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## **The Nutcracker**

### *The Nutcracker "The Overture" Act 1*

Mary Beth is sitting in the audience. Her hair is rung through with her fingers, her eyes covered by sunglasses worn by college students for a hangover. She is laying back in her seat, a microphone kissing the edges of her lips. She yells for the first four girls to run out. They have to courtesy on five, six, seven, eight of the first four counts of the music. I'm sitting close to the speaker backstage. It is nine o'clock at night, and I have lost track of how many hours I have spent sitting here. I'm wearing a black Ballet Tucson sweatshirt which was all we were able to wear. I can feel the tips of my fingers clamming up from the cold.

### *The Nutcracker "The March" Act 1*

It is our first rehearsal. Mary Beth has cast nine party girls instead of the six that she needs. She calls it a "pretend audition", telling us that whoever is the best won't have to share the part. It was never an audition. It is the third song of the "Party Scene". I sing the choreography in time with the music. "Dosey doe, around and switch, dosey doe around and switch." I duck under the pretend bridge, a girl sticking out her toe, so I will fall. I stop thinking. The music tells me what step is next, and where to go. I let my eyes close. I have to share the party girl part.

### *The Nutcracker "Gifts/Herr Drosomeyer's arrival with his Nephew" Act 1*

The first thirty seconds of the song is my favorite moment in the ballet. His name was Isaiah, and he was my "party dad" and we were able to dance together for the first thirty seconds. I sing it along in my head, my brain thinking of the next step, my face smiling towards Isaiah. I have forgotten about Mary Beth at the microphone. She yells for me to get on the yellow tape. I look down at my feet to see that they are only one centimeter away from the yellow tape. I stand on the yellow tape exactly. She yells louder into the microphone.

### *The Nutcracker "Guest's Goodbye" Act 1*

Mary Beth brings in the costumes for each party girl to try on. I am originally the blue girl, sharing with a girl named Rose. I am told to try the dress on first. I stand in front of the rest of the girls, and stick out both of my arms, my palms flipped upward. She wraps the dress around the rest of my body, her hands reaching behind me to find the zipper. She reaches inside of the dress and her fingernails cut deep into my stomach. I will have nail marks there for the rest of the day. Her hands move up closer to my chest and grip me tighter to her, her other hand pulling tighter on the zipper. *Too big, too fat, she says.* I am forced to change to be the green party girl. Mary Beth tells everyone who will listen that I was just too big to fit in the other dress.

### *The Nutcracker "The Battle" Act 1*

It is three o'clock on a Tuesday. I am wearing my pair of pink tights and Mary Beth is sitting back in the audience. She keeps repeating the same thing, about the long day ahead of us. Party Scene staging comes after this. I am one of the Rats or Big Mice as Mary Beth liked to call them. She walks up onto the stage pulling out a wedgie. She looks at me, I turn away from her flattening my hair, trying to get the curls to stop from bouncing up. She yells at a ten-year-old because they are out of line, then a couple of twelve-year-olds. We move on to the big circle, I reach down to pick up one of my toy soldiers. My partner who is supposed to help me lift doesn't want to help. My hands are sticky with sweat. I move her forward, as she slips slightly out of my hand. I am told she is in the wrong spot. I am forced to lift her by myself ten more times. She plays the music for me saying it should help me focus. The music simply distracts me, but it cuts out her voice. Mary Beth shakes her head at me muttering to herself. I am the reason that we are all stuck here because I can't see where the red mark is on the stage.

### *The Nutcracker "Waltz of the Snowflakes" Act 1*

It is the hardest scene to do. If one person is out of line, the others following behind will fall. We sit in the dressing room. The music isn't loud enough to hear. It is an eerie silence, the soft tones of voices from upstairs saying something. I hear the singing of girls as it reaches the end of the snow scene, the music must have been turned up louder. I cover my ears, praying that no one falls. Not so that they won't hurt themselves, but because I don't want to hear Mary Beth scream.

#### *Intermission*

Some dance with the music, others dance because of the music.

#### *The Nutcracker "Candy Cane" Act 2*

The dance had been taken off Pointe a few years before. Mary Beth thought that we should try it on Pointe. It was a simple dance mostly running to different spots on the stage. She slowed the song down in rehearsal when we started learning it, her hand was clutching a diet coke with the straw piercing her mouth. I wasn't sharp enough on the diagonal. She watched only me, seeing if I could be exactly on the four different corners. It didn't matter if anyone else was. She shook her head and looked at me. I was going to be the reason that we didn't get to do the dance on Pointe, Mary Beth thought. I made notes after that rehearsal, practiced turning to the four corners of my bedroom, in time to the music. The first thirty seconds, playing on a loop. We did the dance on Pointe, Mary Beth said she was surprised I pulled it together.

#### *The Nutcracker "Sugar Plum Fairy and Cavalier Pas de Deux" Act 2*

I sat outside in the Ballet Tucson hallway. I went into the kitchen pouring myself a small glass of water. Mary Beth came inside. She asked if I was eating. I said no. She said that was good that a girl like me shouldn't be eating anyway. I went back into the studio watching Jenna be lifted in the air, the music reaching its crescendo. I thought whatever was happening to me when I was lifted like that it wouldn't matter. The music softened, I remember wanting to cry. I didn't have enough in me to cry. The music ended.

#### *The Nutcracker "Sugar Plum Fairy and Cavalier Coda" Act 2*

Jenna was always the sugar plum fairy. We were both redheads, and I was considered to be the lesser version of her. She was forty years old and still dancing the same dance. She was too old to still be a dancer, but Mary Beth had never liked change, or anything different. In the Coda, the sugar plum fairy has to do eight *fouettes* and Jenna was never able to do them. Her legs wouldn't support her anymore. We watched from the wings. I stood close to my friend, she was in awe of what Jenna could do, I was praying that she wouldn't fall.

#### *The Nutcracker "The Finale" Act 2*

On the last day, and the last show, people would pretend to be sad, but smile when they thought no one was watching. It was my last one. Mary Beth didn't know I was leaving. She knew I had come to interview for Interlochen, but she didn't know I had decided to go. I think a part of her was sad that I was leaving, not because I was leaving, but because she couldn't yell at me anymore. A wrong part of her brain enjoyed what she was doing to me. I was the girl. She pushed me until I either broke or became her. I broke. She got away with it because no one believed a teacher would do that to a student. Abuse was something to be expected in the dance world. I finished the finale on the last note, my knee hitting the ground. We stood up and bowed. I remember I started to cry. I walked away, my face red from the make-up wipe that had smudged the lipstick. I saw Mary Beth as I left. I remember running in the opposite direction, afraid that she had seen me. Afraid that she would say good-bye. They played the final songs of the Nutcracker on repeat the last day. The finale was stuck in my head.