

2008

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Recommended Citation

Allardice, James. "The Dancer." *The Iowa Review* 38.3 (2008): 134-136. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.6531>

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JAMES ALLARDICE

The Dancer

Her father would call out, “Dance for me, Jenny,” and she would dance. Each Friday night, the small ball of gray at the end of the sofa—her mother—would read her Danielle Steel, but her father would watch his eight-year-old girl spin across the living room carpet, her ponytailed blond hair and her pink ribbon—freshly pressed—sailing behind her. Her faded pink tutu would bounce to the melodies of *Full House* and *Home Improvement* that drifted out from the TV, and the re-glued glitter on her leotard—last year’s birthday present, now too tight—would sparkle in the light of the lamp above her father’s La-Z-Boy recliner. Even his cigarette smoke, funneled up by the lampshade, would sway to the beat of her dance.

“Do you see my little girl, Ellen? Do you see her?” he would shout as Jenny flung herself across the room in wild pirouettes before crumpling to the floor before him. “Jenny’s going to be a great ballerina.”

Without looking up from her book, her mother would point out, “That would take a lot of lessons. More than we can afford on your salary.”

But the two of them would ignore her, and Jenny would whirl across the floor. Finally, hot and exhausted and a little tipsy, she would curtsy. Her father would laugh and break into applause. A smile from her would open his wallet, and he would toss her a dollar. With a gleeful plié, she would bend down and pick up her allowance.

“You’re going to be great some day, Jenny, and I’m going to come and see you dance,” he would say, and she would smile again.

Her mother would close her book and say, “This is all very cute, but it’s far past your bedtime, young lady.”

Her slumping shoulders would pray, “Daddy?” and of course he would accede. “Jesus, Ellen. It’s not a school night... besides, it’s only nine.” Then, her mother would know it was really *her* bedtime.

Her mother would pad out of the room, and a tortoise-shell cat would pounce into the warm depression in the sofa. Her father

would howl, “Encore, encore.” And so, bounding off the sofa and leaping from a kitchen chair, she would dance for him. The TV would become her barre as she stretched her leg out behind her—her run-lined tights stretching, almost ripping—and she would hold a shaky arabesque for the longest time. Then, right in front of him, she would twirl on her tiptoes until they ached and her plastic tiara flew off and she could feel her red face pulsing. Then she would crash into her father’s lap, and he would give her a big kiss. The cat would slip out of the room, leaving the two of them alone.

There, in the lap of his slick-worn blue jeans, tucked in his sweet-smelling flannel shirt, she would watch TV. His warm hand, pressing against her tights, would hold her tight. His aftershave would intoxicate her; she would plead with him for a tiny sip of his beer, and of course, he would give in. His fingers would flutter across her stomach, tickling a laugh out of her that would invite a laugh from him. She would beg him to stop, but of course he wouldn’t, and he would tickle her until she almost peed in her pants. She would beg another sip of his beer. The fuzzy tattoo on his arm would ripple as they howled at Carol Burnett and Johnny Carson.

As though watching TV, she would see him pick up the heavy, drooping body of his daughter and carry it into her bedroom. He would place it on the bed and scoot the cat away. Slipping the ballet slippers off the tiny bound feet, he would expose the crimson nail polish that had been stolen from the bathroom cabinet. The stiff tutu would slide off the thin waist. He would gently pull at the pink ribbon, and the ponytail would fall apart, and he would stroke the blond hair. He would say—every Friday night he would whisper—“Sweet dreams, Jenny, sweet dreams,” and he would kiss the quivering cheek. His hand would glide across the taut stomach, teasing and tickling. The pushed-away Care Bears would bounce onto the floor, and the discarded old leotard would fall from the trembling bed. Like the blown-glass angel on the shelf above the bed, she would look down upon the two of them.

Faraway, now clothed in ink, she still dances. An indigo angel on her shoulder watches over her as she hangs Chagall-like in a firm arabesque above everyone. Her thigh tightens, her calf strains, and yet she holds it. They call out, “Dance for me, Jenny,” but she can barely hear them over the room-rattling music. She swings her leg around the pole, pulling them right out of their seats, but a green-

eyed dragon rises up her back and spits at them. A quick pirouette and then another and another. She spots herself in the mirror. She flies around again, and the lights, punching holes in the blackness, swirl around her. Again she spots herself. When she stops, her now-black hair sails across her face and cascades down her breasts as the room whirls around her. A rattlesnake twists around her stomach. It holds her tight and bares its fangs at them. The pole, her barre, steadies her. Their heads bob with each plié, each one timed to the thundering drumbeat. She steps into fifth position, and hangs weightless and motionless; a pair of yellow cat eyes above her right breast glares at them as they wait for her next move. She can only see dark shapes and blurry faces, clapping and laughing and shouting. Her snake hisses and they pull back. The lightness of her arms pretends to invite them in, but she turns away and disappears behind the pole. When she reappears, someone calls out, "Dance for me, Jenny," and she takes off. She furiously pirouettes again and again and again, so fast their smoke can't touch her painted skin. Their eyes follow her and their mouths drop.

She is at the edge; she mimes a smile and makes them open their clammy wallets. With a delicate plié, she bends down to pick up her money. She smiles again, and their hands reach out to her, but she pulls away.

Again, this Friday night like each Friday night of her life, she dances. She spins away from her bed, leaving him crumpled and spent. She twirls across the bedroom and out of the window.