

They were dancers. Their whole lives, nearly. They were dancers who taught dance and taught it well, as their mother had.

"Every girl wants to be a ballerina . . ."

That's what their brochure said, their posters, their website, the sentence scrolling across the screen in stately cursive.

The Durant School of Dance, est. 1986 by their mother, a former soloist with the Alberta Ballet, took up the top two floors of a squat, rusty brick office building downtown. It had become theirs after their parents died on a black-ice night more than a dozen years ago, their car caroming across the highway median. When an enterprising local reporter learned it had been their twentieth wedding anniversary, he wrote a story about them, noting their hands were interlocked even in death.

Had one of them reached out to the other in those final moments, the reporter wondered to readers, or had they been holding hands all along?

All these years later, the story of their parents' end, passed down like lore, still seemed unbearably romantic to their students-less so to Marie, who, after sobbing violently next to her sister, Dara, through the funeral, insisted, I never saw them hold hands once.

But the Durant family had always been exotic to others, even back when Dara and Marie were little girls floating up and down the front steps of that big old house with the rotting gingerbread trim on Sycamore, the one everyone called the Hansel and Gretel house. Dara and Marie, with their long necks and soft voices. Their matching buns and duckfooted gait, swathed in scratchy winter coats, their pink tights dotting the snow. Even their names set them apart, sounding elegant and continental even though their father was an electrician and a living-room drunk and their mother had grown up eating mayonnaise sandwiches every meal, as she always told her daughters, head shaking with rue.

From kindergarten until fifth and sixth grade, Dara and Marie had attended a spooky old Catholic school on the east side, the one their father had insisted upon. Until the day their mother announced that, going forward, she would be giving them lessons at home, so they wouldn't be beholden to the school's primitive views of life.

Their father resisted at first, but then he came to pick them up at the schoolyard one day and saw a boy—the meanest in fifth grade, with a birthmark over his left eye like a fresh burn—trying to pull Marie's pants down, purple corduroys to Dara's matching pink. Marie just stood there, staring at him, her fingers touching her forehead as though bewildered, transfixed.

Their father swerved over so fast his Buick came up on the curb, the grass. Everyone saw. He grabbed the little boy by the haunches and shook him until the nuns rushed over. What kind of school, he wanted to know, are you running here?

On the car ride home, Marie announced loudly that she hadn't minded it at all, what the boy had done.

It made my stomach wiggle, she said much more quietly to Dara in the backseat.

Their father wouldn't talk to Marie for days. He telephoned the school and thundered at the principal, so loud they heard him from upstairs, in their bunkbed. Marie's face in the moonlight was shiny with tears. Marie and their father were both mysterious to Dara. Mysterious and alike somehow. Primitive, their mother called them privately.

They never went back.

At home, lessons were different every day. You could never guess. Some mornings, they'd get out the great big globe from their father's den and Dara and Marie would spin it and their mother would tell them something about the country on which their finger landed. (Singapore is the cleanest country in the world. The punishment for vandalism is caning.) Sometimes, she had to

look things up in the mildewed encyclopedia in the den, its covers soft with age. Often, it seemed like she was making things up (In France, there are two kinds of toilets . . .), and they would laugh about it, the three of them, their private jokes.

We are three, their mother used to say. (They were three until they were four, but this was before Charlie came, and all of that.)

But mostly, the day-every day-was about ballet.

Their father was away for work so often, and for so long. To this substation, or to that airfield, doing things with fiber optics-none of them knew, really.

When he was gone, they wore leotards all day and danced for hours and hours, in the practice room, along the second-floor landing, in the backyard thick with weeds. They danced all day, until their feet radiated, tingled, went numb. It didn't matter.

That was how Dara remembered it now.

House cats. That's what their mother used to call them, which was funny, if you thought about it, because their mother was the one who kept them home with her. Not one sleepover, nor camping trip, nor a neighbor's birthday party their entire childhood.

They made their own fun. Once, on Valentine's Day, they all cut out valentines from faded construction paper and their mother made a lesson for them about love. She talked about all the different kinds of love and how it changed and turned and you couldn't stop it. Love was always changing on you.

I'm in love, Marie said, like always, talking about the fifth-grade boy with the birthmark who pulled her pants down, who had once hid under her desk and tried to stick a pencil between her legs.

That's not love, their mother said, stroking Marie's babyfine hair, brushing the back of her hand against Marie's forever-pink cheek.

Then she told them their favorite story, the one about a famous ballerina named Marie Taglioni, whose devotees were so passionate they once paid two hundred rubles, a fortune at that time, for a single pair of her discarded pointe shoes. After the purchase, they cooked, garnished, and ate the pointe shoes with a special sauce.

That, their mother told them, is love.

Now, more than two decades later, the Durant School of Dance was theirs.

All day, six days a week for the past more-than-a-dozen years, Dara and Marie taught in the cramped, cozy confines of the same ashen building where their mother had once reigned. Steamy and pungent in the summer and frigid, its windows snow-blurred, in the winter, the studio never changed and was forever slowly falling apart. Often thick with must, overnight rain left weeping pockets in every ceiling corner, dripping on students' noses.

But it didn't matter, because the students always came. Over a hundred girls and a few boys, ages three to fifteen, Pre-Ballet I to Advanced IV. And a waitlist for the rest. In the past six years, they'd advanced fourteen girls and three boys to tier-one ballet schools and thirty-six to major competitions.

Every summer, they hired two additional instructors, three on weekends, but during the school year, it was just Dara and Marie. And, of course, Charlie, once their mother's prize student, her surrogate son, her son of the soul. And now Dara's husband. Charlie, who couldn't teach anymore because of his injuries but who ran all the business operations from the back office. Charlie, on whom so many students had passing crushes, a rite of passage, like the first time they took a razor blade to their hardened feet, or the first time they achieved turnout, rotating their legs from

their hip sockets, bodies pushed to contortion. Pushed so far, the feeling ecstatic. Her first time, Dara felt split open, laid bare.

The Durant School of Dance was an institution. Children, teens came from three counties to take classes with them. They came with sprightly dreams and limber bodies and hard little muscles and hungry, lean bellies and a desire to enter into the fairy tale that is dance to little girls and a few special little boys. They all wanted to participate in the storied Durant tradition set forth by their mother thirty or more years ago. Encore, ŽchappŽ, ŽchappŽ, watch those knees. Their mother, her voice subdued yet steely, striding across the floor, guiding everything, mastering everything.

But now it was Dara's and Marie's voices-Dara's low and flinty (Shoulders down, lift that leg, higher, higher . . .) and Marie's light and lilting, Marie calling out Here comes the Mouse King! to all her five-year-olds and bending her feet and hands into claws, the girls screaming with pleasure . . .

Charlie in the back office listening to parents bemoan their child's lack of discipline, the exorbitant cost of pointe shoes, the holiday schedule, Charlie nodding patiently as mothers spoke in hushed tones about their own long-ago ballet aspirations, of the mad fantasy of tutus and rosin, satin and tulle, floodlights and beaming faces, leaping endlessly into a lover's waiting arms.

Everything worked, nothing ever changed.

And yet gradually the Durant School of Dance, decades after opening in a former dry goods store with a drooping ceiling, had become a major success.

"I always knew it could be," Charlie said.

Which one does your daughter have? Dara or Marie?

They look so much alike, but Dara's dark to Marie's fair.

They look so much alike, but Dara has the long swan neck and Marie the long colt legs.

Both carry themselves with such poise. They show our daughters grace and bearing.

They bend and twist our squirmy, pigeon-breasted little girls into lithe and lissome dancers. Our girls walk into the Durant School shrill and strident, with the clatter of phones and the slap of flip-flops, and an hour later, they have been transformed into the strong, sweated stillness of an empress, a czarina, a Durant.

Our daughters love them both, especially Marie.

Marie, because she taught the younger ones. Because she would get down on the floor with them, would fix their loose braids and, when they burst into tears, secretly give them strawberry sugar wafers. After class, she might even teach them how to do that dance like their favorite pop singer if they showed her first on their phones. At day's end, Dara would peek into Marie's studio, the pastel crush of wafer crumbs, the abandoned hair ribbons and bent bobby pins, and wonder if Marie understood little girls too well.

Dara followed their mother's model. In her studio, she stood queen-like, her chin jutting like a wolf's-that's how Charlie described it-quick to correct, quick to unravel them, the girls with the lazy extension, the girls pirouetting with bent knees.

Someone had to keep up the tradition of rigor, of firm discipline, and it inevitably fell to Dara. Or suited her best. It was hard to tell the difference.

But, for the most part, to all the little girls, their faces upturned, their matching pink tights and scuffed leather slippers-still more to their parents who crowded the lobby, who steamed up the windows, unwrapping their children from fuzzy, puffy coats and nudging them, gently, into the studio-Dara and Marie were the same, but different.

Dara was cool, but Marie was hot.

Dara was dark, but Marie was light.

Dara and Marie, the same but different.

Every girl wants to be a ballerina . . .

It was always the photograph that first drew them in. Dark Dara and pale Marie, their heads tilted against each other, matching buns, their feet in relevŽ. The photograph was the first thing you saw when you walked into the studio lobby, or clicked on the website, or picked up the community circular or the sleek lifestyle magazine and saw the glossy ad in the back.

Charlie had taken the photograph and everyone talked about it.

So striking, everyone would say. E-thee-er-real, some would even venture. The littlest girls, padding in in their ballet pinks, would stare up at the photo mounted in the lobby, fingers in their mouths.

Like fairy princesses.

So Charlie took more photos. For the local paper, which featured them regularly, for their marketing materials as the school grew in size. But the photos were always, fundamentally, the same. Dark Dara and pale Marie, poised, close, touching.

Once, a marketing person offered them a free consultation. After observing them in the studio one summer day, sweating in the corner, wilting on the high stool they'd given him, he spoke to Charlie under his breath for a long time. That was how they ended up with the photo of Dara and Marie at the end of a long day, after dancing together in the quiet studio, their bodies loose, their leotards soaked through.

Charlie shot them collapsed upon each other on the floor, their faces pink with pleasure.

"Move closer," he said from behind the camera. "Closer still."

Closer still. Back then, it seemed impossible to be any closer. The three of them, so entwined. Charlie was Dara's husband, but he was also so much more. Dara, Marie, and Charlie, their days spent together at the studio, their nights in their childhood home. Back then.

After the shoot, looking at images on Charlie's computer, Dara hesitated, imagining what their mother might say of the photos, their bruises and blisters and blackened toenails hidden, their bodies so smooth and perfect and bare. "Are you sure?" she asked.

"They tell a story," Charlie said.

"They sell a story," Marie added, snapping her leotard against her damp skin.

Dancers have short lives, of course. What happened to Charlie-his crushing injuries, his four painful surgeries-never left their minds. His body, still as lean and marble-cut as the day their



mother brought him home, was a living reminder of how quickly things could turn, how beautiful things could be all broken inside. One had to plan, to make a trajectory. That was what made Dara and Charlie different from Marie, from their parents.

Marie always seemed ready to bolt, but never for long and never far. How far could one get if one still struggled to remember a bank card pin number, and left gas burners lit wherever she went.

So, when Dara and Charlie did marry-at city hall, he in an open-collar shirt and back brace and she in a tissue-thin slip dress that made her shudder on the front steps-he brought with him a small trust fund from his long-deceased father, to be broken open at last like a platinum piggy bank on his twenty-first birthday. The amount was modest, but they used it to pay off the mortgage for the studio building, drooping ceiling and all. They owned it outright. It was theirs.

We'll do it together, he said.

And Marie.

Of course, he said. We three. We means three.

It was the three of them. Always the three of them. Until it wasn't. And that was when everything went wrong. Starting with the fire. Or before.

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