feeling like a kid pretending to be a frumpy, middle-aged accountant, I attempted to play grown-up and get excited about finding employment, assuming responsibility, and buying a house some day.

I poured over the printout listing job interview opportunities offered by the myriad companies eager to take on Michigan grads. Do I want to be an actuarial? What the heck is an actuarial? How about a headhunter? A marketing assistant? In human resources? Sell insurance? Perhaps I should vie for one of the coveted corporate positions with Proctor and Gamble working to make neon-green dinosaur-shaped fruit roll-ups more profitable? Or apply to be a sales rep for Del Monte fighting over prominent grocery store shelf space for fruit juice and canned peaches? What can one do with a Bachelor's degree in psychology anyway?

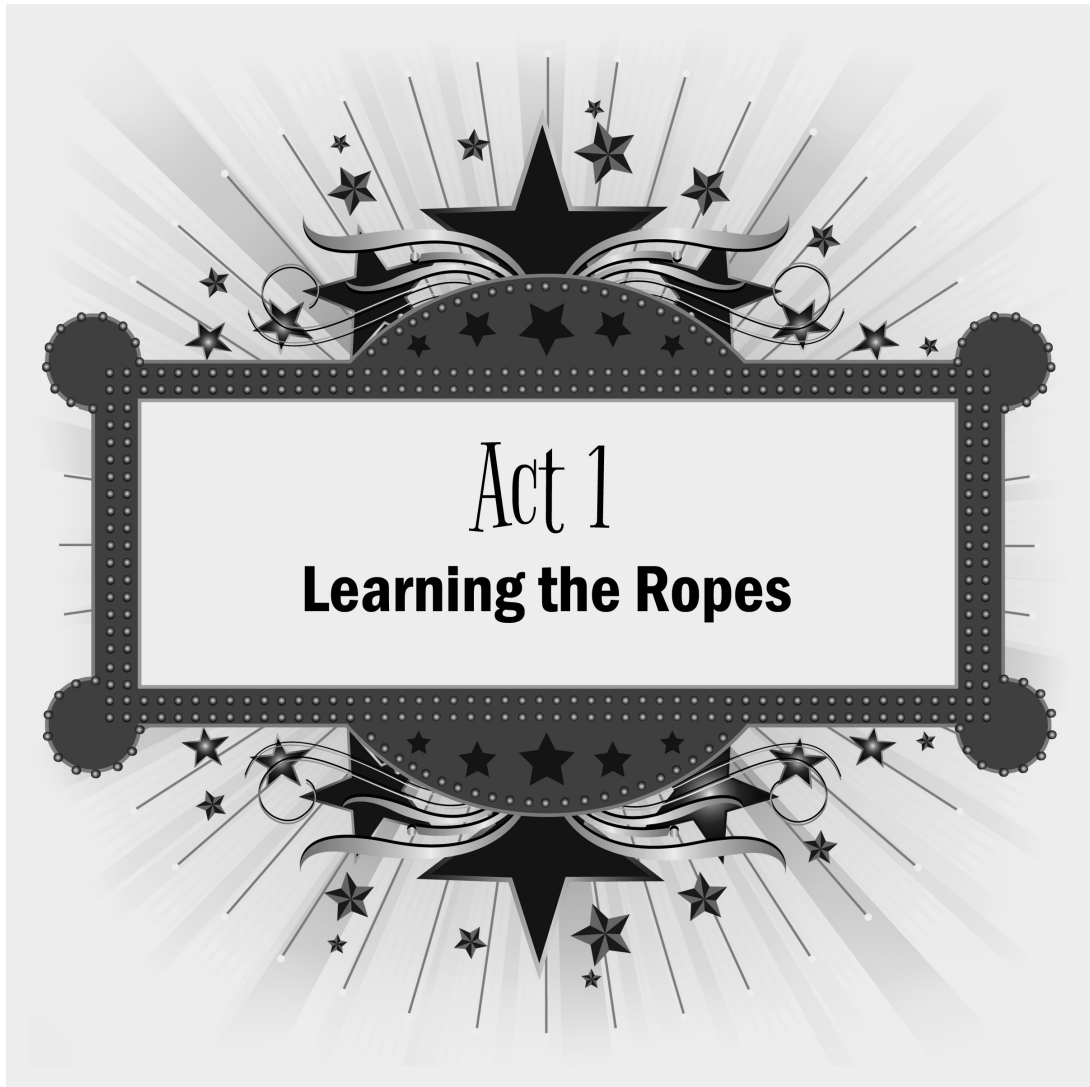
The thought of choosing any of these careers gave me a splitting headache and put me into a gloomy funk. For the entire week following graduation, I cried. I loved my social life at school with my sorority sisters and the zany, outgoing, artistic, talented friends I'd met through Impact Jazz. My life had been full to the brim with activities, events, and parties. Every day offered a new and exciting adventure. What do I have to look forward to now? A boring, predictable existence where my sole purpose in life is to make money? Settling down with the sensible folk? My stimulating student lifestyle had come to a screeching halt. I was the proud owner of a top-rate education but had no idea what I was going to do with it.

To make matters worse, I pondered the imminent end of my performing days and distressed over whom I would be if no longer a

dancer. I couldn't think of anything else that made me special, that separated me from the rest of the population, that gave me worth. Terrified of losing myself if I quit dancing, I spiraled into a deep, dark pit of despair. When Jenny asked, "Kristi, what are you going to do after graduation?" I stared blankly into space. "Move to New York to become a professional dancer with me," she commanded. Faced with seemingly dire career options, I actually considered her offer.

Jenny was abandoning her major—mathematics; she realized her true love was dance. Manhattan was her hometown, and she could always live with her parents if worse came to worse. What did she have to lose? More importantly, what did I have to lose? I hadn't the foggiest idea what would be in store for me if I flippantly threw away my stuffy business suit and college education for a sexy leotard and dance class. Was it wise to turn my back on the relatively safe, comfortable, practical world of nine-to-five and venture into the wild unknown of show business? Would I be heading blindly into a Bermuda Triangle of thespians, likely to mysteriously disappear with the other reckless showbiz wannabes, never to be seen on stage again? What should I do?

With a seemingly useless Bachelor's Degree in Psychology and no clue where my life was heading, I took a month-long, soul-searching backpacking trip through Europe. Discovering a world full of fascinating people, places, and experiences, I was impassioned, inspired, and couldn't wait to see what the next day would entail. I felt so alive and wanted that spirit of adventure to stick with me forever. When I returned home I had my answer: "God, I'm a dancer. A dancer dances!"



## **Final Scene: New York City, August 9, 2002**

Priscilla was right: I *was* good enough to be a professional, I admitted to myself, as I shifted to a more comfortable position in my airplane seat. The clues had been there all along. I never did take Priscilla up on her offer, opting for college instead. But what if I had? How might my life have turned out differently? Regardless, I made it. Even though I didn't attend a prestigious conservatory of dance or some phenomenal university known for its musical theatre program. Even though I didn't apprentice with the American Ballet Theatre or study under the tutelage of a world-renowned instructor. On the contrary, the core of my dance schooling came from Dolly Dinkle studios, and it was pretty good training, as it turns out. After all, I managed to milk all my childhood dance lessons enough to create a pretty healthy career and recoup my parents' sizable investment.

The pilot's voice on the intercom jolted me back to the present. "Flight attendants, prepare for landing." Giving an imaginary salute to all my dance teachers, I opened my eyes just as the island of Manhattan was coming into view. New York City: the birthplace of my showbiz career and now, it appeared, the final resting place as well. I had come full circle, and this symbolic sense of completion was not lost on me.

After disembarking, I forged my way through the hustle and bustle of JFK and grabbed a cab to my dear old college friend Jenny's house in Astoria, Queens, where I'd be staying. "Hot enough for ya, today?" I said, trying to make cheerful small talk with the foreign cabbie. "That sun's been brutal all week," he replied shaking his head. I recalled the hot July day that had greeted me when I first came to New York fresh out of college.

The streets of Astoria were familiar, but I felt like an entirely different person than I did during my maiden voyage to Queens. It was hard to believe fifteen years had passed since my first professional dance gig in this most infamous of cities. So much has happened to New York, and so much has happened to me, I marveled, since that fateful summer in 1987 when I began my journey into show business.